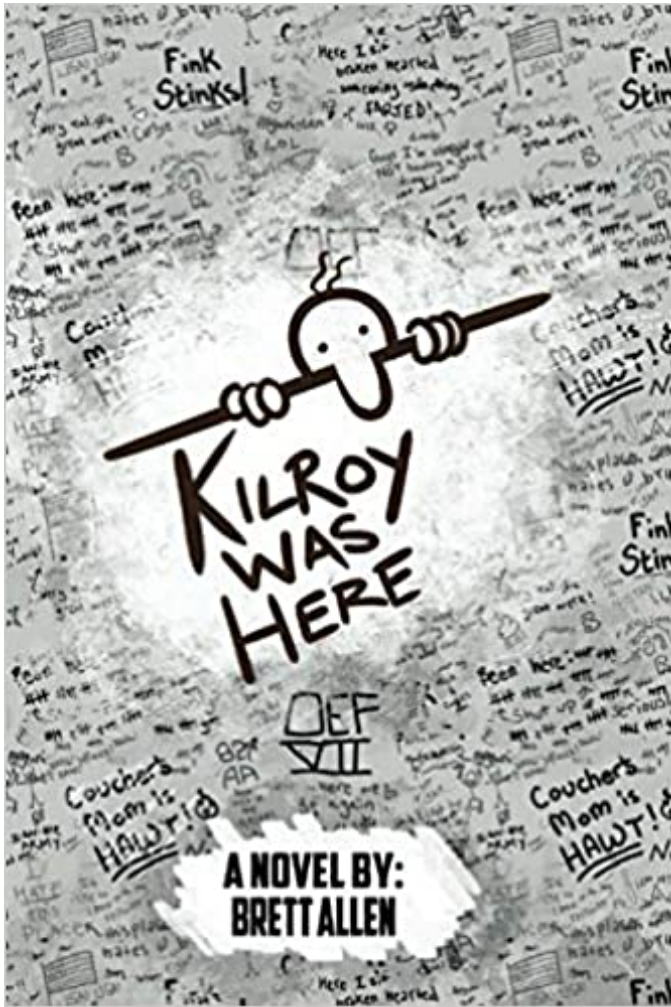


# “The ‘Office Space’ of War Novels”: Susanne Aspley Interviews Brett Allen, Author of ‘Kilroy Was Here’

I first heard about Brett Allen’s debut novel, [‘Kilroy Was Here’](#), by tweet from Matt Gallagher ([@MattGallagher0](#)), author of [Empire City](#), [Youngblood](#), and [Kaboom](#). (Matt always has good reading recommendations, and this one was outstanding.) Reading this book felt like I was listening to a good war story over beers with friend. I sent Allen a DM to ask if I could interview him because I loved his book so much. Thankfully, he agreed.

Although ‘Kilroy was Here’ is billed as humorous satire, the book is deeper than just that. It’s a non-trauma hero’s classic journey to redemption through the frustrations, absurdities and intense human relationships that war brings. It’s filled with vivid descriptions such as “spooning his rucksack”, “stretched like hot mozzarella”, and “The prisoner was still there alright. His face was expressionless, but the smile carved in his neck was ear to ear.”



But don't take my word for it, here is an excerpt:

*There's a series of sub-conscience steps taken in the seconds following an explosion. Most people don't know this because most people have never been blown up before. First, you check yourself. It's natural instinct. Self preservation. Call it whatever you want except selfish. Following a blast, a soldier must confirm he's physically whole and still in possession of all critical appendages and eyeballs. The Army calls this, "Life, Limb and Eyesight." This is a critical step before rendering aid to comrades. It does no good fixing your buddy's broken fingers while your own leg is dangling from a bloody stump.*

As to why he wrote this novel, Allen explains so in the forward:

"It is not this story's intent to down play the sacrifice of

veterans, but more to dispel the notion that merely wearing a uniform makes you a hero. Like the civilian world the military is made up of all kinds: hard workers and sandbaggers, optimists and assholes, straight shooters and functional alcoholics. Most of us wore many of these hats at different times, sometimes all at once. We were never perfect, but we were always there."

**Aspley:** *'Kilroy' has several layers. The top layer is biting satire/comedic. LT Rye also wades through the second layer that is the tragedy of war. You write so the reader understands this but always give them a hand to pull them out so it's not totally unbearable. Did you intend to write the book this way? Or how did you decide to juggle all that's going on?*

**Allen:** The layers of the book happened naturally over multiple drafts and, in a way, were unavoidable when writing humor against a backdrop of war. In Afghanistan, as I'm sure was the same in Iraq and in all other conflicts, tragedy is the baseline. At its core, the entire experience of war is rooted in tragedy, with death and destruction and dominance at its beginning, middle, and end. These pieces are unavoidable in telling any war story; to not include the ugly parts would be to neglect the setting altogether. The diplomatic and logistics elements are almost equally necessary. War is chaos and these elements are the attempts to control and direct that chaos to a, hopefully, achievable goal, no matter how fruitless or absurd they may sometimes seem.

The comedy/satire piece was probably the easiest to weave in. I think a fair amount of veterans, arguably the majority, develop a pretty black sense of humor. It's a way of coping and of dealing with the stresses and realities of military life and deployment life, but the trick was finding the right level of gallows humor that would be palatable for both civilians and veterans alike. I was lucky to have some great Beta readers to help me sort through that piece. As far as

juggling the events of the book, it really flowed together nicely once I picked the proper point of view. Most of the book is rooted in real events, which serve as a jumping point for the absurdities that follow.

When I first started writing *Kilroy*, I had a lot of plot, but not much story. It wasn't until I was a couple of chapters in that I rediscovered the "Kilroy Was Here" graffiti and refreshed my memory on the history there. The concept of soldiers leaving physical graffiti marks on the battlefield resonated and I began thinking about the invisible marks we leave everywhere we go. Oftentimes they are left by actions or words we may not deem important at the time, but may be impactful to others. This idea of "leaving your mark" became the thread I tied the book together with, as I know there are a lot of veterans who returned home with a "what did I even accomplish there?" mentality. I'll let the readers decide if it worked or not.



Brett Allen, author of 'Kilroy Was Here.'

**Aspley:** *There is a huge civilian- military divide when it comes to GWOT (or least that is my opinion). I know many veterans write books to try to bridge that gap. Most civilians can't fathom the gore and situations some vets experienced. But everyone has a co-worker like GIF, (the Good Idea Fairy) whose ideas are actually asinine and you want to punch them in face. Did you write 'Kilroy' with that in mind- to make it more relatable?*

**Allen:** My initial intent was to show these characters for who they were: exaggerated versions of personalities I'd encountered in my four years of service. It wasn't until I had a few years in the civilian workforce under my belt that I realized a lot of these personalities are 100% translatable and anyone who has ever dealt with the good, the bad, and the ugly of middle management would be able to recognize a lot of the characters and sympathize with Rye's situation. I've had a couple of people describe the book as the "Office Space" of war novels and I'm extremely happy with that description.

For Kilroy, I didn't feel I should wait to write it for two reasons. First, most of the book was based on memories of actual events. I feared if I waited too long I might lose the ability to tap into the emotions experienced and the book would be less for it. Second, while I was writing, I wasn't sure if the war would ever end (only joking a little). By the time the book was published in November of 2020, eleven years had already passed since my deployment. Nineteen years since the war started. Almost as long as the stretch from WWII to Hogan's Heroes. I believe enough time had passed that the story would resonate with the older vets of the Forever War, if not the new, younger generation.

**Aspley:** *The story arc for 'Kilroy' is perfect, the ending felt like a blockbuster Hollywood movie climax, and I'm not just*

saying that. So, the question is, did you plot this book out with a proper outline hitting all the specific points, or are you a by-the-seat-of-your-pants writer- just let the characters take off and see what happens?

**Allen:** Kilroy was my first attempt at long-form writing and it really forced me to learn what kind of writer I am. I can confirm I am NOT a “by-the-seat-of-your-pants” writer. I tried that approach at the beginning. I sat down and started punching out chapters, letting the characters (I started out in the third person following two different characters) make their own decisions and just go where they led. Things went off the rails fast. Many writing sessions ended with my head softly banging on the desktop. About Chapter 13 I threw in the towel on this method. Instead of going back, I continued on in the first person, but under the pretense that everything that had happened to the characters in the first thirteen chapters had instead happened only to Rye. I also spent a solid two months mapping out the rest of the book. I had a big ol’ spreadsheet modeled on examples I’d seen used by Joseph Heller for *Catch-22* and J.K. Rowling (yes, J.K. Rowling) for *Harry Potter*. It served its purpose and I slogged through the remainder of the first draft using the spreadsheet as a road map (insert “Lieutenant with a map” joke here) and modifying it as I went. Once the first draft was finished, I went back and completely rewrote the first thirteen chapters in the first person, which was actually fairly easy because I now knew where Rye needed to end up. I should note I read many different books on novel writing while writing *Kilroy* and I tried a lot of different techniques. Ultimately I ended up blending the pieces I liked. I learned a lot during the process, but not before doing it the wrong way a bazillion times.

**Aspley:** Eric Chandler wrote a poem, ‘Air Born’, for his poetry collection, [Hugging this Rock](#). In it, Chandler’s favorite porta-potty graffiti was ‘Toodles, Afghanistan.’ My favorite

*was in Kuwait, which read, 'Saddam sucks'. Besides 'Kilroy was Here', was there any other graffiti that you really liked?*

**Allen:** I do not recall any specific graffiti from the deployment outside of the widely overused and unoriginal bathroom stall "Here I sit all broken hearted..." mantra (maybe only a few people will know what I'm talking about here... Google it if you dare). I do, however, have a graffiti-based story from deployment that didn't make the final cut of the book. Outside our FOB's Command Post there was one lonely port-a potty (much like in the book). The port-a potty was mainly used by the Squadron Staff, as the larger, semi-permanent and multi-person toilet trailer was a much farther walk, being centrally located in the Troop housing area. One day the Squadron Commander entered the CP hopping mad and started chewing folks out (not entirely uncommon). Turns out, someone had tagged the port-a potty wall with a rather uncomplimentary (and profane) assessment of the SCO's leadership abilities. Since the culprit could not be identified, the port-a potty was made off limits to EVERYONE for about a month—in the dead of winter. So everyone in Squadron Headquarters had to trudge through the snow and ice and ankle breaking gravel, across the FOB to use the bathroom. I'm pretty sure it was uphill both ways. War is hell.

**Aspley:** *I read your two short stories on Kindle, "Post" and "Kherwar." Are you considering releasing a short story collection next? Or what is your next writing project?*

**Allen:** I have a series of short stories I've begun to brainstorm, but nothing more than that. The stories would be stand-alones, but may also be strung together to fit a broad narrative; I haven't decided. I am a big fan of Ray Bradbury's "The Martian Chronicles", which has been an inspiration for the structure. Before I develop that further, though, I'm working my way through my second novel. I'm currently on the third draft of another satirical fiction piece which I'm particularly excited about. This one will be a bit of a

departure from *Kilroy* in that it's not military themed. It follows a contentious mayoral election in a small Michigan town and ties in pieces of the legend of the Michigan Dogman. I'm hoping to complete it soon, but my wife and I both work full time, and with two small children, writing projects are slow and often only advance in the wee morning hours or after everyone else in the house has gone to bed. In a way, though, I think it makes the end product better because it forces me to think longer on parts I may have just pencil whipped otherwise. In other ways, it's brutal and the anxiety often builds to the point of spontaneous combustion. I think that's how most writers feel, though, especially early on, so I think I'm doing it right. Or at least not entirely wrong.

*Aspley: Thank you, Brett for your time, and looking forward to your next book!*

Allen, Brett. [Kilroy Was Here](#). A15 Publishing, November 2020.

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