

**New Review by Adrian
Bonenberger: John Milas' "The
Militia House"**



**THE
MILITIA
HOUSE**

A
NOVEL

JOHN MILAS

In the Mind of Madness

There is a nightmare I used to have with some regularity even before my time in the military, in which a house from my childhood concealed some horrible and sentient threat bent on doing me harm. How else to describe it? The house – its bannisters, its rooms – the attic, sometimes the basement, sometimes a room at the end of a hall – contained within a horror so awful that to perceive it would be to go mad, or die. Naturally, I'm sitting here writing, so the horror was never perceived... but what if... someday... ?

This dream contains within it the purest and most intense fear I have ever experienced. No event or encounter approaches it, in or outside combat. Fear, paralyzing and irresistible, is not like the anxiety one actually encounters in one's daily life. And in moments of great danger one does not feel fear as such – in my experience it is either a rage that compels one to action, or something quite different, which compels one to inaction (often, taking cover behind a wall).

John Milas, whose publications have appeared before in *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has a new book out that captures a small portion of that pure fear, and taps into it as effectively as any story I've ever read. *The Militia House* follows a marine lance corporal and his unit during the tail end of an uncomfortable deployment to Afghanistan. As they take over responsibilities for a helicopter landing zone run by the British, a remote building just outside the base draws their attention. The British discourage the marines from exploring it but they insist, and have a very bad time inside. Bizarre things start happening to them – or is it all in their minds? As reality itself begins to fray, ultimately, it doesn't matter.

Another horror story that considers the line between sanity and insanity is *In the Mouth of Madness*, a John Carpenter film starring Sam Neill, and I thought of that while reading the book. The protagonist has a blog that's gotten him in trouble with his commander – the power of writing to change a

deployment, to get people fired, is a quiet but insistent thread in the background. Again, if the protagonist has the power to destroy others' lives with words, with his perspective of the war, isn't it likely that he can author his own destruction through imagination (madness), too?

And what are haunted house stories if not stories about the mind, with the "house" and its various rooms forming memories, concealing some terrible insight about the self that a protagonist cannot face? In another film starring Neill, *Event Horizon*, the haunted house is a spaceship – and the revelation by Neill's character every bit as awful as that of any film of its genre.

The book functions effectively as an allegory about regret, and shame, and if not PTSD, the conflicting emotions that arise from military service overseas. Milas is a veteran of Afghanistan who deployed with the U.S. Marine Corps, and writes with authority about the place and the inconveniences particular to those deployments. In that sense, it is in addition to a reflection about the war, a kind of meditation on the challenges faced by young leaders; responsibility for the lives of others, and being "good" in the eyes of authority.

Milas's protagonist and marines return to The Militia House later in the book. They cannot keep away from it. What happens is both upsetting and also surprising, and I don't want to spoil the ending, because it's worth reading the book to learn what happens. I encourage people to do so, and enjoy the well-composed story as well as it's lively (if – well, this is horror! – plausibly frustrating characters). If you've ever suffered from nightmares, and you enjoy interrogating why, you probably like horror as a genre... and if you like horror as a genre, you'll like *The Militia House*.

Killing is Easy



Killing is the easiest thing in the world, easier than sex. Easier than raising a family or bringing a child into the world, or building a house. Easier than painting or writing or music. Killing is easier than sleeping.

Before November 13th I couldn't have told you how 9-11-2001 felt. Watching the attacks in Paris, the killing, I remembered helplessness and a physical desire for vengeance, like fourteen years were gone. As I texted, instant-messaged, and emailed friends in the affected zone, desperate for news of their safety, I felt alternately overwhelmed by great sadness and murderous rage. It was clear then, as it is now, who was responsible for the injustice. And I wanted payback.

For those who have not felt the call to kill in the name of humanity and justice, it is a godly thing. Reading through the initial reports, I choked back tears, heading—where else?—to the gym, hoping to direct this urgent compulsion toward the noble desire for blood somewhere, *anywhere* else. On the stationary bicycle and then at the weight machines watching the President express solidarity for France, I fantasized about my phone buzzing with news from a friend in the military calling me back into service. In the interests of honesty, I must admit that this fantasy involved him telling me that the time had come to clean the Middle East once and for all. From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and then the vast Atlantic Ocean off North Africa, we would impose the final, drastic justice this situation demanded. That's what I *felt*.

That's what the ISIS terrorists in Paris must have felt reading news of defeat after emasculating defeat for their movement in Sinjar, in Syria, and in Iraq. *We have to do something, and the time has come to martyr ourselves.* They must have believed that they were correct to act, and enjoyed the doing of the deed. Killing is the easiest thing in the world.

That seems to be what Francois Hollande was feeling when he implicitly committed France to military action against ISIS, [saying, among other similar things: "It is an act of war that was committed by a terrorist army, a jihadist army, Daesh, against France,"](#) and "we will lead the fight and it will be merciless." As the attacks in Paris unfolded, I felt the same way.

And that's the end of civilization. It's popular to joke about France and Europe being weak, now, being militarily incompetent in the aftermath of WWII, but things are stable in Europe and mostly safe as a result of progress, the horror our grandfathers felt when they saw the red gurgling aftermath of their deeds stain their hands, uniforms, and relationship with the natural world. Until 1945, Europe and Eurasia had been by

orders of magnitude the most violent place in the world. Mechanisms for killing on an industrial scale never imagined anywhere else were [pioneered in the USA and perfected in Europe](#). When it comes to violence, Europeans are not just masters—historically, they transcended mastery, elevating it first to the realm of [art](#), then, later, incorporating it. It took us *seventy years* to suppress the natural European inclination toward violence on a level that would make even a hardened ISIS fighter's stomach turn and head spin—seventy years, which, in the balance, doesn't seem like enough by half.

The end of civilization is when one acts based on feeling, and especially that low, barbaric feeling to hurt or murder. I know, because I felt it last night—can still feel it in waves. In Afghanistan, over 26 months, the two infantry units I was with killed hundreds of Taliban, Haqqani and Al Qaeda operatives (over 1,000?), taking 15 deaths in return—killing is easy. But what gives me and people like me our reason for being in the liberal West—the evolution of liberal arts education, pioneering human and then civil rights, the components that make us superior to ISIS terrorists, dogs, spiders, and lizards, is that we aspire to be *reasonable*—we are capable of thinking out the logical conclusion of our actions, and acting differently given different stimuli, acting generously and altruistically although our bodies may tell us that killing or hurting would be more satisfying. This was the lesson the West drew in the aftermath of World War II, on the bodies of so many Germans, Russians, Japanese Ukrainians, Polish, French and more—enough bodies to make Syria again three times over. This is the lesson I drew from war, as well. Killing is easy, but it only leads to more killing. And there's always more blood than you know. Blood that's sticky, and gets everywhere.

No, people who believe that France and Europe are weak because they do not act sufficiently violently for their tastes (a)

don't [know the region's extraordinarily bloody history](#), and (b) don't believe in [biology](#). Civilization and modern western society—cultural constructs that encourage cooperation and altruistic behavior—are fragile things, to be nurtured and protected at all costs. They're the product of peace—in times of war, people become callous, cease caring about others, wantonly indulge in the brief satisfaction of vendetta. Small acts of humanity and grace become acts of heroism.

After finishing my time at the gym and hearing from most of my friends, I returned home, showered, and headed out to dinner with a photojournalist friend to discuss the night's events, process what I was feeling. Fielding phone calls on the drive into the city, drinking beers over Turkish kabab, then calling other friends on the way back home, I was able to stabilize the urge to hurt and hate, to ameliorate it with that greatest benefit of living in a developed, safe, modern country—generosity.

Even though it feels now like hurting the people responsible will provide satisfaction, will solve the hurt, logic as well as a brilliant, counterintuitive moral imperative unearthed by Christianity instruct us that the answer in this situation is to open our arms wider, to “turn the other cheek” to the despicable insult, rather than to deliver injustice for injustice, which other cultural traditions and tribal societies would demand. The parasites that are ISIS feed on blood and violence. Let us, by our actions, demonstrate our moral and intellectual superiority. History instructs that we can go down a very different path—we could, if we desired, exterminate them—but then, wouldn't we just be descending to their primitive, animalistic level?

Some reactionaries in European and Western society would have us do precisely that—would turn Europe back into the brutes they were 70 years ago, or would indulge America's more recent penchant for “shock and awe.” This is a popular anti-intellectual idea on the right: we should do what feels good,

and to hell with civilization. To beat the thugs we must become thugs ourselves. Here's [one such confused hot-take](#). Suffice it to say, if someone is advocating for violence, that person is not civilized, nor do they support humanistic values like charity, magnanimity, and (ultimately) the precious elements that separate humans from apes or lower forms of animals. They are the enemy.

On the other side are people who over-intellectualize the problem, and would stifle any action—those of the extreme left, who have already begun stating their belief that one should experience a similar emotional reaction to the bombing of Baghdad as one does to the terrorist attack on Paris. As a humanist, I am more sympathetic to a call for widespread empathy than I am to kill (empathy is harder than killing), but it is unsympathetic at best (and inhuman at worst) to claim before the bodies are cold that one must feel for all humans or for none at all. It is a truism among this group that Westerners don't react to tragedy outside their community (this type of reaction is already common on Facebook and Twitter), as though feeling for anyone besides oneself were a bad thing if one does not immediately think to feel for everyone. Insisting that others should have to always feel empathy for everyone all the time (that they should behave like bodhisattvas or saints) or never at all (that they should behave like sociopaths) exhibits an interesting symmetry, but doesn't seem like a useful or productive philosophical or human stance, although I suppose it must make the claimer feel satisfied on some level or they wouldn't do it.

For the 95% of Westerners affected by the tragedy who aren't on the extreme left or right, it is okay to feel something about this tragedy without needing to take on the problems of the world. If you have a personal connection to Paris, as many do, rage or grief is perfectly natural. If you don't have a personal connection to Paris but do to the event, rage or grief is perfectly natural. And in either case, regardless of

how one's natural and appropriate feelings on the subject (I certainly felt like exerting violent vengeance on behalf of a city in which I have lived, visited often, and to which I have longstanding and deep cultural ties), the next step is to divorce thought from feeling, and to act in keeping with our cultural, humanist heritage: reasonably.

This means collectively and individually helping other humans (the refugees of war, the migrants, the aspirational and the cursed), because it's within our power to do so. We of the developed world are not infected with that ideological disease one finds so often among the mad, the disaffected, and those living in chronic poverty—the cultural *imperative* to kill—as are these ISIS psychopaths. No—let us this once demonstrate our laudable willpower and the unquestionable superiority of our civilization by letting the sword fall from our hand—let us show our strength by not doing what is easy, and easier for Americans and Europeans than anything else (for we are the best at that easy task of killing)—let us show the world mercy. Otherwise we risk losing what was bought with an ocean of our own blood.