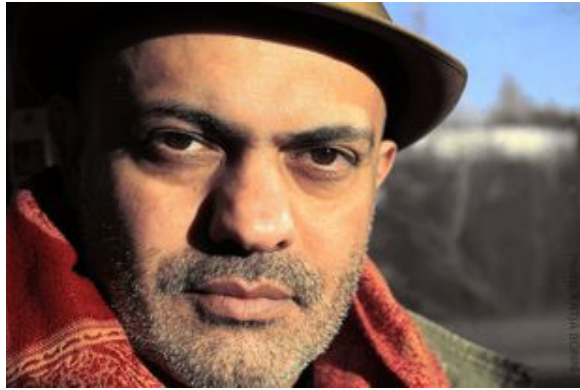


# New Interview of Author Hassan Blasim, by Peter Molin

Hassan Blasim's 2014 short-story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* captured American readers with its harrowing portrait of an Iraq wrecked by authoritarian rule, oppressive Islamic custom, American invasion, and sectarian in-fighting. The stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* were Poe-like in their ability to combine story-telling prowess—often humorous—with unexpected and sensationally graphic violence. Especially for readers familiar with the growing body of works written by American veterans of Iraq, *The Corpse Exhibition* aptly portrayed the nightmare of recent Iraq history from the other side, while confirming the sense that however bad Iraq might have been for American fighting men and women, it was infinitely worse for Iraqis caught in the melee. Now comes Blasim's *God 99*, a genre-defying text from which signature-style Blasim short-stories emerge organically from a textual seedbed composed of memoir, auto-fiction, and transcribed emails. The narrator is "Hassan Owl," an Iraqi exile now living in Finland, who begins a blog titled *God 99* to document the experience of other Iraqi refugees living in Europe, but that conceit is only the start-point for a wide-ranging set of story-lines and thematic concerns. Roughly categorized, these include descriptions of Hassan Owl's early life in Iraq, where the dream of a peaceful life full of artistic creativity are blasted by political and religious persecution and violence, the many-year exodus that follows as Hassan Owl makes his way out of Iraq to Finland, the texture of everyday life in Finland in which quote-unquote normal existence is elusive for Arab refugees still touched by enduring conflict in the Middle East, and, finally, Hassan Owl's attempt to reconnect with a beloved family member now said to be living somewhere in the Middle East.



Author Hassan Blasim. Photo  
by Katja Bohm.

That's a lot, and adding spice to it all are short interludes between chapters excerpted from a long email thread between Hassan Owl and a mentor, a fellow Iraqi émigré named in the novel *Alia Mardan*, who is based on the Iraqi expatriate writer Adnam al-Mubarek. Potentially intimidating, the hybrid mix is unified by Blasim's dazzling prose voice, which inflects descriptions of even mundane occurrences with funny and/or startling story-turns and moments of imaginative insight. *God 99* offers a profound sense of the connectedness of war in Iraq and contemporary European life, and, even more so, a superb self-portrait of an artist in exile—a 21<sup>st</sup> version of James Joyce, Henry Miller, and the other revered expatriate authors of 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature.

I had a chance to speak with Blasim about *God 99* and his current life in Finland. We spoke in English via Zoom, and I have condensed and clarified his answers.

**Molin:** Do you have a particular audience or ideal reader in mind when you write?

**Blasim:** I never imagine that someone's looking over my shoulder while I write. But because I write in Arabic, I do consciously try to play with classical Arabic style, mostly by incorporating street language, to make an Arab reader feel the uniqueness of what I'm trying to do. Mostly though the fight

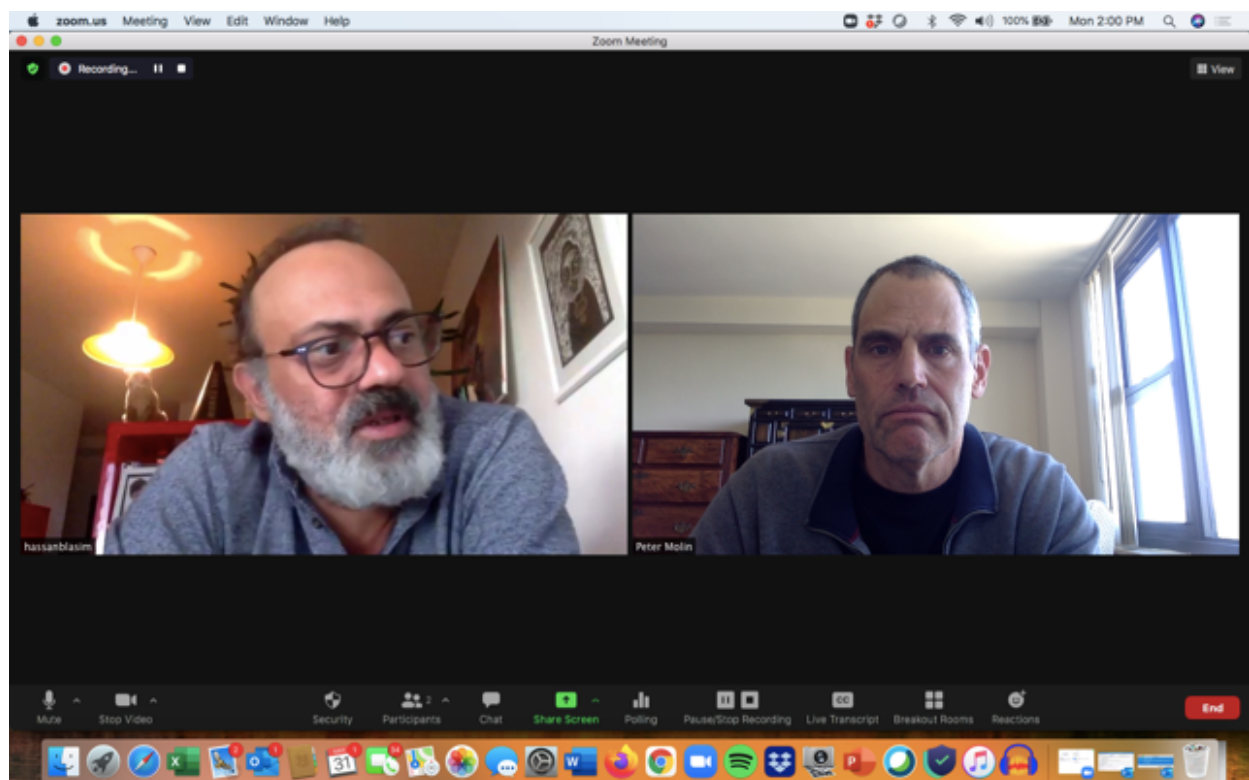
is with myself, and I don't consider what any reader might think—there's just not time or space for that. When I send the book to the publisher, it's pretty much finished—to include the design for the cover and the lay-out of the text. That's very important to me. The publisher may suggest changes, but I'm not usually very receptive. Some readers and reviewers haven't understood *God 99*; I think they expected or wanted more short-stories since my previous book—a collection of short-stories—had been successful. I had more short-stories, but to publish them as stand-alone tales in a collection to me was boring. I wanted to incorporate the stories into a larger and more complex structure, which a novel allowed me to do.

**Molin:** How would you describe your reception in America and in Europe?

**Blasim:** I don't think world literature is popular in general in America, which means people aren't used to looking for Arabic books and probably don't understand real Arabic culture apart from what they get in the movies or the news, both of which are full of cliches. I especially don't understand the publishing market and the intellectual climate. When I first published in America, I was happy like any author would be. But you need someone with energy to promote you to readers and newspapers and critics, and I didn't know how that works. Unfortunately, my first trip to America was not enjoyable. It was a huge problem getting permission to enter the country, both in terms of obtaining a visa and then going through customs, which made me feel like a criminal. And without going into detail, some of the readings and writing events were unpleasant, too. I'm not in a hurry to repeat any of that. In Europe it's better for me because I've learned a lot over the years and become more recognized by readers and book people. My books are translated into many languages, they've been adapted to theater often, and every month there are one or two book festivals somewhere where I'm asked to read.

**Molin:** How about in Iraq and the Arab world?

**Blasim:** When I first began writing stories in Arabic after arriving in Finland, I sent them to many publications in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries. But no one was willing to publish them because they said they broke too many taboos and the language was too coarse. So my first publications were online and then later in print in Europe. Only after I was translated into six languages in Europe did anyone in an Arab country publish me, even though I was already popular among young people who could read me online. But now with *God 99*, it's the same thing again. It's currently banned either officially or publishers won't touch it. I still feel my real work should be back in Iraq and helping Iraq understand itself better, but I'm not permitted to do that. It would be dangerous for me and my family still in Iraq to even try. It's still very easy to get shot by someone for expressing unpopular views.



Hassan Blasim and Peter Molin in one of the three Zoom interviews conducted for this story. Screen capture by Peter Molin.

**Molin: What about fiction attracts you?**

**Blasim:** It's important for English and American readers to know that I don't only write fiction, I write poetry, criticism, plays, and essays, too, that haven't yet been translated into English. I also write a lot in support of refugees, gay rights, and Iraq and the Middle East. But as for fiction, it's what I have loved most all my life, from the time I was a boy. I always liked the way stories could contain extremes and opposites, such as how a story could be both a love story and a horror story, a funny story and a sad story, both tender and violent. Fiction is serious for me, but it's also play and pleasure. In my writing, I enjoy trying to make all these parts come together. A lot of my sense of how to write fiction comes from my love of movies, from which early on I was impressed by how easily they switched between different types of scenes and moods. In my stories I want that same effect, something unexpected happening, something changing all the time. That's how I try to write, too, I don't plan anything ahead of time, I just enjoy the rhythm of writing and the chance to play. I open my laptop and I type...

**Molin: *God 99* pays tribute to many writers and movie-makers who have inspired you, both Arabic and Western. As a youth in Iraq, what attracted you to European and American art, film, and literature?**

**Blasim:** When I was growing up, my friends and I loved European and American movies, art, music, and books, me probably most of all. It seemed so free—there were no taboos and everything was possible. A lot of it was easily available. Even after the first Gulf War, for example, in the early 90s, we were still reading Raymond Carver and Richard Ford stories. When economic sanctions were put in place by the US that limited imports and forced us to restrict the use of electricity, we would still gather in apartments and have parties while watching Oliver Stone movies. We loved Arab writers and artists, too—we celebrated all art and artists, especially contemporary

ones—they were heroes to us.

**Molin:** One writer referenced frequently in *God 99* is the Italian author Italo Calvino. What do you like about Calvino?

**Blasim:** Calvino is very popular in Arab countries generally. For me, I love him because he is my opposite. I'm very loud in my writing, like an Oliver Stone or Quentin Tarantino. But Calvino is so cool, and you can tell he's a slow and deep thinker, in a good way. I'm jealous of people who can sit and consider things without getting excited, because that's not me, nor is it like Iraq, which is so passionate and excitable, like heavy-metal music. The part in *God 99* where I describe fleeing Iraq and traveling through Europe making my way to Finland with only book, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, is true.

**Molin:** That's important—the book you carry with you when you are fleeing from one country to another! Another writer you mention is Henry Miller. How is Miller important to you?

**Blasim:** I discovered Henry Miller in the 1990s and read six of his books, all of which was a big shock for me growing up in a society where so much was restricted. He's a great fighter and he's honest.

**Molin:** When did your admiration for American and Western art become complicated by politics and war?

**Blasim:** From the beginning. As a teenager reading Western books and watching Western films, I learned many ideas about freedom—individual, cultural, religious, and political. My friends and I wanted to change culture and society as much as we wanted to be rid of Saddam, and we didn't like the restrictions of Islam either. Mostly we just wanted to do what we wanted, such as drink, which I started to do as a teenager. I quickly learned that books could be transgressive, too—many were censored and you could get in trouble if you read them. So in the beginning, my love of Western art placed me in opposition to the dominant attitudes in Iraq.

That continued in college where I studied film. From classroom discussions and making short films, I learned that it was dangerous to complain about the government, so I kept quiet about politics, but I still got into trouble. After I made a documentary about poverty in Iraq, for example, I was visited by Baathist officials who questioned my motives. My teachers always complimented my ideas and work, but it was clear that they were also warning me about being too radical and too outspoken. Within the college there were lots of rumors about spies, and one of my teachers warned me that if I didn't keep silent, the police would send for me after sunset, which was an idiom for being executed, being sent "into the dark"—we knew many people were being shot in those days. Meanwhile, members of my family were also in trouble with the government, which was constantly watching us. This is when I knew that I would eventually get into trouble if I stayed in Iraq and it was important to find somewhere freer and safer.

After the American invasion in 2003, the problem for me changed. By 2004 I was in Finland, but I was hearing horrible reports from friends and family in Iraq and I could see things were going to get very bad. The sectarian civil war was breaking out, and the danger and violence were worse than ever. So now I began to speak out and write against the Americans and the religious violence the invasion unleashed.

So, my attitude toward America is complicated, like a crazy mystery. In terms of the culture and people, I don't know many Americans, but my Iraqi friends in America encourage me to visit again or think about moving there. They tell me the people are friendly and the living is easy, more so than in Europe. That wasn't exactly my experience on my first short visit, as I mentioned above, but the diversity of people, the literature, and the music all are appealing. The politics and the capitalism are not.

**Molin: During the period you were trying to flee Iraq and then settling in Finland (2000-2004), how did you keep alive the**

## **dream of being a writer and artist?**

**Blasim:** In high school I wanted write and make films, and I studied film in college. I was always writing, but then my life was unsettled for a long time, but when I got to Finland I began to write again, and I had some small jobs that allowed me to write and translate, but it was boring and not creative. But fiction and public writing happened after I finished work and was sitting at home. After I discovered the Internet everything changed for me. The Internet gave me an outlet and allowed me to build an audience, and then led to the print publication of my books.

**Molin: You must get asked about identity a lot—have you come to think of yourself as Finnish?**

**Blasim:** It's funny because I'm a Finnish citizen, but I'm not considered a true Finnish writer because I don't write in Finnish and so am not eligible for Finnish literary prizes. Still, I now have a lot of good memories from living in Finland for many years, and when I travel around Europe, it feels good to return to Finland, where I am comfortable. But I also still feel like an exile, which doesn't make me sad. Exile can be a gift for a writer, or for any human being. When you think about it, reading is a form of exile—when you read a book about New York or Tokyo, you go into a temporary form of exile that takes you out of the boring daily life of your own country and allows you to see things differently. I've learned not to become too attached to one place, so I treat any location I'm in like a hotel—one room is in Baghdad, another is in Helsinki, etc. That's also how I've come to think about my identity.

**Molin: In *God 99*, it's written that Finns are very conservative except when they're in the sauna or at the bar. As someone who is one-quarter Finnish, I like the part about the saunas and the bars.**



**Blasim:** Yes yes, I like it here a lot. The country is peaceful and the people respect free speech. That's good, very good.

**Molin:** In *God 99*, the chapters recounted by the narrator are interspersed with short interludes transcribing email conversations with a woman named Alia Mardan. In an Author's Note you explain that the emails with Alia Mardan are based on actual emails you exchanged with Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak, who lived for many years in Denmark before dying in 2017. Why is al-Mubarak important to you and how did you devise this form for the novel?

**Blasim:** As I began to write *God 99*, I had a lot of stories but no structure. I was also depressed about the death of al-Mubarak, who was my friend and mentor. When I was on the move from Iraq to Finland from 2000-2004, he would write me long emails full of talk about great artists, classical Arabian folklore, and philosophy. I didn't have any books or much time to read, and I was very desperate, so he was my best friend and teacher, an angel really. Those emails meant so much to me even when I arrived in Finland and was working in restaurants and was even homeless for a while. We often talked about writing a book together, but never got the chance while he was still alive. When after his death I was lost emotionally and thinking about how to bring the pieces of *God 99* together, it occurred to me to use our email dialogue to frame the stories I had written. It might make things difficult for the reader at first, but it works for me personally and I think for the book, too. The emails in *God 99* are all real, though I cut them up and made a collage of the thousands of emails we've exchanged.

**Molin:** You change the gender of your interlocutor from a man to woman. Why?

**Blasim:** That's my ode to Scheherazade—the inspiration for a thousand stories!

**Molin:** Alia Mardan is interested in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century French-Romanian essayist Emil Cioran and writes frequently about her ongoing project to translate Cioran into Arabic, which seems to amuse the narrator. How is Cioran important for *God 99*?

**Blasim:** Cioran is not popular in Europe now, in part because he had a brief association with the Nazis, [an association he renounced and regretted]. Maybe he is just too dark for Europe, but he is widely loved in Arab countries. They love him so much it's crazy. It's his pessimism, his bleakness, his nihilism, his black humor. But I haven't read all his books, mostly I like his quips, many of which I got from al-Mubarak.


**Molin:** All right. Let's end with some bigger questions.

**Blasim:** Smaller questions are good, too. Just normal is best.

**Molin [laughs]:** OK, then, how about last thoughts?



**Blasim:** I wonder what your memories are of my visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where you were my host. Did you often invite artists and writers?

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Poster made by Peter Molin for Hassan Blasim's visit to West Point.

**Molin:** Yes we did, at least while I was there, and before and after, too, I think. We brought in mostly Americans, and not all military writers, a lot of civilian writers, poets and filmmakers, too, including Oliver Stone. I would say you were pretty far out there compared to others in terms of your background, but you were a trooper—you gave a great reading and talk and were pleasant with everyone, even though it must have seemed a strange thing for you, after the way war has wrecked Iraq. But you gave us our money's worth, and we all—faculty and cadets, including several international cadets from Arab countries—enjoyed hanging out with you.

**Blasim:** Some of my friends are surprised to learn I visited there, but I was encouraged to do so by my hosts in New York City, who knew West Point had a tradition of inviting writers such as Orhan Pamuk to visit. I just thought it was an interesting opportunity and was just taking things as they came.



Hassan Blasim at West Point. Photo by Peter Molin.

**Molin:** Well, I'm sure I was pretty inconsiderate about what it all meant for you—it couldn't have been easy. Maybe I was hoping for you to learn that we aren't all monsters or stupid idiots, at least not all the time. I mostly wish I could have given you a funner memory, like we might have gotten drunk in the barracks or something like that. You haven't written the visit into a story yet, for which I think I'm glad.

**Blasim:** No, no, that wasn't a bad day. Still, I hope that we can meet again sometime with that military stuff far behind us.

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Hassan Blasim, [\*God 99\*](#). Translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. First published in Arabic by al-Mutawassit, Milan,

## **Fiction from Peter Molin: “Cy and Ali”**

*The following short story is based on the myth “Ceyx and Alceone,” as recounted in Ovid’s Metamorphoses.*

Cy busied himself with the by-now routine activities of a combat patrol: gathering his personal gear and stowing it in the truck, drawing the big .50 caliber machine gun and mounting it in the gun turret, setting the frequencies and security codes on the radio, helping out the other crew members and being helped by them in turn. As he waited for the mission commander to give the patrol brief, he thought about his wife for a few moments. Ali had not wanted him to go on this deployment; he had had options that would have kept him in the States, at least for a while longer, and she could not understand why he had been so eager to return to Afghanistan.

“I think you are crazy,” she had told him. Left unstated was the suspicion that he liked the idea of going to war more than he liked the idea of being with her. She loved him dearly, and though he professed his love for her, too, she couldn’t help but feel that he didn’t value their relationship as much as she did. Cy also wasn’t sure what to think, either then or now while he waited for the patrol brief to begin. Returning to Afghanistan had been important to him, but beyond his claims about needing to be with his unit and doing his duty, he

sensed that there was a cold hard nugget of selfishness about his willingness to jeopardize his marriage—not to mention his life—for the sake of the deployment.

Rather than give Ali an excuse or an explanation, he had offered a compensation. “When I get back, I promise I’ll make it up to you,” he had said, “I’ll go back to school, or find some job where I won’t have to deploy again anytime soon.”

The offer seemed lame, even to Cy, like he had thought about it for two seconds, but Ali acceded to it anyway. She loved Cy in part because he was a soldier, but some things about being a military wife were really bad. Now she busied herself with her classes, her part-time job, and her friends and family. But she worried a lot, and had a premonition that things might not end well.

The day’s mission was nothing special: accompany an Afghan army unit while they resupplied three of their outlying outposts. The mission commander explained that the Americans’ role was to inspect the readiness of the Afghan outposts, and to provide artillery and medical support in case anything happened along the way. Cy’s job was gunner on the mission commander’s truck, which was to be third in the order of march behind two Afghan trucks. From the truck’s exposed turret he was to man the .50 cal while keeping an eye out for suicide bombers, IEDs, and ambushes. But nothing was expected to happen; “There has been no enemy activity on the planned route in the last 48 hours,” the mission commander informed them. They had traveled the day’s route many times before with nothing more serious occurring than a vehicle breakdown. Sure they planned well and rehearsed diligently, but that was all the more reason the actual mission was probably going to be not much.



Which is why what happened, at least at first, had an unreal feel. Three miles out, on Route Missouri, Cy saw the two lead Afghan trucks come to abrupt halts and their occupants pile out. The Afghan soldiers took up firing positions on the right side of the road and pointed their weapons back to the left side. Because he had headphones on and was chattering with the other truck occupants, Cy was unable to immediately distinguish the sound of gunshots, and it took him a moment to comprehend that the Afghans had stumbled into an ambush. Other Americans also soon gleaned what was going on and suddenly the radio net crackled with questions, reports, and commands.

“Action front... Scan your sectors.... Anyone have positive ID?... There they are... 11:00 200 meters. Engage, engage!”

Cy identified three turbaned gunmen firing at the Afghan army trucks from behind a low wall. He charged his machine gun and began to shoot. He had fired the .50 cal dozens of times in training and thus was surprised by how far off target were his

first two bursts. But very quickly he found the range, and was rewarded by seeing the big .50 caliber rounds chew up the wall behind which the insurgents were hiding. Dust and debris filled the air; Cy couldn't tell if he had hit anyone, but surely the fire was effectively suppressing the enemy. By now, the other American trucks had identified the gunmen and were firing, too. Still, it was so hard to figure out exactly what was happening. That the three insurgents behind the wall were capable of resisting the torrent of fire unleashed on them by the American and Afghan soldiers seemed impossible, but no one could tell if there were other enemy shooting at them from somewhere else.

Soon, however, the sound of explosions began to fill the air. Again, it was not immediately clear that the Afghan army soldiers and the insurgents were now firing Rocket Propelled Grenades at each other. "What's going on up there?" Cy heard the mission commander ask him through the intercom. Loud booms resounded everywhere from the impact of the rocket-fired grenades. Cy next heard "RPG! RPG!" echo through his headphones as the Americans understood that they too were now under attack. A round exploded against the truck to his left and Cy felt the blast wave wash over him. How could the enemy engage them so accurately?

As the battle unfolded, Cy realized the situation was serious, no joke. The rest of the crew was protected inside the armored truck, but he was partially exposed in the machine gun turret. He continued to fire the .50 cal, doing his best to punish the insurgents who were trying to kill them. The noise was deafening, but in the midst of the roar of his own weapon and the other American guns, as well as the cacophony of human voices on the intercom, he discerned that enemy fire was pinging around him and sizzling overhead. Though he was not scared, he thought about his wife.

Ali had felt uneasy throughout the day. She had not been able to communicate with Cy, which in itself was not so unusual.



She understood that sometimes missions made it impossible for him to call or write. Still, she sent him emails and texts and the lack of a response for some reason felt ominous. That night, she had had a terrible dream. Cy appeared, looming over her, silent and reproachful, and Ali had awoken with a start. Nothing like this had ever happened before, not even close. She didn't know what to do, so she watched TV for a while and then began surfing the Internet. She thought about calling her husband's unit rear-detachment commander, but decided not to. There was no one she could talk to who wouldn't think she was overreacting, so she didn't do anything except continue to worry.

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The next morning two officers appeared at Ali's door. "The Secretary of Defense regrets to inform you that your husband has died as a result of enemy fire in eastern Afghanistan," one of them intoned. It was all too true, but for Ali the reality of the situation dissolved in a swirl of chaotic thoughts and physical sickness.

Ali waited on the tarmac at Dover Air Force Base with Cy's parents. An honor guard was also present, as well as a contingent from her husband's unit, and a general whom she had never seen before and whose name she didn't catch. Everyone was very nice to her, but Ali was confused. She didn't know if she was supposed to be strong and dignified or to collapse in a pool of tears. She also didn't know if she was angry with her husband, angry toward the Army, or just some strange combination of sad and proud. As her husband's casket emerged from the plane, Ali felt herself drawn toward it. First she was taking small tentative steps, as if she were nervous about breaking some kind of rule or protocol. Then she was running, moving quickly toward the casket while the others in attendance waited behind. She was barely aware of what she was doing, but her feet seemed to no longer be touching the ground. It was as if she were floating or flying, and her arms

were beating like wings of a giant bird. “O, Cy, is this the homecoming you promised me?” she thought, or maybe said aloud. Then she remembered throwing her arms around the casket, but at the same time she also felt herself rising into the air, in unison with her husband, who now was alive again and also seemed a magnificent, noble bird. Together, Cy and Ali soared upward, and the plane and the honor guard and the onlookers whirled beneath them as they circled in the sky.

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## **Fiction from Peter Molin: “The Brigade Storyboard Artist”**

Captain Alex Athens had been the undisputed master of PowerPoint storyboards within the brigade headquarters since the unit’s arrival in Afghanistan. No order was disseminated until he had compressed it into a carefully orchestrated one-slide tapestry of photos, maps, graphic symbols, and textual data that prescribed every detail of an upcoming mission from intelligence to logistics to actions-on-the-objective. No mission was complete until he had compiled a perfectly manicured one-page/one-screen garden of text and images representing information, data, assessment, and analysis that thereafter would comprise the enduring record of whatever had happened, no matter what anyone said later on, and each storyboard he created was eminently ready to be submitted up the chain-of-command, if the event or mission recorded was important enough, to “the highest levels” and consequently shape understanding of what was happening on the battlefields



endeavor, lots of people grumbled, could be prickly to deal with, and periodically descend into funks, but a spirit of shared servitude, black humor, and forced good cheer generally prevailed, so it was notable that Captain Athens had few friends among the many other staff officers, nor did he seem to bond with the other officers scattered throughout the base. But whether he was liked or not was really beside the point. Since no one worked for him directly, he couldn't really make anyone miserable personally, so as long as he kept creating storyboards that were better than anyone else's and were loved by the brigade commander, then that was enough, more than enough, really.

But when Captain Athens went on mid-tour leave, the problem arose of who would replace him as the brigade's designated storyboard creator. Captain Jones tried, but his storyboards were full of errors and oddly un-synchronized typefaces and needed dozens of revisions before they were ready to be disseminated. Captain Smith's were okay, but just okay, and he couldn't complete them in a timely manner, let alone work on two or three simultaneously as could Captain Athens. With Captain Athens gone, both morale and effectiveness within the brigade headquarters plummeted. Without his storyboards suturing gaps between concept and plan and plan and action, uniting the headquarters across all staff sections and up-and-down the chain-of-command, it felt like the brigade was fighting the enemy one-handed. Orders were understood incoherently and execution turned to mush. Storyboards sent higher generated questions and skepticism, or even derision. The brigade commander's mood turned more horrible than usual and he pilloried his deputy and senior staff members, accusing them of sabotaging the success of his command.

Desperate for help, the brigade ransacked their subordinate units for an officer or staff NCO who might replace Captain Athens. Of course none of the subordinate units wanted to give up their own best storyboard artist, so now they engaged in

subterfuges to avoid complying with brigade's tasking. That's how Technical Sergeant Arrack's name got sent up to brigade. In his battalion, he'd been a night shift Tactical Operations Center NCO whose potential as a storyboard artist was unrecognized. An Air Force augmentee to an infantry unit, he had never been outside the wire, much less in combat. Nothing much was expected of him by the infantry bubbas with whom he worked, thus the night shift TOC duty answering routine radio transmissions and compiling the morning weather report. The battalion submitted his name to brigade confident that it would be summarily rejected and they wouldn't have to replace Sergeant Arrack on the night shift. But Sergeant Arrack's trial storyboard for brigade had been magnificent. Created to support the brigade's new plan to engage the local populace on every level of the political-economic-cultural-military spectrum over the next six months, it was a masterful blend of bullet points, text boxes, maps, charts, images, graphics, borders, highlights, and different type faces and fonts, totally first-class in every way and obviously presentable without correction even at "the highest levels." The brigade operations officer's heart leaped when he saw it, because he recognized how good it was and was confident that it, and Sergeant Arrack, too, would make the brigade commander very happy.

And so he was, and so for the remaining three weeks of Captain Athens' leave Sergeant Arrack was the brigade go-to storyboard creator. In twenty-five days he generated thirty-seven unique storyboards in addition to the routine ones that accompanied daily briefings and needed only to be adjusted for recent developments. The entire life of the brigade during that period passed through Sergeant Arrack's fingertips and into his computer's keyboard and then to reappear in magically animated form on his workstation screen: raids, key leader meetings, unit rotation plans, IED and suicide bomber attacks, VIP visits, regional assessments, intelligence analyses, and every other operation and event that took place in the

brigade's area of operations was nothing until it was transformed by Sergeant Arrack's storyboard artistry.

Captain Athens heard-tell of some of this while on leave and didn't like it. Though overworked as the primary brigade storyboard artist, he liked the status and the attention it brought to him. Truth to tell, he was glad when his leave ended and he made his way back to the brigade headquarters. But his first meeting with Sergeant Arrack did not go well. Sergeant Arrack was seated at his workstation, busy on an important project. Engrossed in what he was doing, he had barely looked up. "Hm, good to meet you, sir, I've heard a lot about you," he murmured, and turned his eyes back to his computer screen and began tapping away again at the keyboard. Captain Athens hated him immediately, and he could tell his place within the brigade HQ had now changed. Among other things, people just seemed to like Sergeant Arrack more than they liked Captain Athens, and were eager to work with him, eat with him, and hang out with him, while they approached Captain Athens gingerly. And when the brigade operations officer assigned Captain Athens a new storyboard project, it was obvious that it wasn't a priority mission, what with the operations officer making a lame excuse about easing Captain Athens back in slowly.

Over the next five weeks, the tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack bubbled. Captain Athens was now Sergeant Arrack's superior, and though Captain Athens didn't do anything totally unprofessional, he didn't make things easy for his subordinate, either. He assigned him menial tasks such as inspecting guard posts around the FOB walls in the middle of the night and inventorying the headquarters supply vans, all ploys designed to get Sergeant Arrack out of the brigade headquarters while reminding him of his place in things. Rarely did Captain Athens let Sergeant Arrack near a computer and he never complimented him or made small talk of any kind with him. Everyone on the staff saw what was going on, and

gossiped about it endlessly, but no one said anything officially, and the atmosphere within the brigade headquarters roiled as a result of the unconflicted animosity. For his part, Sergeant Arrack spoke about the matter only in guarded terms with some of the other staff NCOs. He didn't want to make trouble, but it wasn't long before he hated Captain Athens just as much Captain Athens hated him. The brigade commander pretended not to notice anything was wrong, but neither did he tell anyone that he had come to like Sergeant Arrack's storyboards more than Captain Athens'. The captain's were good, but Sergeant Arrack's were better.

The tension between Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack boiled over when Captain Athens told Sergeant Arrack he was detailing him to the dining facility to conduct headcounts. Sergeant Arrack determined not to take the sleights any longer and complained to the senior Air Force NCO on post who spoke to the brigade command sergeant major who then spoke to the brigade commander. The conversation between the commander and the command sergeant major took place at an auspicious moment, however. The night previously a raid to capture a high value target had gone very wrong. The intended target had not been at the objective and the military age male who had responded to the noise outside the family kalat walls with an AK-47 in his hand and subsequently shot by the Americans had been a nephew of the provincial governor. That's not to say he couldn't have been Taliban, too, but there was no proof that he was, and his death would certainly demand explanation. Next, a woman in the kalat, distraught and angry, had charged the American soldiers, and she too had been shot. As the unit had waited for extraction from the already botched mission, the helicopters coming to get them had identified a group of gunmen a klick away from the landing zone. Not taking any chances, the helicopter pilots had opened fire on the shadowy shapes in their night vision goggles, but the gunmen turned out to be a platoon of Afghan army infantrymen on patrol with their American advisor team. Even worse than worse, the

advisors had done most things right—they had had their mission plan approved, called in all their checkpoints, and marked themselves and the Afghans appropriately with glint tape and infrared chem lights that should have made them recognizable to the helicopter pilots—but once buried deep in the mountain valleys their comms had gone tits-up and they couldn't talk to anyone quickly enough to forestall the attack from above. So now the airstrike was a cock-up of the highest order and six Afghan soldiers, along with the two civilians, plus one American soldier, were dead, and higher headquarters was screaming for information and the Afghan provincial governor was outside the door demanding to know what the brigade commander was going to do about it.

If any event was going to be briefed at “the highest levels,” it was this one for sure, and the brigade would need the best damn storyboard anyone had ever created to make sure the right narrative and message were conveyed or the mess would even grow bigger. It wasn't just that the facts had to be right, the tone had to be perfect, or even more than perfect, if that was possible. The storyboard had to signify that the mishap in the dark night was just an unfortunate blip in a continuum of fantastically positive things that were happening and that everything was under control, that the brigade had this, would get to the bottom of things, learn the appropriate lessons, take the right actions, punish appropriately who needed to be punished, and just generally get on with it without any help from higher and especially without the basic competence of the unit, which meant the reputation of the brigade commander, being put up for discussion.

The brigade command sergeant major, oblivious to the events of the night before, walked into the brigade commander's office at 0730 to discuss the Sergeant Arrack situation. Normally the brigade commander would have cut him off, but the mention of Sergeant Arrack's name gave him an idea. He would have both Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack build storyboards



describing the events of the previous night. It would be the ultimate test, he thought, to build the best storyboard possible under the most trying conditions imaginable, and whichever storyboard was best would go a long way to forestalling tidal waves of scrutiny from above. The brigade commander issued directions to the operations officer and the operations officer passed the word to Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack. Each commandeered a workstation with an array of secure and non-secure laptops spread out in front of them and multiple oversized screens on which to project their designs. They gathered records of radio message traffic and patrol debriefs, both hard-copy and digital, pertinent to the botched mission and opened up all the necessary applications on their computers. Each was told they had full access to anyone they needed to gather information and reconcile conflicting reports, but they had only two hours to complete their work and send their storyboards to the brigade commander, who of course would pick the one to be sent to higher. Captain Athens and Sergeant Arrack fueled themselves with energy drinks, snacks, and dip, and got to work. After two hours of furious endeavor, each pushed save one last time and sent their storyboards forward.

Captain Athens' storyboard was good, real good. The brigade commander gazed at it on his computer screen and admired its very organized and aesthetically pleasing appearance. In the upper left corner was the required administrative information—unit name, date-time group, security classification, etc. Down the left border was a timeline, in great detail, of all the events that had taken place on the mission. In the upper-half-center was a map that showed the locations of the night's major events. Each was marked with a succinct, well-turned description of what had occurred in each location. Below the map were four pictures, each dedicated to showing a different aspect of the night's events. On the right were a series of summarizing statements that prudently listed complicating factors, actions already completed in response to

the disaster, and actions planned to be taken in the name of damage control. Everything was done extremely competently, perfectly positioned, not a thing out of place. Borders, background, font and font-size were all to standard. It exuded the professionalism of a unit that had its shit together in every way and as such would undoubtedly forestall questions and offers of unwanted help. The brigade commander was pleasantly surprised; Captain Athens had come through in spades.

Then the brigade commander opened the email attachment sent by Sergeant Arrack. The PowerPoint slide clicked into focus and the brigade commander gasped, for what appeared was not what he expected and could hardly even be said to be a storyboard. Unbeknownst to the brigade commander, Sergeant Arrack had been up all night trying to resolve a problem with his daughter's childcare plan back home in New Mexico. The situation still wasn't right when he had gone to chow in the morning. At the dining facility, he sat with a group of soldiers from his old infantry battalion who filled him with stories of how shitty things had gone down on last night's raid. When Sergeant Arrack arrived at brigade, a scorching email from his ex-wife greeted him accusing him of not fulfilling the requirements of their divorce decree. Then the operations officer gave him the mission to make a storyboard that would cover the brigade's ass about the fucked-up raid, and do it in so-called "friendly" competition with an officer whose guts he hated, and vice-versa. "Fuckin' fuck this fuckin' horseshit," he had muttered as he settled into his workstation.

Sergeant Arrack's creation was immediately arresting, no doubt, but it had little obviously to do with the mission the night before. Instead, Sergeant Arrack had created a gruesome montage of horrific war-related images, snippets of military operations orders and Persian script, along with smears of colors, mostly red and black. The most striking image was that of an Afghan man with a knife sunk to the hilt in the side of

his head. Somehow the man's countenance teetered between that of an extremely gaunt but handsome young Afghan and a skullish death-head whose vacant eye-holes bore into the viewer like the gaze of doom. It was as if Sergeant Arrack, an extremely talented artist, had perceived the assignment as a chance to portray the hellishness of war as effectively as possible, without a touch of romantic idealization of its dark side, and had done so in way that manifested both supreme imaginative power and technical skill. The whole thing, beautiful and terrifying at the same time, constituted a huge FU to the Army mission in Afghanistan generally and to a brigade he no longer cared about personally.

The brigade commander expressed mild concern about Sergeant Arrack's state-of-mind—"Holy shit, Sergeant Arrack has lost it!"—but he was too busy to either take offense or worry much about Sergeant Arrack now. He of course selected Captain Athens' storyboard as the competition winner and with no changes immediately forwarded it to his boss accompanied by a note explaining that he was in full control of the response to the calamities of the previous night. He then told Captain Athens to look out for Sergeant Arrack but under no circumstances did he want to see him in the brigade headquarters again. Captain Athens didn't have any problems with the order and even gloated a little that his competitor had cracked up under the pressure of the tough assignment. Sergeant Arrack's perverted storyboard might be museum quality but that's not what mattered now. Working with the command sergeant major and the Air Force liaison NCO, Captain Athens placed Sergeant Arrack on 24/7 suicide watch for a week and then reassigned him to the FOB fuel point in the motor pool. Now, instead of building slides in the air-conditioned brigade operations center for review at "the highest levels," Sergeant Arrack pulls twelve-hour shifts in a plywood shack annotating fuel delivery and distribution on a crumpled, coffee-stained spreadsheet secured to a dusty clipboard. To kill time during the hours when absolutely nothing is happening, he sweeps

spider webs from the corners of the office.

*“The Brigade Storyboard Artist”* originally appeared in [Time Now](#), October 7, 2016.

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## **Interview: The Problem of the Hero: Peter Molin Talks with Roy Scranton**

**Introduction:** Roy Scranton’s soon-to-be published *Total Mobilization: American Literature and World War II* expands upon Scranton’s controversial 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article “The Myth of the Trauma Hero, from Wilfred Owen to ‘Redeployment’ and ‘American Sniper.’” The *LARB* piece asserted that American war literature over-privileges the emotional suffering of white male American combatants at the expense of their war victims, while ignoring larger social and political aspects of militarism and war. In *Total Mobilization* Scranton locates the birth of the trauma hero in canonical World War II fiction and poetry. He connects literature with culture by making two arguments: 1) Treating soldiers as easily-damaged and pitiable victims of war obscures moral reckoning with war guilt and effective reintegration by veterans into civilian society, and 2) identifying and isolating veterans as a sanctified social caste offers veterans a dubious cultural reverence that overestimates the authority of their experience, while satisfying a dubious logic that preserves soldiers their identities as good men and the wars they fought as good wars. In making this argument, Scranton shuffles the deck of

World War II-writing, inviting readers to seriously reconsider the cultural work performed by canonical works, and asking them to pay more attention to a number of novels, poems, essays, articles, and movies that tell a different, more nuanced story about World War II and the decades after.

The interview was conducted via a series of phone calls and email exchanges.

– Peter Molin

**PM: When did the concept of the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural reality begin to form in your mind? Was it related more to your actual service in Iraq or to your reading and beginning efforts to write afterwards?**

RS: I can pinpoint the origin of my conceptualization of the trauma hero and, in fact, the origin of what became *Total Mobilization*, in a graduate seminar I took on war literature at the New School, in 2007 or 2008. I was anxious about taking the class, because it was one of the first graduate seminars I was to take, and because I was highly sensitive about the way in which my personal experience in Iraq might distort the classroom dynamic. I wrote the professor an email in advance, asking about the course, expressing my concerns, and assuring him that I was really interested in the material, not in using the classroom as a space to talk about myself. He responded enthusiastically, encouraging me to join the class, and telling me that my personal experience need not be a focus in the seminar, though he was convinced the mere fact of it would help my fellow students better connect with the material.

The syllabus was fairly typical “war lit,” jumping from the *Iliad* to [Robert Graves’] *Good Bye to All That* and Wilfred Owen, then a bunch of stuff on Vietnam, then I think ending with [Anthony] Swofford’s *Jarhead*. What quickly became apparent, however, was that for the professor, all the material we were reading could only be understood through a

combination of Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For this guy, all war literature was a story of trauma. But not just for him: he was merely a particularly dogmatic preacher of what was, I soon realized, a pervasive cultural belief.

Now I'd loved *Hero with a Thousand Faces* when I read it in high school, and spent two or three years annoying my friends by breaking down every movie we saw into its constituent archetypal moments, the giving of the boon, the crossing of the threshold, confronting the father, blah blah blah. But that had been a long time ago, and I'd long since realized the limits of Campbell's reductionist approach, despite the real insights it often offered. And while much war literature did seem to fit loosely within the adventure-story framework Campbell elaborated, reading something like [Ernst Junger's] *Storm of Steel*, to take only one example, through the lens of trauma seemed deeply mistaken, not only missing what was most interesting about the work, but wrenching its central premises into an alien ideology. The same thing seemed true with the *Iliad*, which is deeply misunderstood when viewed through the lens of trauma (as in [Jonathan] Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which misreads Homer and misunderstands Greek culture, though does nevertheless have real insights), as are numerous other works.

So I did what I do, which was to ask annoying questions, find counter-examples, and probe the professor's all-encompassing theory for weak points. The entire seminar was soon taken over by our intellectual grappling: things rapidly spun out of control and devolved into a power struggle. I was fighting for my intellectual integrity, my authority as a veteran, and my grade, while he was fighting for—well, it turned out that his brother had gone to Vietnam and come home fucked up, and this professor seemed to have devoted his life since to fixing his brother by proxy. I did not know when I started the class that I was to be another such proxy, but when our conflict climaxed

in him sending me an eight-page email telling me how sorry he was that I was so traumatized and how much he wished he could help me, I went to the department chair.

The professor was not invited back to teach. I saved my grade, wrote an essay about trauma and confession that was published in George Kovach's journal *Consequence* ("The Sinner's Strip-Tease: Rereading *The Things They Carried*," *Consequence*, 2:1, Spring 2010), and started delving deep into the idea of trauma: where it came from, how it worked, and why everybody seemed to conflate it with socially organized violence.

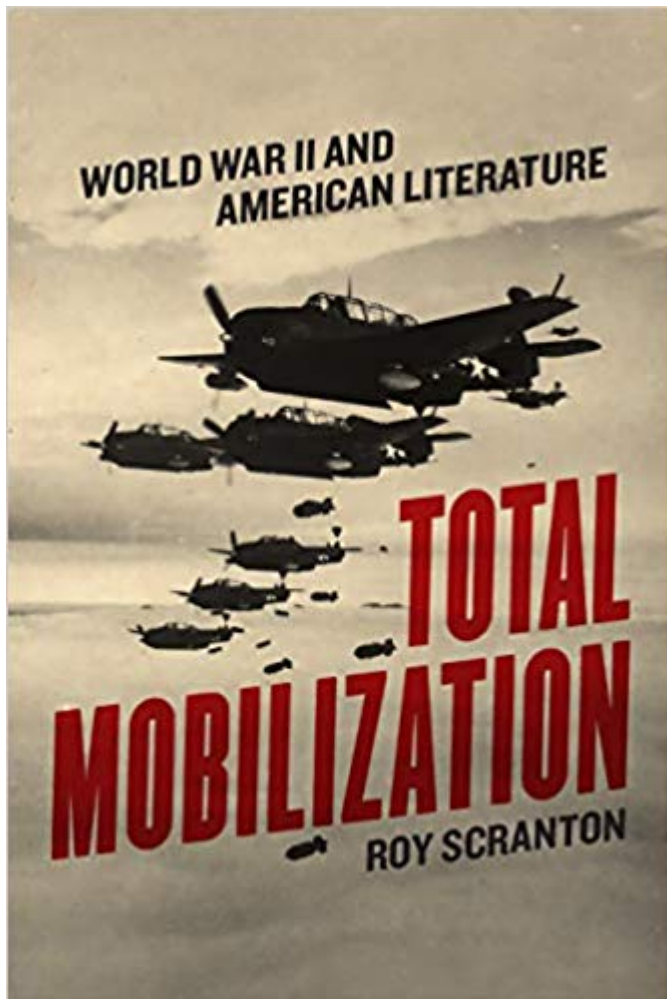
**PM: At what point did you begin to sense that the trauma hero trope worked not as a redemptive effort by authors to "humanize" soldiers by illustrating the brutality of war, but a pernicious cultural mechanism that valorized an unhealthy way of thinking about soldiers, war, and militarism? Was there a specific book, thinker, or event that crystalized the impression?**

RS: From the beginning, really, I was asking myself how this worked and who it served. Cui bono, right? I was also—let's just say that I was deeply formed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and at the same time as I was taking that seminar on war literature I remember reading Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Now Foucault... I'm not going to spend any time defending Foucault, as a thinker or a historian or whatever. I've always thought he's the Jamiroquai to Nietzsche's Stevie Wonder. But a key point of the *History of Sexuality*, which is a basically Nietzschean point, is that saying we're *not* going to talk about something is a way to talk about it. Repression is a mode of expression. Foucault made this point about the Victorians and sex, but it's worth keeping in mind anytime you start looking at cultural practices, since taboos and mysteries and so on are usually key to a culture.

This may seem sideways, but it's important to remember that

trauma is always “that which cannot be spoken.” Recall Tim O’Brien’s mystical lyricism about how there’s no such thing as a true war story (which I discuss in my chapter on trauma). Narrating the unspeakable is a power move: it designates you as a master of mystery. Now I already knew about and was suspicious of the moral authority invested in veterans simply by fact of their having joined the military. It was a pretty short step then to see how trauma functioned as a way of evoking and preserving a sense of mystery around that authority. Luckily, I happened to come across Israeli historian Yuval Harari’s magnificent book, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, which provides a deep synoptic cultural history of how the experience of war changed in the west from being understood as a testament to one’s capabilities, like a bullet point on a CV, to being understood as a revelation of esoteric wisdom. That book was very useful for helping me understand how contemporary perspectives on the experience of war evolved and what kinds of cultural work they do.





PM: Early in [\*Total Mobilization\*](#), you list a fairly conventional canon of well-known World War II fiction and poetry. But these are not the works you want to discuss in *Total Mobilization*. Instead, you bring to the fore authors such as poet Kenneth Koch and popular entertainment fare such as a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Why? What do we get by paying attention to this “alternative canon”?

RS: Norman Mailer wrote in “The White Negro” in 1957 that “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it.” Yet by the early 2000s, if not before, a clear mythic framework had emerged for understanding World War II, which can be seen in the pre-eminent WWII films of the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both from 1998, that re-interprets WWII through both the American war in Vietnam and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. This framework interprets World War II as

primarily an individual traumatic experience of violence that leads the individual to a more enlightened state, in *Saving Private Ryan* to a deeper patriotism, in *The Thin Red Line* to a deeper Transcendentalist engagement with the non-human world. But these films come out of a major cultural revision of the meaning of World War II that happened primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, first in literature, then in film, which laid the groundwork for these more explicitly trauma-based narratives. The mere fact of this should strike observers as puzzling, since World War II was an unquestionable American victory, a war in which America suffered fewer casualties than any other major combatant nation, and the origin of a half-century of American global hegemony. *Total Mobilization* explores two questions concurrently: First, how did World War II (and by extension, all war) come to be identified with trauma? Second, what is this re-interpretation obscuring?

What I found in my research by going back to the literature of World War II with fresh eyes, discounting the academic and literary consensus which tendentiously declares that World War II "didn't produce any great literature," is that writers attempting to make sense of WWII—from Ralph Ellison to Herman Wouk, from Wallace Stevens to Kenneth Koch, from James Jones to Joan Didion—were obsessed by a set of problems I group under the idea of "the problem of the hero," essentially questions about how the individual relates to society in a time of total mobilization.

What was at stake was a conflict between different kinds of stories society told itself about its values, which is to say, how Americans told themselves the story of who they were: on the one hand, narratives in which every individual was an equal and independent member of a commercial democracy where everything was for sale, and on the other hand narratives in which every individual was subordinated to the collective and the most important thing anyone could do would be to sacrifice their life for the nation. The total mobilization of American

society to fight World War II demanded, in Kenneth Burke's words, a "change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives."

In effect, World War II opened wide a conflict that had been building within the western world since the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict between nationalism and capitalism, specifically the conflict between the metaphoric logic of nationalism and metaphoric logic of capitalism around the issue of bodily sacrifice. This is the conflict at the heart of *Total Mobilization*, the conflict at the center of World War II writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the conflict for which the "trauma hero" provides an imaginary solution. Looking at works that have fallen outside the canon—such as Kenneth Koch's war poetry, wartime Bugs Bunny cartoons, Wallace Stevens's wartime poetry (which is generally derided or ignored as war poetry), or James Dickey, who has been more or less deliberately abandoned—while also revisiting canonical works such as Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," *Catch-22*, and *The Thin Red Line* with new eyes, helps us see the complex historical reality that the post-Cold-War academic and literary framework erases and obscures.



Author Roy Scranton

**PM: In particular, I was struck by your rereading of Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." How has that well-known very short poem been misunderstood or not**

## appreciated in its full magnitude?

RS: Jarrell, as many readers will know, was drafted during the war, and served stateside as an instructor in “celestial navigation.” He never saw combat, but he did see plenty of men who were headed that way. One interesting thing about Jarrell is that he writes all these poems in which youthful, virile young men are sacrificed to state power, but his letters show a pervasive and thoroughgoing contempt for his fellow soldiers. What he thought of the actual men he served with (he calls them racists and says they are intellectually “indistinguishable from Cream of Wheat”), however, is less important than the use he made of them in his poetry, which was to revitalize the British trench lyric through a Protestant American mindset. In his poetry, pre-eminently focused on bombers, Jarrell is performing a complex ritual substitution: the victims of American political violence—German and Japanese soldiers and civilians—is being replaced by the agents of that very violence—the bomber crew. The picture is flipped, so that instead of seeing Germans and Japanese women and children physically wounded and killed by American bombing, we focus instead on the suffering that bombing causes the person doing it. With the fully developed trauma hero myth the suffering is purely spiritual, but we can see Jarrell working it out de novo, as it were, making the transition from the physical—as in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”—to the spiritual—as in the poem “Eighth Air Force.”

The observation that Jarrell turns killers into victims isn't new. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, “The secret of [Jarrell's] war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?” What I do in *Total Mobilization* is look at the context and mechanism for how this happens within the genre I identify as the “bomber lyric,” within the literature of World War II, and within broader

currents of American literature from 1945 to the early 2000s.

As I write in *Total Mobilization*: "If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless, even if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power, since that is their objective social role. Hence stories of soldiers must be read in light of their complicity with and participation in sovereign power. Soldiers are the state's killers. That's their job. Jarrell's efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, turn soldiers into victims of their own violence. Such efforts are not only deluded and obscurantist but ethically naïve."

**PM:** In the chapter section titled "The Hero as Riddle: The Negro Hero and the Nation Within the Nation" you tie together Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killen's 1962 novel about a black quartermaster company in World War II *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to interrogate the racial dimensions of the trauma hero. What is significant about the African-American literary perspective on World War II?

RS: What looking at the African-American literature around World War II really helps illuminate is how much the question of war literature, and the related question of the hero, are related to what Benedict Anderson famously called "the imagined community of the nation." War literature qua "war literature" is fundamentally tangled up in questions about the national identity of the writers and subjects of that literature. This is why when people say "Vietnam War literature," they typically mean [Tim] O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or [Larry] Heinemann's *Paco's Story* or [Karl] Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, rather than Bòo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* or Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

The single most important issue at stake in the African-American literature of World War II is the question of national belonging. As James Baldwin puts it in a reminiscence written many years later, "This was in 1943. We were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar's children and the 'yellow-bellied Japs'... I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heartbreak and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. (And we *did* our duty.) The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can't betray a country you don't have... And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens."

As I discuss in the work of Baldwin, Richard Wright, John Oliver Killens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Ralph Ellison, the dilemma faced by many African-Americans under total mobilization during World War II was that they were being *ordered* to sacrifice themselves for the war, they *wanted* to sacrifice themselves for the war, but they were structurally incapable of actually sacrificing themselves—because while they could serve and while they could die in that service, like Messman "Dorie" Miller died, like Lieutenant John R. Fox died, like Sergeant Reuben Rivers died, their deaths were not recognized as legitimate sacrifices for the nation, since they were not seen as genuine constituents of that nation. In Jim Crow America, the negro was not regarded as a free citizen, hence while the negro was expected to give their life for their country—or indeed anytime it was demanded—that act was not regarded as sacred.

For writers such as Ellison and Killens, this problem emerged not only as a sense of having been prohibited from joining the (white) nation, but also as a provocation to understand their own identity as already existing within a "nationality," what James Baldwin called "a nation within a nation," which is to

say Black nationalism.

When we take into account how nationalism is constructed through ideas of shared blood, either through inheritance or through sacrifice, we begin to see the powerful ideological work narratives of collective violence do in shoring up cultural hierarchies—or in opening them to criticism and question. It's no mystery that the trauma hero in American war literature has been predominantly white, or that when we talk about "American war literature," people mostly mean literature by white men. Militarism, American identity, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and in fact have been woven together since World War II over and over again, in novels and poems and films that focus on traumatized white citizen-soldiers suffering for the violence they themselves unleashed on countless unnamed Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan bodies.

**PM: An author who is not a veteran and who is not often thought of as a writer with an abiding interest in World War II is Joan Didion. But *Total Mobilization* asserts her importance in understanding how the American West and the World War II Pacific Theater were connected in ways that differed from the American East Coast's connection with the war in Europe. How can we think of Didion as a World War II writer?**

RS: One of the central conceits of so-called "war literature" is that it is primarily by and about men in combat: Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien. But the violence of combat, as dramatic as it may be, is only one aspect of the larger phenomena of socially organized mass violence. Even thinking back to the *Iliad*, say, only parts of that work are about actual combat, and not necessarily the most interesting parts. Who can forget the scene on the battlements between Hector and Andromache, where Hector's son Astyanax recoils from his father's helmeted face in fear?

The Trojan War was perhaps the greatest literary and dramatic subject of Athenian culture, but the work addressing it was in no way restricted to narrow representations of the combat experiences of individual warriors. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to Sophocles's *Philoctetes* to Euripedes's *The Trojan Women*, we see Athenian dramatists and poets exploring a wide range of that war's events and effects. Similarly, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, World War II was a hugely important cultural event in American history, easily the most important event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and when we take a wide view of post-1945 American culture, we can see that cultural and aesthetic representations of World War II have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films. From Pearl S. Buck's novel *China Sky*, depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* and continuing with the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*; from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* to George Lucas's *Star Wars*; from Chester Himes's novel of racial tensions in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the protagonist of which is a professor of "Hitler Studies," the variety of American cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is at once a testament to the war's importance and an overwhelming strain on our efforts to understand it.

Yet if we were to go looking for the war's impact strictly in the canonical "war literature," which is focused on the traumatic combat experience of individual soldiers, we would not see it. The focus on trauma obscures and elides the historical complexity of the event. This is how someone like Joan Didion, for whom the effect of World War II on American



society is probably the central subject of her career, can be excluded from the canon of "war literature."

There is much to say about Didion's work, not least to speak of its sheer technical brilliance, or of the interesting place she occupies in literary history, as the American heir of Conrad and Orwell and the progenitor of the pop-art merging of advertising and the Stein-Hemingway tradition we eventually see fully developed in Don DeLillo, for example. But first and foremost she is a chronicler of American empire, the complex way that the frontier mentality of "the West" transformed into the Cold War mentality of "the West," through the crucible of victory in World War II. As a native Californian, old enough to remember Pearl Harbor but too young to do anything about, dragged around the country by her father (a reservist called to active duty), who saw her home state undergo a dramatic transformation from what was essentially agricultural feudalism to being perhaps the primary sector of the military-industrial complex and the utopian dream-space of suburban America, Didion was remarkably well placed to witness the disruptive and disturbing emergence of the post-45 American military Leviathan, which she tracked through her fiction, journalism, and memoir, from her first novel, *Run, River*, which is about the effects of World War II on agricultural life in the Sacramento Valley, to her memoir *Where I Was From*, which explicitly connects the frontier mentality of the Western pioneers with the emergence of American hegemony, while also elucidating the inescapable, long-term effects of military industrialization on Californian culture. Indeed, as she argues about modern Hawaiian culture in a key article I discuss in *Total Mobilization*, postwar Californian culture is inextricable from hypostasizing American militarism. And while it may be easier to see this in the west, in Hawaii and California, which only exist as they do today because of World War II, the insight applies to the whole nation. Since 1942, the United States has been a society mobilized for war, organized for war, even if only a small cadre do the actual

fighting. Didion helps us see that.

**PM: To what extent do veteran authors and artists knowingly and culpably participate in the trauma hero narrative? I would think, or maybe hope, that most would be horrified to think that their works instantiate or re-instantiate misguided, reactionary, and generally oppressive cultural and historical practices and patterns of thinking. But you suggest that they do.**

RS: The most generous response would be to say that we're all figuring it out as we go. We have the stories we love, the stories we were raised on, like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, for example, we have the stories we take up when we're trying to figure out how to make sense of an experience, we see how people respond to the stories we try to tell—and we make decisions as we go. Especially those of us trying to have careers, trying to reach a wider public; you can't just say whatever shit you feel like. There's some back and forth, whoever you wind up talking to, and sometimes there's more freedom and sometimes there's less, and most folks will take the path of least resistance rather than try to fight their way through to a deeper understanding. Some people maybe know better and choose not to give a fuck. But most people think they're good people, most writers believe they're trying to really get into the complexity, and that they're doing the best they can. The deeper issue is that people lie first of all to *themselves*, but that's just human nature.

One example we could discuss from *Total Mobilization* is Brian Turner. I know Brian, I like Brian, I respect Brian. I have long admired his poetry. I think he's a good man and a good poet. But the situation he found himself in with the cover of *Here, Bullet...* The cover of that book is a striking visual example of the work that the trauma hero does to refocus attention from the typically brown-skinned victims of war to the spiritual travails of the white American soldier: it shows

Turner himself, alone in an empty landscape, facing the viewer with a thousand-yard stare. As Turner describes the process that led to this cover (in an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), he and his editor decided to literally erase Iraqi bodies from the photo they used because he thought the blunt truth of his experience would repulse readers. The thing is, he's not wrong. From a certain perspective, he made the absolute right choice. On the other hand, telling people what they want to hear, trimming off the unpleasant bits, leaving off the hooded Iraqi prisoners—all that contributes to a collective vision of the Iraq War that focuses on the psychological suffering of American soldiers at the expense of even *seeing* the bodies of the people we killed, never mind discussing the larger political context, which is an outright scandal. So do I sympathize with Brian, as a young poet making decisions about his first book, to minimize the unpleasant reality of the Iraq War and try to keep people focused on his poetry? Of course. But I think we also have to consider the big picture.

Several scholars have begun attending to the ways that the “veteran-writer” operates in the MFA economy of postwar American literature, most pre-eminently Mark McGurl, Eric Bennett, and Joseph Darda. What they've found is that the role of the veteran-writer has been privileged in the MFA-dominated literary economy as a form of white ethnic identity writing. Just like writers of color are expected and encouraged to put themselves forward first of all as representatives of their racial or ethnic trauma, so are veteran-writers expected and encouraged to put themselves forward as representatives of their war-time trauma (A broader critique of how identity-based grievance works to create subjects conformable to the commodity logic of neoliberal capitalism can be found in the work of writers such as Joan Scott, Allen Feldman, Wendy Brown, and Asad Haider, among others). These expectations function all along the line, at every level of gatekeeping, from MFA admissions to agents to publishing to award

committees. Working against these expectations is profoundly risky, especially for emerging writers.

It can be done—Percival Everett's wicked satire *Erasure* comes to mind, or Eric Bennett's novel *A Big Enough Lie*, perhaps my own novel *War Porn*—but it's not usually going to win you accolades.

**PM:** My reading of *War Porn* is that its Iraq vet protagonist refutes sympathetic identification as a trauma hero, nor can we grant him the experiential authority of the “noble veteran.” What is the relationship in your mind (and chronologically) of *War Porn* and the academic work that became *Total Mobilization*?

**RS:** I started *War Porn* pretty soon after coming back from Iraq, while still in the army and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, then finished the first draft the summer after I ETS'd, in Berlin in 2006. There was a lot of revision ahead, but the main generative work was done. And as you suggest, I was even at that point working out a pretty strong critique of the trauma hero, even if I hadn't distinctly articulated the figure itself. I feel like *Total Mobilization* is working out analytically some of the things that *War Porn* was working out narratively.

**PM:** Your framing of the issue seems divisive and perhaps even something of a betrayal of the veteran-writer community, which we might say you helped establish with the seminal 2013 *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* anthology (co-edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher, and containing work by contemporary veteran-writing luminaries such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, Colby Buzzell, David Abrams, Brian Van Reet, and Jacob Siegel, and military spouse Siobhan Fallon). Can you talk about the desire or efforts by contemporary vet-writers to form a veteran-writer community? Can you talk about how you see your work in relation?

RS: In the conclusion of *Total Mobilization*, where I talk about the end of the Cold War and shifting arguments about the meaning of World War II, I bring up as an example the National Air and Space Museum's attempted exhibit on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2. The exhibit failed, largely because of pressure from veterans' groups. One of the sticking points was the number of expected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, which was a key piece of evidence in arguments about whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified. The historical record—the consensus of professional historians—is clear: there was a clear path to surrender with Japan that would obviate any Normandy-style landing on Honshu and Kyushu, which invasion the US military at the time expected would lead to 30,000 to 50,000 casualties. The Air Force Association and others kept insisting that the language in the exhibit employ later estimates of 500,000 or more casualties, which come from Truman and Henry Stimson's postwar memoirs and are unsupported by the historical record. As military historian John Ray Skates notes in his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, "the source of the large numbers used after the war by Truman, Stimson, and Churchill to justify the use of the atomic bomb has yet to be discovered." At one point in the argument, Tom Crouch, who was the chairman of the museum's aeronautics department, put the problem neatly: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want to do an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."

Historian Edward Linenthal describes this as conflict between a "commemorative" view and a "historical" view. We face the same conflict every time we come back to the act of representing war, discussing war, talking about war literature, because—as I argue in *Total Mobilization*—war is one of the key practices through which human beings construct their collective identity. Every discussion about war, about a

museum exhibit, about the cover of a book of poetry, about a poem, is a discussion about who “we” are, which is to say what it means to be American. And the conflict Linenthal describes, the conflict exemplified in the issue at the National Air and Space Museum, is over whether we should focus on commemoration—remembering together, emphasizing our bonds and our unity, reassuring ourselves of our basic goodness—or on the objective historical record, which often shows the American military and American government doing horrible things for morally unjustifiable reasons.

I’ve seen this play out in smaller ways in the vet writers community. When we were putting *Fire and Forget* together, around 2011 or 2012, it seemed like one major thing vet writers could do for each was to help keep each other honest: to help keep each other from telling readers what they wanted and expected to hear. I think a lot about Jake Siegel’s story from *Fire and Forget*, “Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere,” in this respect: the experience of war the characters in that story are commemorating is so raw, so powerful, that the idea of betraying the experience is tantamount to betraying your battle buddy. But as the vet writers community became more definitively established, as the actual experiences of war have faded into the past, as people have built careers as professional veterans, I’ve seen the community grow increasingly hostile to dissent. It seems like there’s been a real closing of ranks, a sense of a community supporting and protecting each other, and any real critical function has been lost (present company excepted, along with a few others). Commemoration has won out over any concern for the historical record. This is no doubt connected to the way that the “vet writer” serves to recuperate white ethnic militarism as a commodifiable victim identity (as discussed above), a fundamentally unstable identity formation given the historical and contemporary privilege afforded white men in American society, and given the tendency of militarism (however tempered by liberal multiculturalism) to resolve into a

fascistic worship of power as such.

**PM:** The conclusion of *Total Mobilization* asserts that contemporary war-writing about Iraq and Afghanistan represents a continuation, even a doubling-down, on the trauma hero trope. How has this come about and what are the consequences?

RS: I wouldn't say it represents a "doubling-down"—while I think trauma has remained central to contemporary war writing about Iraq and Afghanistan, I also think that many writers have looked for ways to innovate, if only to distinguish themselves from previous generations and each other. The film *American Sniper* and Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds* are the most obvious and conventional versions of the contemporary trauma hero story, but even Powers struggles to renovate the trope, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, by pushing through O'Brien's total negation of truth to wind up with something that is the obverse of Hemingway and Owen's insistence on particular factual sensory data: representing the act of violence as the origin of linguistic indeterminacy and the font of literary production as such. And with [Phil Klay's] *Redeployment*, [Brian Van Reet's] *Spoils*, [Elliot Ackerman's] *Green on Blue*, and [Will Mackin's] *Bring Out the Dog*, just for a few of the most talked-about examples, you can see writers struggling to get past the trauma hero, with varying degrees of gumption and success. Overall I think it has to do with long-term cultural changes: trauma remains a powerful concept for understanding reality, but I suspect that it's on its way out, and that a new emphasis on materiality is emerging. Which is to say, that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in trauma is increasingly less persuasive than that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in the body. But this is only a supposition. We'll have to wait and see. But as soon as the traumatized veteran becomes useful again, we see him return. The trauma hero will probably be around for a long time.

**PM:** In practical terms, how can understanding the trauma hero

**as a literary trope and cultural myth help us think better, more clearly, about actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war? What might the nation, or its military-medical apparatus, do to help them?**

RS: Well, I've written a work of literary and cultural history, not a practical guide to coping with trauma. I would say, though, that the entire way that we understand "actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war" must be understood as process of collective meaning-making. The psychologically damaged veteran is certainly suffering, but that suffering takes shape in performing a specific social role, which is the "traumatized veteran." As long as we stay within the bounds of the discourse, there's no way to "help" such a person by pointing out that their genuine suffering is culturally produced. I suppose we might tell them "trauma isn't real," but then what? They have to make sense of their experience somehow, and the best that could come from delegitimizing a culturally dominant way of making sense of experience would be the emergence of a new way of making sense of experience. Are there better and worse ways of making meaning? I think so. But that's another discussion. The only *practical* help my project might offer is, I would hope, some understanding of the ways that the "actual veteran" exists in relation to the "nation."

I'm a Spinozist at heart, which means I'm a materialist, but it also means that I believe freedom comes first of all from understanding. Until you understand what compels you to understand your experience through certain roles, frameworks, and practices, you'll be stuck performing those roles, seeing through those frameworks, and acting out those practices. Understanding may never provide physical or social liberation, but it can at least open a space for some freedom of thought and movement, and the possibility of equanimity toward the world as it exists, which is to say a sense of peace.

**PM: On what grounds can a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan feel**



**good about his or her service? On what grounds can a veteran construct a guilt-free life post-military?**

RS: I'm not here to make former soldiers feel good about their experience. The whole premise feels a bit absurd to me. Nor am I interested in articulating a way for anyone to live life "guilt free." I think guilt, like shame, can be useful and healthy. How else do you learn and grow as a person except by confronting your mistakes and owning them, internalizing them, recognizing what you did and finding a way forward? "Guilt-free" is an advertising slogan.

This goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the difference between "commemorative" and "historical" views about war and the role of the veteran in American culture. I feel no obligation as a scholar, critic, or writer to "commemorate" war or to "honor" the direct role some people play in America's wars. On the contrary, I feel an obligation to be faithful to the historical record, objective facts, and unpleasant realities. Because I am myself a veteran, some people see a contradiction there, as if selling my ass to the US Army for four years somehow obliges me to participate in the collective myth-making of American militarism. But such an expectation is absurd. I refuse to play the role of the professional vet.

It seems clear that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unjustifiable in any moral sense. Everyone involved was not only complicit, but an active agent in genuine evil and massive human suffering. You have to come to terms with that.

**PM: You also have a novel coming out this year, titled [I \[Heart\] Oklahoma](#)? What can we expect?**

RS: It's a "road movie novel," a vision-quest, a deep dive into the blood myths of modern America. Let's just say there wind up being a lot of bodies on the highway. LitHub is publishing an excerpt, which I'd suggest as the easiest way to

see whether you feel like taking this particular death trip.

