

An Interview with Elliot Ackerman

Elliot Ackerman is the author of four novels—most recently Red Dress in Black and White, set in Istanbul primarily during the 2013 Gezi Park protests—and a memoir.

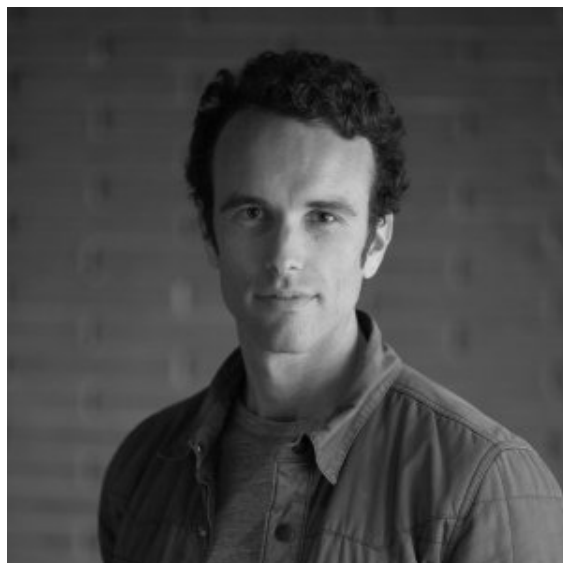
Here's a synopsis of [Red Dress](#):

“Catherine has been married for many years to Murat, an influential Turkish real estate developer, and they have a young son together, William. But when she decides to leave her marriage and return home to the United States with William and her photographer lover, Murat determines to take a stand. He enlists the help of an American diplomat to prevent his wife and child from leaving the country—but, by inviting this scrutiny into their private lives, Murat becomes only further enmeshed in a web of deception and corruption. As the hidden architecture of these relationships is gradually exposed, we learn the true nature of a cast of struggling artists, wealthy businessmen, expats, spies, a child pulled in different directions by his parents, and, ultimately, a society in crisis. Riveting and unforgettably perceptive, *Red Dress in Black and White* is a novel of personal and political intrigue that casts light into the shadowy corners of a nation on the brink.”

Wrath-Bearing Tree is featuring an excerpt from Red Dress this month, and were glad that Ackerman agreed to drop in for a chat to accompany it. Here, he talks with WBT co-editor Andria Williams.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Hi, Elliot. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I just finished Red Dress in Black and White, which the Seattle Times called “cunning, atmospheric” and “splendidly gnarly” (!).

I'd love to hear about the writing process for the novel. I think I remember reading that you spent several years on this book. What gave you the idea for a love story set in Istanbul?



Elliot Ackerman, author of 'Red Dress in Black and White (Knopf, May 2020).

ELLIOT ACKERMAN: I lived in Istanbul for about three years, arriving shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests that are mentioned in the novel and staying until 2016. Throughout my time in Istanbul, I could see how those protests—a political event—echoed in the personal lives of so many of my Turkish friends. I've always been interested in the fault line between the political and the personal, so it felt very natural to tell a love story not only set in Istanbul but also set within a society in crisis, which Turkey very much was during the years that I lived there.

AW: *One of the other Wrath-Bearing Tree editors, Michael Carson, and I both noticed some similarities – in tone, in the characters, in the use of a young boy as onlooker – to Graham Greene's The End of the Affair (but without the fatal dose of Catholicism!).*

Is Greene an influence, or are these similarities coincidental? Who are your biggest literary influences?

EA: I've always admired Greene's work and I think he and I are interested in many of the same themes, namely the intersection of the personal and the political. *The End of the Affair* is a great book but didn't directly influence the writing of this book, though I certainly see what you and Michael are talking about. William, the boy you mentioned in my novel, does serve as a more passive onlooker. The sections that are told from his point of view are important because they give us a glimpse of the principle characters from outside the many other biased perspectives that occupy the novel.

As for other literary influences, it's tough to say because they're constantly evolving. There are, of course, those classic writers who you encounter when you're younger and constantly return to (Greene, Hemingway, Malraux, Didion, Balzac, etc.) but I'm always reading and being influenced by what I read, so of course that filters into my work. Recently, I've greatly enjoyed books by Renata Adler (*Speedboat*), Richard Yates (*Young Hearts Crying*), Catherine Lacey (*Pew*), Richard Stern (*Other Men's Daughters*) and Shelby Foote (*Love In A Dry Season*).

AW: *You write quite frequently from what could be considered an "othered" position: with close third-person perspective on characters who are Afghan, in Green on Blue; women, such as Mary in Waiting for Eden and Catherine in Red Dress in Black and White; as a Turkish businessman in Red Dress, and as a dozen or more other people across your work who aren't like yourself.*

As a fiction writer myself, I'm interested in this part of the craft, and am wondering if you could speak a little about it. Some writers of fiction stick close to their own time frame, social milieu, and so forth, and that can work very well. But I think there's a certain bravery and liveliness to writing from a variety of perspectives.

Did this sort of wide-ranging style come naturally to you, or

did you have to train yourself? What about the adjacent humor of being frequently referred to as a “journalist” when you so often write from completely different points of view than your own?

Who is to say that I [even] am writing about the “other”? In *Green on Blue*, I wrote about a young man fighting in an Afghan militia; I spent three years embedded and fighting in the very militias I wrote about. Mary is a woman, sure, but she is a military spouse; if you know anything about my life, it will probably come as no surprise to you to learn that military spouses who’ve lost loved ones certainly don’t feel like the “other” to me, and in the case of Catherine nor does a woman living in the expatriate scene in Istanbul. Also, if you believe, as I do, that every person contains within them the “feminine” and the “masculine” it is no problem for a man to write from the female perspective or for a woman to write from the male one. As for Murat, he is Turkish, but he is also a businessman who struggles to balance his personal life with his professional life; and, well, let’s just say I have plenty of loved ones who have faced similar struggles.

I only bring up these examples because the current fashion in so much of literature—and, sadly, in art—is to force writers into a cul-de-sac of their own experiences as defined by those who probably don’t know them and are assuming the parameters of the artist’s experience based on some superficial identity-based epistemology. That type of censoriousness makes for bad art and, in my view, bad culture.

AW: *Thanks for those thoughts!*

Much of ‘Red Dress’ is set around a dramatic protest which took place in Gezi Park, when citizens rallied against the government’s urban development plan. Can you talk about these protests? Were you present for any of them?

EA: These protests—which occurred principally in May and June

of 2013—began as a demonstration against the proposed development of Gezi Park—a greenspace in central Istanbul—into a shopping mall. The government reacted brutally to handful of activists and then the protests spread, becoming the greatest political upheaval in Turkish society in a generation.

I wasn't present for the initial set of protests but was present for the subsequent protests in the fall and into the following year. There are scenes in the novel that describe the protests and I recreated those based on conversations I'd had with friends who participated, as well as the work I did as a journalist covering subsequent protests in the same parts of the city.

AW: Do you see reverberations of the Gezi Park protests in the current and enduring protests that have surged in the United States this summer?

EA: The way the protests have captivated the public consciousness is certainly similar, but American society isn't Turkish society. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests led to the re-writing of the Turkish constitution, a failed military coup, the creation of an executive presidency as opposed to a parliamentarian one where Erdoğan can stay in power indefinitely, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of anti-Erdoğan intellectuals and the state takeover of the majority of media outlets. We're far from there, and I think it's important not to engage in hyperbole, as if the situation in the U.S. (troubling as it may be) is analogous to Turkey.

AW: In an interview with The Rumpus, you speak very eloquently about your time in the Marine Corps, and how much of it is essentially about "building love" for fellow Marines, but then being willing to tear this down – that the mission supersedes even such a strong love.

I see elements of this thinking in both Waiting for Eden and Red Dress. Can you speak more about this idea, in military

service, life, and art?

EA: Art is the act of emotional transference. How often have you gone to a museum and been overwhelmed by a work of art? Or seen a film and cried? When I am writing—if it's going well—I am feeling something as I put the words on the page, and if you read that story and feel some fraction of what I was feeling then I have transferred my emotions to you. That we both feel something when we engage with the subject matter is an assertion of our shared humanity and that is an inherently optimistic act.

To create this type of art—in stories—you have to learn to love your characters. In the military—to serve, to sacrifice—you have to learn to love the people you are alongside. My time in the Marines taught me how to love people across our many seemingly profound but ultimately superficial divides. That impulse has ultimately found its way into my writing. My hope is that it finds its way to my readers in the stories I tell.

AW: What are you working on next?

EA: I've co-authored a novel with my friend Admiral James Stavridis, whose last position was as Supreme Allied Commander Europe; it is a work of speculative fiction (so a bit of a departure for me) which imagines what would happen if the U.S. and China went to war, primarily at sea. It is a story told on a broad canvas with a large cast of characters. It's been a lot of fun to write and will come out in March 2021, with Penguin Press. These calamitous events take place in the year 2034, from which the novel takes its title: *2034*.

AW: That sounds like lots of fun. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Elliot.

[Red Dress in Black and White](#) is now available wherever books are sold.