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A Mountain Studio of One's Own

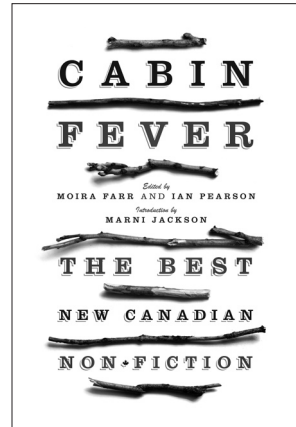
Cabin Fever: The Best New Canadian Non-Fiction

Moira Farr and Ian Pearson, editors. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2010. Paperback, 335 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Jacqueline Marino, Kent State University, U.S.A.

Since 1989, more than 150 nonfiction writers have participated in the Banff Centre's exalted Literary Journalism Program. At this month-long residency in the Canadian Rockies, writers enjoy secluded cabins, onsite editors and the company of the similarly driven. Although the program seems like a treasure to the genre, writers of literary journalism have rarely needed such creature comforts. Literary journalism has always been about telling stories of real life—often stories of struggle, conflict, and *dis*comfort. For *People of the Abyss*, Jack London moved to the East End slums. For *Random Family* a hundred years later, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc hung around the Bronx with drug dealers' girlfriends. Great literary journalism is born of immersion, not seclusion. This is practically a characteristic of the genre, transcending time, circumstance, and culture. So I approached *Cabin Fever*, a thirteen-work anthology representing the best nonfiction of Banff's past six years, with plenty of skepticism (okay, and maybe a little jealousy).

Some stories skew literary and others journalistic. To me, a nonfiction work is "literary journalism" if it matches the five-word definition Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda set forth in *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, a 1997 collection I still require in my basic Feature Writing class: "Thoughtfully, artfully and valuably innovative." In almost every story in *Cabin Fever*, I found thoughtfulness, art and value. Megan K. Williams's quest for a driver's license in Rome got me thinking about the values we teach our children. It was the first work of journalism I've read that got beyond the Italians-as-morally-inferior stereotype—not the sort of thing one would expect from an article about driving habits. Bill Reynolds also takes us on dangerous roads—on a bicycle in Toronto. Book-ending his narrative with his own bicycling drama, which includes both physical and psychological conflict, he compellingly weaves together facts and figures, anecdotes and ponderings. "We manage by slipping through the cracks in the urban bustle, finding the seam, whether through a traffic jam or in a designated lane," he writes. "Still, the act of riding encases us in a protective fantasy. With one push of the pedal, the rider is bombing around the neighbourhood—ignoring the dull parade of adult duties, full of youthful optimism, insulated from the stultifying conformity of public transportation, the headaches of



car ownership . . .” (279). To bike or not to bike? For those who pedal in the city, that’s a loaded question. Reynolds makes sure we know it without sounding the least bit preachy.

Several stories are memoirs, including Charlotte Gill’s “Eating Dirt,” which is about her life as a treeplanter. Gill’s poetic style slowed down my reading because I kept lingering on her dreamy sentences. “Our hands are scratched and scabbed, our fingerpads etched with dirt,” she writes. “They feel to us, our own digits, swollen and pulsating, like the hands of cartoon characters when they bash themselves with hammers. We came chubby and pale at the end of the winter. We shrank down and hardened, like boot leather dried too fast. We have calluses on top of calluses, piled up on our palms and soles. Farmer’s tans. Six-packs. Arms ropy, muscled and veined” (13). Gill is one of the writers who rely on personal experience over reportage, which didn’t surprise me. How much reporting can one realistically get done in a private cabin in the Canadian Rockies? A cabin of one’s own is where one *writes*. But other works in this anthology contain a great deal of reporting, making the memoirs seem more suspect. As I read them, a passage from Marni Jackson’s introduction kept haunting me:

For works of non-fiction, there used to be a reader’s compass we could trust, with a needle that always swung round to the true north of fact. But the closer you get to the magnetic poles, the more unreliable a compass becomes—the needle begins to swing about wildly. Something of the same thing has happened in non-fiction writing. We live in a disoriented time, where truth is a kind of magnetic pole; from a distance it behaves like a stable point of reference, but the closer you come to it—in the intimacy of a memoir or the imagined details of an historical narrative—the more its precise location blurs. (5)

She adds, “The boundaries of fact and fiction will probably continue to blur, encouraging writers to play in the intertidal zone between the two” (5). The genres of fiction and nonfiction will “flirt with one another, and the result will be vital new work” (6).

Others have suggested that literary journalism will evolve to include greater doses of personal (as opposed to independently verified) truth. As Norman Sims pointed out in *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, memoir has played an increasing role in literary journalism since the 1970s. However, the distance between verified fact and “personal truth” is not a creek but a gulf. Flirting is fine, but let’s not marry the two.

I finally got both the reporting and the literary writing I craved in two travel pieces, classic stories of searching: Taras Grescoe’s pursuit of a myth and Andrew Westoll’s quest for a tiny frog. Inspired by much literary attention to the Green Fairy, including Gustave Flaubert’s warning that “one glass and you’re dead” (the quote Grescoe used to title his story), the author thought he found absinthe in 1997 in a hipster bar in Barcelona. “After soaking sugar cubes in the transparent, oily-looking liquid, poisoning them on a three-tined fork, and lighting them on fire until the alcohol burned off, we dissolved the caramelized sugar in the pure absinthe,” he writes. “Topped up with cold water, our brandy glasses became the crucible for the now-fa-

miliar alchemy of opacity, and the burnt sugar leavened the bitter herbal bite” (139). He wrote about the experience for *Salon.com* and *The Face*, but his doubts and the ensuing absinthe hype—enter Johnny Depp and Martha Stewart—kept him searching. He got more obsessed, eventually embarking on a journey to find the “holy grail” of absinthe in a Swiss valley, making many taste detours along the way and leaving us wondering whether authenticity, not absinthe, is the real myth.

In “The Blue Jewel of the Jungle,” Westoll reports from Suriname, the least-traveled country in South America, with a scientist’s attention to detail and a poet’s sense of wonder. This is a place where people measure distance in number of sunsets one will encounter while traveling, a place of rain forests and wild things—iguanas, anacondas, and the elusive *okopipi*, “the soul of the last Eden” (224), a poisonous blue frog Westoll is determined to find. During his journey, the author chronicles the brutality of watching a type of monkey he used to study get butchered; then he tells you how it tastes slipping down his throat. The piece follows a beautiful narrative arc that will be instructive for even beginning feature writers.

One memoir meets the literary journalism definition of “innovative.” John Vigna gives the reader a variety of viewpoints from which to witness his tortured relationship with his brother, Paul, an often drug-addicted, manipulative, and unbearably toxic presence in his life. As the little brother, Vigna is adoring, easy prey. Paul gets him to do what he wants by promising compliance will toughen him up for hockey. Vigna relays one instance where Paul lies to his father about John’s role in killing a gopher with a stolen slingshot. He writes, “Father slid his belt off his khaki shorts, grabbed Small, pushed him up the stairs to the bathroom, slammed the door. Big grinned at his cleverness and his ability to lie to Father, who believed him since he was the oldest. Big listened to the sound of leather smacking skin. He wondered if Father would strike Small’s hand and wrist with the buckle, as he often had done to Big. He listened for a confession but heard only wails. He knew Small wouldn’t tell Father. He also knew that Small would brace himself for each stinging blow by telling himself that he’d be a better goalie” (179). At other times in his life, Vigna feels angry, charitable, and guilt-ridden toward his brother. The reader wonders if he will ever find peace. In addition to excellent character development and jarring-yet-effective switching from first to second person, “Ballad” wins fact points for a postscript.

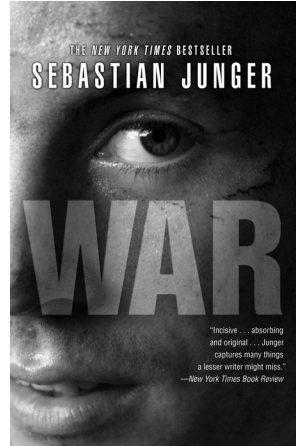
Besides the Banff experience and their physical location between the book’s covers, what common thread (besides Canada, of course) holds these thirteen works together? There are memoir and reportage, travel writing and science writing, and nonfiction with varying degrees of factual accuracy. That compass needle fluctuating at the poles of truth does the same thing when you use it to signal literary journalism. One reader will see it in stories such as these; others will say they miss the mark. It wasn’t always obvious that I was reading works from a program billed as “literary journalism,” but I never doubted I was in the presence of master storytellers.

Legacies of Literary Style in Wartime Journalism

Todd Schack, Ithaca College, U.S.A.

*The publication of recent works of literary journalism about war, especially Sebastian Junger's *War* and Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War* (reviewed in LJS 1, no. 2, Fall 2009, 120–22), are reminders of a rich literary journalistic heritage. The following review essay compares and contrasts a range of significant works of American literary journalism about war to Junger's book.*

*As this article was going to press, we learned that Tim Hetherington, co-director with Junger of *War*'s companion documentary *Restrepo*, was killed reporting from the war zone in Libya. We would like to dedicate the following article to his memory*



WORKS DISCUSSED

War by Sebastian Junger. New York: Twelve, 2010.

The Forever War by Dexter Filkins. New York: Knopf, 2008.

The Face of War by Martha Gellhorn. 1959. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988.

Dispatches by Michael Herr. 1977. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Liebling: World War II Writings by A. J. Liebling. Pete Hamill, editor. New York: Library of America, 2008.

Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches by Ernie Pyle. 1986. David Nichols, editor. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2008.

M by John Sack. 1967. Lincoln: IUniverse, 2004.

Night Draws Near by Anthony Shadid. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.

Sebastian Junger's recently published book, *War*¹ (2010), which depicts the Afghan war in the Korengal Valley "as soldiers really live it," will inevitably garner many comparisons to other, more famous works of literary war reporting, and it is perhaps worthwhile to preempt that critical discussion with an investigation of what, exactly, works of literary journalism bring to the depiction of war. By revisiting some of the classic works of literary war reporting, and by noting those elements that have made them canonical in terms of the level of detail—the themes, character development,

imagery and symbolism, immersive reporting and flair for language—we might see more clearly whether recent works such as Junger’s *War* rise to the level of literary journalism. Further, and more important, we might consider how this literary aspect works to better inform the public about our current wars, and how a war correspondent, via these devices, may work to interpret these conflicts for us beyond mere facts.

Junger, best known for his book *The Perfect Storm*, was embedded with Battle Company, Second Platoon of the U.S. Army’s 173rd Airborne unit, operating at the Korengal Outpost in Afghanistan. In one year he took five trips to the Korengal while working on articles for *Vanity Fair*, on which this book is largely based. While Junger is certainly cognizant and quite honest about the limitations embedded journalists face—specific examples of this follow below—there is one aspect of that must briefly be mentioned here.

Considering that there are multiple, well-defined limitations facing an embed²—not least of which are the facts that such a journalist: (1) is dependent upon the military for food, travel, and safety; (2) becomes emotionally attached to the soldiers; (3) may risk the objective integrity of the writing (either via official censorship or a subtle self-censorship); and (4) never witnesses the “other side,” that is, the actual *results* of all those moments of fighting—it may be rightly asked whether an embed is able to produce a piece of literary journalism at all.

While successful examples are few, and while it is entirely predictable what *type* of story an embed who aspires to literary heights is limited to write (i.e., the “worm’s-eye view” made famous during World War II by Ernie Pyle), it is indeed possible to produce literary journalism as an embed. This does, however, depend on author reflexivity and intentionality—or the conscious acknowledgement on the part of the writer to signal to the reader that he or she is entirely aware of such structural limitations.

To his credit, Junger makes clear that *War* is just such a story, that he is aware of his own limitations: “I’ve been in Afghanistan many times before . . . and it is a country I care about tremendously. This time, however, I’m not interested in the Afghans and their endless, terrible wars; I’m interested in the Americans. I’m interested in what it’s like to serve in a platoon of combat infantry in the U.S. Army” (25). And further, on journalistic limitations:

Journalistic convention holds that you can’t write objectively about people you’re close to, but you can’t write objectively about people who are shooting at you either. Pure objectivity . . . isn’t remotely possible in a war; bonding with the men around you is the least of your problems. Objectivity and honesty are not the same thing, though, and it is entirely possible to write with honesty about the very personal and distorting experiences of war. (26)

Once he makes these disclosures, he writes the story of Battle Company using the devices that have made the best literary war reporting so recognizable and that have been used by the best writers of the genre, most notably Ernie Pyle. Arguably the most famous of World War II reporters, Pyle had a signature style that included a fine-grained level of detail, the use of repetition, the first and second-person points of view, and especially his capacity to let the reader witness little moments of what

might be called soldiers' etiquette—or how one acts or doesn't act in a combat zone. One famous piece, "The Death of Captain Waskow," displays all such devices:

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden pack-saddles, their heads hanging down on one side, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other, bobbing up and down as the mules walked . . . I don't know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and you don't ask silly questions. (195–96)

Junger provides many similar moments in *War*, especially regarding the combat moment itself, and how the intensity of that moment determines how soldiers act both in the heat of battle as well in the many monotonous spells in between fire-fights. In combat, Junger writes,

Margins were so small and errors potentially so catastrophic that every soldier had a kind of de facto authority to reprimand others—in some cases even officers. And because combat can hinge on the most absurd details, there was virtually nothing in a soldier's daily routine that fell outside the group's purview. Whether you tied your shoes or cleaned your weapon or drank enough water or secured your night vision gear were all matters of public concern and so were open to public scrutiny . . . The attention to detail at a base like Restrepo forced a kind of clarity on absolutely everything a soldier did until I came to think of it as a kind of Zen practice: the Zen of not fucking up. (160)

Pyle was adept at showing—as opposed to telling—how soldiers acted and spoke, what is and is not done in a combat zone, and most important, what it felt like to be there. A. J. Liebling (arguably the second-most famous World War II reporter), in a *New Yorker* article entitled "Pyle Set the Style," wrote:

A substantial fraction of the readers of the seven hundred papers [in which Pyle's column appeared] read nothing about the war but Pyle and the headlines. He was the only American war correspondent who made a large personal impress on the nation in the Second World War . . . You could have been sleeping on the ground for a fortnight without thinking much about it, but when you read that he had been sleeping on the ground, your bones ached. (752)

Similarly, Junger spends a substantial amount of time showing us the minute details of the soldier's lives, the mundane activities, etiquette, and lingo: "Soldiers spend a good deal of time trying to figure out how to reproduce the sound of gunfire verbally, and 'ka-SHAAH' was the word Second Platoon seemed to have settled on" (82). Certainly, Junger is at his best when the level of his descriptive detail is as fine-grained as Pyle's, as in this passage:

The sun has fired the Abas Ghar with a red glow and a few of the brighter planets are already infiltrating the afternoon sky. The men are standing around in dirty fleeces and their pants unbelted smoking cigarettes and watching another day come to an end. They're dirty in their pores and under their nails and their skin has burnished to a kind of sheen at the wrists and neck where the uniforms rub. Dirt collects in the creases of the skin and shows up as strange webs at the corners of the eyes and their lifelines run black and unmistakable across the palms of their hands. It's a camp of homeless men or hunters who have not reckoned with a woman in months and long since abandoned niceties. (157)

These are Junger's "Pyle-esque" moments, but he has sequences that are indicative of other writers as well. While Pyle was certainly the best-known World War II reporter, he was most likely not the best overall writer during the war, a judgment that would likely have to go to either Liebling or Martha Gellhorn.³ Liebling wrote with a literary style that enabled his readers to see and make sense of the macro-level meaning in micro-level detail. Famous for pulling no punches, he wrote what he saw and said what he meant, no matter the subject, such as the following passage on a not-altogether inconsequential figure in the days following the French defeat: "One man only showed any hope in Tours—the long-nosed, stork-legged Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, Undersecretary for War, who was there chiefly because the field commanders had refused to have him with them" (103).

But Liebling is at his best when describing with minute detail that is heavy with meaning the actions of the ordinary folk caught in the machinery of war. In *The Road Back to Paris*, he writes of the day Paris fell to the Germans:

The last impression of Paris we carried with us was of deserted streets everywhere around the railroad stations, where the crowds were so big that they overflowed all the surrounding sidewalks. . . . The roads leading south from Paris were gorged with what was possibly the strangest assortment of vehicles in history. No smaller city could have produced such a gamut of conveyances, from fiacres of the Second Empire to a farm tractor hitched to a vast trailer displaying the American flag and a sign saying "This trailer is the property of an American citizen." (99)

Considering that Liebling was writing to express his moral outrage, especially at what he thought was the unconscionable lack of courage in isolationist America, the irony in that last line is especially poignant. It also shows in sharp relief the value of a literary style that is admittedly subjective rather than objective, yet all the more honest due to the author's subjectivity.

Writing on "War and the New Journalism," Greg McLaughlin states that the literary journalist "subverts the whole notion of objectivity . . . It is journalism as art, the writer's moral vision and personal perspective always to the fore" (163), which in turn is better able to provide the type of macro-level historical, political, even moral context of the events than a conventional, objective approach. This is what Junger meant when he stated: "Objectivity and honesty are not the same thing, though, and it is entirely possible to write with honesty about . . . war." Showing precisely this, that he is also adept at providing such macro-level meaning, he writes:

The Korengal was a safe haven from which insurgents could attack the Pech River corridor, and the Pech was the main access route to Nuristan, so a base in the Korengal made sense, but there was something else going on. The valley had enormous symbolic meaning because of the loss of nineteen American commandos there, and some soldiers suspected that their presence in the valley was the U.S. military's way of punishing locals for what had happened in the Abas Ghar. For both sides, the battle for the Korengal developed a logic of its own that sucked in more and more resources and lives until neither side could afford to walk away. (52)

This subjective expression of "moral vision and personal perspective" that defines the literary style in war reporting, either overt or couched in symbolism, invokes

the legacy of Gellhorn, and if Pyle and Liebling are the most famous writers of the World War II era, Gellhorn would have to be the most overlooked and underrated. She also pre-dated the other writers as a war correspondent, beginning her career in the mid-1930s reporting on the Spanish Civil War.⁴ Yet it is her unmistakable voice, which couched no expression of moral outrage nor hid behind any Lippmann-esque standard of objectivity, to which every subsequent generation of literary war reporter is indebted, including Pyle and Liebling. In “The Third Winter” she writes in her signature understated style:

November, 1938. In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather. The cafés along the Ramblas were crowded. There was nothing much to drink; a sweet fizzy poison called orangeade and a horrible liquid supposed to be sherry. There was, of course, nothing to eat. Everyone was out enjoying the cold afternoon sunlight. No bombers had come over for at least two hours. The flower stalls looked bright and pretty along the promenade. “The flowers are all sold, Señores. For the funerals of those who were killed in the eleven o’clock bombing, poor souls.” (37)

Such is Gellhorn’s style, where a pleasant afternoon is “perfect bombing weather,” and aerial bombardments are known for the hour on which they occurred, indicating, for the victims, both their frequency and ineluctability. She could also be frank with her moral vision yet remain cognizant of her role as a journalist:

In the Second World War, all I did was praise the good, brave and generous people I saw, knowing this to be a perfectly useless performance. When occasion presented, I reviled the devils whose mission was to deny the dignity of man; also useless . . . but I could not fool myself that my war correspondent’s work mattered a hoot. War is a malignant disease, an idiocy, a prison, and the pain it causes is beyond telling or imagining. (2)

However much she denies her own influence as a journalist, she did tell of this idiotic disease, and she told it remarkably well. In one passage indicative of her reviling the “devils” of war, she writes:

A fat old Italian in Cattolica, who had worked for twelve years on the Pennsylvania Railroad, was trundling his pitiful possessions home in a handcart. The Germans had occupied Cattolica for three months and had evacuated the citizens one month ago, and during this month they looted with horrid thoroughness, like woodworms eating down a house. What they did not wish to steal, they destroyed; the pathetic homes of the poor with smashed sewing machines and broken crockery and the coarse linen sheets and towels torn to shreds bear witness to their pointless cruelty. This old man was going home to a gutted house, but he was a healthy happy old man, and he was overjoyed to see us and he invited me to visit him and his wife the next day. The next day his wife was dead, as the Germans came over that night and plastered the little town with anti-personnel bombs. (136)

It is in her intimate detail, creative use of metaphor, and her understatement of pain, grief, and misery that we find her style, a style that has become indicative of the best of modern literary journalism. Yet despite her understatement, she also wrote with a moral clarity that was as obvious as a children’s parable. In “A Little Dutch Town,” she writes: “October 1944. This is a story about a little Dutch town called Nijmegen and pronounced any way you choose. The moral to the story is: it would

be a good thing if the Germans did not make a war every twenty years or so and then there would be no story about little towns called Nijmegen” (138).

While Junger is certainly less overt in his expressions of moral vision, he is no less courageous in that one of the most striking aspects of *War* is his discussion of two topics that are for the most part taboo in conventional war reporting: the personal psychology of the front-line soldiers, and the addictive nature of combat. Indeed, these topics—both related of course—are the major themes of *War*, and he went to great lengths researching and quoting from psychological and sociological studies of war, from sources as disparate as the U.S. Army, the *American Psychological Association Monitor*, the Rand Corporation, the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* and many other academic, military, and think-tank sources. While he discovers certain truths about combat that are less than comfortable to one who has never lived it, his writing here does flirt with a cardinal sin of literary reporting: too much telling, not enough showing.

Junger must have been aware of this pitfall, however. At the moment the language becomes a bit too academic. He has a way of exploring this psychological theme exemplified through dialogue and scene-setting detail:

Anderson sat on an ammo crate and gave me one of those awkward grins that sometimes precede a confession: “I’ve only been here four months and I can’t believe how messed up I already am,” he said. “I went to the counselor and he asked if I smoked cigarettes and I told him no and he said, ‘Well you may want to think about starting.’” He lit a cigarette and inhaled. “I hate these fuckin’ things,” he said. (40)

Or another example is about a soldier having trouble coping with the death of a much-loved staff sergeant named Rougle:

Cortez worried that Rougle was still alive when the enemy overran the position and that they had executed him where he lay, but there was no evidence to support that. Nevertheless, the thought was to torment Cortez in the coming months. Every night he’d dream he was back on the mountain trying to run fast enough to make things turn out differently. They never would. “I’d prefer to not sleep and not dream about it,” Cortez said, “than sleep with that picture in my head.” (106)

Both of these instances, and others like them, lead to Junger’s musings on combat psychology, biology, and military history. And while Junger does an admirable job of making us feel what it’s like to be a soldier, to identify mentally with a modern soldier fighting in Afghanistan, he is certainly not the first war correspondent to attempt such psychological profiling, and is rather indebted to two other writers, John Sack and Michael Herr.

John Sack, author of *M* (named after M Company of the 1st Infantry Division), whose signature style relies heavily on detailed description and multiple points of view—including getting inside the heads of the soldiers—also explored the psychology of the troops he was embedded with (although that term didn’t exist at the time). In one such passage, he writes of a soldier’s internal anxiousness to get on with the business of killing:

To kill a communist soldier: this was Demirgian’s dream . . . this was Demirgian’s sacred quest. For a boy with no past history of animus to Asians of any political

party, a year on that distant continent and Demirgian's wish to kill communists had gone beyond all expectations, it was something fierce, his bones had become like a thing turned black, a thin black liquid ran in his arteries, no other friends of his felt it that passionately, the reason—that was Demirgian's secret. A bullet, a piece of his bayonet, it didn't make a diff to Demirgian *how*, a tent peg if it was sharp enough, a shovel, a can of kerosene, a kitchen match and—*bastard! die!* Demirgian's imagination knew no mercy—kick him in the genitals, finger in his eyeballs, stick him in the ash-can, ha-ha-ha! *Yeah*, Demirgian thought in his wait at this ambush area, it might be the night tonight—a toss of a hand grenade, success! An explosion and *I'll look at him lying there dead and I'll think*—Demirgian thought of a pale yellow face, the mouth like a broken bottle, the starlight on crooked teeth—*I think I'll be sorry about him*—yeah, Demirgian thought. *I'll say to him poor bastard! You're fighting for a losing cause!* And later if there was a watch upon him, Demirgian thought he might take it, a souvenir. (153–54)

Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, widely considered to be the quintessential book on Vietnam, featured all the devices of literary journalism. In a particularly telling segment on the psychology of fear—and the drug-like quality of combat—Herr writes:

Quakin' and Shakin', they called it, great balls of fire, Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body, get as close to it as you can without being in it yet or of it, guess who's flying around about an inch above your head? Pucker and submit, it's the ground. Under Fire would take you out of your head and your body too, the space you'd seen a second ago between subject and object wasn't there anymore, it banged shut in a fast wash of adrenaline. Amazing, unbelievable, guys who'd played a lot of hard sports said they'd never felt anything like it, the sudden drop and rocket rush of the hit, the reserves of adrenaline you could make available to yourself, pumping it up and putting it out until you were lost floating in it, not afraid, almost open to clear orgasmic death-by-drowning in it, actually relaxed. . . . Maybe you couldn't love the war and hate it inside the same instant, but sometimes those feelings alternated so rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until you were literally High On War, like it said on all the helmet covers. Coming off a jag like that could really make a mess out of you. (58–59)

Here is the theme that has perhaps been forgotten by generations since Vietnam, and one that today's public would probably rather not acknowledge, one that Junger is anxious to deliver: that combat, while being evil and messy and idiotic, still holds qualities—excitements, really—that are found nowhere else in the world, and this truth is the one that journalists rarely write:

War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them. It's insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know. Soldiers discuss that fact with each other and eventually with their chaplains and their shrinks and maybe even their spouses, but the public will never hear about it. It's just not something that many people want acknowledged. . . . Don't underestimate the power of that revelation. Don't underestimate the things young men will wager in order to play that game one more time. (144–45)

It is a drug, as addictive to soldiers as narcotics to a user, and while Junger is certainly not the first to uncover this truth, it does bear repeating. In one passage Sgt. Brendan O'Byrne tells Junger: "Combat is such an adrenaline rush . . . I'm worried I'll be looking for that when I get home and if I can't find it, I'll just start drinking and getting in trouble. People back home think we drink because of the bad stuff, but that's not true . . . we drink because we miss the good stuff" (232). And Junger writes of another soldier: "Meanwhile Steiner was running around with a big grin on his face. 'It's like crack,' he yelled, 'you can't get a better high.' I asked him how he was ever going to go back to civilian life. He shook his head. 'I have no idea'" (180).

Considering more contemporaneous writers, Junger is also indebted to both Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War*, and Anthony Shadid's *Night Drums Near*, not only for the visceral aspects of relating to the reader what it feels like to be in combat, and for the level of reflexivity all these writers bring to bear on the subject of war reporting, but for the psychological effects war has, on soldiers, civilians, and journalists. As Filkins confesses in *The Forever War*,

Back in the world, people were serious, about the fillings in their sandwiches, about the winner of last night's ballgame. I couldn't blame them, of course. For me, the war sort of flattened things out, flattened things out here and flattened them out there, too. Toward the end, when I was still there, so many bombs had gone off so many times that they no longer shocked or even roused; the people screamed in silence and in slow motion. And then I got back to the world, and the weddings and the picnics were the same as everything had been in Iraq, silent and slow and heavy and dead. (340)

Remarking on his own struggles to understand post-invasion Baghdad, Shadid writes in *Night Drums Near* that:

Moving through the blood-soaked city, I tried to do my job, but at every turn, I was repulsed, overwhelmed with a desire to leave this place and, for that matter, the country itself. I walked past a finger and a piece of scalp with knotted, matted hair; a chunk of brain had been tossed into a pot of still steaming rice. (The kettle was considered cleaner than the ground) . . . The logic of violence never envisioned a triumph or an ending. There would be no winner, no agreement, no real truce . . . It was theater, and people kept dying to create those indelible scenes, a portrait of a debacle designed for world consumption. (356–57)

Both Filkins and Shadid are able to accomplish what the best of literary war reporting has done all along: be more honest than objective about what Gellhorn called the "idiotic disease" of war, however their particular subjectivities stem from their unembedded status. In Shadid's case, he was one of only a handful of Western reporters who wrote from the Iraqi civilians' perspective, and he did so with a level of insight and historical and cultural sensitivity that would win him the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 2004. Filkins (whose book won nearly every available nonfiction prize in 2008 except the Pulitzer), wrote from the U.S. military's as well as the Afghani and Iraqi perspective (Schack). Because of this and their use of literary devices, both these reporters were able to provide the sort of insight that better informs the public, and interprets the deeper meanings for us beyond the mere facts

that conventional journalism relies upon in strict adherence to staid objectivity.

Exemplifying precisely this, both Shadid and Filkins independently arrive at a similar conclusion about perhaps the most important aspect of the American military effort: that, despite Madison Avenue strategy backed by billions of dollars, the U.S. will always lose the battle because of its the inability to use language effectively—or even perceive reality correctly. In *Night Draws Near*, Shadid points out:

As always, the Americans used one vocabulary and the Iraqis another. Bremer spoke of the law, while Sadr spoke of martyrdom. . . President Bush described the fighting as pitting those who loved freedom against those who hated it, while Sadr inverted the relationship and claimed the fight itself was blessed . . . The Americans talked about independence but were perceived as occupiers . . . In the war of words, the Americans never really had a chance. (375)

Likewise, Filkins discusses at length the fact that there were two dialogues (and thus two distinct realities) occurring at all times in Iraq: that which the Americans spoke of and believed in, and the other, which the Iraqis never spoke of to the Americans, and which actually existed:

There were always two conversations in Iraq, the one the Iraqis were having with the Americans and the one they were having among themselves. The one the Iraqis were having with us—that was positive and predictable and boring, and it made the Americans happy because it made them think they were winning. And the Iraqis kept it up because it kept the money flowing, or because it bought them a little piece. The conversation they were having with each other was the one that really mattered, of course. That conversation was the chatter of a whole other world, a parallel reality, which sometimes unfolded right next to the Americans, even right in front of them. And we almost never saw it. (115)

Both these writers also employed potent images and symbolism to describe, as did Liebling, Gellhorn, and others, the macro-level meaning in micro-level detail. In a moment symbolic of the ironic ineffectuality of overwhelming military might, Shadid describes the following scene:

Down a street in Sadr City that day, near pools of sewage and wet trash, children showered rocks on an M1A1 Abrams tank. Its force too great for the task at hand, its armaments singularly unsuited to the enemy before it, the tank's turret swiveled back and forth through smoke and dust blown up by a brisk breeze. It swung helplessly, and the children threw rocks defiantly, and this went on and on. In the end, it was a draw. (377)

That image alone tells the reader all she needs to know about the disastrous miscalculations of the Iraq War, and why it was destined to fail. Filkins, emphasizing the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context into which the Americans brought their military machine, uses a sports metaphor to symbolize all that the Americans don't understand about the nature of the enemy which they face:

People fought in Afghanistan, and people died, but not always in the obvious way. They had been fighting for so long, twenty-three years then, that by the time the Americans arrived the Afghans had developed an elaborate set of rules designed to spare as many fighters as they could. So the war could go on forever. Men fought,

men switched sides, men lined up and fought again. War in Afghanistan often seemed like a game of pickup basketball, a contest among friends, a tournament where you never knew which team you'd be on when the next game got under way. Shirts today, skins tomorrow. On Tuesday, you might be part of a fearsome Taliban regiment, running into a minefield. And on Wednesday you might be manning a checkpoint for some gang of the Northern Alliance. By Thursday you could be back with the Talibs again, holding up your Kalashnikov and promising to wage jihad forever. War was serious in Afghanistan, but not that serious. It was part of everyday life. It was a job. Only the civilians seemed to lose. (50–51)

Junger also uses strong imagery and symbolism to interpret the deeper meanings beyond the facts, and though his subject is limited to the cultural context of Company C in the Korengal valley, as we have seen above, he is able to write reflexively and provide insights into not only the psychological effects of war, and the combat etiquette that Pyle made famous, but he is also as adept at making the sort of macro-level meaning from micro-level detail as are Liebling, Shadid, and Filkins. In one such moment, Junger describes the moment when one soldier—O'Byrne—is asking another soldier, nicknamed "Money": "If you were Hajj, why would you want to wake up in the morning and shoot at us? Money, why would Hajj want to do that?" Money, Junger writes, is "not interested in this conversation." So instead, Junger provides his own answer:

The immediate answer was that we built a firebase in their backyard, but there was more to the question than that. Once in a while you'd forget to think of the enemy as the enemy and would see them for what they were: teenagers up on a hill who got tired and cold just like the Americans and missed their families and slept poorly before the big operations and probably had nightmares about them afterward. Once you thought about them on those terms it was hard not to wonder whether the men themselves—not the American and Taliban commanders but the actual guys behind the guns—couldn't somehow sit down together and work this out. I'm pretty sure the Taliban had a healthy respect for Second Platoon, at least as fighters, and once in a while I'd hear someone in Second Platoon mumble a kind of grudging approval of the Taliban as well: they move like ghosts around the mountains and can fight all day on a swallow of water and a handful of nuts and are holding their own against a brigade of U.S. airborne infantry. As a military feat that's nothing to sneeze at. The sheer weirdness of war—any war—can never be entirely contained and breaks through at odd moments: "I went out to use the piss tubes one night," O'Byrne admitted to me once, "and I was like, 'What am I doing in Afghanistan?' I mean literally, 'What am I doing here?' I'm trying to kill people and they're trying to kill me. It's crazy. . . ." (170)

Indeed. And this moment, exposing war, as did Gellhorn, as "a malignant disease, an idiocy," demonstrates the power of literary journalism in wartime, as it shows rather than tells just how crazy and idiotic is this business called war.

In Junger's *War* we have a story that is neither original nor objective, but these are strengths, not weaknesses. The story itself—of soldier's lives, their waking and sleeping nightmares, their psychological victories and defeats, their desire for combat to simultaneously cease forever and continue endlessly—is a story as old as war itself, and while we may wish we didn't have to hear it again, it is the one story that must be told as long as we continue to wage war, again and again. As for the lack of

objectivity, it is precisely in the subjective nature of literary war reporting, the use of style, art, and imagination that is the legacy of writers such as those discussed here. It is that legacy that allows a writer such as Junger to report honestly—but not objectively—beyond the facts and interpret for the public the big picture as evident in small, telling details. Indeed, it is the literary journalism aspect itself and all the attendant devices that work together to provide a deeper, more honest understanding that (once again) war is hell, and, as Michael Herr famously put it: Hell Sucks.

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- McLaughlin, Greg. *The War Correspondent*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.
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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The references to literary war reporters above are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight the legacies of style to which Junger is indebted for his book, *War*. I have not, for instance, considered works preceding Spanish Civil War. In addition to the works cited in my essay, readers interested in literary war reporting might wish to consult the following highly selective list for excellent examples of such writing:

COLLECTIONS

- Keegan, John. *The Book of War: 25 Centuries of Great War Reporting* (New York: Penguin, 1999).
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SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

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SPANISH CIVIL WAR

- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. Chicago: Mariner Books, 1980.

WORLD WAR II

- Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Sajer, Guy. *The Forgotten Soldier*. New York: Brassey's Press, 1990.
- Grossman, Vasily. *A Writer at War: A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941–1945*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

KOREA

- Halberstam, David. *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*. New York: Hyperion, 2007.

VIETNAM

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THE “HOME FRONT”

Bryan, C. D. B. *Friendly Fire*. New York: Bantam, 1982.

EL SALVADOR

Didion, Joan. *Salvador*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1982.

Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

GULF WAR I

Sack, John. *Company C: The Real War in Iraq*. Bloomington, Ind.: IUUniverse, 2000.

WAR (ON TERROR) IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Sack, John. “Anaconda,” *Esquire*, August 2002.

ENDNOTES

1. The book *War* was written by Sebastian Junger and released in 2010 in conjunction with the companion documentary *Restrepo* (2010), co-directed by Junger and the late Tim Hetherington (d. 20 April 2011). The documentary was nominated for an Academy Award, and won the Grand Jury Prize for Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival.

2. I refer the reader to an excellent edited volume on the topic, *Embedded* (2003) by Bill Katovsky.

3. I am here excluding John Hersey, whose *Hiroshima* is obviously a classic of literary journalism, and rightly so. While his other work during the war, including *Into the Valley: A Skirmish of the Marines* and *Men on Bataan*, might be considered “literary” it was considerably less developed as such, and for this reason I am bringing the reader’s attention towards Liebling and Gellhorn, as they deserve as much credit as Hersey, yet are rarely awarded such.

4. Astute readers will here ask: “What of Gellhorn’s husband, Ernest Hemingway?” While he was also writing about the Spanish Civil War, his writing was neither as polished nor as memorable as his wife’s (a possible exception being “A New Kind of War”), and if there is one thing that may not be said of Hemingway it is that he has been overlooked and underrated. The purpose of this essay is precisely to bring to light the legacies, many of which forgotten, that current war journalists are indebted to, either consciously or not.

