

Johnny Got His Gun

Review

Ben Habeebe

1967

a review of

Johnny Got His Gun: A novel by Dalton Trumbo. York: Bantam Books, Inc., 150 pp.

Let's make America nauseous!!!

In 1939 Dalton Trumbo published a novel calculated at times to send the reader scurrying to the commode to brace his arms against the bowl and retch.

The book is *Johnny Got His Gun*. It was released in paperback last month by Bantam Books.

Never have I read such a book. By the third or fourth chapter (they're short) I felt a hand tightly grip my intestines and twist until my stomach weighed a ton.

A few pages later, I wished "Johnny" dead. Later I wept for him. Then loved him. Prayed for him. Hoped against hope for him... and finally was inspired by him.

"Johnny" is Joe Bonham who was called to Europe in 1917 to "make the world safe for democracy."

He didn't want to go. It meant leaving Kareen, "beautiful so beautiful" Kareen. And his mother and his sisters who he had to support because his father was dead.

And Kareen's father, Mike, who had spent 28 years in a mine with an IWW red card in his pocket, and who now damned everybody. But who sent Joe and Kareen off to make love because it was Joe's last night before becoming a doughboy. And who then brought them breakfast in bed the next morning.

Joe boarded the troop train in Los Angeles, the platitudes of music and words ringing in his ears... the fear heavy in his gut.

Never again would he walk to Kareen, taste the salt of her tears, touch her cheek, hear his mother's call, see long-familiar places, or smell the California mornings.

Joe was going off to be dead. But he was going to live through it.

Not to tell about it... just to think about it.

Joe Bonham woke up in a hospital. At least he thought he was awake. It was hard to tell. He couldn't hear. His face was covered with bandages so he couldn't see.

He could feel the doctors working on his left arm. "He felt the pinch of a sharp instrument grabbing something and getting a little bit of his skin with each grab. The pulling kept on in short jerks with his skin getting hot each time. It hurt. He wished they'd stop.

He could feel the things they were doing to his arm and yet he couldn't rightly feel the arm at all... It was like he felt through the end of his arm...

"Oh Jesus Christ they'd cut his left arm off."

That was the beginning of a string of discoveries for Joe, each more terrifying, more lonely and more isolating than the last.

He learned his right arm was gone too and his legs. And the bandage covering his face was a mask. And beneath it was no face. No eyes. No nose. No mouth. No chin. Everything, the works blown away by a shell or deftly cut away by the surgeon's knife.

He was a medical miracle. Fed intravenously. Sustained by a breathing tube. Kept alive by a team of doctors and nurses.

Only his mind was whole.

His mind which first said it had to be a dream. Then languished in memory. Beautiful memory, sad memory, happy memory, boy's memory, adolescent memory, men memory, father, mother, Kareen, work, war, run, Shale City, Howie, Glen Hogen, Mexicans, war, tired, morning, sun... His whole world, memories.

Time passed, he knew time was passing but he couldn't figure out how much. He became obsessed with time. Finally he figured out a system of keeping time.

New Year's Day in Joe Bonham's mind. He had measured time for one year. He had mastered time. He was ecstatic.

And he remembered another New Year's Day.

And so it went. Discovery. Remembrance. Time passing.

And then he discovered a way out. A way to break through the wall of silence that bound him more securely than any prison.

He started tapping with his head against his pillow. His one moving organ. S-O-S, S-O-S...

His nurse tried to figure out what he was doing. She attempted everything she could think of to quiet him. Finally she jacked him off. And when that failed to still him she had him shot-up with a sedative.

He lost track of time. He took to tapping in his sleep.

Joe finally broke through. It was a different nurse. She came in and wrote M-E-R-R-Y C H R I S T M A S on is chest. She was determined to communicate.

And after what seemed like forever the nurse realized that there was a rhythm and a method to his tapping.

She brought a man into the room who knew Morse code. And he tapped out on Joe's forehead, all that was left of his face:

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

He told them what he wanted. He wanted out of the hospital. He wanted to join a freak show. To be taken to every village and town in every city. To show himself off. To say look at me: I am war.

I am the dead-man-who-is-alive. I am the live man-who-is-dead. I am the man who made the world safe for democracy. "Take me to the places where men work and make things.

"Take me to the schoolhouses...

"Take me to the colleges and universities and the academies and convents...

"Take me wherever there are parliaments and diets and congresses and chambers of statesmen..."

And he felt the vibrations as the man to whom he had broken his silence walked from the room.

The man returned and began tapping on Joe's forehead: "WHAT YOU ASK IS AGAINST REGULATIONS. WHAT IS YOUR NAME? E?"

It's all so relevant.

Johnny Got His Gun was written in 1939 about World War I. Joe Bonham kept in his hospital room, maintained, sustained, decorated—a hero, a medical miracle.

But hidden. What he wanted was against regulations. The world must never know where war is at.

"You fools, you fools, you fools..." said Joe Bonham.

It's fiction, it's unreal, Dalton Trumbo could never really know for sure how it would be.

Last year *Terres de Hommes* in a mission of mercy brought what was to be a plane-load of napalmed children, scarred, burned, horribly disfigured from Vietnam to Switzerland for treatment. When the plane touched down the French rescue organization learned that a trick was played on it. The plane was filled with children who needed treatment, but none were napalmed. None were mutilated and deformed until they scarcely resembled human children. A planeload of sick children.

And then there was the woman who said it was "bad taste" for *Ramparts* and the *Fifth Estate* to show the world the spectre of napalmed children.

Well let's make America nauseous.

Let's promulgate pictures of the children of war. And of the soldiers who are losers, the ones who come back half men.

Let's put Joe Bonham on display. What we need is a campaign to send Joe Bonham to all the well-meaning Americans who speak progress and humanism and then talk "national honor," "stop the communist menace," and the like. Send a copy of Johnny Got His Gun to Bobby, and Mark Hatfield, and to Mayor Cavanagh.

Send one to your boy in the army, and to the one going into the army, and to the recruiting officer selling his bill of glory and right, and to Chet Huntley, and to all the PTAs in America, and to mother wherever she may be. Send a few down to the local American Legion Hall so they may remember something else about what it was like besides the medals.

Let's make America nauseous!!! Let's coin a new slogan:

"THROWUP, DON'T FIGHT."



Ben Habeebe
Johnny Got His Gun
Review
1967

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/29-may-1-15-1967/johnny-got-his-gun>
Fifth Estate #29, May 1-15, 1967

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net