

When the War Comes Home

Cara Hoffman's new novel examines the consequences of war when a damaged soldier returns home to a small town & she's still in battle-ready mode

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a review of

Be Safe I Love You by Cara Hoffman. Simon & Schuster, paper edition 2015, 289 pp. \$26

What sacred thing could pass through her lips now? What choir could shield her from the sound of her own voice?

"I did terrible things," she said.

"Of course you did, Troy said calmly. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

—from the text

Cara Hoffman's new novel is about a soldier with PTSD coming home to small town America. Many of the themes she explored in her debut, *So Much Pretty*, surface again in *Be safe I love you*: isolation, poverty, environmental destruction, and the erosion of community.

Lauren Clay is a soldier returning from Iraq where she has witnessed acts and participated in violence that is routine for the military stationed there. When she is forced to reintegrate into another kind of routine, that of the small town life that is waiting for her back home, Lauren starts to see the cracks in her own armor and slowly enters a downward spiral that triggers her survival mode, taking her family with her on one final mission that "brings the war home."

It's hard to read this novel as explicitly anti-capitalist, much less anarchist, but its illustration of impact of violence lead the *London Sunday Telegraph* to declare it "one of the five best modern war novels. And, this from an author who hadn't experienced war directly.

Although Hoffman's motivation seems to be to humanize and complicate the soldier narrative, she is very careful not to put words in her protagonist's mouth, to the point that she allows Lauren a righteous suspicion of any civilian input, whether from her leftist father or her former civil rights activist and Vietnam vet godfather, PJ.

Yet the bones of an anti-capitalist critique are there, in the doppelganger oil rigs of Iraq and Quebec, in the internet-age alienation Lauren's brother Danny leaves behind when his computer and cell phone are taken away and replaced with wilderness, in Lauren's decision to sell her body to the army, and in the way she and her friend Daryl know the real reason for the war, reading left-wing news sites as they wait to be deployed.

Besides this skeleton, there is also the knowledge that Hoffman, however careful she is in framing a collective story gleaned from her interviews with soldiers (including her brother who served two tours in Afghanistan), does possess such a critique, yet lets the story generate its own questions, cast its own contradictions, and ultimately leave us without an ending that we, as anti-capitalists, can feel glib about.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the backdrop to the protest movements and financial crises of the past fifteen years, and we are nowhere near seeing the end of the impact they will have not only directly, on those being invaded and attacked by “our” armies, but also in cities like Lauren Clay’s place of birth, Watertown, N.Y.

The city Lauren returns to is haunted by soldiers from the first Gulf War and Vietnam. The local vets are so omnipresent and damaged that Lauren repeats an army mantra to herself to avoid associating her experience with theirs. This mantra goes something like: she and her fellow Iraq vets are different, better trained, more prepared for the aftereffects of combat, their weaponry better, their war unlike any other.

Yet as her mental and emotional states begin to swing out of her control, we can see that neither believing in these premises nor associating with other vets is helping Lauren navigate her trauma.

Like she did in *So Much Pretty*, Hoffman uses narrative to reveal the silences that make the violence of everyday life go unexamined and unaddressed. In this book, the subject matter she meticulously researched is also a part of her own story.

In a recent interview, Hoffman revealed that until she began writing *Be Safe I Love You*, she had never asked her army vet brother to tell her about his combat experiences. This collective fear of facing the true war stories, those that aren’t memorialized in the official national narratives of heroic war movies and other propaganda, creates a context that suffocates soldiers like Lauren as they put on the face of the “returning warrior” they are expected to be.

Be safe I Love You, which is being made into a movie by Saudi director Haifaa al-Mansour, is also about the growing demographic of working-poor families struggling to make ends meet in the age of austerity. Joining the army may seem like a choice among many to Lauren’s friends Holly and Shane, but Lauren is the one who makes it knowing there aren’t many other careers she can have with a high school education that will immediately ensure her family home isn’t foreclosed on and her brother Danny won’t have to fend for himself when she leaves home.

Although Hoffman doesn’t let Lauren off the hook with this argument, it demonstrates the incredible pressure and attraction that draws people into the armed forces, the promises of “signing bonuses, the GI Bill and the size of the checks.”

While we may oppose capitalism’s wars and denounce “Support Our Troops” rhetoric spouted by liberals and conservatives alike, there is something unavoidable about the trauma and poverty often faced by war veterans. The Vietnam conflict is still having social repercussions, with suicide and homelessness part of that never-ending war story those vets share with the ones from Iraq.

This means that as radicals, we are invested in struggles that are attempting to address the traumas of wars past and present, whether we work on issues like homelessness, are part of the anti-poverty movement, support those living with mental health issues or the aftermath of sexual assault.

However, we still need to deal directly with war in a manner that doesn’t pose U.S. casualties or its veterans as its main victims. Organizing against the empire’s continuous invasions attempts to protect those who are ground up by the imperial forces and trying to keep people like Lauren Clay from becoming part of the war monster in the first place.

With the growing number of stories of sexual assault and rape in the army coming to light, women in combat are often victims of the same institution they are representing. Yet this is not that story.

This is about a woman who has found success in the army, become an officer, and even made it home uninjured. It is the story of how women are now protagonists in wars, too. Lauren Clay’s is a new, less familiar face of war, with needs that are both unique and similar to those of men who have returned from combat. This means her story and those like hers are already affecting us collectively, in homes, on the street, in our organizing.

This may be one of the first times we hear the story of this new kind of war veteran, but it won’t be the last.

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Cara Hoffman’s writing in the *Fifth Estate* can be viewed in our web site’s name]fe_author&taxo[0][opt]&taxo[0][term]=cara-hoffman][Archive section. See also CaraHoffman.com.

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