May-2013

Book Review: The Price of War

Thomas Nester
Bridgewater State University, thomas.nester@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol32/iss1/14

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
This journalistic and whiggish approach takes what are scores of individual and complex case studies, irons out the uniqueness of each place and time, and stitches them together into a fabric that Mann proclaims is global capitalism.

publications on the history of globalization, but this readability comes as a simplified version of complex issues. Mann’s discussion of the nineteenth-century guano industry is as good an example as any among his scores of case studies. Mann provides the reader with an understanding of the science of guano as a fertilizer, the history of agricultural reform in nineteenth-century Europe, the brutality of the labor of guano extraction, the journalistic appeal to expose guano slavery, and the imperial competition between the United States and Britain to control the world’s guano islands in the Pacific Ocean. To do this, Mann brings in the insight of historians, scientists, political scientists, and economists; often via interviews. Although Mann tells a rich and interwoven story that stitches together the complexities of academic disciplines, in the end, his story is driven by his fear of globalism, which is exposed in this case with his story is driven by his fear of globalism, academic disciplines, in the end, his stitches together the complexities of often via interviews. Although Mann write: “They [Amazonians] had been forced to live covert, hidden lives, always worried about dispossession. Now they would be free to live in their creation, the world’s richest garden.”(488) The success of Rosario’s farm, according to Mann, was due to her acceptance of non-native, market-oriented crops and the use of new technologies such as freezers and cell phones that enabled more successful engagement with the global foods market. Thanks to globalization, Rosario found economic happiness. Yet just a few pages later, Mann takes us to the Filipino terrace farms at Hlago, which have been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mann tells of the economic collapse of the terrace farms and efforts to introduce heirloom rice production for export to Europe and the United States. Mann concludes that “The global market is not the solution, activists say, but the problem! These supposed do-gooders are just hooking Filipinos into the worldwide network of exchange, making them dependent as never before on the whims of faraway yuppies!”(500) Thus, in this story, global capitalism killed indigenous culture and environment.

This inconsistency might actually be the book’s real contribution. Globalization is especially complex. Neither the eco-activist nor the corporate capitalist is exclusively right. From an economic worldview, globalization is a smashing success. There is more food and more money than ever. But from a local environmental and cultural perspective it is a crushing defeat. Local culture has been evaporated by globally mass-produced goods ranging from Nike shoes and shorts to Starbucks coffee and McDonald’s hamburgers. Mann’s final assessment comes at the very end of the book: “Economists have developed theoretical tools for evaluating these incommensurate costs and benefits [of globalization]. But the magnitude of the costs and benefits is less important than their distribution. The gains are diffused and spread around the world, whereas the pain is intense and local.”(505) Given that the effect of globalization is most profound on the local level, perhaps more localized and empirical case studies would be more enlightening than grand narratives that tend to universalize the unique realities of people and environments all around the world.

individual writing styles and modes of authorship aside. Powers has earned the right to be placed in this distinguished category through his ability to communicate the immutable horrors of war and the indelible scars it leaves behind. This book cuts like a knife and should be required reading for Americans who readily embrace military solutions to national security challenges. Powers’ greatest achievement in this work may be his compelling ability to evoke the psychological wreckage the Iraq War has left behind among America’s combat veterans. The book details Private James Bartle’s struggles to readapt to civil society after his tour in Iraq and his efforts to organize his wartime memories into a coherent and meaningful past, all while coming to grips with the fate of his good friend, a fallen soldier. From the moment he steps back onto American soil, Bartle seethes at a nation he no longer identifies with: “the land of the free, of reality television, outlet malls and deep vein thrombosis”(101), very different concerns than those that occupied soldiers in Iraq. Powers’ protagonist experiences a tremendous sense of dislocation and alienation, withdrawing completely from family, friends, and society as he struggles to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an inescapable souvenir of war. The author’s gripping elucidation of the challenges combat veterans face as they reintegrate into society is powerful stuff. The adulation he endures from civilians produces a

B ased on the rave reviews Kevin Powers’ first novel, The Yellow Birds, has received, it appears that the literary world is ready for the next generation of war novels and author–veterans to emerge from the West’s recent military misadventures in the Middle East. Most popular reviewers agree. The Yellow Birds is one of these books and Powers one of these authors. Not one to be easily impressed, New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani labels it “a classic of contemporary war fiction.” Hector Tobar of the Los Angeles Times calls it “the first American literary masterpiece produced by the Iraq war.” Rolling Stone’s Darren Reidy declares it “the first great Iraq War novel.” As an author, Powers has drawn numerous comparisons to Tim O’Brien, Ernest Hemingway, Erich Remarque and Siegfried Sassoon.

Individual writing styles and modes of authorship aside. Powers has earned the right to be placed in this distinguished category through his ability to communicate the immutable horrors of war and the indelible scars it leaves behind. This book cuts like a knife and should be required reading for Americans who readily embrace military solutions to national security challenges. Powers’ greatest achievement in this work may be his compelling ability to evoke the psychological wreckage the Iraq War has left behind among America’s combat veterans. The book details Private James Bartle’s struggles to readapt to civil society after his tour in Iraq and his efforts to organize his wartime memories into a coherent and meaningful past, all while coming to grips with the fate of his good friend, a fallen soldier. From the moment he steps back onto American soil, Bartle seethes at a nation he no longer identifies with: “the land of the free, of reality television, outlet malls and deep vein thrombosis”(101), very different concerns than those that occupied soldiers in Iraq. Powers’ protagonist experiences a tremendous sense of dislocation and alienation, withdrawing completely from family, friends, and society as he struggles to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an inescapable souvenir of war. The author’s gripping elucidation of the challenges combat veterans face as they reintegrate into society is powerful stuff. The adulation he endures from civilians produces a

more profound sense of isolation, like a “hole is being dug because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the murderer, the fucking accomplice, the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight.”(145) The question of guilt pervades this book. Bartle’s guilt is intensely personal and involves a fellow soldier, but readers will detect a larger conversation at play in Powers’ story. When something goes so terribly wrong, as the Iraq War did, someone ought to be held to account. Powers offers some oblique answers, but his characters are too wrapped up in their circumstances to worry much about making any bold assertions. These are left for the reader to contemplate. But Powers does offer some biting commentary. For example, the U.S. government’s decision to go to war intrudes on Bartle’s anti-heroic army life, one he had adopted to escape home, prove his manhood, and avoid responsibility. At his unit prepares to deploy to Iraq, Bartle finds himself “struggling to find a sense of urgency that seemed proportional to the events unfolding in my life.”(34-35) Washington faced similar challenges as it counted an emerging insurgency after toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime. In the novel, “Mother Army”
This book cuts like a knife and should be required reading for Americans who readily embrace military solutions to national security challenges.

Readers Respond

On “Objectivity”

I received the latest issue of Bridgewater Review. I am very impressed with the quality of research, writing and illustrations, and the variety of interesting articles. [The] piece on “objectivity” is very much to the point. How tiresome it has become to read and hear “scholars” of all disciplines and genres are welcome and encouraged, including scholarship about research interests and trends, scholarship about teaching and learning, creative writing and short reviews of other publications.

Articles should be 1700-2200 words in length, though shorter articles will also be considered. Creative writing can be submitted at lengths shorter than 2200 words. Those wishing to submit are asked to consult the Bridgewater Review submission guidelines (available from the Editor). In keeping with the founding spirit of our faculty magazine, the editors are equally interested in unfinished pieces of writing that may need assistance with revision and in published pieces that are publication ready. All submissions will be reviewed, but there is no guarantee that submitted work will be published.

Bridgewater Review also welcomes Letters to the Editor with the hope that it remains a locus for community discussion at Bridgewater State University.

Submissions should be sent electronically to: Andrew Holman, Editor, Bridgewater Review, bridgewater.review@bridgew.edu

Articles published in Bridgewater Review may be reprinted with permission of the Editor.