

JESSE GOOLSBY

A Group Conversation with Veteran Artists David Abrams, Jerri Bell, Brian Castner, and Colin Halloran

This conversation with veteran artists is one of a series of three group interviews conducted over the spring of 2016. Importantly, the discussion below showcases varied and distinguished voices and their views on such essential topics as artistic inspiration, the state of contemporary war literature, the beginning and maturation of individual creativity, and art as a possible bridge for the military-civilian divide. The other group veteran artist conversations appear in [The Iowa Review](#) and [Consequence Magazine](#).

Participants:

David Abrams is the author of *Fobbit* (Grove/Atlantic) and a contributor to the anthologies *Fire and Forget*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Watchlist*. His stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Glimmer Train*, *Consequence*, *The Greensboro Review*, and several other places. He lives in Butte, Montana where he runs the literary blog The Quivering Pen.

Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for *O-Dark-Thirty*, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS *Mount Whitney* and HMS *Sheffield*, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow,

Russia. She has published both short fiction and nonfiction, and she and Tracy Crow have a book of military-themed nonfiction forthcoming from University of Nebraska Press/Potomac Books.

Brian Castner is a nonfiction writer, former Explosive Ordnance Disposal officer, and veteran of the Iraq War. He is the author of the new book *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, and the war memoir *The Long Walk*, which was adapted into an opera and named an Amazon Best Book for 2012. His writing has appeared at *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Outside*, and on *National Public Radio*. In 2014, he received a grant from the Pulitzer Center to cover the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, filing stories for *Foreign Policy*, *VICE*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Colin Halloran is author of two poetry collections, 2012's *Shortly Thereafter* and 2015's *Icarian Flux*.

Please tell us about your entry into writing and the arts. How and when did the initial impulse arrive to explore war through your work?

ABRAMS: There are two answers to this question: 1. when I first started writing, and 2. when I first started writing about war. The former happened when I was about five years old and I wrote my first book—a crayon-and-construction-paper affair called “The Tick-Tock Clock.” This was right around the time I learned to read and, after three years of having bedtime stories read to me by my mother, I was empowered by the independence of decoding letters and words on my own. Actually making sense of sentences and associating them with the pictures on the pages of those early-reader storybooks brought up feelings of joy and self-confidence and marvel and awe at the many possibilities I saw branching out before me. Because readers all so numb to the mystery of literacy by now, I don’t think any of us can precisely recall how big of a life-changing moment that was for us when we were three, four, five, or six years old and we first made sense of language. Apart from losing our virginity or suffering the grief of a loved one’s death, learning to read might be the most significant life-changing moment we’ll ever experience.

My origins as a “war writer” probably began on my first day of Army basic training in 1988 at Fort Knox, Kentucky. This was another significant life-shock moment, one that rewired my brain to start thinking in different ways. You have to understand, up to that point, I had zero (maybe even sub-zero) interest in the military, so all of this was a brand-new, confusing, scary world to me. When, as a

writer, I'm plunged into a shocking environment like that, I think my imagination kicks in. All of my senses dilate, all the pores open, and I start taking everything in to be stored for later use. That's how it was for me in basic training, at each duty assignment (Georgia, Texas, Alaska) and especially when I went to war in Iraq in 2005. If you'd told me in 1987 that I would one day publish a novel about war, I would have probably laughed until I fell off my chair. But, you know, life happens and you either adapt, overcome, or write about it. I should mention that *Fobbit* is far from the first thing I wrote about the military; my twenty-year career was spent in public affairs. I started out as a journalist, so I was a "war writer" from Day One.

BELL: I've been writing war stories since elementary school, when military service was the last career anyone would have predicted for me.

In third grade a twenty-five-cent Scholastic book order netted me a copy of Claire Huchet Bishop's *The Secret Cave*, based on a true story of French school children who hid ten of their Jewish classmates from the Nazis in World War II. After church and Sunday dinner at my grandmother's house, I'd tell my cousins stories about how the "Nazis"—the grownups—would kill us if they found us, and I'd make them spend hours sneaking around and hiding in the maple trees and the attic crawl spaces with me.

Almost thirty years after that, in a Craft of Fiction class at Johns Hopkins, our instructor assigned John Gardner's writing exercise "*Describe a barn as seen by a man whose son has just been killed in a war. Do not mention the son, or war, or death.*" I put everything I was feeling about war into that exercise. I was still on active-duty then, and had just been informed that I was on thirty-day standby to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan as an individual augmentee. The exercise became a war story that appeared nine years later in *Stone Canoe* as "Memorial Day." It's not a bad first story, but it's not the war story that I would write now.

CASTNER: I never felt the specific impulse to explore the war through my writing. And by that, I mean the war was almost secondary, the setting and context but not the driving impetus. It was an evil thing that had happened to me and my friends, but I cared more about my friends than the war itself. Still do.

So for my first book, my memoir *The Long Walk*, I felt a need to explain. To tell myself the story of what happened in Iraq and the process of coming home, to make sense of the grief and loss and fear that consumed me. I wrote the book six years ago, and words like "PTSD" carried a lot more stigma back then. I was really writing a ghost story, but I thought I was crazy.

My second book, *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, is an investigation into the death of a good buddy in Afghanistan. He was also a bomb tech, and I wanted to know who killed him. It's a question that would have made almost no sense in a previous war—the “enemy” was always anonymous, a mass of faceless uniforms. The Nazis are dug in over there, go shoot them. Now we track down individuals with drones and call it war. So I wanted to learn as much as I could about this person, name him if I could, understand the other side of the conflict. But again, although the war was the framework within which the death occurred, my friendship compelled me to write the book, not the conflict itself.

The war didn't make me a writer, but it did give me something worth writing about. The topic rose to the occasion.

HALLORAN: I've always written, and always written poetry, from about the time I was six. I fell away from it during and following my time in the military though. I didn't start writing about my war (and post-war) experiences until a couple years after I'd been back from Afghanistan, and the initial impulse had nothing to do with war. My grandfather, who was a major influence in my life, was dying. I was at his bedside leading up to it, and at one point *something* came over me. I found a pen, ripped the back pages out of one of those “learning to grieve” books, and just wrote. Later that day, after he'd passed, I looked at it and it was a poem. It was then, with the help of a therapist—to whom my first book is dedicated—I realized that writing would be my method of coming to terms with my war experiences. I like to think of it as my grandfather's final gift of wisdom.

There has been a lot of discussion about the military-civilian divide in our country. One common refrain is that service members and veterans should discuss who we are and what our service means to us, and to listen to our fellow citizens who may have different perspectives. Civilians are often implored to listen to the stories of veterans as a remedy for the unconsidered “Thank you for your service” line. In this general context the words “discuss” and “listen” can take many forms and tenors. What possible role does war literature, and veteran art, in particular, play in addressing this issue?

HALLORAN: I think a primary purpose of art is to translate the unknowable, convey the un conveyable. And what is more difficult to comprehend than war? In this light, veteran-created art and literature is essential to closing the military-civilian divide and creating a culture of empathy and understanding. I honestly

believe that's the only way we change moving forward. I think it's also important to note, though, that not all war literature is written by veterans. There are some wonderfully powerful portrayals of contemporary warfare and its consequences that have been written by journalists and civilians with no military experience. Some people are quick to dismiss these as "inauthentic" or even offensive to veterans, but if a piece is done respectfully and carefully, and accesses the soul of the war experience, it should be celebrated.

ABRAMS: I think there are a lot of cultural, economic, racial, sexual, and philosophical divides in our fragmented society today, not just the separation between members of the military and the general public who've never served. We all have our little tribes and for the most part we stay within the comfort of those circles. The internet is supposed to bring us all together—and it can to a degree, but it also amplifies and sometimes encourages the divisions between us. Most of the time, it comes down to one side standing on a cliff and shouting across the chasm to the other side. In its best and most effective moments, art is the bridge people can walk across to have a better understanding of what it's like on the other side of the canyon.

CASTNER: I admit, I'm of at least three minds on this. On the one hand, if anything will bridge the gap between the veteran and civilian experience, it will be the arts and literature. Art is, after all, an empathy life-hack, the best mind-meld between humans that we've found yet. I read *Invisible Man*, and someone else reads *The Things They Carried*, and we've each shared and learned something.

On the other hand, though, I have discovered this Sisyphian rock keeps rolling downhill. America is pigeon-holed, and in reality, the audience for a lot of war literature is fellow veterans and their families. Everyone is in their own bubble, and it's hard to break through. One reason I was excited to see *The Long Walk* become an opera is that I thought we'd finally do that. I thought the Venn diagram overlap between opera go-ers and military veterans was nil. But talking to audiences afterward, I discovered there was still a lot of preaching to the choir. And even if you do break out, who knows what the message will be? I recently met a college kid who told me he is enlisting in the Navy to be a bomb tech because he read my book. I thought I had written a warning, but he felt inspired.

Which leads me to contradictory opinion number three. Maybe there is some value in these silos? As a veteran, it can be frustrating that your service is invisible, that average Americans have little idea what is done by the military in their name.

Can we bridge that gap with literature? At least a little. But what would it take for full understanding and appreciation? What kind of devastating war would have to occur for Americans to appreciate veterans as much we wish they would? New York City loved its police and firefighters after 9/11, so how far should we multiple that? I'm afraid that for American thanks to move beyond tokenism—beyond bumper-sticker Superbowl patriotism—the cost is so high, the required national tragedy so large, that I would rather be unthanked and misunderstood and we preserve the comparative peace. It's human nature, to be consumed by one's own small world. Why would I want to bring more violence to those small worlds so our service is better understood?

BELL: Literature—especially fiction—is a safe space for exploring unsafe topics and ideas. In a time when American society is so politically polarized, war literature lets both writer and reader explore challenging questions of good and evil, right and wrong, desire, complicity, guilt, mortality, and the complex, chaotic, messy business of being human without having to commit to an absolute moral stance. Literature can ask questions and play around in the muck of possibility without having to deliver answers. Good war literature may make strong moral propositions, but it doesn't deliver absolute, simple answers to difficult questions. It asks readers to think and decide for themselves. That kind of safe space for reflection and consideration seems to have disappeared from public discourse nowadays. Literature and art are all we have left.

While any citizen who thinks about war can create war literature, veteran art carries the authority of lived experience. It's an added responsibility for those of use who write, an extra weight added to Hemingway's injunction to write the truest sentences that we can.

What do you find encouraging about the state of contemporary American war literature? Of concern?

CASTNER: I'm encouraged that the veteran writing community is seeking out new voices to talk about war. Not only diverse American voices, but Iraqi and Afghan writers as well. Qais Akbar Omar and Hassan Blasim are two of the most successful. For several years, it's been hard to escape stories by young white male officers. And yes, I know I contributed to this glut. But through mentorship programs and in workshops, Words After War for example, I see a real focus on broadening the conversation.

Of concern, though, is how much of this work is getting out, and whether publishers are open to stories or writers that don't fit a certain mold. It's not that editors are discriminatory; they are generally perfectly open-minded and inclusive people. But publishers are in the business of selling books, and I'm afraid there is a perception that only a narrow range of stories sell. There might be a grain of truth here, but it's a self-fulfilling prophecy as well.

ABRAMS: I find it encouraging that war is being explored and interpreted in a variety of media—not just through powerful fiction and memoirs, but also through poetry (like the terrific work of Colin, and Brian Turner, Hugh Martin, Seth Brady Tucker, Jehanne Dubrow and so many others), theater (Maurice Decaul's *Dijla Wal Furat*, Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, and Helen Benedict's *Lonely Soldiers* come to mind) and visual art, to a somewhat lesser degree. And OPERA! The fact that Brian's *Long Walk* has been set to music with a libretto speaks to how potent the subject of contemporary war can be in the arts.

BELL: I'm encouraged every time *O-Dark-Thirty* gets another submission from a Vietnam War veteran. So many of those men and women buried their war experiences in the deepest hole they could dig, often at great personal cost. So much is lost when society devalues our experiences and we go silent. I'm also encouraged that women veterans are writing. Nearly all the memoirs of women who served between the Civil War and OEF/OIF were self-published with small print runs, late in their lives, at the encouragement of family members who wanted to capture the experiences before the women died. Or they remain unpublished in archives and small museums around the country. But *O-Dark-Thirty* was flooded with submissions when we called for work for our women veterans' themed issue [Spring 2016].

My only concern is that too many women veterans' stories are still being told by others. Men and civilian women may write about women veterans with the best of intentions; they may be dedicated allies; but our service will always be seen through a lens with some inevitable distortion if we don't start demanding to speak for ourselves. We need to work as hard and learn to write as well as we can, and to insist that our stories are heard.

HALLORAN: My biggest concern is the aforementioned division between civilian and veteran writers. It's not overtly prevalent, but it does exist. If an artist or writer is able to convey an important message pertaining to war, they should be

heard, regardless of their biography. I always say to people: did JK Rowling go to Hogwarts?

In terms of what I find encouraging, there is far too much for this interview. Personally, it starts with the community, which I think this interview is a fine demonstration of. Gone are the days of the literary salon, but over the past few years, the military writing community has grown and is both interactive and supportive. Five, six years ago, I was taken under a wing, now I am in a place where I can do the same. As the community grows, mentees become mentors, and we all assist and support each other however we can. This support leads to more works being created, which leads to more works being consumed. The fact that we've had members of our community's work converted into orchestral performances, movies, operas, and more means that we're reaching a wider audience every day, which helps further that culture of understanding I've mentioned. As far as what this all means for American war literature, specifically, I think we may be entering...I hesitate to call it a "golden age" because it's born out of strife, but the reality is that we are entering the most prolific period of American war literature because the last fifteen years of war have been American-led. The Vietnam War saw the production of some great literature and art, but much of it was civilian produced or counter-cultural protest literature. The great "war poets" in whose tracks I try to follow came from England during the Great War. This time it's our war, which means it's our literature. In that aspect I'm excited for what the artistic future holds.

Often there is an assumption in human (and therefore artistic) terms, war is war and the differences from age to age are mostly technological, strategic, tactical. Do you agree? Are the works emerging from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars fundamentally the same as the war literature preceding them? How might they be uniquely different?

ABRAMS: Part of me wants to hold with that truism that "a war is a war is a war," but there's no denying the shape of battle has changed dramatically over the years. We no longer have huge, Tolstoyan armies sweeping across broad, open plains and clashing where they meet. Today, we have single-shot snipers firing from second-story windows and armor-piercing bombs that take out soldiers one Humvee at a time. Boundary lines are blurred and the theater of war is 360 degrees—it's a true "theater in the round." We saw some of this in Vietnam, and it's only increased since then. Technology has leant itself nicely to this style of warfare—from the way we gather intelligence to the computers which guide our missiles. War has

become a more impersonal affair—we now have the capability to kill our enemy by remote control and never have to smell his blood. In some ways, contemporary war literature is driven by the tension of soldiers raised on the idea that wars were fought by two large opposing bodies (as in *War and Peace*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, et al) and who must now deal with a one-on-one war of uncertainty (if you can't see the opposing brigade marching toward you across the field, then where *is* the enemy? He could be anywhere and strike at any time). I think it's this "known unknown" that drives the tension in much of our current war narratives.

HALLORAN: Yes, but also no. I often talk about emotional versus physical landscape, and what I mean by that is that a work, say *The Things They Carried*, though occupying a different era and physical landscape (Vietnam) than my war (Afghanistan), can completely capture my feelings about the experiences I have had. On the flip side, something from my war, say *Lone Survivor* or *American Sniper*, occupy the same era or physical landscape, but I don't connect with them as closely. Another fundamental difference in terms of war is that this is the first major, prolonged conflict, which is being fought by an all-volunteer military. This has several consequences. The wars are having less of an impact on the general populace, making the literature more important, but also less relatable to the everyday reader. It also impacts the variety of people going and fighting; we're less likely to see an Owen and Sassoon wind up in the same place at the same time, less likely to have childhood pals from the same neighborhood winding up in the same unit. Finally, it means that we're fighting it differently. We have more "lifers" going on multiple deployments, which, at least for now, limits the amount of literature being produced, something Castner wrote insightfully about in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* last year, particularly in reference to the difference in warfare and American war literature between Iraq and Afghanistan. There are also far more opportunities for war literature from other essential perspectives, with writers like Qais Akbar Omar and Dunya Mikhail, and organizations like The Afghan Women's Writer Project, and even an anthology of Taliban poetry. This will allow a far more complete portrait of war through literature than we have seen in past conflicts.

BELL: War means killing other people, and dead is dead no matter how one dies. But every war is unique in human terms.

Technological changes in warfare connect intimately with the social conditions that lead to war, the individual and collective human cost of that war, and

eventually to the art that comes out of it. All of that changes over time, and from one conflict to another.

For the last year I've studied war literature written by women veterans since the American Revolution, and there is a vast difference in what women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are writing from what was written in earlier wars. Women veterans' writing cannot be understood in the absence of historical and social context. Women's official, publicly acknowledged presence under fire in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, American society's interest in and approval of their service, their own interest in writing either professionally or creatively, their access to advanced education, a new sense of agency, and their unique experience as still-unequal partners in the profession of arms are changing the game both for them and for the body of war literature.

CASTNER: When I was a brand new lieutenant in the Air Force, I was talking to a college buddy who was a brand new lieutenant in the Army. I loved the Air Force, and he hated the Army, and I was surprised. How could he? And he said, "Dude, being in the Army has sucked since the Romans." And I think that's about right; soldiering is soldiering, and though the weapons may change, most guys still think about boots and hot chow and how their sergeant is going to screw them over. And even more importantly, killing people is still killing people, and grief and anger have been around a long time.

For *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, I was much more aware of war writing as a genre—I had studied what was already on the shelf, so to speak—and so I was consciously trying to find the right balance. War hasn't really changed, and yet if you are going to add a book to that shelf, you had better damn well say something new or interesting or both. And so in writing about Afghanistan, I wanted to focus on what made this war unique. It's like Passover. What makes this night different from all other nights? My answer was three things: contractors, drones, and the way both sides target specific individuals. I tried to write about that, and still I inevitably wrote about all those 3000-year-old themes as well. I start with a military funeral, after all, one of the most traditional motifs around.

But in a literary sense, I think there is another difference, and it's what I already alluded to a bit, this expectation of what a war story should look like. This is the first generation of war writers that all read Tim O'Brien in high school, and he put the idea in everyone's head that war literature is about a few specific things. Loss. Guilt. Shame. Redemption, since "stories can save us." So, fiction or nonfiction, the

stories that sound like that go on the literary pile, and the proudly righteous that don't apologize for combat go on the unliterary pile, and never the two shall mix.

As a veteran artist, do you experience a pressure or expectation to create art exclusively about military conflict?

BELL: Not so much. I was on shore duty from 2001 until I retired in 2008; I didn't deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. But if I'm writing something about the military, I do feel pressure to work in response to a male-centric canon of "war literature," and to the masculine experience of military service and warfare.

The dominant culture can affect every choice a writer makes—sometimes in ways that we're not consciously aware of. In the case of contemporary American war literature one sees this in the frequent absence of Iraqi or Afghan characters, the overuse of the "trauma and redemption" narrative, and the male *bildungsroman*. Women's experiences of military service and war are diminished or disregarded—and sometimes we do it to ourselves.

When I wrote "Memorial Day," it simply didn't occur to me to write about a mother who had lost her daughter in a war. And the novel I tried to write in graduate school was set on a destroyer just before the repeal of 10 USC 6015, the law that prohibited women from serving on naval combatants and in aircraft expected to engage in combat missions. Women only appeared on those pages as wives, ex-wives, girlfriends—and as a vague future threat to the masculinity of seagoing sailors. I was still on active duty then, and when the fiction advisor suggested that I write the novel from a woman's point of view, I refused. Women didn't talk about how things really were, I told him: anything we said or did that made waves would just make life harder for us and for every other woman serving.

Many military women thought then, and some still do, that we need to deny the existence of a difference between our experiences and men's. To some extent, that denial has been a necessary weapon in the fight for full integration and for an end to gender-based discrimination. But sometimes we just drink the freaking Kool-Aid and start to believe it ourselves. Both forms of denial have often prevented us from exploring our experiences of service and war candidly and fully in writing.

Because of this, stories about women's experience of war are more often being told by others—men, or civilian women like journalists Helen Benedict and Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and novelist Cara Hoffman. As Deanne Blanton and Lauren Cook point out in *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War*, when women's stories are told by others they often find their

military experience “shaped in compliance with cultural expectations of female behavior.” In the Civil War era this led to publication of a large number of popular, sentimental romances in which a beautiful young girl disguises herself as a man to go fight the damn Yankees/Johnny Reb and wins the everlasting love of her company commander through feats of improbable derring-do. In contemporary accounts portray women who serve as either “she-roses” or victims.

So if I feel any kind of pressure, it’s to try to detox from the Kool-Aid and write honestly about my own military experience during a period of rapid change in women’s roles, and to try to set the historical and literary record straight—to portray women who serve in the armed forces as complex and contradictory characters whose experiences are not always identical to those of men.

CASTNER: There is only a pressure and expectation if you like to be published. I admit, I do, so yes, I’ve discovered editors put war writers in a niche. But we’re not so special here: nearly every successful writer has a niche, and it is the rare mind that is allowed to truly write about anything. I’m sure lots of food writers want to cover football, and football writers wish they had the gravitas of war writers, and some war writers want their next novel’s protagonist to be a chef. But that’s not how the industry works, and I try to remind myself that many up and coming writers would kill for a niche, because it means editors will take their stuff. Veterans have knowledge and authenticity to write about war, and if you want the same standing on another topic, you have to do similar work to earn it, put in the years to be an expert.

HALLORAN: I try not to, but it’s a thought that’s always at the back of my mind, a fear of being pigeonholed. I will always be grateful for my first “non-war” poem (“As Flies Are Wont to Do”), inspired by a Ron Padgett poem and written while I was still working on *Shortly Thereafter*. Of course, in retrospect, war is still very much present in the poem, which was included in *Icarian Flux*, a collection that while not explicitly about war, is rooted in the varied aspects of post-war existence. But I think the most recent book is a big step forward, as I was able to get into more subtle poetics and techniques. Moving forward, I’ll be writing about new topics, and now that I have a nephew, in addition to three young nieces, I’ve even been dabbling in children’s poetry, which is a nice pressure release from war writing.

ABRAMS: No, not really. If I'm going to be brutally honest, I don't want to be known as a "war writer." Even though I've published a novel and a handful of short stories about war, and even though I'm currently working on another novel set during Operation Iraqi Freedom and another half-handful of stories about my military experiences, I would like at some point to move on to the other stories crowding my head—the ones that have nothing to do with blood and bullets and wearing a uniform. But first, I have to write the war out of my system.

Of the many literary works or art that have influenced you, please select one and tell us a little bit about why that particular work is so important to you.

HALLORAN: As a "war poet," I have obviously extensively studied everything from Homer to Owen and Sassoon, to the brilliant, raw, and poignant *Dien Cai Dau* by Yusef Komunyakaa, marveled at Picasso's *Guernica*, and been motivated by the works of contemporaries like Brian Turner. But if I have to choose just one, it would be the work of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. His selected works, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, completely changed the way I look at my own war experience and the way that I wrote about those experiences. Darwish has an ability to find even the tiniest sliver of beauty in a tragic experience, and his poetry conveys the beauty and humanity in even the most dire and tragic circumstances. His work taught me that I could still be myself—artistic, positive, and enthusiastic—while writing about death and destruction. It reminded me to hold on to those pieces of me that I clung so desperately to while living war in my writing of war.

CASTNER: At the risk of providing a trendy answer, I'm choosing Joan Didion. And not the latest ad campaign or image or reputation of Joan Didion, which is very fashionable now, but the work itself, especially *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. Not only is it a clinic in craft at the sentence level, but it is so sneakily ambitious. She somehow manages to distill the breadth of California down into small stories about small people. She doesn't draw distinctions between reportage and memoir and narrative. She just writes a series of great stories that add up to more than the sum of their parts. And she has given permission to several generations of nonfiction writers to similarly write agnostically about large topics and find the general truth in the very specific. As often as I can when I'm writing, I think "What would Joan Didion do?" and I try to follow that. How much of Afghanistan can I squeeze into a few very real characters?

ABRAMS: The obvious suspect is *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. Its ghost clings to the pages of *Fobbit* and my love for the novel is well known (I even devoted a week of blog posts to it at The Quivering Pen). But I'd also like to mention that midway through the writing of *Fobbit*, I was equally inspired by *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer. I'd heard about the novel for years, but until 2009, I'd never cracked it open. At the time I started reading *The Naked and the Dead*, I was struggling with self-doubt over *Fobbit*'s fragmented structure. I was writing scenes, which turned into chapters, which jumped from character to character. I felt there wasn't any cohesive flow (and there still may not be in the final product), but once I saw what Mailer was doing—using a style that moved like a roving camera between his characters—I felt I had permission to continue structuring *Fobbit* in this way. It's weird to say this, but it's like Mailer gave me a thumb's up from the grave and that, more than anything else during the writing of the novel, allowed me to relax and breathe easier.

BELL: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* changed my life. During the 1970s in West Virginia girls let people curl and brush their hair, learned to turn cartwheels so they could try out for cheerleader, wore a pretty dress to the senior prom, got married (preferably to a handsome boy who'd played varsity football), worked in a bank or taught elementary school for a year or two, and then settled down to raise children, cook, and clean the house until they went into a nursing home or died. That vision didn't suit me; I suspected I'd never measure up to those expectations. By the time I checked a copy of *Little Women* out of the elementary school library in fifth grade, I *knew* I was screwed: my hair refused to hold a curl for five minutes even if my mother used an entire jar of Dippety Do on it, and I'd never be able to turn a proper cartwheel. Jo March threw me a lifeline, an alternative vision of adolescence and adulthood. I could be a tomboy, rebel against domesticity and domestication, go off to New York, even write stories! And I could still live happily ever after, even if the handsome hero married my beautiful younger sister (mine is even prettier and more talented than Amy March).

On a more serious note, *Little Women* was the book that fired my ambition to write. I unconsciously absorbed some of my earliest ideas about character, realism, sensory detail, emotional resonance, romanticism, and depiction of women's lives in fiction from those pages. I only realized decades later that *Little Women* was a war novel—not just a children's novel—and learned that Alcott was a veteran too: she volunteered as an Army nurse during the Civil War.

What are you working on now?

ABRAMS: Another novel set in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This one is more serious in tone than *Fobbitt*—more tears than laughter—and I've been working on it sporadically since 2013. I have a finished draft, but it still needs another polish (or three) before it's ready for prime time.

BELL: Former Marine Tracy Crow and I are co-writing a nonfiction book about the memoirs, diaries, and letters of women who served in the military. We originally planned a simple anthology, but realized early on that we needed to frame our selections in their historical and literary context. We ended up doing more research and original writing than we expected. We hope we're writing the book that we would have wanted to read when we joined the armed forces as young women many years ago. It's due out in the spring of 2017, and after we turn in the manuscript this June I plan to return to fiction: the Navy stories and a very rough draft of a novel that grew out of one of the story outlines.

CASTNER: I'm a co-editor on an anthology of short fiction from veteran writers. We recruited a diverse group of authors, and we hope it sounds new and fresh. It'll be published by Pegasus Books next year. But for my own writing, I've also started a book on another subject that I think rises to the occasion, and I'm happy to report that it has nothing to do with war.

HALLORAN: I recently completed a chapbook of poems about conflict in 2015, exploring war from an outsider's perspective, particularly focusing on the refugee experience. The next project is a prose memoir that will look at my military service and PTSD through the lens of my life as an artist and outcast. While covering much of the same material as *Shortly Thereafter*, I'm excited about the aspects of my story that prose allows me to delve into in an entirely different way.

JESSE GOOLSBY is the author of the novel *I'd Walk with My Friends if I Could Find Them* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), winner of the Florida Book Award and long-listed for the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. His fiction and essays have appeared widely, including *Epoch*, *The Literary Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, and the Best American series. He serves as Acquisitions Editor at *War, Literature & the Arts*. An active-duty Air Force officer, he earned his PhD in English from Florida State University.