

COMMENTARY BY JESSICA HELLMANN

High Skies and Fat Horses

Great books occupy a part of your soul. They worm their way in under your skin, they slip through cell membranes, pieces of them break into your cell's nucleus and the language molds itself into your DNA. Great books are like a virus. They occupy you. They wholly consume you. Troubling books, on the other hand, are books you aren't quite sure what to do with, they take up space in your working mind. They sit in the half-darkness between conscious and unconscious thought. You read them, think about them, forget about them, only to have them reappear suddenly when you least expect it. That's what William Wallisch's novel *High Skies and Fat Horses* is to me. It became a long-term occupying force in my mind.

Wallisch opens his "novel on war and human imperfection" with Captain Norm Whitman (nickname the Appo Kid) of the United States Air Force arriving via a "weary old C-47" to the Korean island of Tolsan-Do. He's there to be a US military advisor to the 771st ROKAF Aircraft Control and Warning squadron. I naively assumed this novel was set during the Korean War, a war I haven't read or heard much about. Perhaps we don't write much about Korea because it's not a completed story. The war is ongoing with no final resolution. No concentration camps to be liberated; no Nazis to be defeated. No iconic last-choppers-out-of-Saigon images to be shared around the world. But instead of providing a book about this lost war, Wallisch offers a surprising perspective on the Vietnam conflict. He situates his novel in 1967-1968 (he ends it with Captain Whitman embroiled in the Tet Offensive)—meantime, his readers begin to understand what it means to be an occupying force.

Captain Whitman and the various cast of characters (the hated and incompetent Major Dubbs; Sergeant Goldman, the up-for-any-shenanigans medic; Father Paul Fisher the tortured, alcoholic Catholic chaplain; the obsessed, maladjusted, soon-to-be murdered in a love spat Lieutenant Andy “Oyster” Packer; the gaggle of Catholic missionary priests who help run the island’s pig farms; and Colonel Lee, the commander of the ROKAF troops) are portrayed as occupying forces who are also susceptible to occupation. The island of Tolsan-Do is still occupied by United States forces, however the people and equipment of the 771st ROKAF Aircraft Control and Warning squadron go on to another occupied land, Vietnam, to help out with the American war effort there. Tolsan-Do, although technically an occupied space, claims the life of Lt Oyster, and in turn becomes an occupier. The missionary priests occupy the hearts, minds, and souls of their Korean flock. But they too are trapped on the island, separated from their homeland of Ireland for life. The oldest priest has experienced multiple occupying forces, having been captured and imprisoned by the Japanese until the Americans ended that war. Father Paul Fisher is occupied by thoughts of a comrade who died during the attack on Pearl Harbor. The characters and the space of the novel are obsessed by the idea of occupation. Wallisch allows his readers to see how the US functions as an occupying force. In his novel, the occupation of Korea is in its infancy and the active occupation of Vietnam is nearing its end. As Americans, we don’t like to see ourselves as occupiers, but it is, perhaps, the activity we are best at.

Alcohol abuse surfaces as the favorite pastime in Captain Whitman’s world. Father Paul drinks to forget. Captain Whitman drinks because “this wasn’t really drinking. It was get-well time. It was medicine.” The rest of the base drinks mainly because war, especially occupied war, is boring. In a conversation with Wallisch, I asked about the rampant alcohol use in the era of the novel since I’ve only lived in the “Zero Drinks Underage, Zero Drinks When Driving, One drink per Hour, Three Drinks per Night,” better known as, the 0-0-1-3 rule in the Air Force. He responded by saying when he “came through the Air Force/military door in 1963, there was one hell of a party going on. Just sober up in the morning. It wasn’t everybody, but alcohol was a part of . . . so much.” It’s that pause at the end of his statement that troubled me the most. In this way alcohol, and more specifically addiction, becomes another aspect of occupation. In that same conversation, Wallisch shared that his “sense is that self-medication is still a part of the military scene. It’s a big part of the present American culture. It’s a worldwide problem.” It is in these acts of “self-medication” that we can fully see how occupation works. The coping mechanism, for whatever the ailment, shifts and becomes the problem.

Alcohol is not the only preoccupying vice found on the island. Captain Whitman and his fellows also engage with women who practice the oldest profession, prostitution. The levels of prostitution vary from the *yobos* who have a “boyfriend” that rotates as soon as the men get on and off the rotator to Osan, to the women who worked as *kisaeng* (entertainers and companions). The *kisaeng* houses that Wallisch creates are full of women struggling to make a living, which means they offer sex in addition to a night of companionship. Out of all the occupations in the novel this is the one that troubled me the most. These women have no choice, and neither do the ones who fill the bar visited by Captain Whitman in Vietnam, to survive they have to hope that they won’t get pregnant by some GI; end up with some incurable disease; or dead via war, disease, pregnancy, or violence from their customers. I understand why Wallisch included these women—because they exist—but I felt like they deserved to exist outside of the men’s wartime experience and reminiscing. All we, the consumers of war literature, are allowed to see are the men’s projections of these women. They lose their humanness and it’s not only their bodies that are occupied, but their stories and their existence. Even though Wallisch told me he “wanted to tell their stories,” I felt these characters were presented more shallowly than they could have been. There’s no space in this novel, occupied by Captain Whitman’s descent into alcoholism and his fight out the other side, for these or any women’s voices to be heard. They are secondary characters that fill a trope. This, of course, may have been Wallisch’s point.

Not everyone coming to this novel will be or will have been a member of an occupying force, or live in an “occupied” space. We are all, however, like Captain Whitman and his alcoholism, occupied by something. For me it’s worry. Worry controls me, it freezes me into inaction. Worry about judgment, worry about writing, worry about getting it wrong, worry about living, worry about dying, worry about my cat while I’m at work, worry about the all of the things in this world that I can’t quite understand. It is my occupying force. I spent a month or two grappling with the novel’s ending, which then led me to being frustrated with the line that stared back at me from the cover of the book: “There’s a little of the Appo Kid in all of us.” It mocked my inaction. There’s *no* Appo Kid in me, I fumed. I am *not* Captain Norm Whitman, I am *nothing* like him. But, yes, there *is* a little of the “Appo Kid” in all of us. May we do our best to come out of our “occupations” as Captain Whitman does at the end of *High Skies and Fat Horses*: “lean and clean.”

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