

MATTHEW SARDA

**Waiting and the Intermediary**  
**A Conversation with Elliot Ackerman**

*Stay in any branch of the service long enough and you will inevitably learn of a colleague or classmate who makes the ultimate sacrifice at the expense of an improvised explosive device. In the muddled context of our current conflicts, where detached politicians wage undeclared wars with nary a beginning or concrete finish, an American military footprint still exists in the countries where my colleagues died.*

*We cannot place fallen service members into the arc of history because the arc is not complete. In the meantime, we do our best to memorialize the fallen. Granite statues are erected in our dead's likenesses, awards and ceremonies are created in their honor, and military facilities and naval vessels assume the names of our fallen. But what happens to those who are left behind waiting? Who acknowledges their sorrow? Few public spaces commemorate the women and men left lingering for their loved ones to come home from war. Elliot Ackerman's third novel *Waiting for Eden* broaches the universal anguish of waiting.*

*Our best stories often involve reactions to the end of human consciousness, and Ackerman's robust imagination lends itself well to the subject. Mortally wounded by an IED blast sustained while on a Marine combat deployment to Iraq, Eden Malcom waits for his death in a Texas hospital. It is in this hospital where Eden's wife Mary waits for her husband to die. The novel's narrator, an unnamed Marine who dies from the same blast that crippled Eden, observes Eden and Mary from his purgatorial state, unaware of what fate befalls Mary, Eden, or himself. All of the characters must acquiesce to the new normal that pervades and disrupts their lives. Ackerman ventilates the arcs of these three characters with enough surgical precision to make the reader carefully examine Ackerman's meticulous language selection, setting, and textures.*

*It took me all of a summer afternoon to devour *Waiting for Eden*. While Ackerman jokes that his novel is "mercifully short," I spent weeks fully digesting his prose. Readers often impose their own personal intimacies on more resonating novels, and I found myself frequently transposing my own experiences with what the characters endure in the novel. Like Mary, I have spent days and nights in uncomfortable hospitals waiting for a loved one to die. Witnessing the arbitrary and inconsistent transitions from assisted living to palliative care to hospice care, I realized, despite our advances, just how little agency humans have in the process of dying. Like Eden, my loved one wanted to die on his own terms, which only further excruciated his own suffering while confined to this planet. And like Mary, I was forced to accept the limited mental facilities my loved one suffered. His suffering made me question what it meant really to be alive, for what I saw was both*

*living and not living. While not wholly identical, my memories and Ackerman's imagination overlap and together we reach the same conclusions about humanity. We all live. We all will wait on someone to die. We all will die. Eventually, someone else will wait on us to die.*

*Ackerman and I spoke over the phone where he answered some of my lingering questions concerning the novel, his creative process, and the pain in waiting. Several of his responses surprised me, and I was thankful to have interviewed him.*

**From a professional resume' standpoint, your tenure in the Marines went about as well could be desired: five combat tours, a White House Fellowship, Bronze Star for Valor, and Silver Star. Coupled with your undergraduate education from Tufts, you could have generated the typical officer's memoir, a one-off book that leverages you into the paid speaker circuit, which then places you into a leadership position at a Fortune 500 company. First and foremost, as a reader, I want to thank you for writing novels. Explain your commitment to fiction and what you seek to attain in your prose.**

One question I'll often get asked talking about books or writing is, "It's odd that you were a Marine and you wound up writing fiction. That does not seem like the normal trajectory." So your question is not one I'm unfamiliar with. If you know me, you look at it a little bit differently, and ask isn't it odd that I wound up being a Marine being the person that I am? I naturally come back to fiction and the arts. Before I was a Marine, I was a big skateboarder and have always been artistically inclined, but was also drawn to go into the service. So I put a lot of that artistic side of my personality on hold for the eight years I was in the Marines. You do not have as many outlets, so when finally I left the Marine Corps, it seemed very natural for me not only to write fiction but also to go into a career in the arts.

With any subject there's truth you can get to in fiction that you might not be able to get to in the same way based off the constraints that exist in writing memoir. I write nonfiction, I write lots of journalism. I have a book of nonfiction that's coming out next spring. My writing runs the gambit. The only thing I haven't really done is poetry. But fiction is always where I felt the most at home. I consider myself a novelist first because I'm drawn to the creative freedom you have in writing a novel or writing short stories.

**Years are not mentioned in *Waiting for Eden*. The onus falls on the reader to bridge**

these gaps to the best of his or her ability. The closest clue you provide is in when the narrator describes Mary cross-referencing where Eden's death falls in line with other Americans:

In the papers and on cable news they counted the dead from the two wars separately, giving each a running number. For ten hours the kid made Iraq's number 816, then another kid in Ramadi by way of Spokane made it 817. Splitting the numbers kept each figure manageable, but on the night Eden came in Mary began to add all the numbers. To her, the kid's number was 1,314.

I perused a website tracking US Troop Fatalities in Iraq. For me, this provides a good reference point for where your characters are in their lives. Straight from your lips, I would like to know your rationale behind obfuscating dates, and if what I did as a detail-oriented reader (cross-checking your excerpt with historical fatality charts from Operation Iraqi Freedom) runs contrary to your authorial vision for *Waiting for Eden*.

When writing—what feels most natural to me—is that the story not attempt to exist in a very specific place because I like the type of story that resides more in imagination. By keeping the stories outside of one fixed place, they become a little bit more real to me. These stories, I think, live on longer. That's intuitively what has always felt right to me. *Green on Blue*, for instance, was a book where I did not place the events in one detailed valley with all the various tribes and subtribes and the subsequent politics involved. I wanted to tell a story that felt universal. So I picked one valley. I picked one province. Because I was general with the descriptions, you end up with a book that has a larger ambition to it. That also was true with *Waiting for Eden*. I did not want to necessarily fix it on a map. By fixing it on the map, it becomes a specific story as opposed to a universal story.

In an interview with *Esquire*, you stated that *Green on Blue* was at least partially motivated by the dubious portrayals of Afghans by the American media. Is *Waiting for Eden* a counter narrative to anything currently portrayed by the establishment?

Not really. At its core *Waiting for Eden* is a book that is less political than I think *Dark at the Crossing* or *Green on Blue* are. At its core, it's a book about these three characters: the narrator, Eden, and his wife Mary. It's also a meditation on life and death. I was not trying to battle against a prevailing narrative per se so much as tell one story between these three characters.

**You dedicated your first novel to Afghan soldiers you served with. You dedicated your second novel to a Syrian refugee you developed a rapport with when you were a journalist living in Turkey. You dedicated *Waiting for Eden* to your mother, novelist Joanne Leedom-Ackerman. I have my theories, I want to hear from you as to why you chose to dedicate this particular novel to your mother.**

It's a book about a woman. The novel is about Eden, it's about the narrator, but I think Mary suffers the most in this book. It was the first book of mine where I wanted to acknowledge my mother's influence on me as a writer. My mother taught me how to write so it seemed appropriate to dedicate this book to her.

**Since you call this a universal story, I am curious to the editorial changes *Waiting for Eden* went through, if any writers, colleagues, or medical professionals provided inputs for authenticity along the way.**

I have a process I go through when I'm working on a project and people who read for me. I did not come from an MFA program. A lot of people who come from MFA programs tend to have a very wide net of readers. I notice that my friends who are writers who do come from MFA programs seem to give their work to a broad range of individuals to solicit feedback from. I do not have a very wide net of readers. I see their process. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I'm much more protective and selective of who I let read in my draft form. Most of my books I will maybe give to two or three people before I send them to my agent. I am not relying on those readers for details as much as if the characters are resonating with the readers. Sometimes I will give my work to a reader who I want to check me off on a specific aspect of a book, but often the readers are more for story working. Something like *Eden* I gave to two or three readers whose opinions I respect and whom I trust.

**These are the same readers who have been around with every previous novel?**

By and large, yes. Probably three or four people read my novels before they come out.

**May I ask who?**

Sure. My mother is a great reader. You certainly need to know who your readers are and what they are good for. It's kind of like you have a stable of them. A mother is a great reader because she loves you. Your mother will love you enough to be hard on you. She's not your friend; if she does not like something it's not like I'm going to stop being her son. But she loves me enough for me to not go out and present something that isn't working. She'll be tough with me about that. The other is my longtime girlfriend Lea Carpenter who is also a novelist and a screenwriter. She was an editor for many years. She also falls into that category of people who love me enough to not let me go out into the world with something that isn't good. She has impeccable taste. Ben Fountain is a dear friend who will read for me, as well as my larger circle, my agent and my editor. Those are the people I really lean on. Finally, in all my novels, anyone who is in the acknowledgements is normally someone who has read the book. So if you're interested you can see the early readers there.

***Waiting for Eden* examines the contemporary concept of a military deployment and what sacrifice means beyond the standard tropes of sacrifice for the good of the country. People devote attention to the men and women who voluntarily deploy, but no one really speaks of the men and women they voluntarily leave behind. Eden's wife Mary views his second deployment as selfish. Mary's mother views Eden's deployment as the abandonment of her pregnant daughter. When Eden speaks with the narrator, he applies and an interesting perspective on his situation:**

“We've burned and bled, but we were never asked to wait. [Mary]'s waited, they all have. They're trapped by us and they wait.”

**When you were a Marine, you made your family and loved ones wait. What is it about**

**waiting that is more excruciating than burning and bleeding?**

What was fairly present in my mind when I was writing this novel was the fear that people must deal with at home. For my family, they often would not know when I was safe or wasn't. So in their mind, I'm constantly under threat. Whereas when I would spend time deployed I would know if I was sitting back at the firebase where I was basically safe, and if I would know if I was on a raid at night, I would know that it was dangerous. So I was able to rest and linger between those two places. My family wasn't. My family had no agency in the matter. When you add agency to the matter, when you add agency to your personal safety, you're calling the shots that make dealing with danger a little bit easier. For example, is it more frightening to drive down the highway at 130 miles per hour, or is it more frightening to drive down the highway as a passenger at 130 miles per hour? I would argue that it is the latter. When people go on deployments, they are more in the driver's seat than the family they leave behind. So it's more excruciating for the families.

**In terms of control, both the narrator and Eden perish by means of an IED. You're at the wrong place at the wrong time. I would argue that you do not have any control over those circumstances in the same manner as the driver of the speeding car in your metaphor. Does the lack of agency with those characters factor into anything at all?**

I think in terms of that choice of how Eden was going to wind up in the bed and how the narrator was going to wind up—the IED blast was not defining to them. It could have been anything. The way they're hurt isn't central to their story.

**It's not?**

In my mind. As a writer, when crafting this story, I did not want to write a chapter all about Eden doing x, y, and z in the gunfight and this happens and then that happens, and then he winds up this way. It's not central to the story. Often as a writer, what you're doing is trimming down your writing to its most essential components to make a good story. How Eden winds up in the bed—that's not the story. *Waiting for Eden* is not a war story. Eden could have been a firefighter, he could have been a police officer. He could have been an unfortunate guy who gets

hurt in a house whose friend is in the house with him. That IED is a device that gets him into the plot. And then you learn about that story. In my mind, that's where the real story is—in the decisions that Mary makes. But if you read it differently, that has as much credibility as what was in my mind.

**I sense that these utterances from your novel have been conversations of which you (or the Marines you served with) have been on the giving and receiving end:**

“It's always *have* to with you all, as if you have no choice, as if you've conveniently forgotten you volunteered for all this. You ever think that once or even never was enough?”

“It's just different. The first time I wanted to go. Now I need to.”

**Why is there such a sliding scale regarding adequacy when it comes to military service?**

I don't know if it's adequacy regarding military service as much as it is the draw of something and the tension that exists. For Mary, she wonders, “what's this draw?” why does he have to leave her. That's what he's wrestling with. Because he abandons her early in the book and the question throughout the book is whether or not she is going to abandon him. And so I need to explain the nature of his abandonment of her. She does not want him to go. Eden doesn't necessarily have to go. So why is he so drawn to go?

**Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems, based on the articles I've read, that you left the military mostly on your own terms. At what point were you fully satiated with your military service?**

I just got to the point where I felt there were other things that I wanted to do with my life. I really enjoyed that experience. Staying in was now occurring with a very high cost because I was not able to do those other things.

**In a televised interview for The Pritzker Military Museum and Library, you allude to**

**“an emotional transference” that occurs between writer and reader. You state that if your writing is going well, “maybe you feel some fraction of what I was feeling in that moment...That transfer of emotion is an assertion of our shared humanity.” Do you agree with the assertion that it is acceptable, even exciting, for readers, influenced by their own historical context, to project their own meaning onto a work you created?**

Of course. Each person should engage with a work of art on their own terms. Because a work of art might resonate one way with one person and resonate differently with another person. That’s the whole point. No one wants to read a book or see art where it’s only able to be taken one way. No one should be telling anyone else what they should feel or think about a book. You should interpret my book or anyone’s book however you want to interpret it. If the prevailing view reads one way, and a minority has read it a different way, both views have legitimacy. That’s one of the great things about reading and art—each person has their agency when engaging with the art form. We all have our agency in how we engage with art: whether we like it, whether we don’t like it, what the meaning is we draw from it. You might read a book and draw all sorts of meaning from it. I might read the same book and get different messages from that book and draw different meanings from it. That’s what’s supposed to happen.

**But there has to be an acceptable range of responses between creator and receiver. So when a reader responds, through the medium of Twitter to an article you wrote about the strains of perpetual war on an apathetic American populace, “Sorry. Don’t want your violent backward Afghan buddies moving next door,” it is clear this reader does not understand your assertion of a shared humanity. What can you do with this information as a writer?**

Most wars occur because of a failure of imagination. You go to war, both sides think they’re going to win, so one side is always wrong. There’s always a miscalculation fundamental to all wars. Also, there’s a lack of empathy in humanity and imagination. So when someone responds the way that you describe, that to me is indicative of a lack of imagination because you cannot imagine who these people are and what emotions they are going through. And that just fuels war. Right now, because we have a concept of an all-volunteer military; we rely heavily on

foreign troops. If you don't want to engage with the wars or our national security as an American citizen, you don't have to. We exist in a heightened state of moral hazard. That's where we are and we will see where that leads us as a country. That's the reason why when so many Americans go abroad, we don't understand the values we export are very different than the values that we claim to represent at home.

**Matthew Sarda** is an air force officer who currently teaches for the Department of English at the United States Air Force Academy. He lives in Colorado Springs with his wife and son.

**Elliot Ackerman** is the author of the novels *Dark at the Crossing*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Green on Blue*. He is both a former White House Fellow and Marine, and served five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, where he received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for Valor, and the Purple Heart. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, among other publications. He currently divides his time between New York City and Washington, D.C.