COMMENTARY BY JULIEN MATHONNIÈRE

War tales that blur the lines but extol the truth: How fiction helps make cogent war stories

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk
by Ben Fountain
Ecco, 320 pp., $25.99

The Yellow Birds
by Kevin Powers
Little, Brown & Company, 230 pp., $24.99

Fobbit
by David Abrams
Grove Press, 384 pp., $15.00

Armadillo
by Janus Metz Pederson
Lorber Films, $29.95

Hell and Back Again
by Danfung Dennis
Docurama, $29.95

Trying to recount and to stage combat experience without betraying its uniqueness is a daunting and challenging exercise, irrespective of how good one grasps the reality of conflict. Embedding with the troops is hardly a sufficient condition, for despite unprecedented physical access to the soldiers, it is always difficult for an outside observer to learn about their true feelings, not to say for a writer to translate them into words.

For all their qualities, a lot of war stories have consistently failed to convey the utter singularity of battlefield experience to the general public, often lacking precision in the form of appropriate narratives. The ever increasing intrusion of cameras and reporters in every little corner of battle zones has ironically done little to improve our understanding of war. And most soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan betray a sense of annoyance at the idea that the war they saw and lived still inhabits their minds in a way which is too profane and profound to be aptly described by newsmakers or writers.

Back to 2003 and the early stages of the Iraq campaign, there was a widespread although short-lived enthusiasm for the military blogs that flourished on the web. Written like daily dispatches from the battlefield by real soldiers on the ground, they won billows of admiration by readers and editors alike. While the former found comfort in shifting away from mainstream media as the only reliable source of information and sole perspective, the latter where enthused by the authenticity they lent to such testimonials, only to later discover that some of the said bloggers had actually never left the home front for the thick of war.

But the reason why those blogs received so much publicity in the first place was their authors' ability to capture some specific aspects of the war and to process them through their very own lens, often with a flowery language, little inhibition for profanities and a style and imagination deeply rooted into pop culture. And as mixed they may have been in quality, they seemed at loggerheads with hero-worshipping *shoot-them-all* tales ordinarily found in combat literature. They rang more true, less for being the work of real soldiers than for displaying a real freshness in stylization and invention that rendered them more truthful.

Film director Werner Herzog often said that factual truth was less important than digging into a deeper stratum to find moments that be somehow illuminating. There are few directors for whom the distinction between fiction and reality means so little, suggesting that they may in fact often weave together in complicated ways. Essential meaning can be revealed to viewers by the use of imagination rather than the pursuit of an accountant's truth. Herzog calls it the 'ecstasy of truth'.

"*Facts per se are not so interesting for me,*" he says. "*Facts do not illuminate; they create norms. The Manhattan phone directory has 4 million entries which are factually correct, but as a book it doesn't really illuminate you. I've always said we have to look beyond realism, beyond facts*." Does that imply that every war story should include an element of fiction to get closer to the truth? Herzog certainly brought up the idea that all documentaries were constructed fictions in which facts and invention had to blend seamlessly.

Zero Dark Thirty, Kathryn Bigelow's latest film has stirred a critics' nest by precisely doing this, producing a fiction that has the pretense of a journalistic inquiry. By using the aesthetics of cinema to enliven an otherwise bleak reality, she clouds viewers' judgment with the suggestion that some of the depicted events might have happened just exactly as described in the film. Bigelow has conspicuously fudged the line between entertainment and accuracy in order to make the whole film ring more "true", somehow denying its fictional value as a pure work of art. The viewer is left with a gamut of disturbing impressions, none of which can be clearly classified as fiction or proven fact.

One year ago, war photographer Danfung Dennis toed a very similar line. Embedding with a Marine company in Afghanistan, he shooted an entire movie with his reflex camera in a deliberate attempt to smudge over the frontier between factual war reporting and film making. Dennis explained his move from still photography to video as an intent "*to shake people up—to show the war's brutal reality in an honest way*." An interesting if only ambiguous statement from a photographer whose job it already was to churn out graphic images of conflicts. Or is this an admission of the inherent defects of war photography, which is always fraught with the most awkward biases and incompleteness?

As if truth needed more elaboration to be fully palatable, this rationale strangely echoes Herzog's philosophy. Despite being an interesting experiment, Dennis' *Hell and Back Again* is less about fiction than technical virtuosity. By introducing film making techniques to traditional reportage, Dennis has strived to bridge the gap toward a wider audience, giving his images a near perfect, indeed photographic quality. But what the film makes up in clinical precision, it lacks in emotional warmth, somehow failing to establish a connection between Sergeant Nathan Harris and the viewers. Rather we are left in stunned disbelief and hardly feel any sympathy for the film's hero – a real soldier – the depiction of whose life on the front lines or stateside resembles a collection of icy war photographs.

Based on a very similar approach, *Armadillo* equally stands out as a compelling effort to convincingly show combat and its aftermath. Danish director Janus

Metz tries to convey the unique feel of war by capturing the experience of Danish conscripts, all volunteers for a six-month mission in Afghanistan. Metz excels at showing how contradictory feelings gradually build up into the soldiers' minds, long before reality has dulled their certainties to cynicism. They resent the indifference if not outright contempt of the people they are supposed to protect and end up finding relief and addiction in deadly skirmishes with the enemy. What strikes is the mesmeric quality of the movie, mixing dark aesthetics and soundtrack with a punchy production. The author abstains from all moral judgment or any attempt at explaining or commenting. The interpretation of his war radiograph rests in the eyes of the beholder.

Yet, as cleverly produced as it may be, *Armadillo* remains poised on the edge of fiction, no matter how hard it is wired into the facts. The empathy we feel for the protagonists is entirely the result of an elaborate narrative construction. These two films have in common their particular adroitness in untangling facts in a meaningful way, rather than pointlessly inviting the viewer to share the hardships of those fighting for the sake of objectivity - which embedding only rarely produces. By this token, fiction is less about flinging realism out the window than about trying to verbalize it in a cogent way.

"*I've come to believe that only in fiction will this insane war finally reach an American reading public*." David Abrams acknowledges that this statement from his agent Nat Sobel completely changed his life or at least his idea about how to relate his own experience in Iraq. Leaving aside the gung-ho style that characterized earlier accounts of the war, his book *Fobbit* probes the depths of absurdity of military life behind the wire of FOBs (Forward Operating Bases – hence the nickname FOBbits of its inhabitants).

One of Abrams' voices is Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr., who holds the quixotic view that "*fictional tales are better and more enjoyable the nearer they approach the truth or the semblance of the truth*." With a handful of other characters, he's part of the PR team that weaves careful storytelling into army *newspeech* before force-feeding it to the media. Reflecting upon his own experience as a former army journalist, Abrams delivers a bitterly humorous account of the war in Iraq.

Blending fiction and journalism, his tale is a concerto played with several hands, where situations range from the heroic to the squalid, each player delivering his own tune in exquisitely crafted dialogues, inner monologues, diary entries, memoranda and press releases. Despite the quirkiness of the characters and for all their peculiar idiosyncrasies, their individual adventures or lack thereof still ring true, precisely because they've been so skillfully wrought as fictions. They seem to indulge in their

inner thoughts just as much as in the comfy womb of the FOB : wishing they'd never get out.

Fobbit has drawn comparison with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, but Abrams' novel is far more deeply rooted into realism and this is why it may seem so familiar to us. It also differs greatly in tone and register from earlier accounts of the war. Ironically, his is a fiction about how the reality of war is crafted into fiction by the Army master wordsmiths, from the sanitized confines of their air-conditioned cubicles.

The war memoir is a booming genre that has conspicuously attracted a host of writers those last few years, some of them good but a lot of them bad, resulting in tons of poorly strung literary works. Yet, a few of them seem able to find the tone and range of vocabulary that such a unique experience demands to be aptly passed up to people who have not lived it. Ben Fountain's debut novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* stands as one interesting such attempt, along with *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers. Both are pitch-perfect looks into soldiers' experiences, based on finely observed, deeply affecting and deftly construed narratives. Using a different but original timeline, they both invite the reader to be an active participant to the story they tell.

Fountain's novel might aptly be dubbed a "Leopold Bloom in Dallas", if only slightly more incisive, for as James Joyce's illustrious *Ulysses*, it takes place over the course of only a few hours at a Dallas Cowboys game on Thanksgiving. Like Joyce's main character, his seems equally prone to flights of fancy and free-flowing streams of consciousness, providing far richer insights into the mental states of the protagonist than any minute detail of firefights would.

Powers' is more of a deconstructionist experiment, moving back and forth between Iraq, Germany and a few places across the US in a desperate attempt to piece together the broken shards of traumatic memories. Unlike Fountain, Powers served with the United States Army as a machine gunner in Iraq in 2004 and 2005. He has channeled his experience into this extraordinary novel where one feels the mind-blowing kick of his prose with impressive skill and mastery. It doesn't lack a Joycian quality either, in particular when Private John Bartle engages in an entirely unpunctuated monologue on a tidal rising of painful memories.

Notwithstanding their difference in tone, both novels share a similar consciousness about the seriousness of their object, framing matters in strangely echoing ways. They both show how soldiers seem to shed a part of themselves with every new death they witness, especially those of close friends. Powers' novel depicts Private Bartle's enormous difficulty to tune back to civilian life after he failed to bring his best army mate Daniel Murphy home alive, thereby breaking

his promise to Murphy's mother. He's haunted by the loss and sees "*the ghosts of the dead fill[ed] the empty seats of every gate he passed*."

In a recent *New York Times* 'At War' blog column, Thomas James Brennan, a former U.S. Marine who served in Iraq, described the feeling of having left a part of himself on the battlefield:

> "*After being so close to death, things that once excited you have a way of losing their thrill when you return home. I wanted to feel alive again. Strangely, that involved surrounding myself with the threat of death*."

Although he has never served as a soldier, this disconnect is also very accurately described by Fountain, especially when his characters mingle with wealthy VIPs, including the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, Norman Oglesby, supposed to incarnate the despotic arrogance of business savvy Jerry Jones. In fact, he is only one of many fictional tricks used by Fountain to lampoon the shallow spectacle of flag-waving patriotism. While Billy makes small talk about the war, his minds wanders back in Iraq where his best friend Sergent "Shroom" Breem died in his arms.

Billy and the men of his squad are propelled for a two-week "Victory tour" after they performed acts of gallantry in Iraq. Chaperoned by a veteran Hollywood producer and tossed from place to place during a boisterous halftime show, they are thanked by grateful Americans who hardly realize what they just went through. This makes Billy uneasy as he vaguely resents the fact he's treated as props by the civilians he meets, a way for them to express their patriotic feelings.

> "*They say thank you over and over and with growing fervor, they know they're being good when they thank the troops and their eyes shimmer with love for themselves and this tangible proof of their goodness*."

Billy gradually senses how remote his combat experience seems from anything most of those civilians have ever encountered. While he wants and needs to understand it, he would also like ordinary people around him to squeeze some sense out of what he's done over there.

> "*Having served on their behalf as a frontline soldier, Billy finds himself constantly wondering about them. What are they thinking? What do they*

want? Do they know they're alive? As if prolonged and intimate exposure to death is what's required to fully inhabit one's present life."

It has been a recurrent theme in recent war fiction to describe how characters who have seen combat seem to experience a feeling of emptiness, a loss of mark or the impression to live an existence shorn of sense and purpose as soon as they exit the battlefield. For them, the sensation of being equates their war mission. Bigelow has shown incredible adroitness at conveying this particular feeling with nifty scenaristic tricks, such as Sergeant James - *The Hurt Locker*'s main character - flummoxed in a supermarket cereal aisle when he suddenly realizes how the nullity of ordinary life compares to the extremity of war. At the end of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the question of where Maya goes next remains unanswered, with the lingering suggestion that nothing will really match something as monumental as the chase for Bin Laden.

Both Bigelow's characters have in common their willingness to fight for their own extreme sense of self: their confidence, their fortitude, their willingness to place themselves at the very edge of self-destruction. Real soldiers like Brennan sometimes also seem to be longing for danger, while Fountain's and Powers' heroes are yearning to return to ordinary life, and acutely aware of the gap to bridge. As Fountain's hero, Billy, puts it:

> "*A kind of abyss separates the war over here from the war over there, and the trick, as Billy perceives it, is not to stumble when jumping from one to the other.*"

Billy seeks the means for verbalizing the numbing complexity of his conflicted feelings about death, grief and the fate of soul without, in his own words, "*shitting all over their very real power.*" Confronted with unsettling questions from the other guests, he envies them for having the "*luxury of terror as a talking point*" when he himself has to physically commit to it. He tries to figure out what his friend Shroom would have said or done in situations like these.

> "*[...] and he wonders by what process virtually any discussion about the war seems to profane these ultimate matters of life and death. As if to talk of such things properly we need a mode of speech near the equal of prayer, otherwise just* shut*, shut your yap and sit on it, silence being truer to the experience*

than the star-spangled spasm, the bittersweet sob, the redeeming hug, or whatever this fucking closure *is that everyone's talking about*."

Fountain's and Powers' stories describe the coming of age and loss of innocence of their characters, how they gradually lose their certainties, somehow mimicking the real Danish soldiers of *Armadillo*. They also learn how surviving the battlefield is a matter of sheer luck and hazard. This comes to Private Bartle as a chilling epiphany:

> "*There are no bombs made just for us: any of them would have killed us just as well as they'd killed the owners of those names. We didn't have a time laid out for us, or a place. I have stopped wondering about those inches to the left or right of my head, the three-miles-an-hour difference that would have put us directly over an I.E.D.*"

Fountain's hero Billy, on the contrary, doesn't sound so serene about the way death may just pick you up at random and how unhinged he feels by the knowledge that a mere few inches could make all the difference.

> "*The freaking randomness is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace on the way to chow, choosing the third shitter in line instead of the fourth, turning your head to the left instead of the right. Random. How that shit does twist your mind.*"

In both accounts, there is an undertow of natural bewilderment and queasiness about the fact that certainties and absolutes seem meaningless in the aftermath of combat. Billy tries to keep an acceptable social attitude with civilians but he ends up resisting the powerful urge to smash one of the guests' esophagus to disarm him from his personal weapon. Meanwhile, he engages in continuous razor-sharp diagnosis of the world around him, finding it increasingly frustrating not to be able to find someone with whom to confide, even in the person of his beloved crusty sergeant. As he himself recognizes, what he longs for is "*more of the profile of the stable adult*".

Bartle also has an ambiguous relationship with his curmudgeon battle-scarred sergeant, whose callousness is only a façade for his foredooming. In the end, they mutually decide to share the terrible secret that underlies Murphy's death, a decision they will both pay a heavy price.

At least one of these books, if not all of them, seems to indicate that the quality of veteran doesn't necessarily confer any kind of authority in artistic expression. This holds true for Powers too, whose real talent is precisely his ability to fictionalize his hideous and brutal experience into an elaborate and dashingly handsome poetic form. The perennial problem with trying to describe the traumatic experience of war and combat may remain, but the consistency and density with which these novels bear witness to the war is truly illuminating.

It is remarkable how fiction in all these books and films has proven a perfectly suitable way to provide a clear narrative picture of the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. By mixing up the mundane and the hostile into immersive details, they weave an intense storytelling where war is recounted as it truly is: a never ending business, at least in the soldiers' mind. They also represent the best insider's view audiences have gotten of the war so far. Fiction, for that matter, is merely a wrap-around cinematic or literary artifice that strives to make sense of the nihilistic core of combat. It is a powerful tool that gives give us essential insights into the war, still unmatched by any other documentary effort.

Julien Mathonnière has been a journalist and editorial professional for 15 years, writing on defense, geopolitics and foreign policy for journals in France, Britain and the U.S., as well as on his CrossTalksUK blog and more recently, TIME Magazine. Curious about the world, always eager to learn, he holds dear the conviction that nothing is more important than keeping to develop and expand one's knowledge on a variety of new subjects. Julien embraced journalism because it gave him the opportunity to do so and to mingle with people whom he might have never met otherwise. A book worm and passionate writer, he believes that journalism provides a good vantage point and rich networking opportunities and although he turned to corporate communications, he's always stayed a journalist at heart. He is now pursuing a MSc in Petroleum, Energy Economics and Finance at the University of Aberdeen to broaden his geopolitics expertise to energy and commodities markets.