

PETER MOLIN

Frederick Busch and Annie Proulx Forebears of Contemporary War Fiction

In an *Atlantic* magazine article titled “Where’s the Great Novel about the War on Terror?” Matt Gallagher, the author of the Iraq War memoir *Kaboom*, explored reasons why, as of the time he wrote in 2011, so little fiction had appeared that addressed America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Almost a decade after the first bombs were dropped in Afghanistan,” Gallagher states, “even the most avid bookworm would be hard-pressed to identify a war novel that could be considered definitive of this new generation’s battles.” Gallagher considers several reasons why so little contemporary war fiction had yet been published. The wars’ lack of closure had drained would-be authors’ clarity of vision and sense of purpose. Publishing whims favored domestic subjects aimed at women readers. It was only natural that memoirs constituted the first wave of literary response to the wars and given time more fiction will come. About all these points, and especially the last one, Gallagher is ambivalent. He notes the recent publication of Siobhan Fallon’s collection of short stories *You Know When The Men Are Gone*, about military life on Fort Hood, Texas, during a time of war, but hesitates to conclude that more war fiction will follow Fallon’s achievement. Iraq and Afghanistan, he suggests, may turn out to be like other “brushfire wars,” such as the Phillipine-American War at the turn of the 20th-century, that never generate “classic” novelistic depiction.

Time would prove Gallagher wrong in regard to his last point, for in the coming years a number of story collections and novels heralded what *Washington Post* book critic Jeff Turrentine would later call a “Golden Age” of contemporary war fiction.

Zimmerman's *The Sandbox* had arrived relatively uncelebrated in 2010, but joining Fallon in 2011 was Helen Benedict's attention-grabbing *Sand Queen*, which dramatized US Army misogyny and brutality at a makeshift military prison in Iraq. 2012 brought two National Book Award finalists, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (with Fountain's novel taking the book-of-the-year award), as well as Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch* and David Abrams' *Fobbit*. Zimmerman's, Powers', and Abrams' novels were the first contemporary war novels authored by veterans of Iraq or Afghanistan, but others novels and tale collections by veterans would quickly follow. *Fire and Forget*, an anthology edited by Gallagher and fellow veteran Roy Scranton, arrived in 2013 and heralded the appearance in print of several authors who would soon publish titles independently, most notably Phil Klay, whose collection of stories titled *Redeployment* (2014) duplicated Fountain's feat by winning the National Book Award. The ensuing years would see many more war novels authored by veterans, including Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2014), Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* (2015), Jesse Goolsby's *I'd Walk With My Friends If I Could Find Them* (2015), Ross Ritchell's *The Knife* (2015), and John Renehan's *The Valley* (2015). War fiction authored by non-veterans, many of them women, also became a major presence in the publishing landscape in the years after 2012. Roxana Robinson's *Sparta* (2013), Hilary Plum's *They Dragged Them Through the Streets* (2013), Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War* (2013), Greg Baxter's *The Apartment* (2013), Lea Carpenter's *Eleven Days* (2013), Masha Hamilton's *What Changes Everything* (2013), Aaron Gwyn's *Wynne's War* (2014), Cara Hoffman's *Be Safe, I Love You* (2014), Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2014), and *War of the Encyclopaedists* (2015), co-authored by veteran Gavin Korite and civilian Christopher Robinson, constituted a war-fiction surge that belied Gallagher's 2011 trepidation. Joining the fiction published by major publishing houses were dozens of stories self-published, published online, and in anthologies, and the explosion seems not to have run its course. Gallagher's own novel about war in Iraq, *Youngblood*, appeared early in 2016 and Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, which Gallagher in his *Atlantic* essay uses as an example of a contemporary war novel that was struggling to find a publisher, also made it into print in 2016.

However shortsighted Gallagher was looking forward, he wasn't wrong as he canvassed the literary response to Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011. Memoirs and journalism about the wars had been plentiful, movies such as *The Hurt Locker* had captured critical and popular attention, and the poetry of ex-Army infantryman Brian Turner had been hailed for its synthesis of soldierly grit and detail and MFA-honed literary awareness. Besides Zimmerman's *The Sandbox*, little fiction had yet appeared, though, save for Fallon's short stories, which when they

appeared in collected form in 2011 marked the commonly understood start point of the contemporary war fiction flourishing. Two American writers, however, neither veterans, but both well-established, highly-regarded authors, had crafted short stories about war in Iraq and placed them in estimable literary venues well before Gallagher wrote and Fallon's stories appeared in book form. Frederick Busch published two stories, "Good to Go" and "Patrols," in the literary reviews *The Threepenny Review* and *Five Points*, respectively, before including them in his 2006 collection *Rescue Missions*, while Annie Proulx's "Tits-Up In a Ditch" appeared in 2008 in the *New Yorker* and later that year appeared in her collection *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3*. Though unnoticed by Gallagher in 2011 and not widely remembered now, Busch's and Proulx's stories, it can rightfully be claimed, began the process of bringing America's twenty-first century wars into fictional focus.¹

Revisiting Busch's and Proulx's stories now recovers the hidden forebears of contemporary war literature by helping us understand how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were first portrayed by the nation's literary artists. Study of their fictional antecedents not only profits contemporary war writers who can learn from Busch's and Proulx's craft, examination of their tales alerts us that many of the preoccupations of later war fiction were first rehearsed by members of an older generation of authors, with numerous correspondences but also subtle shades of difference. Indeed, "Good to Go," "Patrols," and "Tits-Up in a Ditch" portray and investigate subjects and themes that would later prove characteristic of the novels and short-stories written in their wake: war experienced individually as traumatic and nationally as folly, the difficulty of the return from war, the divide between those who served and those who did not, and the problems associated with speaking about wartime experience. Fallon, Fountain, Klay, and the other authors of the post-2011 war fiction surge may or may not have been aware of Busch and Proulx, but they did not conjure their subjects out of thin air; they built them out of the bricks of a national discourse that first found fictional expression in the works of Busch and Proulx.

Between 1971 and his death in 2006, Frederick Busch authored 27 books, most of them novels or story collections, but also criticism and essays. His *New York Times* obituary described Busch's work as "poetic novels and stories" [that] delved into the

¹ The Siobhan Fallon stories that first appeared in literary magazine prior to 2011 include "The Last Stand" (published as "Burning") in *The Briar Cliff Review* (Spring 2008), "Camp Liberty" (published as "Getting Out") in *Roanoke Review* (Summer 2008), "Gold Star" (published as "Sacrifice") in *Salamander* (December 2008), "You Know When the Men Are Gone" in *Salamander* (May 2009), and "Inside the Break" appeared in *New Letters* (Spring 2010). Note should also be made of the short fiction by Iraq veteran Brian Van Reet that appeared in literary magazines prior to 2011: "The Rooster," in *Shenandoah* (Spring-Summer 2008); "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek," in *Southern Review* (Summer 2009); and "Tower Six," in the *Evergreen Review* (August 2009)

seemingly unspectacular but ultimately profound experiences of people and families grappling with existential crises.” Several of his most highly regarded novels, such as *The Night Inspector* (1996), *War Babies* (2001), and *A Memory of War* (2003), are explicitly set in post-bellum milieus (the Civil War, Korea, and World War II, respectively) as if the aftermath of war provided the right mixture of social and personal ingredients to facilitate exploration of the “profound experiences” and “existential crises” of his characters. In an essay titled “My Father’s War,” published in 1998 in *A Dangerous Profession: A Book About the Writing Life*, Busch suggests that his interest in veterans stems from curiosity about his father, who saw extensive combat in Italy in World War II as a member of the Army’s 10th Mountain Division. Busch’s father Benjamin rarely spoke about the war, and Busch’s essay recounts his frustration at discovering that his father’s war journal consisted of decidedly terse descriptions of exciting and important events. In his father’s journal, “Ditto” and “Same” serve as often-used catch-all terms for describing days in which the younger Busch imagines the most intense war experiences must have occurred. Maddened by his father’s laconic war narrative, Busch ends “My Father’s War” by proclaiming, “When I write, then, when I place my characters in a geography I labor to make actual-feeling, in some way true, perhaps I’m trying to earn my reader’s approval. Maybe I have to find him first. Maybe, when I write, I’m mapping him” (30)—“him” here being, not the reader, but Busch’s father.

The search for his father’s absent war experience is refracted in Busch’s two Iraq War stories, “Good to Go” and “Patrols,” only here the target of understanding becomes a younger man, whom we can read as at least partially based on Busch’s son, also named Benjamin. Frederick Busch never served in the military, opposed the war in Vietnam, and was avowedly liberal in his politics. The younger Benjamin Busch, on the other hand, after completing a degree in fine arts at Vassar, obtained a commission as a Marine Corps officer and subsequently served two tours in Iraq. In both “Good to Go” and “Patrols,” older men—in the first case a father of a young Iraq veteran and in the second a journalist back from Iraq—measure their own “unspectacular” existential torpor against the war-fueled anguish of experienced combat soldiers. In “Good to Go,” a husband and wife, separated and in the process of divorcing, he alone and she already with a new partner, visit their son Patrick, who has returned from a brutal tour in Iraq. Described as “[G]rown and damaged, dangerous,” Patrick in Iraq had been an infantry team leader who holds himself responsible for the death of one of his men (44). He has taken up residence in a squalid room in his hometown, bought a rifle, and now snarls at his mother and father, who are at a loss to understand what has become of their son. “I was the corporal let us get separated from the squad,” Patrick exclaims, “I was the one directed our fire onto a little square sheep-shit hut, and I was the one got us shot to

wet fucking rags” [sic] (41). “Everything was fucked,” Patrick says, but he is as equally mad at his parents—especially his mother—as he is at himself and the military (35). “I thought of you,” he berates her, “I did. I thought about you and Les in your new house and you in your new job. I thought about Pop all alone” (38).

“Good to Go” is narrated through the point-of-view of Patrick’s mother, whom we see struggling to balance her happiness with her new life with her new partner with sympathetic efforts to help her badly hurt husband and even more badly damaged son, each of whom repay her attempted small kindnesses with bile. The story is hers, and Busch could have portrayed her savagely, but he doesn’t, for the narration suggests that her own transgressions, such as they are, are understandable and forgivable in comparison to the circuitry of rage binding her husband and son even as they join in blaming her for their unhappiness. We intuit that Patrick’s mother has been both witness and unwitting cause of an Oedipal battle between her husband and son, that their seeming rapport built on shared animosity toward her is just the surface manifestation of their own lifelong emotional tug-of-war that has grown exponentially more debilitating as they have aged. She notes that Patrick sees his father as a weak, timid man, which is the reason he thinks his mother has left him and the reason he himself has failed the test of combat to which he has set himself. As Patrick’s mother begins to connect the family’s dysfunction with the destructiveness of war, Busch writes, “After twenty-five years, she thought, all they knew was this standing in their separateness to hold their ground against their son. And what kind of achievement did that amount to?” (45). In “Good to Go,” then, a useless and senseless war completes the ruination of a family already fractured by internecine psychological trauma.

“Patrols” is a longer, more complex story than “Good to Go,” but it shares with “Good to Go” an older male protagonist flummoxed by his relationship with a younger combat soldier. Mason, the story’s protagonist, is a journalist who has repaired to the house of his editor to complete a story about his tour as an embedded journalist with a Marine unit in Iraq. The work is not going well for Mason; his story exists in shards and impressions that his editor Ada seems far more capable of piecing together than does Mason: “She asked him, over and over, to tell her the meaning of what he had thought were clear, simple sentences. It was a history of unworthiness, he believed, the story of a man without courage who traveled with young men and their officers who went only toward trouble, whereas he constantly wanted to run away” (262-263). Mason admires Ada’s competence, which he equates with a strength and bravery he does not possess. For Mason, writer’s block is a failure of will and imagination, and his self-reproach is exacerbated by memories of a humiliating relationship with the commander of Alpha Company, the Marine unit with which he was embedded. “Captain Goldsworthy,” the

narrator writes, “was a slight, slender man who struck Mason as being made entirely of hard leather” (250). Fearless and never-at-a-loss for words with his own men, Captain Goldsworthy won’t speak directly to Mason and refers to him, even in his presence, in third-person. “You will not fire unless you are fired upon or deem yourselves in peril,” Goldsworthy tells his Marines before a mission, “In which case, you will kill with efficiency. You will try to check with me on any peril factor. But you will stay smart and therefore *live* Marines. And *he* [Mason] fucking well had better not be putting any salty language in my mouth when he writes his tale of Alpha’s derring-do” (255).

In “Good to Go,” Patrick’s father uses the word Vietnam-era term “clips” to describe the ammunition carriers for Patrick’s rifle and is quickly and tartly corrected by Patrick, who informs him that modern Marines use the term “magazines” (43). In “Patrols,” we also see Mason losing the battle of words to describe war with an experienced veteran (as well as with his editor). It’s not hard to speculate that Busch has found dramatic scenarios in which to recast the communicative imbroglio that characterized his relationship first with his father, and perhaps his son, too, on the subject of war. So too is he able to dramatize the play of lexical differentiation between the contemporary war in Iraq (and Afghanistan) and the wars that preceded them. The two stories introduce a number of other scenes, themes, and manners of approach that would characterize future stories written about the post-9/11 wars. While Captain Goldsworthy appears hardy enough to survive war untraumatized, the experience of war for participants and observers such as Patrick and Mason results in psychological damage that manifests itself as anger, self-loathing, failed relationships, and failure to be productive. The two stories portray gaping chasms between those who fought and those who didn’t, a cognitive and experiential misalignment that would soon be described repeatedly in national discourse as the “civilian-military divide.” The rhetorical difficulty of speaking about war, an important aspect of the divide, would become a theme that would reverberate constantly in fiction about the war in the following decade: veterans who find it hard to talk about war, or to find the right words to convey their experience of war, are omnipresent in works by Fountain, Klay, and the other war writers who came into prominence after 2011. Busch’s interest in the homefront and life after war is another salient subject that would be depicted frequently in war fiction to follow, and, finally, the presence of women in his two stories about war signals a thematic component that would become an especially distinctive hallmark of contemporary war fiction.

Annie Proulx’s “Tits-Up in a Ditch” amplifies the interest in a woman’s experience of war emergent in Frederick Busch’s “Good to Go” and “Patrols.” Proulx, the author of the acclaimed novel *The Shipping News* and the short-story “Brokeback Mountain”

on which the popular movie of the same name was based, has called “Tits-Up in a Ditch” her “strongest story” in a *Paris Review* interview. It’s also one of her few stories that feature women characters in leading roles and the only one, to my knowledge, that invokes the nation’s 21st century wars. As such, “Tits-Up in a Ditch” might be said to represent a significant literary intervention regarding America’s modern wars by one of its most prominent authors. Proulx’s focus, however, is more on Wyoming than Iraq, but even so “Tits-Up in a Ditch” instantiates two important characteristics that would strongly define the overall fictional body of work portraying war in Iraq and Afghanistan: its emphasis on the experiences of women in the military and as military spouses, and its authoring by non-veteran women.

“Tits-Up in a Ditch” takes its title from an exclamation by one of its main characters, a hapless Wyoming rancher named Verl, who uses the phrase to describe a cow that has floundered and died in a mudhole. It’s meant by Verl to flippantly describe what he tries to pass off as an unavoidable ranch-related mishap. To Verl’s wife Bonita, however, the strained effort at jaunty humor is one more piece of evidence that her incompetent husband lacks the fortitude and competence necessary to meet the challenges of ranch life. It helps explain not only their poverty but the moral turpitude of their daughter, who gave birth to a daughter at age fifteen and then fled the next day to California, leaving the child, named Dakotah, in Verl and Bonita’s hands. Verl’s crude phrase registers in Dakotah’s mind, too, and it recurs to her long afterwards when she uses it to describe her own ruined, hopeless lot in life: failure to complete high school, a bad early marriage and single motherhood, a failed effort to pass an Army medic training course, followed by a catastrophic tour in Iraq in which she loses an arm to an IED, and then, even worse, the death of her boy when he is thrown from the back of the luckless and careless Verl’s pick-up truck. She also learns that her husband has been badly mangled by a massive bomb blast in Iraq, though his injuries barely register in comparison to her own calamities. The Army and Iraq are almost incidental to Proulx’s relentlessly scathing depiction of Wyoming, which she portrays as wracked by a proud-but-destructive frontier provincialism and ideology of hardy individualism as much as it is by economic struggle and harsh weather and geography. But where characters in other stories in *Fine Just the Way It Is* play out their brutish lives largely within Wyoming’s boundaries, “Tits-Up in a Ditch’s” global and martial dimensions allow Proulx to sharpen her critique of the social dynamics—family dysfunction, economic poverty, and early, often violent, death—that wreak havoc on the state’s inhabitants.

Even if Dakotah’s military service is only a small episode in the greater familial tragedy unfolded in “Tits-Up in a Ditch,” the passages describing her short career are full of detail and important implications. Proulx suggests that Dakotah’s meager

Army stint is no antidote or escape from the far-more blighted family and social milieu that poorly prepares her for success in the military. Proulx is not especially impressed by the rhetoric justifying the Global War on Terror or the notion of expressing “thanks” to soldiers for their service, but even so her rendering of the military and even war make them look good compared to life in Wyoming. Descriptions of Dakotah’s medic training, as well as scenes describing her treatment and rehabilitation are not cynical; Proulx suggests that they are organized and executed competently enough if only Dakotah had the wherewithal to take better advantage of them. The story also does not suggest that Dakotah is representative of a generation of dead-end kids who are being used by the nation’s rich to fight their wars—many of Dakotah’s friends in the military come from reasonably promising backgrounds and the Army for many of them is a practical means of actualizing their life prospects. For Dakotah, however, Wyoming has not prepared her well at all for life outside the state. As we follow her to Iraq and back we realize that the journey has been unnecessary: the carnage of the Iraq battlefield is equaled by the devastation Wyoming exacts on its own citizens, especially its young and particularly its young men. As Dakotah observes the Wyoming landscape as she returns to Verl and Bonita’s ranch after her deployment, she muses:

She knew what blood-soaked ground was, knew that severed arteries squirted like the back-yard hose. A dog came out of the ditch and ran into a stubble field. They passed the Persa ranch, where the youngest son had drowned in last spring’s flood. She realized that every ranch she passed had lost a boy, lost boys early and late, boys smiling, sure in their risks, healthy, tipped out of the current of life by liquor and acceleration, rodeo smashups, bad horses, deep irrigation ditches, high trestles, tractor rollovers, and unsecured truck doors. Her boy, too. (218)

It is soon after this passage Verl’s phrase “tits-up in a ditch” comes back to Dakotah as an apt description of her own predicament, as her own amputated arm and the death of her son enroll her firmly in the Wyoming litany of death and dismemberment. Proulx’s emphasis on bodily wounds and physical disability stands in contrast to Busch’s focus on psychological injury, but her commentary on the war’s greater political aims and its pursuit of those goals is equally oblique. In her telling, a nation whose citizenry are as wrecked by poverty, ignorance, and self-destructiveness as those who populate Wyoming have little right to wage international war and probably no chance of winning one. Overall, though, Proulx, like Busch, has little to say about bigger questions surrounding America’s effort to wage a “Global War on Terror.” Her

interest, again like Busch's, is in the experience of individual soldiers, the social and familial contexts that compell them to join the military, and the accelerated pace of personal catastrophe wrought by war on its already damaged participants.

"Good to Go," "Patrols," and "Tits Up in a Ditch" reflect the age and literary background of the authors, as their tales' points-of-view are those of older men or women contemplating a younger person's and younger generation's war experience. This perspective would distinguish their stories from the war fiction that would come later, which is generally focused on or related through the eyes of young men and women who do the fighting or who are nearer to fighting men and women in age and outlook. Still, giving credit where credit is due, Busch and Proulx pioneered many contemporary war fiction subjects, themes, and styles that would be refined and elaborated on in later years, but not substantially altered.

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Annie Proulx, Ludmilla Ulitskaya, Nicolas Fargues and Alissa York will meet at the International Forum on the Novel in Lyon later this month to debate the power and purpose of love in fiction. We present exclusive extracts from their answers to the question 'why so much love?' Published: 15 May 2008.Â As an exhibition exploring the heroic myths of the American frontier opens in the UK Annie Proulx, who lives in Wyoming, reflects on the grim reality behind the enduring fantasy of the lone ranch hand. Published: 7:37 PM. How the west was spun. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the National Book Award for Fiction, and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. She is the author of two other novels: *Postcards*, winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award, and *Accordion Crimes*. She has also written two collections of short stories, *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and *Close Range*.Â Annie Proulx has written some of the most original and brilliant short stories in contemporary literature, and for many readers and reviewers, "Brokeback Mountain" is her masterpiece. Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, two ranch hands, come together when they're working as shepherd and camp tender one summer on a range above the tree line.