

War, Not-War, and Peace: A Pulitzer Prize Centennial Series

Too often, 'peace' is simply the absence of active war. Ours is a country—and culture—forged in a crucible of war and conquest. What defines much of our national character is aggression, both its light and dark sides. The five Pulitzer Prize recognized books selected for this series are:

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, 1991 Fiction finalist

Empire of the Summer Moon by S. C. Gwynne, 2011 General Nonfiction finalist

Maus by Art Spiegelman, 1992 Special Citation winner

Neon Vernacular by Yusef Komunyakaa, 1994 Poetry winner

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr, 2015 Fiction winner

These choices reflect, not only the requisite scholarship, but a deep commitment to presenting Pulitzer winners detailing both the active elements of war—seen clearly in *Neon Vernacular*, *Maus*, and *Things*—as well as the long-lived legacies of war, in those periods optimistically called 'peace.' The fragmented peace/non-war axis is evident in all five of the texts, which span a history beginning with the Indian Wars (*Empire*), move to WWII (*Maus* and *All the Light*) and the Vietnam war (*Things* and *Neon Vernacular*), and culminate in contemporary time. Perspectives are as broad as possible in these Pulitzer Prize-winning books: characters are black, white, mixed race, Indian. Male and female, blind and sighted. German, Jewish, French, American, Comanche. Even genres have been examined to undercut the idea of the Pulitzers as awards for only certain kinds of texts: fiction, non-fiction, history, biography, poetry. The result is a prism through which war and peace are refracted in multiple colors, a vivid palette of war, not-war, and peace.

Since its earliest imagining in the will of Joseph Pulitzer, reportage and stellar writing have been two of the criteria for the Pulitzer Prize. Four of the earliest prize categories were for journalism, while four others were for 'letters and drama': "[I]n letters, prizes were to go to an American novel, an original American play performed in New York, a book on the history of the United States, an American biography, and a history of public service by the press."¹ In other words, from its inception the Pulitzer had seven categories specifically devoted to non-fiction, despite its current fame for selecting poets and novelists.

This is no accident. One of our major challenges when reading the literature of war—whether non-fiction, fiction, or poetry—is that literature by its very nature beautifies

¹ *History of the Pulitzer Prize*, accessed 1/20/15. <http://www.pulitzer.org/page/13989>

what is essentially a brutal and tragic endeavour. However horrific the scenes from the Indian Wars, WWII, or Vietnam, Pulitzer-quality writing redeems those horrors and makes of them something else. It's both the gift and the curse of literature. And yet, how else can we learn of what other centuries--other men, women, and children--suffered under the bloodtide of combat, and from its after-effects?

The arts of 'creative' writing as historically defined--poetry and fiction--can draw readers to focus on beauty over horror, craft over tragedy. History and non-fiction, however, provide details and statistics (1/2 the population of the Comanches dead to smallpox at the turn of the 19th century, for instance²) to counterbalance the elegiac beauty of writers like O'Brien, Komunyakaa, and Doerr. Such balance is critical, given the seductive qualities of Pulitzer-level writing. Tim O'Brien warns us, early on, that: "True war stories....do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis." Beauty--by its very nature--is an abstraction. And therefore not, O'Brien warns us, to be trusted:

For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach... A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. (*Things* 73)

Although all five of the books selected are male-authored--war throughout history has been seen as a gendered endeavor--women are significant partners in each of the texts: in *Empire*, Quanah Parker's mother, Cynthia Ann Parker, is as much a presence as her son. Her picture becomes a kind of leitmotif for what war does to all who are touched by it: their lives are permanently disrupted, even when they 'adapt.' As Quanah Parker, legendary as the Principal Chief of the Cheyennes who became an American, did; Parker even sat on the local school board.

In Anthony Doerr's WWII novel (*All the Light We Cannot See*) a female, young Marie-Laure, is one of the two primary characters. Marie-Laure carries more than half the novel's action. Even in *Maus*, a son's retelling of his father's life and the two men's time together revisiting it, women are vivid participants. Art Spiegelman's mother, Anja, is a strong warp thread in the Spiegelman family tapestry: her parts of the story are critical, adding both dimension and pathos to the narrative.

Like *Light* and *Maus*, *Neon Vernacular*--with *Things*, arguably the most traditionally 'male' of the five texts--offers readers women who make important contributions within the text. In "Changes; or, Reveries..." Komunyakaa replicates a conversation between two women discussing their lives, partnering the dialogue with a 'reverie'

² *Empire of the Summer Moon*, 92.

ostensibly focused on music, but—like the talk of the two women—about long-ago trauma: ‘a man can hurt for years/before words flow into a pattern...’ (*Neon Vernacular* 9). The women’s talk touches only lightly on war: ‘The man went off to war/ and got one of his legs/ Shot off and she wanted/ To divorce him for that’ (ibid). But the war is still there, years after combat, and Komunyakaa uses everyday language and the interaction of two women to underscore its impact on the years and secondary victims that follow. Even *The Things They Carried* uses the figures of Martha and Laura as framing devices, and stand-ins for love and betrayal.

Everywhere the ugly scars of war impede healing the same way thick scar tissue impedes movement. This inability to leave the trauma completely behind is perhaps most obvious in *Maus*, where the father, Vladek, first refuses to discuss his experiences during the Holocaust at all, until his son is able to get him started: talking about Anja, Vladek’s wife and Art’s mother. Only with this introduction is the story of the Spiegelmans’ lives able to be shared. And in doing so, Art Spiegelman also provides a historical framework for WWII, something the more immediately combat-centric narrative of *The Things They Carried* lacks.

All wars have context. But *Maus* and *Empire of the Summer Moon* differ from the other texts in that they draw more explicitly on historical connection. *Empire*, as a historical biography, provides deeply textured background to a series of hellish conflicts: the Indian Wars of the 19th century. Early chapters of the book detail the vastly different Plains Indian and white settler cultures, with particular emphasis on the Comanches of Quanah Parker’s tribe. This deep a cultural schism presages the various Indian Wars themselves, coupled with the betrayal of the US government over decades of interaction.

Cultural distance and difference are not the only reasons for war, however, as *Maus* and *All the Light We Cannot See* illustrate. Nor is war truly ‘over’; combat ends, but the period of ‘not-war’ begins, with its difficult to impossible readjustments. All five texts demonstrate this clearly. As for peace? Both *Neon Vernacular* and *All the Light We Cannot See* illuminate the darkness of trauma and disaffection that shadow so-called peace. Komunyakaa’s ongoing use of the Vietnam war as a metaphor for his life is already established by the publication of the first poem in *Neon Vernacular*, in 1977. The collection’s ultimate publication in 1993 confirms the resonance of war for the author—as much an element of his life, one assumes—as it is of his work. Eschewing spoilers, a similar harmonic vibrates in the closing chapters of Anthony Doerr’s book, where WWII continues to twine long tendrils through the lives of its survivors.

These readings begin with the immediate impact of war in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, where the 'thesis' of the project is stated clearly: "...story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." (*Things* 172). Here, although we see the least disguised, least ornamented of narratives--war at its traditional 'purest,' combat, death, grief--we also have the explicit declaration that "a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight... It's about love and memory. It's about worry." (*Things* 80) And we have O'Brien conflating deaths with childhood stories and war, setting the stage for what follows.

After *The Things They Carried*, with its prose that is poetry, and its liminal space between truth and the stories that grow from it, we look back to the nation's earliest wars--those with the country's original inhabitants, the Indians. In *Empire of the Summer Moon* we become aware of how many vectors influence the development and subsequent playing out of war. From geography to politics to greed to treachery to cultural distance and difference, all are seen clearly in Gwynne's book. Least apparent, perhaps, are the tragic consequences, noted primarily--as they are in O'Brien--in the immediate impact on combat victims.

Next we move to the two volumes of *Maus*, watching as the complex narrative unfolds between father and son. Moving outside of the circle of combat, we examine not-war's effect even unto the next generation. The impact of Anja's suicide (PTSD, no doubt--not reserved for combat veterans) on her husband, son, and her husband's second wife is sharply drawn.

Following *Maus*, we return to Vietnam, where war is framed as terrible beauty, as metaphor and ongoing frame of reference. Komunyakaa gives us scorpions as "Warriors that never zapped/Their own kind" (13), while war criminals, snipers, concertina wire and grenades metamorphose into 'peace.' The same way that fold flags into the triangles Komunyakaa tells us, fold into triangles (26). This is war forged in the fires of a combat veteran's experience, hammered on the anvil of poetry, and made beautiful by polishing. To hold it against O'Brien's prose narrative is to see how a shift in genre offers an entirely different reading of war.

Finally, we loop back once again to WWII. Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* shows us victims of war who are not combatants--the French family of blind Marie-Laure, her father and great-uncle, their friends and other family--each caught in war despite their distance from the 'battlefield.' But there is also the story of Werner, a boy blinded by his almost innocent morality. Together the two negotiate a war as labyrinthine for each as the model neighborhoods Monsieur LeBlanc creates for Marie-Laure.

The five texts in this series are by no means an exhaustive sampling of American wars and conflicts. The Civil War, for instance, is missing, despite excellent reportage, fiction, and poetry available—both at the Pulitzer level and otherwise. Interested readers of war literature may want to pick up Geraldine Brooks' *March*, the Pulitzer's 2006 fiction winner painting a vivid picture of the backstory to Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Or find in Natasha Trethewey's 2007 poetry winner *Native Guard* the same terrible beauty of *Neon Vernacular*. Other periods of war, not-war, and the subsequent unease of peace are covered in various LTAIO's themed readings, with individual books addressing WWI, Indian relocation, Civil Rights, and other contexts of American conflicts.

What remains after concluding the five books in the *War, Not-War, and Peace* series is Tim O'Brien's famous assertion: that what is most important when we write (or read?) about war is to remember—we dream stories as we tell them, “hoping that others might then dream along with [us], and in this way memory and imagination and language combine...” (*Things* 234) Because in stories—in books of poetry, pictures, prose—“miracles can happen.” (*Things* 223)

Further Readings

Brooks, Geraldine. *March*. New York, NY: 2006.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Native Guard*. New York, NY: Mariner, 2007.

Pulitzer Prize website. <http://www.pulitzer.org>

Credits

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“War, Not-War, and Peace: A Pulitzer Prize Centennial Series” was developed by Dr. Britton Gildersleeve. Dr. Gildersleeve, a former Oklahoma Humanities board member, is retired from OSU, where for 12 years she directed a federal non-profit working with teachers and writing, as well as teaching writing. Perhaps because she was raised in Vietnam, or perhaps because her father is in the Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame, Gildersleeve’s academic interests have always included war literature. Gildersleeve also is a “Let’s Talk About It Oklahoma” scholar. Her award-winning publications range from academic articles to three poetry chapbooks.



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