



The Explosion Takes Both Legs: Noir Poems from the War in Iraq. J. B. Stevens 2023. Middle West Press

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The Explosion Takes Both Legs: Noir Poems from the War in Iraq (2023) is not for everybody. Stevens has accomplished an authentic collection of self-struggle that must have been both terribly difficult and highly therapeutic to write, but I fear the wrong person would read it either as a trauma-inducing deep-dive into the very real struggles of returning veterans, or worse, a kind of combat fantasy. I cautiously recommend it for those looking for raw experiences from their poetry.

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As an editor at the *Journal of Veterans Studies*, I am sometimes tasked with soliciting reviews from others of recent books. When I received the assignment to cover J. B. Stevens' (2023) work, *The Explosion Takes Both Legs: Noir Poems from the War in Iraq*, I blindly sent it to a mentor of mine who had lost a spouse to war. This was a mistake on my part, because this collection, which is described by others as gritty, pulpy, and noir, is extremely raw in its treatment of the horrors of combat. I would go so far as to say it feels as though the pieces of recollection contained in the collection seem like excerpts from a therapy journal that is not intended for public consumption.

J. B. Stevens was an infantry officer in the Army. He is a graduate of The Citadel Military College in Charleston, South Carolina. He is also a recipient of the Bronze Star for his service in Iraq. His experiences in the Army ring far truer than the typical stories heard in a typical US Veterans Affairs waiting room and he delivers them unfiltered, complete with all their horror, disgust, grit, and trauma. Stevens' master's degree came from Troy State University, and he has remained a prolific writer, living in the Southern US, and publishing frequently for the last few years.

The Explosion Takes Both Legs: Noir Poems from the Iraq War is his third of four collections. It is organized into four parts, with a "Bonus Short Story" at the end. The first part of the book, "This is my Rifle," sets up the raw tone by referencing the movie *Full Metal Jacket* which features the line, "This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for fighting, this for fun" (Kubrick, 1987, 0:12:40). While reciting the line in the movie, Marine recruits carry an M1 rifle and grab their sexual organs when referencing their "gun(s)." This same kind of behavior is illustrated in the works that follow, as they are unified in their taboo. In "Fat Cook Gun Fight," the speaker recounts the story of a combat situation in which he forced an enlisted cook to transport hot meals to his combat outpost so that his men could eat "hot chow" (Stevens, 2023, p. 4). Stevens writes,

I made him truck hot chow to my combat outpost
for my men.
Mine.
Fat cook loathed me for it.
But I didn't care and never will.
Fuck fat cook. (p. 4)

The distance between officer and enlisted is made plain in the dynamic between the captain and the sergeant (fat cook). The speaker justifies using his position to get hot food in two ways. First, he does so by referencing that the food is for "my men," but this attitude leaves out that the cook was also his man, as evidence by the second way in which the speaker justifies the danger, by stating,

The next day cook asked me to put him in for an
award,
And I did.
And he got it. (p. 4)

The speaker closes the poem by restating the immortality he claimed in the fourth stanza. While illustrating the reality of combat and maintaining a stoic tone, the poem reads in a conversational tone with matter-of-fact consonance at the end. It never considers the danger that the cook was placed in. It simply places the cook as a cog in a machine, which this time, according to the speaker, turned in his favor by awarding him a medal.

The mystique and value assigned to awards is made plain at the end of this section with the poem "The Combat Infantryman (person) Badge." This poem gives a brief history of the Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB) and what it means and meant to the infantry. It reads as less frenetic and is a suitable transition between the first section of the collection which discusses what DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) have described as the "moving in" phase of military adjustment, in which veterans point out all of the ways in which military life is peculiar and begin to transition into feeling comfortable there (p. 81). In the poem, Stevens (2023) writes,

The CIB said you'd been in the shit and you are still
here,
Or something,

...And I got mine in 2007,
And if you ask nicely—I will show you the picture.
(The photo is bloody—but I was young and men
(now people) heal
quickly when they are young.)

...I have mine mounted in a shadow box,
Next to my Great Grandpa's (One of the original's).
(p. 13)

Once again, the speaker recounts a tying of his experience to "real" experience at the cost of others who served at the same time. None of the humility that a reader might like to see is present. It is a shotgun blast of masculinity which only acknowledges that women have earned the CIB, parenthetically, and must now also be considered to have earned "The Mark of a Man (now person)" (p. 13).

The second part of the collection, "Pace Counts," seems mostly connected by stories of maiming during combat. One exemplar of this unity is the ironic poem "Two Feet" in which the speaker recounts a mixed perspective account of how his fellow "Basic Training Company Commander," (a

distinction for recruits in basic training who are chosen to lead other recruits) lost his left foot. Stevens (2023) writes,

He lost his left foot,
The clutch foot,
And it was a good foot.

He spend all that juicy war-money on a 2006
manual transmission
Dodge Viper.
The Viper was red,
We called him a douchebag,
But I think we were jealous. (p. 28)

The irony here is plain. The dark humor is obvious, and it's likely that whoever this story is about, if indeed it is fact, is equally entertained by the irony. Stevens astutely recognizes DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell's (2008) "moving through" stage of military transition. They write, "New roles for participants in this study were certainly evident in the transcript data. In fact, it was at times astounding, horrific, or gratifying to realize the disturbing situations and positions in which some of our students found themselves" (p. 83). By embracing the humor of the irony in his comrade losing the foot that enabled him to drive his new sports car, the speaker shows the state of acceptance of all things ridiculous and horrific that veterans experience in war.

Section three, "Enduring Freedom," references the other big conflict of the "Global War on Terror," but really has more to do with guilt and transition after the military than with Operation Enduring Freedom. As the reader may have guessed by now, this section aligns very closely with DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell's (2008) "moving out" stage of military transition (p. 85). They write, "The theme of 'moving out' is a tool for categorizing the thoughts and ideas presented by study participants about the move toward civilian life" (p. 85). For Stevens (2023), this transition focuses heavily on the failure to transition of others and the feeling that his own survival should make him happy but instead produces guilt. This feature is briefly encapsulated in the first poem of the section, "Endure," which is quoted below in its entirety. Stevens writes,

Iraq took my soul,
Sleep requires medication,
Death beckons peaceful.

Why can't I relax,
The assholes all fucking missed,
I endure.
They missed.

Motivation gone,
My novel consumes the world,
The memories call. (p. 35)

In this very short poem, Stevens recounts many of the struggles that soldiers encounter in transition after having embraced the chaos of combat. He encapsulates the heartbreak that many encounter when their family members fail to transition and are lost, like Neil Landsberg (p. 42), LB (p. 44), Logan Lonkard (pp. 45–46), and so many others.

The last section of the book, "Aftershocks," reads like a reflection after therapy upon more stories of war and transition. It takes a longer view of things and assumes a wiser tone. While the language of the poems is still inextricably tied to the foulness of the experience, the reflection is clear. In the first poem of the section, "The VBIED's Aftershock" Stevens (2023) writes,

The interpreter kept asking me for a gun,
And he loved war-crimes,
But I never did.

I don't like to shoot people.

I didn't want to commit war-crimes—so I never did.
(p. 51)

Note that for one line, the speaker transitions to the present tense. "I don't like to shoot people" seems spoken almost to himself (p. 51). It is the voice of experience ridding himself of the gleeful feelings of combat described earlier and remembering the long climb out of the hole of despair, back to reality.

The Explosion Takes Both Legs: Noir Poems from the War in Iraq is not for everybody. Stevens (2023) has accomplished an authentic collection of self-struggle that must have been both terribly difficult and highly therapeutic to write, but I fear the wrong person would read it either as a trauma-inducing deep-dive into the very real struggles of returning veterans, or worse, a kind of combat fantasy, the likes of which Stevens references in "I Left the Wire" (p. 55). I regret sending it to my friend and mentor to read. It should be read, but it should be read somberly. It is not Humphrey Bogart smoking in a fedora and trench coat in Morocco. It is *Full Metal Jacket*, a cautionary tale, warning us against the realities of combat and its aftermath.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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