

Giant Robot Poems: On Mecha-Human Science, Culture & War, Vol 01. Randy Brown, ed. 2024. Middle West Press. ISBN 10: 1953665306 ISBN 13: 9781953665300



BOOK REVIEW

ANTHONY JAMES ALBRIGHT 

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ABSTRACT

Randy Brown's *Giant Robot Poems: On Mecha-Human Science, Culture & War Vol 01* is a pulpy reminder that veteran writers write about more than just blood and guts. It shows that works about veteran-related topics can be about more than recovery, loss, healing, or all of the typical fodder for veteran work. It is just a fun, thought-provoking collection of Sci-Fi poems from a group of veteran and non-veteran writers that works cohesively together. There are no lines between the veterans and non-veterans. There are no markers to signify that one writer should be on a plinth and another seated, looking up. It's a cohesive collection that addresses pressing questions for society about the expansion of post-humanism. It stands as a clear call for humans to have conversations, regardless of background, about where we've been and where we're going.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Anthony James Albright

North Dakota State University, US

agreatagent@gmail.com

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Giant Robot Poems: On Mecha-Human Science, Culture & War Vol 01, edited by Randy (Sherpa) Brown (2024), emerges as a thought-provoking anthology that combines the genres of military experience and science fiction, bridging the often distinct worlds of “military writers” and “civilian” creators. This unique compilation explores how humanity perseveres amid the encroachments of dehumanizing technology, bureaucracy, and conflict.

Randy Brown, a veteran of the Iowa National Guard, later served as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan from May to June 2011 (Middle West Press [MWP], 2024). Since 2003, he has held the positions of Editor and Publisher at Middle West Press, focusing on veteran-related content and aiding veterans in refining their manuscripts for publication. Brown authored the award-winning poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire* (Brown, 2015) and a hybrid memoir-monograph, *Twelve O’Clock Haiku: Lessons Learned from Old War Movies & New Poems* (Brown, 2022) (MWP, 2024). His editorial contributions include co-editing the anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* (Brown & Leonard, 2019) and *Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear* (Brown & Stice, 2023) (MWP, 2024). Moreover, Brown is a three-time poetry finalist in the annual Col. Darron L. Wright Memorial Writing Awards, administered by the Chicago-based literary magazine “Line of Advance” (MWP, 2024).

The editor’s Foreword sets the stage for the themes woven through *Giant Robot Poems*, highlighting the anthology’s intent to foster meaningful “civil-military” conversations beyond the superficial commemorations often limited to Veterans Day. The anthology’s contributors—many of whom are veterans themselves—navigate complex subjects such as bodily autonomy, artificial decision-making, industrial exploitation, and drone warfare through their poetry. These clusters of poems, with their potent mix of personal experience and speculative imagination, prompt readers to engage empathetically with the intertwined fates of humans and machines.

The collection is divided into five groups of poems: “Let Chip the Bots of War!”; “Soldiers, Pilots, Drones: Lend us Your Gears”; “Demons of Industry, Gremlins of Creation”; “Building the Better Human”; and “Flesh and Bone 2.0 Terms of Service.” Each section contains a collection of poems joined loosely together by themes, but each one sparkles individually. In “I am not a Robot,” for example, Pierre Minar explores the annoyances of responding to Captchas on the internet. He writes, “...I merely wish to gain Access to my bank account so I can get the routing number to Avoid the \$1.99 processing fee to pay the water bill and I promise I am not a robot and now I see I have taken too long And so I will select all images with motorcycles and begin again” (p. 93). In this comically tragic excerpt, the inhumanity of

interaction with technology that was designed for a noble purpose (to catalog and index images on the internet) is recounted in all its relatable detail. But not every poem is so pedestrian or mundane.

The poems delve into the nuanced perspectives of those who have lived the realities of military life and those who employ the lens of genre fiction to grapple with the broader societal implications of technological advancement and warfare. This interplay of voices enriches the reader’s understanding and prompts introspection on the impacts of conflict and innovation on the human condition. In “Surrounded,” Linea Jantz examines giving life in a dangerous world. Jantz writes,

I remember when both of you were born
I held you to my chest split open/ begged God
please let me be enough
I will gladly take the bullets that are coming
I do not know if that will be enough to shield you
I wish I had a robot Goliath of iron or titanium—
what metal best repels a bullet? (p. 51)

The gut-wrenching anxiety of giving life in an uncertain circumstance is on full display as the speaker contemplates a parent’s role in protecting, and ultimately, freeing children into a dangerous world.

The anthology also includes a section dedicated to discussion and writing prompts, encouraging readers to engage actively with the material. In addition to the helpful prompts designed to give human readers the upper hand in this struggle for supremacy, the editor has included a glossary, which elucidates some of the deftly-incorporated military-specific language in the poetry. This thoughtful inclusion is an olive branch to civilian readers and aims to spark further dialogue and creative exploration, extending the anthology’s reach beyond passive reading to interactive participation, perhaps to volume 02.

Overall, *Giant Robot Poems: On Mecha-Human Science, Culture & War, Vol 01* is a compelling and timely anthology. It showcases the talent and perspectives of its contributors and serves as a catalyst for broader conversations about the intersection of military experience, science fiction, and our collective humanity. This collection is a testament to the power of poetry to bridge divides and foster understanding in a world increasingly shaped by technology and conflict.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Anthony James Albright  orcid.org/0000-0002-5620-6425
North Dakota State University, US

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