



Book Review of *Troublemakers: The Greatest Dog and Pony Show in Iraq* by Stephen Russell

BOOK REVIEW

ANTHONY ALBRIGHT 

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ABSTRACT

Review of *Troublemakers: The Greatest Dog and Pony Show in Iraq* by Stephen Russell |
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Blue Ear Books, Seattle, WA (2024).

This book review critically examines Stephen Russell's memoir, *Troublemakers: The Greatest Dog and Pony Show in Iraq*, through the lens of veteran studies. The review explores the memoir's structure, narrative voice, and use of humor, visual art, and storytelling as tools for critique and catharsis. Drawing on interviews and podcasts featuring Russell—including Oscar Mike Radio, Tango Alpha Lima, and Fortress on a Hill—as well as the publisher's description from Blue Ear Books, the review situates *Troublemakers* within the broader context of post-9/11 veteran literature. The memoir's political critique, cultural significance, and ability to bridge the civilian-military divide are analyzed in depth. The review concludes that Russell's work is a powerful, irreverent, and necessary contribution to the discourse on war, service, and storytelling.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Anthony Albright

University of California, Irvine, US

agreatagent@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION: A WAR MEMOIR UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Stephen Russell's *Troublemakers: The Greatest Dog and Pony Show in Iraq* (2024) is not your typical war memoir. It doesn't glorify combat, nor does it dwell solely on trauma or heroism. Instead, it offers a raw, irreverent, and often hilarious account of military life that is as much about the absurdities of bureaucracy as it is about the emotional toll of deployment. Published by Blue Ear Books, the memoir is a hybrid of personal narrative, social critique, and dark comedy; an unfiltered look at the Iraq War through the eyes of a soldier-turned-artist. Russell's background as a member of the 1st Cavalry Division and his post-service work as a cartoonist and writer inform the memoir's unique tone and structure. His voice is conversational yet incisive, blending gallows humor with moments of profound reflection. As he recounts his journey from garrison life to the front lines of Iraq, Russell invites readers to witness the contradictions, camaraderie, and chaos that define modern military service.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE: TWO WORLDS, ONE WAR

The memoir is divided into two distinct parts: life in garrison and life in Iraq. This bifurcated structure mirrors the psychological and cultural shift soldiers experience when transitioning from stateside routines to combat zones. In the first half, Russell paints a vivid picture of the pre-deployment environment filled with mundane tasks, petty rivalries, and the kind of mischief that only soldiers can invent to stave off boredom. These chapters are rich with humor and irony, capturing the surreal nature of military bureaucracy and the coping mechanisms soldiers develop. The second half plunges readers into the chaos of Iraq, where the stakes are higher and the absurdities more dangerous. Here, Russell's tone shifts subtly. The humor remains, but it is tinged with a darker edge. The anecdotes become more fragmented, reflecting the disorientation and emotional strain of deployment. Yet even in the midst of war, Russell finds moments of levity and connection, reminding readers that humanity persists even in the harshest conditions. This structural division is not merely a narrative device—it is a thematic statement. By juxtaposing the two halves of his service, Russell underscores the dissonance between the military's internal culture and the external realities of war. It's a contrast that challenges readers to reconsider their assumptions about what it means to serve.

HUMOR AS RESISTANCE AND RELIEF

One of the most striking features of *Troublemakers* is its humor. Russell's wit is sharp, self-deprecating, and often absurd qualities serve multiple purposes throughout the memoir. On one level, the humor provides relief from the grim realities of war. On another, it functions as a form of resistance against the rigid hierarchies and often nonsensical protocols of military life. In interviews, Russell has emphasized that humor was not just a coping mechanism but a survival strategy. On Oscar Mike Radio, he explained how creating funny comic strips was a way to keep spirits up: "Those are just kind of like little funny strips that we do...to keep people engaged and still have something that's like tongue-in-cheek" ([Oscar Mike Radio On Mission – Always, 2024](#), 18:45). This sentiment is echoed in the memoir's many anecdotes about pranks, inside jokes, and the surreal moments that punctuate even the most dangerous missions.

But Russell's humor is not merely escapist. It is also deeply critical. By highlighting the absurdities of military bureaucracy—the endless paperwork, the contradictory orders, the performative displays of discipline—he exposes the institutional dysfunction that often goes unchallenged. In this way, *Troublemakers* aligns with a tradition of satirical war literature that includes works like *Catch-22* (Heller, 1961) and *M*A*S*H* (Gelbart, 1972), though Russell's voice is distinctly contemporary and grounded in the post-9/11 military experience.

STORYTELLING AS CATHARSIS AND CONNECTION

Russell's storytelling is intimate and unfiltered. He does not shy away from the emotional complexities of service, including grief, guilt, and disillusionment. On the Tango Alpha Lima podcast, he spoke candidly about the losses his unit suffered and how writing the memoir became a form of catharsis ([americanlegionHQ, 2024](#)). "Over these 15 years it was very cathartic to write these things out, to...have to kind of like relive these experiences and talk to people..." (14:45). This emotional honesty is one of the memoir's greatest strengths. Russell does not present himself as a hero or a victim. Instead, he offers a nuanced portrait of a soldier trying to make sense of a senseless war. His stories are filled with contradictions: moments of beauty amidst violence, acts of kindness in the midst of chaos, and flashes of clarity in a fog of confusion. These contradictions are not resolved; they are simply presented, allowing readers to grapple with them as Russell did.

Moreover, Russell's storytelling bridges the gap between military and civilian audiences. By using accessible language and relatable humor, he invites readers who may have no connection to the military to understand the lived experiences of soldiers. This is particularly important in a society where the military is often idealized or misunderstood. As Russell noted in his *Fortress on a Hill* interview:

Because of that, I think those guys' stories they need to be told. People need to know who these people are because the 12 [of] my 12 brothers that died over there, they're important to me, and it's important that other people know who they are and know exactly the circumstances that they died under (*Fortress On A Hill* (Henri), 2024, 4:56–5:14).

VISUAL ART AS A NARRATIVE LAYER

In addition to his writing, Russell is also a visual artist. *Troublemakers* includes original illustrations that complement and enhance the text. These drawings, many of which are drawn in a comic or caricature style, add a visceral and often humorous dimension to the memoir. They serve as visual punchlines, emotional amplifiers, and sometimes as standalone commentaries on the absurdity of war. Russell's background as the creator of *Tales of Nihilism: The Ballad of Phillip Kirschner* (Russell & Pittman, 2023) informs his visual storytelling. His art is expressive and raw, often blending dark humor with stark imagery. This combination allows him to explore themes like trauma, identity, and disillusionment in ways that words alone cannot. The illustrations in *Troublemakers* are not decorative—they are integral to the memoir's impact.

A POLITICAL MEMOIR IN DISGUISE

While *Troublemakers* is framed as a personal memoir, it is also a deeply political text. Russell does not deliver his critiques through polemics or manifestos; instead, he embeds them in the everyday experiences of soldiers. The absurdity of military bureaucracy, the disconnect between leadership and enlisted personnel, and the moral ambiguity of the Iraq War are all recurring themes. These critiques are subtle but powerful, emerging organically from the narrative rather than being imposed upon it.

In his *Fortress on a Hill* interview, Russell spoke about the “dog and pony show” of military operations—the

performative aspects of war that prioritize appearances over substance (*Fortress On A Hill* (Henri), 2024). He described how soldiers were often asked to participate in staged events for visiting dignitaries or media, even as real threats loomed just beyond the wire. These experiences left him disillusioned, not just with the war itself, but with the institutions that orchestrated it. This disillusionment is a thread that runs throughout the memoir. Russell does not question the bravery or dedication of his fellow soldiers, but he does question the systems that placed them in harm's way. His critique is not anti-military; it is anti-complacency. He challenges readers—especially civilians—to confront the uncomfortable truths about how wars are fought, funded, and forgotten.

POSITIONING TROUBLEMAKERS IN VETERAN LITERATURE

Troublemakers occupies a unique space in the growing body of post-9/11 veteran literature. Unlike more solemn memoirs that focus on trauma and recovery, Russell's work blends humor, art, and critique in a way that defies easy categorization. It shares thematic ground with works like Phil Klay's (2014) *Redeployment* and Matt Gallagher's (2011) *Kaboom*, but its tone and structure are more experimental. Russell's use of comics and visual storytelling also sets the memoir apart. In this sense, *Troublemakers* can be seen as part of a broader movement of veterans using alternative media—graphic novels, podcasts, and performance art—to tell their stories. These formats allow for a more nuanced exploration of memory, identity, and moral ambiguity, and they often reach audiences that traditional memoirs do not.

Moreover, Russell's work contributes to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the veteran experience. He does not present a monolithic view of military service; instead, he highlights the contradictions, the absurdities, and the deeply personal struggles that define it. His memoir is not just about war—it's about what it means to live through it, laugh through it, and try to make sense of it afterward.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND CIVILIAN ENGAGEMENT

One of the most important contributions of *Troublemakers* is its ability to engage civilian readers. In a society where less than 1% of the population serves in the military, there is often a disconnect between those who fight wars and

those who authorize or ignore them. Russell's memoir helps bridge that gap. By using humor and storytelling, he makes the military experience accessible without diluting its complexity. Russell's memoir is driven by an ethos of connection and reflection. On Oscar Mike Radio, he discussed how his creative work aims to resonate with others: "I want those stories to... reach out and connect with people, so it's always good to hear that" (*Oscar Mike Radio On Mission – Always*, 2024, 11:58).

This commitment to dialogue is echoed in his appearance on Tango Alpha Lima, where he framed the book as more than a personal narrative: "The call to action is to try to have more people involved in seeing these perspectives and understanding... how we can reflect on that time period and maybe have a better... strategy for things going forward" (*American Legion HQ*, 2024, 13:07). Together, these statements underscore that *Troublemakers* is not simply a memoir—it is an invitation to empathy, a challenge to complacency, and a call for collective learning from the past. In this way, *Troublemakers* is more than a book. It is a cultural artifact, a piece of lived history, and a testament to the power of art to illuminate the darkest corners of human experience.

CONCLUSION: A MEMOIR THAT DEFIES CONVENTION

Stephen Russell's *Troublemakers: The Greatest Dog and Pony Show in Iraq* (2024) is a memoir that defies easy classification. It is at once a war story, a comedy, a critique, and a deeply personal reflection. Through its blend of humor, honesty, and visual storytelling, the book offers a rare and unvarnished look at the lived experience of a soldier during one of America's most controversial conflicts. What sets *Troublemakers* apart is its refusal to conform to the expectations of either military memoirs or anti-war literature. Russell does not offer tidy lessons or moral clarity. Instead, he presents a world of contradictions—where soldiers are both victims and agents, where laughter coexists with loss, and where meaning is elusive but worth pursuing. This complexity is not a flaw; it is the memoir's greatest strength.

CRITICAL REFLECTION: THE POWER OF IRREVERENCE

In a literary landscape often dominated by solemnity and reverence, Russell's irreverence is refreshing and necessary. His willingness to poke fun at the military, at himself, and at the absurdities of war does not diminish

the seriousness of his subject matter. On the contrary, it enhances it. By refusing to sanitize or sentimentalize his experiences, Russell invites readers to engage with the full emotional and ethical weight of military service. This approach also makes the memoir more accessible. Readers who might be intimidated by traditional war literature—or who feel disconnected from military culture—will find in *Troublemakers* a welcoming and relatable voice. Russell's humor opens the door to deeper understanding, and his honesty ensures that what lies beyond that door is worth exploring.

IMPACT AND LEGACY

Troublemakers is more than a memoir; it is a contribution to the ongoing conversation about war, service, and the stories we tell about both. It challenges readers to look beyond the headlines and the hero narratives, to see the human beings behind the uniforms. It also challenges veterans to tell their own stories, in their own voices, and through whatever mediums speak to them—be it prose, comics, podcasts, or performance. In this sense, Russell's work is part of a broader cultural shift. As more veterans turn to creative expression to process and share their experiences, books like *Troublemakers* will play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of war and its aftermath. They remind us that the stories we tell about war are not just about the past—they shape how we think about the present and the future.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Stephen Russell's *Troublemakers* is a bold, funny, and deeply human memoir that deserves a wide readership. It is a book that entertains, challenges, and ultimately transforms the way we think about military service and the people who perform it. Whether you are a veteran, a civilian, or someone simply curious about the realities of war, this memoir offers something rare: a story that is as honest as it is unforgettable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Anthony Albright  orcid.org/0000-0002-5620-6425
University of California, Irvine, US

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