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Review by Guy Biederman

In The Mouth of The Wolf

By Bill McCausland | Santa Rosa, CA: McCaa Books, 2016. 324 pp. ISBN 978-0996069557

Bill McCausland's novel, *In The Mouth Of The Wolf*, tells the stories of three Vietnam veterans who experience the trauma of homecoming after war. Like the main character himself, Memo Muir, McCausland's novel effortlessly crosses the borders of time and place, as separate chapters portray the experiences of these Veterans, as well as their wives and families, before, during, and primarily after their time in Vietnam. Place itself becomes a character as this epic story transverses locations from the southern California coast, Vietnam, Mexico, and briefly, Paris in a seamless and satisfying flow.

McCausland focuses on three soldiers, Memo, Jack, and Chet, each with different military assignments. Jack, who serves as a trauma surgeon in Vietnam, first meets Memo while surfing in San Diego before either of them ship out. Some of this book's most compelling and beautifully written scenes take us to the waves of southern California. McCausland's writing skill and understanding of surfing, as well as war, are understated, yet apparent. Using dramatic, painterly strokes and subtle metaphor, the author paints vivid graceful portraits of the sea, conveying it's power and challenges as well as the opportunities that big wave surfing provides his characters for pleasure, thrill, and release. Jack and Memo seize those moments and ultimately define themselves as they discover their own reservoirs of courage, bonds of friendship, and unique powers of resiliency.

In one early scene that takes place before Jack and Memo are sent to Vietnam, the younger, but more experienced Memo, saves Jack after a massive, harrowing, big wave wipeout. As the two

friends recover and take stock on the safety of shore, Memo convinces Jack to get back on his board and return to the water and face his fear. It becomes a compelling theme in the book, and a basis for their friendship that is explored while they are both in country, and later, after they've returned. It also foreshadows a reversal of those roles between the friends, when both men struggle after their return and reach out to one another for help.

Chet, an infantryman, is a friend of Memo's from high school. Unlike his buddy Memo, a college educated architectural student who receives a special assignment to work in a covert military-civilian counterinsurgency program, or Jack the trauma surgeon, Chet serves in the trenches. He's less articulate about his experiences during the war and instead, chooses to deal with his own trauma through drug use and reckless, dangerous behavior, although in this homecoming story, he certainly doesn't have the corner on that market. Yet, the details of his traumatic war experience in the bush are subtly conveyed and understood, as McCausland skillfully hints at these horrors without relying on graphic battle scenes. Only later, with their buddy in crisis back home, do Jack and Memo find Chet's trove of hidden medals. They both come to understand the demons he brought home from the battlefield, as Chet descends into a tense, ominous, drug-fueled downward spiral.

This rich and fascinating quality of *In The Mouth of The Wolf*, how it illustrates and evokes the experiences of coming home for three vastly different men, without ever specifying PTSD, through these friends from different backgrounds, with training, and assignments, and with their own traumatic homecoming experiences, makes this a very unique and compelling book to read.

The lives of these men, and those who love them come to life on these pages. Memo's wife Kate, from a military family herself, struggles with her own guilt as her hopes to keep Memo from the draft fail when her pregnancy ends in tragedy. When Memo returns, a changed man, prone to mood swings and violent outbursts and periods of silence, and feeling a prevalent sense of guilt and loss

himself, he and Kate struggle to save and rekindle the ideal marriage they shared before Memo's departure for Vietnam.

The wives of Jack and Chet have their own struggles as well and the ripple effects of returning home are honestly and compassionately explored. McCausland goes deep into the lives of these people, exploring their courage and fear, their attempts, some in vain, to understand, love, and live with their mates in the aftermath of war.

McCausland also provides the reader with a fascinating glimpse into Mexican history, art, architecture, and culture. Memo's mother is from the upper class of Mexico City, his father is an American physician, and along with his own architecture training, Memo has a native grasp of Mexico's customs, language, culture, and art.

Including passages, or even dialogue in a foreign language can become problematic for the writer and the reader. The writer must estimate how much a reader, who doesn't speak, in this case Spanish, will understand or intuit, and at what level will they become frustrated or feel left in the dark. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway included Spanish passages, but written in English, using words such as *thou* and *thee* to indicate to the reader that though they were reading in English, the characters were speaking in Castilian Spanish.

In The Mouth of The Wolf, is an idiom in Spanish—*esta en la boca del lobo*—which Memo translates for the reader as, "you don't have a chance." It's a cross-cultural reference that perfectly illuminates the dire circumstances these characters face. All the Spanish included in the book is translated so the reader is never left to wonder or guess. McCausland uses a different, no less effective technique than Hemingway did in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, artfully including dialogue and phrases in Spanish that season the book with color and texture and provide authenticity. These passages allow the language and culture and background of the main character, Memo Muir, to be an intrinsic and organic part of the story itself. Neither Kate nor Jack speak Spanish, so Memo

translates for them and for others around him who don't speak Spanish—and therefore the reader—allowing these passages to be clear and understood, for anyone who may not speak *la lengua* (the language).

In the classic novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, some of the strongest abiding themes are the posttraumatic effects of war on the book's main character, Henry Fleming. It was written of course, long before we learned about PTSD. Crane himself did not even have military experience when he wrote it in his early 20's, and like most books, it had a sizeable number of critics. *The Red Badge of Courage* was one of the first war books to focus not on battle scenes, but on the psychological impacts of war on a soldier in the aftermath of battle. And today, it is still in print.

Bill McCausland's *In The Mouth of The Wolf* never mentions PTSD. His novel is not a clinical examination of this complex and powerful syndrome. It shows, rather than explains the trauma of homecoming after war through the story of three men, and those who love them, who have returned from Vietnam. It never takes a position or establishes a platform on the rightness or wrongness of our involvement in the Vietnam War. It does not glorify war, or the exploits of these men, or take a stand on policy.

Ultimately, this is a story of tragedy and triumph, despair and struggle, hope and personal redemption, as it brings homes the struggles and challenges and breakthroughs these characters faced, each in their own way and on their own path.

McCausland, a Vietnam vet, who returned home and earned a doctorate in clinical psychological and worked with PTSD patients, and later earned an MFA in creative writing brings to bear his skill, experience, understanding, and compassion in this original and compelling story. *In the Mouth of The Wolf* shines its light on the characters that drive this story, the places where they live and learn and love and die, and it doesn't stop there. There are scenes that convey, very specifically,

the impact of the war on the Vietnamese as well, particularly a young mother and her baby. The focus is intense, honest and compassionate; the writing is smooth, the experience visceral. And as we experience the arcs of each character, McCausland allows the reader to share in their experiences, to make them their own, using rich prose strokes, superb dialogue, and intimate knowledge of the war and its lasting effects, brought home by those who fought there. It's a unique book about Vietnam. It's a story of three men, and their families, who experience the trauma of homecoming after war. Epic in scope, personal in its sharp edged focus, it is a novel that stays with the reader long after the final page has been read.

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