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Tom Burns, Elcio Cornelson, Volker Jaeckel, and Luis Gustavo Vieira, eds.
War and Literature: Looking Back on 20th Century Armed Conflicts.
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Abstract

Review of Tom Burns, Elcio Cornelson, Volker Jaeckel, and Luis Gustavo Vieira, eds. *War and Literature: Looking Back on 20th Century Armed Conflicts*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2014.

Keywords

war, literature, 20th century

Tom Burns, Elcio Cornelson, Volker Jaeckel, and Luis Gustavo Vieira, eds. *War and Literature: Looking Back on 20th Century Armed Conflicts*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2014. 265 pp.

The anthology *War and Literature: Looking Back on 20th Century Armed Conflicts* is a wide-ranging book that endeavors to outline how war was presented through fiction and film over the course of the twentieth century. It is a significantly revised, expanded, and updated version of a previous work, *Revisiting 20th Century Wars*, put out by the Núcleo de Estudos de Guerra e Literatura, as part of the Center for Studies of War and Literature at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil. The book's thirteen articles are arranged chronologically by war, beginning with the Brazilian Canudos War of 1897 and ending with the war in Afghanistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with stops along the way at World Wars I and II, the Korean conflict, the Vietnam War, the Bosnian conflict, and the Portuguese colonial wars.

As might be expected in such a wide-ranging collection, the contributions in this volume vary considerably in their scope and theoretical complexity. On one end of the spectrum, several of the contributions are attempts to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the representation of the war experience. Luis Gustavo Vieira's opening chapter focuses on the differences between conceptions of war itself, first as intraspecific dominance contest, then, in the twentieth century, as predation, leading to several interesting conclusions about how war is experienced by the men fighting it, especially in terms of veterans' ability to find their masculinity validated through combat. In an entirely different vein, Roberto Vecchio's piece on war as national trauma explores how war creates enormous difficulties for the collective memory, for the act of bearing witness, and for commemoration. José Otaviano da Mata Machado Silva attempts to create a preliminary framework for understanding the experience of war orphans who did not experience the war directly but had to deal with many of the same issues of incommunicability and isolation that veterans did. On the other end of this spectrum lie several pieces that stick very close to their sources and largely avoid overt theoretical frameworks. Oliver Lubrich's chapter is, for the most part, a list of metaphors for war in Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, and W. D. Ehrhart's contribution on Korean War poetry offers very little in the way of larger theory, focusing instead on validating a largely forgotten realm of poetry about a largely forgotten war. Finally, Elcio Cornelson's article on Bosnian war films sticks very close to the plots of the films as it explores how identity and otherness are presented.

A second form of disparity comes in the nature of the texts used as expressions of the war experience. The various authors in this collection use diaries from combat veterans, such as Ernst Jünger or veterans of the war in Afghanistan, novels such as Antonio Lobo Antunes' *Os Cus de Judas (The Land at the End of*

the World), or Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, films from the Bosnian conflict, poetry from the Korean War, Walter Kempowski's collective diary, *Das Echolot—Ein kollektives Tagebuch (Swansong 45: A Collective Diary of the Last Days of the Third Reich)*, and even Pink Floyd's *The Wall*.

In spite of this wide variety in approaches, several common themes do emerge, including the somewhat ironic idea common to almost all the writings about war, that the experience of war is incommunicable and therefore beyond language or expression. At one level this is a commonplace, but perhaps the most powerful aspect of the book as a whole is the way that this theme emerges through the agonizing attempts of veterans of each of these wars to make sense of their traumatic experience through narration and representation. In the end, this makes a powerful point about the limits of art and literature and ways that isolation lies at the heart of human experience. No matter what the war, when it happened, or which continent it occurred on, the returning veterans all told a similar tale, or rather, found incredible difficulty in telling it. Sérgio Lima's contribution on the fiction of Tim O'Brien is perhaps the most powerful statement of this, as he notes that veterans try to tell their stories "to relieve in print traumatic experiences as a therapeutic exercise, or writing as a way to expel the monsters of memory" (179). Yet, as Lima points out, "the soldier-author becomes much more than a recorder, as he engages in a struggle with creative tensions between memories or what he went through in the war and the metamorphosing power of his imagination" (187).

The wide array of sources and wars covered in this slim volume contributes powerfully, then, to this sense of the commonality of the experience of the veteran, but in another way, the range of the work undermines its potency as well. One of the greatest potentials of a work such as this would seem to lie precisely in the opportunity for comparisons across wars, but in a certain sense, the range of wars, sources, and experiences is so vast in this volume that commonalities beyond those mentioned above are rather hard to find. It is difficult to find meaningful comparisons between the representations of, say, Vietnam and World War II when one has only a handful of works to use for comparison and when the authors have used dramatically differing source materials and theoretical approaches. In this sense, the book is spread a bit too thin. A bit more focus on one or more of the wars, or a bit more consistency in sources, or a bit more unity in theoretical approaches might have helped to create deeper comparisons, but as it stands, these comparisons feel entirely provisional, even ethereal, stretched as they are over so vast and disparate a collection.

Many of the individual pieces in this anthology are well written, masterfully conceived, and nicely executed, but the overall sense at the end of the volume is that the experience of war is unspeakable and shall remain so.

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