



Desert Mementos: Stories of Iraq and Nevada by Caleb S. Cage.

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Desert Mementos does not sugarcoat the ugly side of war. Its young, sometimes unnamed, soldiers represent a collage of experiences during the early phase of a war that proved hard to wage and even harder to understand. Yet, as the book's subtitle indicates, author Caleb Cage's stories are concerned not only with his protagonists' experiences of war, but also with what they carry home with them to Nevada.

Though the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have spawned a number of excellent short story collections,¹ most readers tend to see the novel as the primary form for the literary representation of war. That said, the short story lends itself well to capturing moments from the mundane and comical to the tragic and traumatic as experienced in conflicts fought in multiple yearlong tours by a diverse group of soldiers.

A native Nevadan and West Point graduate who served two tours in Iraq, Cage devotes his introduction to tracing his journey from the battlefield to the writer's desk, something both rare and refreshing in a work of literary fiction. After a brief review of the memoirs that influenced him as a reader and a writer, Cage notes that

Literary fiction allows for more significant examination of these wars and the cities and high desert of Nevada. These works are not limited by the facts of the story like a memoir, and their authors are not shy about using allusions to these similarities and differences as central images and themes throughout their works. Instead of just describing the differences, that is, these works of fiction allow the authors to delve deeper and make real assertions about mankind at its best and worst, located in the discussion of the foreign and the familiar and notions of home and the self. (xv-xvi)

The volume's nine stories feature familiar tropes of contemporary war fiction: for instance, the anticipation of combat, the moral complexity of counterinsurgency fighting, and the jarring transition back to civilian life. Cage also highlights the blessing/curse of modern technologies that both connect deployed soldiers with their loved ones and produce a cognitive dissonance that can undermine the military mission. Thus, the narrator of "Operation Battle Mountain" checks for an email from his pregnant wife just before going on patrol, while his platoon sergeant, who is having marital troubles, asks him to take on more responsibility while the sergeant tries to patch things up with his wife. Compare this with previous wars where two-way communication between family members was only as fast as the US Postal Service. Today's deployed soldiers must routinely struggle to maintain a virtual presence on the home front without allowing it to affect their physical presence in the combat zone.

In *Desert Mementos*, Cage seeks to narrow the experience gap between the volunteer military serving in twenty-first century conflicts and a mostly disengaged civilian population. The book's

1. E.g., Siobhan Fallon, *You Know When the Men Are Gone* (NY: Amy Einhorn Books, 2011); Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (NY: Penguin, 2014); Matt Gallagher, et al., *Fire and Forget: Short Stories of the Long War* (Boston: Da Capo, 2013); and Adrian Bonenberger and Brian Castner, eds., *The Road Ahead: Fiction from the Forever War* (NY: Pegasus, 2017).

opening story, “Tonopah Low,” adopts a second-person point of view that effectively brings the reader into the world of the stories: the story begins “Three nights before your second deployment to Iraq you finish a Michelob and slide the bottle back in the box behind the passenger seat.” Cage also tackles elements that have rarely figured in war fiction. “This Is Not Burning Man” portrays a group of junior officers working in a Joint Operations Center who are skeptical about their role in the war and critical of their overbearing boss’s command philosophy, which consists mostly of nitpicking PowerPoint slides. “Desert Island” follows a pair of soldiers pulling a tense shift in a guard tower.

While the stories themselves break no new stylistic or formal ground, Cage does address larger issues of war and its representation. The narrator of “Proxy War” writes a column for an online newspaper that he pitches as “Iraq from a soldier’s perspective, about our interactions with the locals, about the absurdities of our impossible mission, and about the harsh realities of urban combat. It would be the opposite of my rosy blog posts to family and friends” (48). This sort of meta-commentary on communicating the war experience goes back at least to the First World War. Cultural historian Paul Fussell argued that the combat soldier’s desire to spare his loved ones the horrors of the battlefield (as in today’s “rosy blog posts”) only worsened what is now called the civil-military divide: “Ironically, the reticence which originated in the writers’ sympathy for the feelings of their addressees was destined in the long run simply to widen the chasm of incomprehension which opened between them.”²

The collection’s most interesting and subtle theme is the unintended consequences of choosing to serve in an all-volunteer military during an unpopular war. In “Proxy War,” the narrator tells an embedded journalist that his decision to join the Army created even more distance between him and his already estranged father, who had protested the Vietnam War and tells him over dinner that he thought the war in Iraq was a mistake and that he will not support it, even for his own son.

In “Operation Battle Mountain,” a soldier’s pregnant wife loses one of their unborn twins in the womb, and the other’s health is questionable. His mother-in-law seems to blame his absence for what happened, and hints that his wife (who won’t speak with him) does as well.

In “Soldier’s Cross,” a lieutenant’s parents split up after his father has an affair during the deployment. His mother admits that she is “still pretty confused,” but is beginning to make peace with it now that he’s home. Then she tells him: “I’m still hopeful. I think maybe he was reacting harshly to your leaving, and that this was his only way of dealing with it.” The lieutenant is “momentarily furious that it had become his fault, but he put it all aside and hugged his mother” (111).

Each of these stories reveals an undercurrent of judgment against the soldiers who *chose* (rather than being forced) to join the army. The relatives left behind—a father, a mother-in-law, a wife—cannot help linking the emotional dots between their soldier’s own decision and the grief they must now carry.

Most of the stories depict cynical characters in bleak situations; one could label the book grim and negative. But its final story, “The Golden Dragon,” centers on Matt, a soldier recently redeployed from Iraq, and Amy, the girl he met (and got pregnant) during his brief leave six months earlier. Over dinner (and a sonogram of their unborn child) at a Vietnamese restaurant, they struggle to connect with each other. The story evokes Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” except that Matt views the pregnancy as a “gift.” He remains optimistic about their future despite the challenges they will face, or so he tries to convince himself. In the collection’s final words,

2. *The Great War and Modern Memory* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975) 199.

Matt assures Amy that “everything is going to be just fine”—a thematic counterpoint to the collection’s other bookend, “Tonopah Low.”

Taken as a whole, Caleb Cage’s collection of stories covers a great deal of literary territory in under two hundred pages. Full of keen insights and biting prose, *Desert Mementos* deserves a prominent place on the ever-expanding bookshelf of contemporary war fiction.