



*Missionaries: A Novel* by Phil Klay.

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There are no proselytizers in Phil Klay's debut novel. There is a village priest, an atheist, practitioners of syncretic rituals, and even some acolytes of revolutionary icons like Che Guevara. But none reflects a formal program of religious education and conversion. While the book's title and settings in both the Middle East and Central America suggest otherwise, the religiosity of Klay's characters appears to represent cultural reactions, ways to survive modern life for those living ensnared in wars on terror and drugs.

Ostensibly, *Missionaries* is set in Afghanistan and Colombia, two venues of the United States' forever wars. Like its predecessors in the sub-genre of literary war fiction, the novel describes intense combat, various features of military culture, and technical aspects of military capabilities in action. It also tells stories of the people and places affected by war from their own perspectives. Klay's careful research and commitment to geographical, cultural, and historical accuracy are just two of the many strengths of his narrative.

But *Missionaries* is much more than mere war writing. Like the best practitioners of the genre, Klay exposes deeper truths about human beings and their societies. Rather than concentrating on combat scenes per se, he highlights the lives and relationships of those touched by wars. Among them are surviving villagers who have endured grotesque and torturous murder and rape, as well as social and political instability and corruption. He depicts a war journalist who cannot find purpose in peacetime and, often in passing, the largely untouched American public oblivious to the disruption and suffering its government's policies inflict on the lives of others around the globe.

Concentrating on both Afghanistan and Colombia allows Klay to compare the two wars and the people they affected. This technique reveals clear similarities between the people and how the wars are fought, and shows how both wars fed into each other. And most of all, it clarifies the interconnected complexities of America's role in the world and its use of the military to pursue its own national interests.

Klay's account of various factions in Colombia—the military, the police, the narcos, the revolutionaries, and the mere survivors—foreshadows their counterparts in occupied Afghanistan. The tactics and tools adopted in the military operations in Colombia directly inform the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. The American service members and mercenaries who fought in Afghanistan reappear in the war on drugs, while their Colombian counterparts wind up in the war on terror.

The overlapping aspects of these wars expose not only the US involvement in the affairs of other countries; they offer a distinct warning: American military operations in Colombia actually predict those in Afghanistan and likely elsewhere in the future. In the following passage, we see how specific tactics and strategies evolve to reflect the culture that employs them:

But it wasn't the missions. Liz had been doing this long enough to know that. She'd gotten excited about enough units and their local successes to know that deep in her bones. The missions—chase down Taliban leaders here, train ANP [Afghan National Police] there—did make sense. It was the

war as a whole that was insane, a rational insanity that dissected the problem in a thousand different ways, attached it logically with a thousand different mission sets, a million white papers, a billion “lessons learned” reports, and nothing even approaching coherent strategy. Insanity overseeing a thousand tight logical circles. Sure, it wasn’t the exhausted, drug-addled insanity of Vietnam. Not pot and heroin and LSD insanity, but the insanity of a generation raised on iPhones and Adderall. A glittering, mechanical insanity that executes each task with machinelike precision, eyes on the mission amid the accumulating human waste. (253)

Klay is effectively proposing that the real missionaries referenced in his book's title come down to the two distinct groups of people portrayed in his novel. On one hand are those who willingly spread the gospel of unchecked global capitalism: that is, the contractors, the mercenaries, those who watch wars through drone footage from airconditioned trailers in remote parts of the world. On the other hand are those who tell the stories of people affected by globalized wars, specifically a reporter who covers the war in Afghanistan and the front lines of the drug war in Colombia, and a community activist whose organization records the stories of Colombians who endured decades of terror in their communities. The moral distinction between their causes is patent.

This contrast makes Klay’s *Missionaries* a literary work of political economy. He critiques the social, political, and economic condition of ongoing wars, as capitalism and globalism wreck the lives of those who bear the brunt of conflict. Moreover, his expert control of these themes and plots puts him on a par with the masters of modern literature.

Phil Klay’s 2014 National Book Award-winning short story collection, *Redeployment*, set a very high bar for writing on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Klay has become a noted public intellectual, particularly on issues of society, faith, and culture. His work in both literature and social criticism has won him many devotees. They will be extremely pleased with *Missionaries*.