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Why War Books By Veterans Will Always Be Popular

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We've found that the vets who read our books that deal with war are looking for authenticity in the depiction of war

Veterans' books about war are popular with readers photo credit: Getty getty

Books by veterans about the realities of war, both fiction and nonfiction, are popular with readers and publishers throughout the year—not just on Veterans Day. 2018 book deals reported in Publishers Marketplace by veterans include *Where War Ends* by Iraq veteran Tom Voss and Rebecca Ann Nguyen, about Voss's "2,700-mile walk across America to find relief from PTSD" and *In Iraq I Saw* by medic, intelligence agent and Iraq war veteran Sgt. Gregory Ford, with Eleanor Cooney and Mitch Clogg, among others.

Forbes.com consulted three publishing professionals, Alec Shane, a literary agent at Writers House LLC, Ian Kleinert, Literary Manager at Objective Entertainment, and Julia Callahan, Director of PR and Marketing at Rare Bird Books, about the shifting marketplace for these titles, why there will always be a readership for war memoirs and fiction, how their authors are bringing war to life within the pages of their books, and what types of veterans' books they'd like to see next.

Why veterans' books are popular

All three noted that books by veterans will continue to have a place on publishers' lists and bookstore shelves.

Callahan revealed that the authority of veterans relating their lived experiences resonates with readers. "Unfortunately, at the moment it seems there will always be war, and as it stands right now in the U.S., war is more and more removed from day-to-day life, so the experiences are foreign to a huge swath of the population," said Callahan.

Shane observed that, "There is always going to be a market for military books, by and about veterans. It's an evergreen market, and while the market dynamics and demand shifts over time, we're never going to run out of readers who want to know more about what it's like to go to war."

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As for who's reading these titles, Kleinert told Forbes.com, "Military members themselves are a large part of the marketplace. There is a large portion of active military members who are second, third and fourth generation military. This number is increasing, almost creating a military class."

Why veterans write books

According to Shane, the process of writing their story can help veterans make sense of their war experience. "A lot of times, veterans write the book as a form of therapy and find it tremendously healing to get it all out on paper," he said. Shane cited this as inspiration for Army Ranger McPadden's novel *And The Whole Mountain Burned*, revealing that McPadden wanted "to describe not only the Afghanistan conflict as it actually happened, but what your average soldier experienced during a deployment. He found it incredibly therapeutic and feels that writing the novel did wonders for his ability to adjust to civilian life. Sometimes, writing a book is just as important for the author as it is the reader." For others, they may want to "inspire, educate, or clarify what has become a somewhat muddled narrative regarding U.S. involvement overseas."

Callahan, who's worked on titles such as memoir *No-Joy* by David Rose, about his time serving in Afghanistan, and *Navigating Chaos: How to Find Certainty in Uncertain Situations* by Jeff Boss, a business book inspired by the authors Navy SEAL training, believes that veterans write for the same reason as other authors: to find connection, share their experiences and muse on the human condition. "I think for a lot of veterans I work with, there is a desire to help civilians understand the war experience and a desire to bring solace or comfort or recognition to fellow veterans," she said.

Kleinert said that veterans' don't necessarily see their actions and experiences as different from those of other veterans. "The ones I have worked with for the most part don't consider their own personal stories to be any more special than their brothers and sisters in arms," he said. "Often that's ultimately the message they want to get across: that there are so many people doing extraordinary things every day."

What veteran authors teach readers about war

Shane noted that veterans, such as Nicholas Moore, author of *Run to the Sound of the Guns*, aren't necessarily trying to change readers' minds about war, but simply want to share their unvarnished stories. "Most of the military books I've worked on aren't trying to push any particular agenda or message, which I think surprises a lot of readers," he told Forbes.com. "It's easy to assume that all books in the military genre, fiction or nonfiction, are either rah-rah-America pieces or antiwar propaganda, but that isn't really the case for many veterans. They just want to tell it like it is and recount their experiences in detail, honestly and fairly."

How the marketplace for veterans' books has changed

Shane has observed that the market for veterans' books "has definitely tightened up" in recent years. "There was a large influx of military books about 10 years ago, and thus it's getting harder to break these stories out. Now it's all about a completely unique story, something that hasn't been told before, or a perspective that we haven't really thought about before," he said. He also noted that there's been a rise in military memoir. Why? Shane believes it's because, "Readers crave authenticity, and getting to hear about a particular battle from someone who was actually there offers far more promise than a story told years after the fact. To that end, I've been seeing far less straight-up histories of older wars [such as] Vietnam, WWI, WWII, etc."

Kleinert noted that the types of publishing houses focusing on veterans' books has shifted. "Book publishing in general has gotten more politically and culturally polarized, like all media seemingly," Kleinert told Forbes.com. "I think a book now requires a specific lane, a targeted media platform and an identifiable consumer more than even ten years ago. Because of that, most of the veterans books currently are published by publishers that are known for more conservative content, because conservative media is the platform that seems most fitting for the story to be marketed on, and consumers of conservative media are identified as the target audience."

Callahan said that in her eight years in publishing and four prior years working at a bookstore, the landscape has shifted from strictly war memoir and fiction. She told Forbes.com, "It seems like in the past five or six years there is a much broader range of topics that books by veterans are tackling, from business to fantasy and beyond, which has changed the marketplace for these titles."

" **We've found that the vets who read our books that deal with war are looking for authenticity in the depiction of war** ," explained Callahan. "Even if the book is a fantasy novel, when veterans of war are writing those books, there is an authenticity that may be lacking in books by authors who haven't experienced war. We've also found that memoirs of war told with a dark and biting humor—the types of humor shared between soldiers on the battlefield—are very popular.

The future of books by veterans

All three publishing professionals are eager to work on more books by veterans. In particular, Callahan would like to see queer veteran novels and/or memoirs, as well as fiction or memoir by undocumented soldiers about how they navigated their undocumented status while serving.

Shane would like to see more first person accounts of WWII veterans, especially anyone who served as a flamethrower. He also would like to see more submissions by women, such as female soldiers to special ops, although currently the "vast majority" of submissions he sees by veterans are from male authors.

Kleinert is interested in stories of "heroism that's impossible to believe," citing titles he's represented, including *City of Death* by Ephraim Mattos, a "firsthand account of the retaking of Mosul from ISIS," as well as titles that explore aspects of military life most readers won't ever experience, such as Caroline Johnson's 2019 memoir *Jet Girl*, about her role as an aviator in the U.S. Navy.

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