

War, War Stupid

Ron Kovic's Born on the Fourth of July is the autobiography of a Vietnam War veteran. The previous sentence defines the most important experience of his life, around which the book is built. It is written in the mid-70s, thus after the war. The author presents his personal history as a series of flashbacks, narratives, poems, dreams, and nightmares. It is clear that writing the book was an important part of the self-healing process. We learn from him bit by bit about his happy, normal and typical childhood and teenager years, when he had a few close friends he played ball with, went to school, was interested and active in sports. After a Marine gave a convincing talk in his shiny uniform at his high school, he decided to join the Marines. We learn how unexpectedly brutal the boot camp was for him, but the real thing, the war, was even more devastating. This book does not just retell the story, but the majority of it describes the author's thoughts, reflections, and emotions related to the events. It is not told in chronological order. E.g. it starts 'in medias res' with the moment when he gets injured which is the life-defining event for him, after which his life is changed forever due to the fact that he lost all locomotive and sensory connection of his lower body. From there, we jump back and forth, while the author slowly builds up his courage to share his other life-changing experience, when he killed a fellow American officer. This is the incident that he could not face, could not speak of without going through a difficult inner journey. The stages of his journey included playing the hero (at the parade where he was shown to the public as an empty vessel), retreating from the harsh reality (going to Mexico in the hope of an easy life in the appropriately named Village of the Sun), turning into an activist (and becoming a very active speaker against the war), struggling with depression and alcoholism at various times, attending a University, and trying to become an 'average' person (including getting married and living family life.) However, none of these provided him the balance he was looking for. But each experience gave him something that helped him to move on and integrate the learning into his self as it is journaled in his book. While I suspect the main reason for writing was to coming to terms with the 'whys' of his personal fate, in the process he managed to show the stupidity, uselessness, and devastating effects of the Vietnam War.

Because for me the book is more important on the emotional and thought level than on the story level, I picked short quotes that support my thesis, but the related event is less important. The chapter in which the protagonist gets home drunk one night already paralyzed and pees himself ends with these words: "It was ugly and cold and final." (Kovic, 117) The two 'ands' emphasize all three adjectives that together pretty much define what war can do to you. The night after his base camp was attacked by artillery and scores of people died and he wanted to cry for his friends, but couldn't is explained as "He couldn't feel too much anymore." (Kovic, 215) This means for me that war can kill not just your body but your soul as well. The author summarizes the value of his fight, or lack of it: "All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing." (Kovic, 223) It is not enough that his body defeated him, his soul was forsaken, but the knowledge or feeling that it was for nothing of value gave him the third and final blow. If with his visually descriptive and brutally honest soul-searching Mr. Kovic managed to save one life, by talking out a young mind from joining the army where he might get killed or seriously injured, then he did something of tremendous value. As the old (Talmudic) saying says: To save one human life is to save a whole world.