

"Smitten Gate," a Brutal Anti-war Novel

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The author himself lets you know at the start that this book is going to be very harsh. After the end of the chapter titles, Stan Goff writes, "Warning to readers who have experienced violent trauma or sexual assault. This book contains portrayals of extreme violence, including combat, murder, and rape." His purpose is not to titillate, but to reveal. There are some brief loving sexual passages, but the descriptions of sexual violence and killings are there to repel you.

I had no idea what the title was about until after I finished the book. I was thinking Watergate or something, but the book is not about a scandal. I took another look at the dedication, which mentioned a passage in the bible, Isaiah, section 24:10 which reads, "Broken down is the city of chaos, every house is shut against entry." Looking up Isaiah 24 one reads further in 24:12, "In the city is left desolation, and the gate is smitten with destruction." So there it is. The "city" could be read as the "Camp Virtue" of the novel or as the whole U.S. military. This is no Tom Clancy gung-ho adventure story.

The book flips back and forth between Belize, Honduras, Afghanistan, Somalia, and North Carolina and forward and backward and time. I admit I sometimes got confused, but halfway through the book I couldn't put it down. The story follows Abner Dale, a Master Sergeant in the U.S. Army Special Forces, sent to Afghanistan to shape up a unit in disarray. It does not go well. His soldiers are pretty nasty and he himself is falling apart because of the strain between the decency of his family and his "job" which he sees more and more as killing for corporations. In the midst of this his unit is sent off to capture or kill a high profile Taliban target.

Goff does not glorify "elite" units. His character, Abner, tells his daughter, "'There are a lot of Rangers that really hate black people.' His heart clutched when he saw her change of expression. 'I know, I haven't told you this part, have I? A lot. Including in the chain of command. There's this goddamn Soldier of Fortune Klan Shit subculture there that stays just below the radar.'"

He goes further challenging the "support the troops" brand of so-called patriotism. At one point in the novel there's an argument among journalists in Kabul in which the French journalist is called "anti-American". The journalist fights back and says: "You worship *America*, a kind of golden calf that demands human sacrifice. Some of us do the same for *Mere France*. Secondly, the idea that the armed forces in the United States are doing anything thankless is ludicrous . . . wait, hold on . . . it is ludicrous, because your culture worships them. It worships the soldier. You refer to them reflexively as heroes—as 'our' heroes—even though the vast majority of them have done nothing that could be construed as heroic."

There are passages full of military lore and slang, weapons descriptions and talk about Rangers and

Special Forces and other top notch units. A raid is described in detail with all of its electronics and choreography. The author has the cred to write about this because he was in the military for over 25 years, until 1996. Goff fought against the Vietnamese during the last years of our invasion. Then he was in the Rangers, the Special Forces and Delta Force. He even taught for a time at West Point. His experiences "liberating" Haiti turned him anti-war and anti-capitalism. He wrote a book about it "Hideous Dream-A Soldier's Memoir of the U.S. Invasion of Haiti."

A lot of this book is about the attitude of soldiers towards women. Afghan women are more or less seen just as meat. Feelings towards female soldiers and women generally are on the ultra-crude level. Dale isn't like that. He has a family back home, a wife and a daughter, and it all tears him apart.

There are acts of decency and acts of revenge in *Smitten Gate*, but unfortunately no organizing against the war. I guess that's just the way it was. This is not a group of Vietnam draftees in 1968. It's 2010 in Afghanistan in a "volunteer" military and the long hoped for soldier anti-war movement did not develop.

It would be nice if Americans had the same distrust of standing "professional" armies as did our "founding fathers", men like George Washington for instance. It would be nice if they could remember Vietnam. About ten years ago Seymour Hersh talked at Yale about how he uncovered the My Lai massacre. He talked about going to Indiana to interview one of the soldiers who shot scores of women and children. Hersh told the audience an anecdote that he wrote about later in *The New Yorker*. The distraught American soldier's mother looked at Hersh and said, "I sent them a good boy and they made him a murderer." As Trump and his four star generals talk tough about victory in Afghanistan, Americans would do well to read *Smitten Gate*. Even if they don't care about the Afghans they might want to see what the war there is doing to our soldiers.

You can buy *Smitten Gate* from online vendors for well under \$20.

* Stanley Heller is host of "The Struggle" TV News and author of *The Uprising We Need* (Amazon.com).