

Women's war stories

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue



FUNNY STORY? Tina Fey (right) plays a journalist covering the war in Afghanistan. © 2016 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved.

A new film and a hit podcast both feature women telling war stories—a role that's usually reserved for male protagonists and male narrators.

The film *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, starring Tina Fey, is based on journalist Kim Barker's memoir about Afghanistan. It is part comedy, part coming-of-age story, and part war story. In the podcast *Serial* (the second season), journalist Sarah Koenig tells the story of Bowe Bergdahl, who was held captive by the Taliban for five years and has now been charged in U.S. military court with desertion.

The public has reacted very differently to the two media offerings. *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* has faced disappointing reviews and box office sales, while *Serial* has proved to be a hit.

The first problem for *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* is confusion over its genre. The film's been advertised as a comedy, and Fey gives her audience the laughs they expect. But she does so in a war movie with war horrors vividly depicted. Viewers don't expect the perspective of a female protagonist in a war zone. They're left wondering if *Whiskey* is a romantic comedy, a war movie, or a chick flick.

Fey plays a woman named Kim Baker (not Barker), who is having a midlife crisis. One of the movie's first shots shows us a bottle of vitamins for women over 40.

There is a constant banter about her appearance, with comments about how the small number of Western women

in the country makes Baker more attractive than she would be at home. Fellow journalist Tanya Vanderpoel (Margot Robbie) tells Baker that while she's a seven in New York, she's a nine in Kabul. Baker takes in Vanderpoel's extravagant beauty and responds, "What does that make you, a 15?" Vanderpoel replies with an offhand "Pretty much."

The film also wrestles with questions about the media—who controls the news and why, what gets covered and what doesn't. The film treats cultural differences and the U.S. military with respect, while raising questions about the meaning of the war and the limits placed on women in Afghanistan.

In *Serial*, using the tenacious and sympathetic style that made the first season of the podcast powerful, Koenig explores the mystery of why Sergeant Bergdahl walked away from his post in Afghanistan. Bergdahl sees himself as a whistle-blower. He hoped to have his concerns about the safety of the troops heard by his superiors in the military. But his comrades in arms don't buy this account. They peg him as a deserter and a traitor.

Koenig is credible because she is a thorough researcher who's always curious, always sharp, and doesn't prejudge. She lets her audience know which way she's leaning, but she continues to seek out the truth.

She tells Bergdahl's story as an outsider, as someone who must work hard to understand something new. She is honest about her lack of familiarity with the military and commands empathy as a female investigator who's telling a man's story about a man's world.

Perhaps the public prefers *Serial* to *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* because the public doesn't like war stories that are funny. Or perhaps *Serial* is more popular because it has a built-in NPR audience that's more open to stories that don't fit a standard model.

But in radio a woman's femaleness is not on display as Baker's is in *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. The film's lack of success points to the difficulty of women being taken seriously in a world that assumes that men's war stories are the real ones.