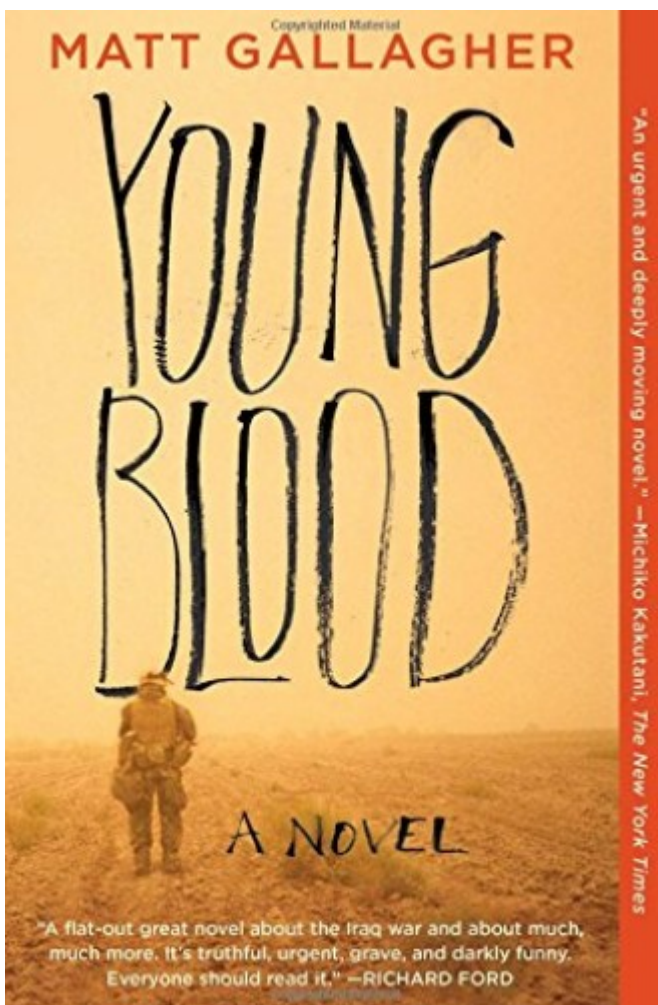


Can war be beautiful?

Fiction and photographs offer nuanced depictions of conflict.

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Youngblood

A Novel

By Matt Gallagher

Atria Books

WAR IS BEAUTIFUL

Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of



War is Beautiful

The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict

By David Shields

powerHouse Books

What does a book thoroughly of its moment look like? It looks a lot like Matt Gallagher's war novel.

And what does the world of the moment look like? Well, for one thing, it's shrinking. Iraq is now on the "edge of empire," in this case, the American empire. A suspected bomb on the road is "an unspooled cassette tape of Bon Jovi's 'Slippery When Wet.'" A teenage Iraqi shepherd boy wears "a Guns N' Roses concert tee."

Other realities of a changing and contracting world are also on full display. It is no longer cool to make jokes about gay people in the military. That favorite millennial word *awesome* makes an appearance. Tanks now have iPod docks. Americans based in Iraq use Skype to keep in touch, and argue, with family back home. The narrator describes this scene at a military base: “Stumbling out of the cybercafé, I passed a joe Skyping with a khol-eyed goth lady holding a toddler. The two adults were laughing together at the child’s burps.”

Any good war novel is part of a long literary tradition that began with Homer and continued in this country with Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Michael Herr, and Tim O’Brien. Gallagher includes many of the well-known tropes of war literature: graphic depictions of battle; characters pondering questions of honor, duty, and courage; absurd bureaucratic entanglements; the realization (acute since the Vietnam War) that missions that lead American soldiers to faraway lands are never as simple as civilian leaders say they are.

Youngblood has a meandering plot—but what novel that depicts war doesn’t? In broad outline, it’s the first-person account of Lieutenant Jack Porter, who is serving just as the United States is about to scale down its military footprint in Iraq. Porter must deal with a hardened and troublesome sergeant who is assigned to his platoon. He shares a loving but turbulent relationship with a war-hero brother who is now back in the United States facing his own scars and traumas from war.

And he has the day-to-day worries of an officer who tries his best to play by the rules and work within the boundaries set by the military and his own conscience. Porter, strikingly comfortable with ambiguity, hears out a commander who reminds him that counterinsurgency “is a complicated task. A thinking man’s war. Requires care, restraint. An appreciation for the gray.” Porter responds: “Sir, I am all about the gray.”

Gallagher is a former U.S. Army captain who has also written an acclaimed memoir based on his time in Iraq. The publisher states that *Youngblood* is “the only Iraq novel set entirely during the war’s contradictory, tentative and unresolved final chapter,” and that this unique focus “truly distinguishes Gallagher’s novel from those of his contemporaries.”

Having read some of the other recent war literature penned by young Americans who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, I am not convinced that this is an important

claim. If any of the war literature being written now is read a hundred years from now—and I think there is a good chance it will be—I doubt that the timeline of its setting will be crucial.

What could distinguish Gallagher's work, however, is the way in which it presents Iraqis and others who serve with the Americans or encounter them in the strained context of "nation-building" (which often involves handing over bundles of U.S. cash to local sheiks) as fully formed, or nearly fully formed, characters. Readers get to know several non-American characters (like a young translator named Qasim, nicknamed Snoop, who is originally from Sudan and plays an important role in Porter's platoon) better than many of the American "joes" under Porter's charge.

Sometimes in war literature there is an empathy gap in describing those who aren't of your tribe, and Gallagher has made major steps to close that gap. But he never lets us forget that this is a war, that the Americans are occupiers, and that from the Iraqi perspective the Americans will leave just as the Ottomans and the British did.

In the end Iraqis and Americans don't—and likely never will—fully understand each other. "Just as all Iraqis look the same to your eyes, all Americans look the same to ours," an Iraqi tells Porter at one point. In turn, Porter realizes that in his relations with Iraqis, a barrier exists based on culture and language that can never be fully overcome: "He was still a them. I was still an us," Porter reflects at one point. "No amount of *chai* could change that."

Gallagher captures the awkwardness of human encounter on both sides. A thriller-like subplot involving Porter's (chaste) relationship with an Iraqi woman named Rana could have gone off the rails in the wrong hands. Gallagher treats the relationship with just the right amount of ambiguity, sadness, respect, and hope.

The book is also clearly of its moment in the way Porter thinks about his country. He is wise to the realities of the post-9/11 United States. And in Iraq he is fully aware of the problems posed by the American occupation. Part nation building, part counterinsurgency, the United States occupation takes place in a country where ethnic divides sow confusion, where Americans are used by locals for "side wars" to even old scores and start new ones. He also acknowledges the asymmetrical nature of war in a place like Iraq, where the all-powerful United States is tripped up by things like roadside bombings. Even to those caught up in the midst of it, the occupation is confusing and exasperating. "Corruption, I thought, warm desert wind

enveloping my face. Bribery. Gross waste of government funds. Perhaps Iraq understands democracy after all," Porter muses.

Another thing Porter understands is that the unnamed American warriors will not likely get much welcome or regard upon their return home. "A platoon of infantrymen, young, silly, fierce men from the country and the ghettos, marching into the outposts of hell because no one else would" will never get the recognition they deserve and only *might* "be lucky enough to work as Walmart greeters."

A subtle religious consciousness is at work in the narrative. Porter and his nemesis sergeant argue over St. Augustine. Porter himself is the "mixed" product of a Catholic and Presbyterian marriage, a tension that arises during a funeral service for a fallen soldier. Porter observes: "The words 'kingdom,' 'glory' and 'power' cut through the air with Protestant severity. I wondered if [the Catholic soldier's] family would appreciate a Cotton Belt Baptist's supplication for their son. It probably didn't matter."

At times the prose is overpolished and overburnished. But Gallagher is a gifted writer who gets most things right. Anyone who has experienced the deserts of the Middle East will immediately understand, even feel and smell, descriptions like this one: "The young day was already overcooked and smelled of sand and canal water."

The aesthetics of Gallagher's prose prompt an ethical question: Is an aesthetic posture appropriate for war? In reflecting on images, David Shields does not think so. His strange, troubling, and useful photographic volume demonstrates how images undergird thinking about (and even support for) the post-9/11 U.S. wars.

A longtime reader of the *New York Times*, Shields found that his attraction to the newspaper's front-page war photos had become "a mixture of rapture, bafflement, and repulsion." He came to believe that the *Times*' photos "glorified war through an unrelenting parade of beautiful images whose function is to sanctify the accompanying descriptions of battle, death, destruction, and displacement."

Collecting many of these striking images into a volume that he calls a witness "to a graveyard of horrendous beauty," Shields claims that the *New York Times* uses "its front-page war photographs to convey that a chaotic world is ultimately under control, encased within amber. In doing so, the paper of record promotes its institutional power as protector/curator of death-dealing democracy." Arguing that all Americans are culpable for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Shields locates a

collective psyche and memory “inscribed in these photographs.” Behind “these sublime, destructive, illuminated images are hundreds of thousands of unobserved, anonymous war deaths.”

Shields may well be right in some cases. But his provocative argument comes at a time when the idea of the front page is itself something of an anachronism—replaced by constant video streaming and images on our smartphones. He gives too much power to the *Times* and its front pages in a moment when traditional media have become, like so much else in society, loosened from their onetime institutional authority.

Longtime critics of the *Times* like Noam Chomsky have praised Shields’s book. I find the ordering of photos into specific themes—Father, God, Pietà, beauty, love, death—to be overly clever and mannered, pounding the thesis into the ground. And from my journalist’s eye, I regard most of the chilling photographs not as glorifications of war but as the work of courageous humanistic witnesses to the horrors of war in the tradition of Goya and Robert Capa.

This capacity for witness may be the strength of Shields’s work. Those who wish to discuss war and peace with depth, empathy, and concrete representation could well use this book as a starting point for debate and reflection.

But then again, they could also reach for their smartphones. Or they could pick up Gallagher’s novel.