

If I Die in a Combat Zone...

Bonk on the Head, John-James Ford. Nightwood Editions, 2005.

The military novel has a long and venerable tradition that includes classic titles (*A Farewell to Arms*, *The Naked and the Dead*), the deadly serious (*The Things They Carried*, *Dirty Work*), and the madcap or comic (*Turvey*, *Catch 22*). In literature, military life often serves as metaphor, suggesting that civilization in general imposes similarly severe limits on our actions and aspirations. The absurdities of life in the military —bullying and hazing, mind-numbing routine, pointless and arbitrary regulations that are enforced with ham-fisted inflexibility — are dragged into the light and either ridiculed or used to dramatize lives lived in the shadow of potential annihilation.

The military novel often is a coming-of-age novel; training takes place while the trainees are young; it is intense, traumatic, and condensed. Depicted as a necessary evil on the road to maturity or as an unpleasant detour from life's true path, the experience always leaves scars the character can display proudly or conceal shame-facedly, depending on the author's political turn of mind. One thing is certain: the military is a polarizing feature of modern life

and any work of fiction that takes place in a military setting will likely establish a political stance in the early pages.

In *Bonk on the Head*, an accomplished first novel by John-James Ford, some of these assumptions are confirmed while others are, well, turned on their head.

Bonk is set in contemporary Ontario, where its main character, Herbert (Verbal) Kempt, is growing up in an Ottawa family with a rich military tradition (both father and grandfather are veterans). The family consists of Herbert's younger sister, the free spirit Gertie, his infant sister Ailish, his father ("The Colonel"), his senile and incontinent grandfather, and his mother. Ford portrays the Kempt household as a war zone. Sitting in opposing camps are Gertie, rebellious and cynical, and the Colonel, representative of iron-fisted authority. Herbert occupies the middle ground with his mother and Ailish. The Colonel, a drinker with a temper, comes into increasingly violent conflict with his son. Ford presents the Colonel as a brutish tyrant, pissed off with the world, a smouldering cauldron of sadistic tendencies. After a series of domestic skirmishes and mainly alcohol-fuelled mishaps (one of which goes down in family lore as the "August 17 Chicken Killing"), Gertie disappears. It is only temporary, but eventually she does leave home for good, maintaining only sporadic contact. Herbert mourns a loss that the rest of the family seem to take in stride.

Herbert's preoccupations are normal for a boy graduating from high school: sex, girls, getting high, sex, food, and sex, in that order. The reader believes he will do anything to escape his father whose influence seems pernicious and destructive and perhaps embrace an environmentally friendly lifestyle of which Gertie would be proud. But almost in deliberate defiance of reader expectations — as if to sustain the military rigors of life under the Colonel — Herbert joins the Reserves and subsequently enrolls at the Royal Military College in Kingston. His motives are and remain obscure: "the plan had been formulating in my mind for some time, but acting on it was thrilling and intimidating enough to make it seem spontaneous." It is a way to escape a corrosive family dynamic, yet it places him within a sphere of influence where the people he meets — in their politics and attitudes — more closely resemble the Colonel than Gertie.

Herbert's basic training and military education includes countless humiliations, degradations, deprivations, and abuses. These are rendered in unadorned matter-of-fact prose that conveys the casual horrors of the training process as well as the depths of his intermittent despair, his determination to succeed, and the sardonic outlook on life and the challenges it poses that ultimately sees him through.

During the gruelling morning jogs around the Mattawa barracks and up Heartbreak Hill, I could read the others and tell who was losing

heart way before they started falling behind. I would wait for them to fall back from the two-rank, double-time formation, and then move up, feeling stronger with each one I passed. At first I felt bad for them, but gradually, as I passed them, they just seemed weak, spineless, gutless. I always ended up running in the front file beside the instructor, Sergeant Cookson, my number one, with a few other Gunners who were in shape. I could get up close and keep my distance at the same time. I was close enough to be noticed and appreciated, but silent enough to avoid being labelled a suckhole.

He emerges a survivor, though hardly unscathed, morally or physically. He has performed reprehensible acts of which he is ashamed and has added his voice to the chants of derision aimed at those weaker than himself. Substance abuse (mostly booze) and, toward the end of the book, an inexplicable disinterest in his own fate, threaten to scuttle his academic career (as a student, he never rises above mediocre). The death of his father seems to diminish him, his relationship with girlfriend Ruth ends, the fines for disciplinary infractions are adding up, his grades are in the toilet, he feels alienated from his friends — adrift, he finds physical and emotional solace only in playing rugby.

After the initial sections, which close with Gertie's disappearance, we believe that her absence will play a huge role in Kempt's life, but other than an early admission that Gertie would talk him out of it if she knew he was joining the Reserves, she is hardly mentioned again until the novel's final pages. The chapters in which Herbert describes his basic training are the most clearly focused, funniest, and sharply realized — his chief tormentor, Stocker, is a fictional triumph: hateful, sadistic, stubbornly memorable. But once we are past these vividly rendered scenes the narrative drifts, and Ford seems to resist imposing structure on his material. Curiously, the book maintains a neutral stance regarding the military: RMC serves as a backdrop for the action, but there is no sense of either idealistic loyalty or moral outrage. One finishes *Bonk on the Head* suspecting that an opportunity has been lost or perhaps misplaced, though at its best the writing is hilarious, vivid, and moves with an energetic narrative thrust that makes for compulsive reading.

At the outset I described this novel as “accomplished”; though it shares some weaknesses with other first novels, it by no means succumbs to them. Ford's brand of humour (largely scatological) is never short of entertaining. For all his dithering, bad behaviour, and self-abuse, Herbert (Verbal) Kempt is a credible and memorable character, and through him the author reminds us that life does not always proceed in a straight line nor does it take us to the place we expected to go. Despite the title, there is wisdom here. I'll be interested to see where John-James Ford takes us next.

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