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Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press / Berkeley: León Literary Arts, 2010. Pp. 598. ISBN 978-0-8021-1928-5.

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In America the Vietnam War is a wound yet to be healed, and the questions persistently asked about the war seem only to exacerbate the wound. Should we have become involved? Having done so, did we fight it with the right strategies and weapons? Should we, at the very least, be proud of our sacrifices? Most Americans avoid these questions unless the war emerges in public debate, as happened in the 2004 presidential campaign when John Kerry chose to make his Vietnam service central to his candidacy. Otherwise, the war is left to scholars, veterans, and military planners.

In our eagerness to ignore Vietnam we are likely to forget that it was, for America, a war with many unpleasant “firsts.” It was, for example, the first war during which the nation was asked to confront possible war crimes committed by Americans. It was, in addition, the first time the nation had to face up to the psychological damage that war inflicts. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” focused our attention in ways that “Combat Fatigue” never did. Vietnam was also the first war that “broke” the American army, and, of course, the first we had to acknowledge losing. Little wonder, therefore, that we have been far more eager to immerse ourselves in memories of World War II. It was no accident that we overlooked the ironic quotation marks in the title of Studs Terkel’s *The Good War*.<sup>1</sup> After Vietnam, yearning to be proud again, we were given the “Greatest Generation” and a president who visited the beaches of Normandy.

Karl Marlantes served in Vietnam and earned the Navy Cross along with several other medals. He has been working on a novel about the war for thirty years, and the result is *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*. The addition of the subtitle is odd: think of *Catch 22* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls* with comparable subtitles. Perhaps the publisher added the words, thinking that “Matterhorn” alone suggested a tale of mountain climbing in Switzerland, a subject of limited appeal in the United States. Whatever the explanation, climbing mountains is what *Matterhorn* is all about. Marlantes gives the name to a mountain in Vietnam that the Marines have captured, are then told to vacate, and subsequently ordered to recapture. What they go through, moreover, in retaking the mountain bears comparison to the efforts of mountain climbing, and so do many of the risks. Death may come with a single false step, and instead of frostbite the Marines suffer from jungle rot.

The novel is largely confined to combat at the platoon and company levels. To assist the reader, the author supplies a “Glossary of Weapons, Technical terms, Slang and Jargon,” which at twenty-one pages may be the longest such ancillary ever attached to a war novel. Far from unique are the book’s characters, many of whom seem familiar: the central figure, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Waino Mellas, is young, inexperienced, and needing to prove himself as he joins Bravo Company; Vancouver is an apparently fearless squad leader who sports a sawed-off M-60 machine gun as his primary weapon and is idolized by the members of his squad; two medics (“squids” as they were called in Vietnam) always do what must be done, and expose themselves to danger without hesitation; Lt. Colonel Simpson and Major Blakeley, the battalion commander and his operations officer, are concerned first and foremost with their own careers; etc. Though we have met such characters in other war novels, Marlantes avoids making them stereotypes. Mellas, for example, is himself very ambitious. Envisioning a political career after his service, he hopes to win a medal and eventually command Bravo Company.

Aside from combat, the other topic *Matterhorn* addresses is race. Vietnam was also the first war in which the military was fully integrated. But Marlantes reveals just how segregated Bravo Company was.

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<sup>1</sup> NY: Pantheon, 1984.

Blacks and whites fight as brothers, but once the firing stops each retreats into the brotherhood of race. In one riveting scene, Mellas, a Princeton graduate who sees himself as a liberal on matters of race, has his illusions dispelled by a black Marine who grasps far better the racial divide in America. “Don’t get excited,” he says to Mellas after accusing him of being a racist. “I’m a racist too. You can’t grow up in America and not be a racist.” If some black characters in *Matterhorn* also seem familiar, like the black power advocate Henry, others, like China, are more complicated.

Books written over a period of decades are vulnerable to changes in attitude, both public and private. *Matterhorn* is no exception. Routinely, Marlantes refers to his Marines as “kids.” While the average Marine or soldier in Vietnam was younger than his World War II counterpart, calling them kids is jarring, indeed, inappropriate. War has always been the province of the young, often the very young. To call Marines and soldiers kids smacks of the same misplaced, demanding sympathy that currently brings the phrase “in harm’s way” to the lips of presidents and politicians speaking of sending men and women off to war. While a book review is not the place to analyze why such unfortunate locutions have crept into the American vocabulary about war, one wonders whether the Karl Marlantes of 1969, or any of his fellow Marines, would have appreciated being labeled “kids.”

Some reviewers have greeted this book as if it might finally be the novel that explains Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> No novel will ever do that. War can inspire great novels, but their writers—one hopes—do not imagine their task is to explain their particular war. How could they? War is arguably the murkiest, most complex of all humanly engineered enterprises. Combat is only one facet of it. We should be thankful for a good book about the combat experience, but for the rest—and Vietnam was a particularly complicated war—we need to look elsewhere. It would surprise me if Marlantes himself does not know that.

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Sebastian Junger, *NY Times* (1 Apr 2010): “Chapter after chapter, battle after battle, Marlantes pushes you through what may be one of the most profound and devastating novels ever to come out of Vietnam.... ‘Matterhorn’ is a raw, brilliant account of war that may well serve as a final exorcism for one of the most painful passages in American history” <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1010.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1010.htm)>.