



The Typist

Michael Knight

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Rife with the crisp dialogue, complex characters, and stunning economy of language for which Michael Knight's previous work has been praised, *The Typist* chronicles the early, halting rehabilitation of the grisly Pacific theater of the Second World War—specifically occupied Japan, where Western bureaucrats flooded into Tokyo, taking charge of their former enemies. When Francis Vancleave (Van) joins the army in 1944, he has every reason to expect his term of service will pass uneventfully. After all, the war is winding down and Van's one singular talent—typing ninety-five words a minute—keeps him off the battlefield and in General MacArthur's busy Tokyo headquarters, where his days are filled with paperwork in triplicate and letters of dictation. Little does Van know that the first year of the occupation will prove far more volatile for him than for the U.S. Army. Bunked with a troubled combat veteran cum-black marketer and recruited to babysit General MacArthur's eight-year-old son, Van is suddenly tangled in the complex—and risky—personal lives of his compatriots. As he brushes shoulders with panpan girls and Communists on the bustling streets of Tokyo, Van struggles to uphold his convictions in the face of unexpected conflict—especially the startling news that reaches his barracks from his young war bride, a revelation that threatens Van with a kind of war wound he could never have anticipated. Though grounded in the history of Japan's reconstruction era in the wake of World War II, *The Typist* is unmistakably contemporary in its portrayal of military occupations and of individual experience in an immensely complicated time. At once spare and captivating, it is a book about unlikely kinships, good intentions gone awry, and the many forks in the road to manhood.

The Typist Details

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From Reader Review The Typist for online ebook

Shelley says

A short, well written story of only 190 pages. This book is a fast read, but you don't necessarily want to read it quickly. I wanted to enjoy what was written by soaking it all in.

It takes place in WW 11. Francis Vancleave, "Van" is the main character, and the Typist, though there are many in General MacArthur's, "Bunny", busy Tokyo head office. We go through the life of Van during his time in the war, and what the outcome of what takes place during that time. We also learn some history along the way too.

A bit of a spoiler: I thought the ending came to an end abruptly, it wasn't as smoothly done as the rest of the story. As to the ending, this is exactly what I would have expected Van would had done.

Henry says

Wish there were half stars.....this should be a 4.5. An exquisite, well-written short novel placed in post-war occupied Japan. The idea of a skilled typist working directly for Macarthur is an interesting trope, and keeps the protagonist in the center of the action. Knight's ear for dialogue is uncanny and his research is good, so he reflects the period well. The story has a couple of interesting twists and turns, so the book is hard to put down, as the cliché would have it.

This novel is not as dense as Shirley Hazzard's "The Great Fire", but the story is a lighter one and in some ways, easier to handle. The ending seemed too predictable when I was reading it, but after a couple of days of reflection, I think it was pitch-perfect.

Larry says

Francis Vancleave is the typist. He is assigned to the typing pool in General MacArthur's Tokyo headquarters following the Japanese WWII surrender. MacArthur takes a liking to Van and invites him to be his son's buddy. In the meantime, he is living with a roommate who, as it turns out, is deep into black market dealings. Van then learns that his wife back home is having another man's baby. And just maybe he is falling for a Japanese girl named Fumiko. Not much excitement in terms of plot, still an excellent novel.

The magic is that the author has managed to write a peaceful novel amidst scenes of the aftermath of total war and nuclear destruction. We see the bombed out buildings, the water-filled bomb craters where the local kids swim, the men women and children disfigured by the engines of war. American occupiers are working to "scrape away the evidence of destruction, to make way for something new." The thing that struck me most about The Typist was how well the Japanese treated the thousands of GI's who occupied their homeland in the post-atom bomb years.

Lisa Matheny says

Loved it. Just loved it.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Nice prose. Could use more plot and character development. An enlisted man relates his experiences in Tokyo during the American occupation following WWII.

Someone got a little *too* Hooked on Phonics. The word is corpsman, not "coreman."

Alecia says

I liked the way Michael Knight writes in this novella. But I think the drama could've been a little more *dramatic*. This is a quiet story of Francis Vancleave, who is stationed in Tokyo in 1944. He is an excellent typist, and this skill keeps him off the battlefield while he works for General MacArthur (his men call MacArthur "Bunny" to each other in this book). Francis's experiences here make up the book, and include a babysitting job with MacArthur's eight year old son. But ultimately, I was left unmoved by the story. Stewart O'Nan, by comparison, also writes "quiet" short novels, but they also can pack a powerful punch dramatically.

Chris says

A boy standing alone in a snow-covered and bombed-out landscape, looking up at the moon, thinking of someone far away.

This is what *The Typist* made me think of.

It is not what the book is about. It is about a U.S. soldier stationed in Tokyo post-WWII. He's a typist under the command of MacArthur. He has a newly-wed wife back home and a roommate named Clifford who will, eventually, make the tragic and common mistake of falling in love.

The typist is also a fan of college football. He is an Alabama man. This will be important later.

Tokyo here is a city of pan-pan girls, industrious street kids, and make-shift diamonds chalked between ruined buildings. It is a city under an American occupation, somewhat in awe of MacArthur and doing what it has to in order to survive. What ugliness remains from the war is presented quietly, and often in passing, as with boys playing baseball among the ruins, or a dance-hall girl's pale, burned skin and crooked hand.

For much of the book, the typist exists as a witness to the louder world around him. He types out his roommate's letters to home (Clifford's mom complains of his hand-writing) and declines to partake in the dance-hall culture that Clifford enjoys and resolutely forgets to mention to his mother. Sometimes he takes walks into the city, to a sake and noodle bar, to practice what Japanese he's learned. Things change, though, as they always do. He agrees to accompany Clifford on a double-date into town. Clifford's girl, Namiki, refused to go otherwise. It is here that the typist meets a dance-hall girl named Fumiko who keeps one arm always hidden within her kimono's folds.

In thanks, Clifford pulls a string or two to get the typist an invitation to watch the Army-Navy game with MacArthur. Not long after this, the typist finds himself playing war with MacArthur's son and the boy's collection of tin soldiers. A friendship evolves while, in the meantime, the typist deals with his wife being pregnant with another man's child, and his dawning affections towards a quiet woman scarred by something very loud and violent.

Knight has a way of painting scenes both beautiful and distressing. There is the general's son, alone in a row boat, paddling around a small, impeccable pond. In another, the typist watches Namiki working as a department store mannequin, holding herself stilly beautiful as onlookers wait for the brief, but inevitable moment when she falters and changes position. And, late in the book, the typist and Fumiko bear witness to a snowy and bizarrely competitive football game held inside a make-shift stadium built within the heart of Hiroshima.

The typist was born in the town of Mobile, a place far away from snow and Udon. His father was tug-boat captain. In Tokyo, the typist often thought of his father alone on a small boat, pushing and pulling much larger ships along dark rivers. By the time of his discharge, though, he carries with him new scenes to ponder, scenes of love and suicide, of snow and football, and of a brief moment of companionship offered by, and accepted from, a scarred woman on a train.

Knight leaves us with the typist at home and transformed, a stranger in a familiar, but different place, populated by familiar, but different people--carrying with him the weight of memories strange and beautiful and violent. Memories like that of a boy in a snow-covered and ruined city, maybe watching the moon, or maybe watching a game of football. It's all you can do sometimes to remember that such things really happen.

Richda McNutt says

This is a spare, elegant book based on the post-war occupation of Japan. It follows an ordinary serviceman who serves as a typist for General McArthur's staff, and his subsequent involvement with McArthur's son, as well as interaction with a handful of locals. It gives a brief glimpse into the life of a person who is quietly uncertain, decent, and non-remarkable - which makes surprisingly satisfying reading.

Louise says

Interesting...but do not understand the ending. I am confused about what happened.....

Jill says

Only those who fully venerate war can think of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a glorified event. Indeed, most fictional books that are set in post-Hiroshima reconstruction are filled with vivid, colorful and poignant descriptions.

So it comes as a surprise that Michael Knight's *The Typist* is such a gentle book. It is devoid of precisely what one might expect in a book set in the wake of World War II: no brow-beating, no heart-wrenching, no intrusive authorial political statements.

At its heart, *The Typist* is a coming-of-age book. The protagonist, Pfc. Francis Vancleave (Van) has one claim to fame: he types an astounding 95 words a minute. That skill keeps him off the battlefield, where his days are filled with mind-numbing letters of dictation and paperwork. That is, until he comes to the attention of General MacArthur, nicknamed "Bunny." Bunny conscripts him to keep company with his young son, Arthur, an isolated boy, who enjoys staging figurine battles with his large assortment of toys.

Van is a man who is marginalized by life. As a married man – and we initially know little about his marriage – he does not enter into the "sport" of bedding the panpan girls who "smoked and teased and sent young boys over with indecent propositions." Unlike his roommate, Clifford, he is a straight arrow, freshly minted from Alabama, more of an observer than a participant. He is able to lose himself in the games of his young charge (would Hannibal outfox Napoleon?) and fits in beautifully in Arthur's isolated world.

There is an authentic simplicity in Michael Knight's sparse writing, a puissance that might elude a less gifted writer. As Van searches for his own legitimacy, Mr. Knight provides him with the luxury of reaching it at his own pace. This is slow, effortless, luxuriant prose, prose that casts a spell, prose that doesn't waste a word and refuses to erect artificial roadblocks to the story. As far as comparisons, one work that comes instantly to mind is Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. There is as much power in what is not stated as what is.

There is a subtle theme of football that runs through the book – and also in the magnificent story that precedes *The Typist*, called *The Atom Bowl*. MacArthur, in shocking disregard of sensibilities, holds a football game to rally spirit in what he dubs the Atom Bowl; "the players trotted out and suddenly the ball was in the air, the Giants kicking to the Bears in the city of Hiroshima, on the island of Honshu, in the occupied nation of Japan." If there is any doubt of how Michael Knight expects us to read this scene, it is dispelled by the opening story. In it, a young boy interviews his "pawpaw" – the last surviving participant of the Atom Bowl. As his pawpaw relives these "gory days", the boy asks him, "What about you? Did you ever feel guilty or anything?" The response: "For what?"

This small, quiet novel centering on a rootless man in search for something he only dimly understands packs a disproportionate wallop. By juxtaposing complex characters with an economy of language, Michael Knight has created a compelling meditation of a sliver of history.

Andrea says

Michael Knight is one of my favorite authors, and I was lucky enough to score an Advanced Readers Copy of this. Knight continues to do here what he has done in his previous short story collections and novellas: he creates perfectly realized, three-dimensional characters, and then proceeds to evocatively and lyrically describe their experiences and interactions with their location and with other people. This book is for anyone who enjoys characters so real you feel as though you know them; readers who love to be immersed in the location of a story; and readers who revel in beautiful, engrossing writing.

Kiwiflora says

Yet another small book, 190 pages, that contains wonderful writing and a good story. Francis Vancleave is a very ordinary young man, from a very ordinary family in a very ordinary town in the state of Alabama. He does have one talent though - he can type, and type very well, taught by his equally capable mother. After Pearl Harbour, being a dutiful young man, without much of a future in the town of Mobile, Alabama, he signs up for the army. Because of his rare skills, he finds himself attached to the Officers Personnel Section of General MacArthur's headquarters staff. He goes to Australia, then Manila and finally Tokyo which is where this story begins, as America begins the process of helping Japan rebuild itself.

Van is a bit of an outsider, not an officer but rooming with Clifford who is, and so ends up socialising with other officers as well. Unlike many of his compatriots, Van is also married, a state that he is very neutral about, but surprisingly faithful to. He is a bit of an enigma to his colleagues not only for this, but for a rather strange friendship he strikes up with MacArthur's young son. It is inevitable through rooming with Clifford that he finds himself involved in the latter's shady dealings with the defeated Japanese, and there is a sense through the story that this is not going to end well. However, through the months that Van is in Tokyo, recording the process of rebuilding, transmitting the correspondence, and generally observing what is going on around him, he actually finds himself. He is like a quiet center in the middle of a storm, and the writer Ann Patchett makes this comment on the back cover. I very much felt this when I was reading it - this quiet, thoughtful, ordinary man, in the midst of extraordinary events, other people's disasters and tragedies, and somehow it helps him make sense of his own life.

Casey says

Because it is so carefully and economically (and beautifully) written, Michael Knight's most recent novel, *The Typist*, is the kind of book you read and think that you yourself can write. In that way, reading *The Typist* is incredibly inspiring; yet, as many know, the books that appear simple are really the most difficult and complex. *The Typist* is a deceptively simple, short book - only a little over 200 pages, and my copy is shorter and more narrow than a standard paperback - but like other short novels in the recent past (I'm thinking here of Stewart O'Nan's *Last Night at the Lobster* and Richard Bausch's *Peace*) it packs as much story into its pages as a novel twice its length.

The plot of *The Typist* is fairly simple. Francis "Van" Vancleave joins the army in 1944 and, because he is an exceptional typist, he is stationed in Tokyo at General MacArthur's headquarters where he is employed transcribing mountains of paperwork. Through a series of events, he befriends MacArthur's eight-year-old son, Arthur, and is enlisted by MacArthur to "babysit" him. On top of the obvious complications that situation breeds, Van is also dealing with a shell shocked bunk-mate who may or may not be working with Communists on the black market. In addition, Van's wife (who he met and quickly married before he left basic training) writes him to tell him that she is pregnant, and that he is not the father. Each of these plot threads play themselves out over the course of the novel, which culminates in General MacArthur's (in)famous Atom Bowl, a football game between American soldiers at the site one of the nuclear bomb detonations. (Knight manipulates the details some, but the game really did occur).

I really can't say enough about this novel. It tackles an issue that has been written into the ground--war--but in a fresh, new way. Essentially, it is a war novel without the war, if that makes any sense. Van is so well written that even in the short space of the novel, he is fully realized and readers, I think, will respond

accordingly.

For more, see my blog: <http://thestoryisthecure.blogspot.com/>

Shannon says

The Typist is a small, quiet novel that is best described as evocative. Unlike many books that I read, The Typist felt like it was more about setting than character or plot. Both of these exist, but took a backseat to the setting of post-war Japan. As my husband and I discussed this book over dinner last night (dinner alone, no less!), he mentioned that there was so much that went unsaid in this book. The author could have taken the book in multiple different directions, but he chose to follow the path of this book and let those other paths go untrod. This choice of the author leaves you with a spare book, free from distracting side plot lines or characters who pop in for just one scene.

The main character, Van, is one I never quite figured out. He keeps emotional distance from everyone in the novel, but instead of leaving me frustrated, it left me intrigued. This leads me to my only complaint about this book: it's so short (a mere 185 pages), so easy to read, so well-written that it's difficult to read it slowly. Yet it's a book that merits savoring. My suggestion? Don't grab this as your next beach read. If you do that, you'll devour it in a few hours. Instead, read one or two chapters at night before bed for a few nights. If you have the self-discipline to read The Typist this way, I think you might enjoy it even more than I did. It's a lovely book and I'm eager to read more of Michael Knight's evocative prose.

Adam Johnson says

This novel offers a keen portrait of a rarely depicted terrain: the post-WWII American occupation of Japan. Don't expect bullets and mortars, here: all the battles are waged within. Our main character Van is a quiet, perceptive guide to this world of subtleties, where the true rules of behavior are elusive. Sex, rank, back-alley bartering and babysitting are all more loaded than they appear. And don't miss the great guest appearance by the great general himself: Douglas MacArthur. A fast and rewarding read that will linger.
