



My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir

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A war memoir of unusual literary beauty and power from the acclaimed poet who wrote the poem "The Hurt Locker."

In 2003, Sergeant Brian Turner crossed the line of departure with a convoy of soldiers headed into the Iraqi desert.

Now he lies awake each night beside his sleeping wife, imagining himself as a drone aircraft, hovering over the terrains of Bosnia and Vietnam, Iraq and Northern Ireland, the killing fields of Cambodia and the death camps of Europe.

In this breathtaking memoir, award-winning poet Brian Turner retraces his war experience—pre-deployment to combat zone, homecoming to aftermath. Free of self-indulgence or self-glorification, his account combines recollection with the imagination's efforts to make reality comprehensible. Across time, he seeks parallels in the histories of others who have gone to war, especially his taciturn grandfather (World War II), father (Cold War), and uncle (Vietnam). Turner also offers something that is truly rare in a memoir of violent conflict—he sees through the eyes of the enemy, imagining his way into the experience of the "other." Through it all, he paints a devastating portrait of what it means to be a soldier and a human being.

My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review *My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir* for online ebook

Craig Werner says

Great book, probably the best on the growing shelf of writing by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As much poetry as memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country* assembles a montage of fragments--images, memories, dreams--that communicate the multiple dimensions of experiences that are at the same time intensely individual and shared with other veterans. There's a profound sense of shared humanity at the core of the book, reflected in his references to other wars (often via the stories of family members who served in WWI, WWII and Vietnam) and his ability to imagine scenes from the perspective of those he was forced, in the moment, to deal with as "enemies." There are some deep blues sections concerning Turner's relationships with families, friends and his wife. The themes will be familiar to veterans, the people in their lives and anyone who's read *Redeployment*, *The Long Walk* or *The Yellow Birds*, but there's nothing vaguely conventional about the way Turner handles them. The resolution of the book, which involves a sweat lodge ceremony, does a beautiful job of sounding a note of hope without ignoring or trivializing his on-going struggle.

Trish says

This shattering memoir describes clear as photographs the heat signatures of memory, the “shadows articulated by light.” It is terribly beautiful and the reverse, both. Shards of sentences fracture the consciousness. Turner tells us the pop-pop-pop of machine guns is patient and sounds sometimes like laughter, or “metallic elocution.”

It is queer to see, hear, speak the gorgeous language in this book and realize it describes the brittle, blistering, terrifying. Killing people with precision instruments. Not always intentional. The discordance is terrible. Turner tells us of the cold hard smooth perfection of chrome-plated steel firing pin. Fear and pitilessness are paired.

I think as I read about these soldiers joshing and murmuring to one another about *field pussy* as they sight their rifles from the flat roof of an abandoned elementary school—do the Iraqi insurgents that are their targets think about these men as men? Turner imagines a bomb maker at his craft. He is an artist. The irony is cold and red and hot and black.

Turner tells us he always wanted to be a soldier. He is from a family of soldiers stretching through a flamethrower on Guam to the Franco-Prussian war and one of the very last successful cavalry charges in modern warfare, the Battle of Mars-la-Tour. These men, these soldiers, survived. As a young boy, Turner practiced surviving. In the California scrub he dug trenches stocked with provisions. He practiced martial arts with his father in a makeshift dojo. He enlists in the cavalry. He thought it would make him a man. It did. But what man is this?

His remembered images startle us into recognition and give no mercy. The language lingers like the taste of cordite on the tongue or the smell of smoke in the hair: The tremble of hair on a dead soldier's head like sea grass on a sand dune; A moustache, found alone, on a bomb-cratered street; The dotted line traced from the Japanese *kamikaze* to the young woman in her homemade and heavily-laden vest.

A man is not big enough for his memories, Turner tells us. America is not big enough to hold the memories that are spilling out of the soldiers not big enough to hold them. The soldiers are dying of their memories. They could unpack some of those memories. Some of it is the detritus and the waste of war. Where do we put the waste?

A *Billy Lynn* moment occurs when a colonel visits Turner's stateside training site and tells them he needs audio and visual for a video game. Wha-a-a? All in the life of a soldier...ours is not to question why...the queer cadence of the top-down command catch the exhausted men sideways.

The work, the name of Brian Turner will ever evoke in me a sighed outbreath, an inward turn...and joy, hope. The beauty and sorrow is palpable, real, painful. Spoken. Written. Acknowledged. Poet warrior. Can we ever have enough of them?

Mark says

I rarely stop reading a book before I have finished, but *My Life as a Foreign Country* is being added to that very short list. I understand that Brian Turner, in addition to being an Iraq War veteran, is a poet. Well, he injects a little too much poetic prose into this thin memoir. In addition to many lines that may be beautiful to read, but upon reflection have no meaning ("...the early morning light illuminates the translucent nature of the grass in its subtle gesture toward infinity." Huh?), Turner also uses dream sequences, sometimes shifting from fact to dream in the same paragraph.

His dreamy poetic visions started to feel redundant, and after nearly reading half the book, I realized that I could not put myself through the last half of this disappointing war memoir. I have read some great war memoirs over the years, but this is not one of them.

Ettore1207 says

Attraverso 136 quadri, alcuni brevissimi flash, altri più lunghi e dettagliati, l'autore parla della sua giovinezza, della sua esperienza di guerra in Medio Oriente, di quella del padre sul fronte asiatico durante la seconda guerra mondiale, e di quella del nonno, anch'egli soldato.

Lui che a 14 anni prepara il napalm con il padre, per gioco. Lui che si arruola per una serie di motivi, alcuni taciuti e altri detti:

Posai il dito sull'elenco e dissi Fanteria perché volevo che il tizio con la divisa di poliestere capisse, più o meno inconsciamente, che non mi fregava un cazzo della fila di nastrini che si era appuntati al petto, che ero assolutamente disposto a gattonare nella melma e nella merda a qualsiasi ora del giorno e della notte, inverno primavera estate autunno e quello che vi pare, che ero pronto a strisciare con la faccia nei liquami salmastri più fetidi e schifosi disponibili al mondo, che ero di Fresno e quelli di Fresno hanno spirito di sopportazione a palate, ne hanno da vendere, quelli di Fresno sopportano all'infinito, quelli di Fresno strisciano meglio di qualsiasi figlio di troia sulla faccia della terra, o quantomeno strisciano al massimo livello, viscidì e freddi come rettili. Per questo mi sono arruolato.

Un libro tagliente.

Noto due prigionieri nella costruzione di mattoni in cui conserviamo le armi sottratte ai nemici. Non so perché vengano tenuti separati dagli altri che stanno nell'area di contenimento esterna, ma presumo che siano prigionieri "importanti" da tenere isolati o, più probabilmente, che ci si sia dimenticati di loro nell'immenso meccanismo della guerra. Sono chiusi in una stanzetta laterale con una parete fatta di sbarre seppellite in basso nelle fondamenta di cemento e conficcate in alto nel soffitto intonacato, a due metri abbondanti da terra. Una cella che fa un po' Far West, 1870. Una cella da città fantasma. Buia. Fetida di urina e sudiciume umano. Distinguo a malapena le sagome tremanti, spalla contro spalla, accovacciate, ingobbite, giusto due fogli di cartone fradicio a dividerli dal cemento freddo. Nel buio sento i loro occhi. Mi guardano. Cesellano nella memoria l'anonimia dell'uniforme. Anche loro stentano a riconoscermi come un uomo.

Mike says

A memoir. Yes, but the poetic prose is hypnotic in the telling. Moving through WWI, WWII, Vietnam and the experiences of his great-grandfather, grandfather and uncle add to his sense that war is timeless and continuous.

"How does anyone leave a war behind them, no matter what war it is, and somehow walk into the rest of his life?"

Mesmerizing!

Francesca Maccani says

per la recensione vedi [leggoveloce](#) su [wordpress](#) o [francesca leggo veloce](#) fanpage su fb

Steve Petherbridge says

Brian Turner is an unusual combination, in modern warfare anyway, of being an acclaimed poet and a professional soldier who has served with the U.S. Army in Bosnia-Herzegovina and later in Iraq. I have read three war memoirs this year including "Storm Of Steel By Ernst Junger" and "All Quiet On The Western Front By Erich Maria Remarque". All these three books confirm that war is a dirty business, there are no real victors and young men serving in armies and civilians are severely traumatised and emotionally damaged at best.

Turner, the poet, shines through this extraordinary well written and lyrical memoir. The success of its unusual format of short and concise, but, tellingly descriptive chapters is a tribute to both him and his editor and grips the reader's attention. I read this book mostly on a damp and dismal Dublin Sunday. It is a page turner.

I cannot better the description by Tim O'Brien, author of the great Vietnam memoir, "The Things They Carried." He describes the book as "brilliant and beautiful. It surely ranks with the best war memoirs I've ever encountered - a humane, heartbreaking and expertly crafted work of literature."

Turner considers not only his own wars (the recent barbarism of Bosnia and Iraq) but those of his father, uncles, grandfathers and great grandfathers (Vietnam, Iwo Jima, Gettysburg). "My Life as a Foreign Country" is a kind of surreal diary of American intervention and conflict, a self exploratory coming to terms by Brian Turner in dealing with his own experience and an attempt at seeking an inner peace, rooted in his voice, but, stretching over the generations of military service, and some sacrifice, in his extended family.

"Half awake, in the opening chapter, he imagines himself, as "a drone aircraft plying the darkness above my body, flying over my wife as she sleeps beside me..." The night-vision hallucinations that are fed back into Turner's haunting and haunted prose dwell periodically on the warrior code of his childhood in Fresno, California: learning to form a fist in the martial arts dojo his father constructed in their suburban garage, feeling the blade of a machete that his grandfather used to kill a Japanese officer he stumbled over in the jungles of Guam. Turner joined up as soon as he could to prove that, like those men who had created him, he too "was willing and prepared to crawl through the mud and muck any time of day or night, winter spring summer fall you name it, I was prepared to low-crawl with my face down in the nastiest, foulest brackish sludge and sewer the world could offer..." It felt like his fate." - the Guardian.

Turner survives and copes, if that is an accurate description, with the ordeal of war, but, has obviously been through the terrors of some form of PTSD and has been significantly helped by his wife, a point he acknowledges in the latter part of the book and extensively in the subsequent afterword. Yet, he retains his humanity for his fellow man, and even the Iraqi people, who no doubt attempted to kill him. He, like all soldiers of all wars, will be haunted by nightmares and flashbacks with memories that will be triggered unexpectedly. This is a survivor's tale and like all such recollections, some memories may be exaggerated and some omitted, but, as I said at the start, war is a dirty business. War is a lose-lose scenario, especially, for participants in the battlefield on both sides of any conflict.

However, Brian Turner's triumphant memoir is an at times frightening insight into war for the rest of us, who have been lucky enough, if not blessed, not to have been involved. No doubt, our politicians and war orchestrators will skim over it and claim that there is a bigger and more important picture to be considered.

A great read and a great book that will linger in our minds, and because the war is still with us, our thought processes will be stimulated by the nightly newscasts we watch from Iraq and Afghanistan. These reports, however accurate they are, will take on a deeper meaning for any viewer who has read this memoir.

Published reviews:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/bo...>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Update 11th January 2015 Published review in New York Times
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/boo...>

Patricia Murphy says

I wanted to read this memoir because it was recommended to me by one of my favorite memoir writers, Kelle Groom. Like Turner, Groom published a couple books of poetry before publishing a memoir and we can see the lyric DNA here in both books' bones. The similarities between the two memoirs do not end there.

Both *My Life as a Foreign Country* and *I Wore the Ocean in the Shape of a Girl* feature dense, non-linear sections with a strong focus on image and a seriously courageous and thorough description of pain and suffering.

I found Turner's book extremely difficult to read, and I mean that as a compliment, and I mean it in many ways. I could read this text only in about 15-minute sittings. I had to keep walking away to enter my own world again for a moment. That was partly due to the thick, descriptive, sometimes surreal and fantastic language, but it was also at times due to the intensity of the subject matter. Through Turner's prose, I learned more about the graphic and violent nature of the work of a soldier than I have from any film or photograph.

We also get moments that are deeply philosophical. I'll share two of them here.

"And for a moment, I knew— here was the great body of Death. A portion of the inheritance we all share."

"Maybe it isn't that it's so difficult coming home, but that home isn't a big enough space for all that I must bring to it."

David Jones says

Turner's memoir in narrative poetry nails a deep dive down into a somber topic: war. Turner's genius manifests in pitting his life against the dramatic scars of his service in the Army's Infantry. Turner talks so much about ghosts and dreams and the lost. But he does so in a way that only cherishes the life of his army fellows. *MLFC* is a brilliant epic about pursuing life after war and living with a thousand dream spectators who either beckon back to war or a hard quitting.

Diletta says

A metà tra il memoir e la poesia, e forse molto di più. La visione di Turner è potentissima: quella di un uomo che si porta dietro, costantemente, e dovrà infatti fare i conti con l'accettare questo carico, uno zaino pieno di ricordi e di uomini.

Simone Subliminalpop says

Una famiglia di militari, generazioni di combattenti.

Dalla prima guerra mondiale, passando per l'ex Jugoslavia, fino ad arrivare all'Iraq (al quale è dedicato gran parte del libro)

Lirico, ma anche altrettanto pratico, d'altronde una guerra è fatta di corpi, persone.

Turner procede per istantanee, abbozzi, piccoli particolari che sommandosi sono in grado di rendere appieno lo straniamento e la potenza di cosa vuol dire far parte di un conflitto.

Cit.

Daniela says

"Forse il punto non è tanto che è difficile tornare a casa, quanto che a casa non c'è spazio per tutto quello che devo portarci. L'America, smisurata ed estesa da un oceano all'altro, non ha abbastanza spazio per contenere la guerra che ognuno dei suoi soldati porta a casa. E anche se ne avesse, non vorrebbe."

Joe McGee says

While I was fortunate to never have seen combat, I was a soldier. My first orders sent me to South Korea where, at 22-years-old, I led my first platoon. What Brian has done here is to paint the soldier's canvas in such an honest, visceral, emotional way that lends itself to a level of understanding that anyone, soldier or civilian, can directly connect to. It is a portrait of a man; a poetic, romantic, philosophical, genuine spirit that tries to find meaning in the world amidst the wreckage and debris - something we all experience at one time or another, at some level. This is a beautiful and exhilarating tour of a man who walked through the valley of death and emerged with a more profound appreciation for life and those in it. This is a bold and powerful book about what it means to be alive; to be truly alive in a world that makes it too easy to shuffle along, one foot in front of the other. Thank you, Brian, for writing this memoir, for letting us into your heart and, in doing so, making our hearts just a little bit bigger and a lot bolder.

Roger DeBlanck says

Brian Turner's memoir *My Life as a Foreign Country* is a profound and compassionate meditation on the pain and confusion of war. Its impact deserves commendation beside such classics as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*. With vivid musings and mesmerizing insight, Turner recounts his experiences as both a Bosnian and Iraq war veteran. In each of the memorable 136 chapters/sections that comprise this unforgettable book, you feel the aching memory of every incident that Turner shares. He probes the loneliness and despair of what soldiering demands and what combat does to the soldier's mind. In Turner's case, he has used his experiences to gain a stronger willingness to understand and forgive, even as he can never forget what happened. His appreciation for the value of life and his gratitude for having survived his tours of duty are particularly powerful messages that echo throughout the book. In total, Turner's poetic vision provides visceral imagery and resonant language that has the power to transport readers into the past and illuminate the present condition of war. This book forces us to examine our own conscience and humanity.

Tina Panik says

Honest. Original. A book to savor.
