

Johnny's Gun

Powerful books, unlike many soldiers, live long and healthy lives. Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* was first published just two days after the start of World War II. Fifty years later, the acclaimed anti-war novel is still in print.

"Johnny held a different meaning for three different wars," Trumbo wrote in a 1959 introduction penned after the Korean War. Eleven years and many printings later, he included an addendum. "Numbers have dehumanized us. Over breakfast coffee we read of 40,000 American dead in Vietnam. Instead of vomiting, we reach for the toast."

In a last-minute effort to prevent a war in the Persian Gulf, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz are meeting in Geneva. They might consider reading excerpts from *Johnny Got His Gun* to each other, over coffee.

The novel tells the story of Joe Bonham, a young man from Shale City, Colorado. Lying in a military hospital, he recalls his mother's fresh bread, and how "you got a thick slice of sweet bermuda onion and put it between two slabs of bread and butter and nobody anywhere in the world had anything more delicious to eat." When it snowed, "the outbuildings were always beautiful and a fence post would have a cap four inches high."

But "on a day in September in 1918 time stopped. There was a howl somewhere and he dived into a dugout and things blotted out and he lost time."

He lost more than time. Joe Bonham has no arms or legs. He is deaf and completely blind. A skin of soft cloth masks what used to be his face. "The hole began at the base of his throat just below where his jaw should be and went upward in a widening circle." It ends halfway up his forehead. He feels like "a full grown man suddenly being stuffed back into his mother's body."

Time is suspended. Deprived of sights and sounds, he has lost his bearings. Lightless days stretch into one endless night. He struggles to catch sunbeams on his neck and forehead to punctuate time. Years of dammed thoughts finally burst when he begins to communicate by Morse code, tapping his head against his pillow.

Dot-dot-dot dot dot dot-dot-dot. SOS. Help.

A finger taps his chest: What do you want?

He wants to be an "educational exhibit," amongst other choices. It would be a great thing "to concentrate war in one stump of a body and to show it to people so they could see the difference between a war that's in newspaper headlines and liberty loan drives and a war that is fought out lonesomely in the mud..."

Or the desert sands of Kuwait. *Johnny Got His Gun* puts a human face on the price of war, a face without eyes or a nose or a mouth, a "red gash with mucus hanging to it."

The Pentagon has dispatched the hospital ships "Mercy" and "Comfort" to the Persian Gulf, each with the capacity to treat 1,000 wounded soldiers. The U.S. toll alone could run as high as 5,000 dead and 15,000 wounded — in the first ten days alone. Iraqi casualties are predicted to be far greater. God knows how many civilians will perish.

"You can always hear the people who are willing to sacrifice somebody else's life," thinks Joe.

"Take me wherever there are parliaments and diets and congresses and chambers of statesmen," he says. "I want to be there when they talk about honour and justice and making the world safe for democracy...I want to be there to remind them I haven't got a tongue to stick into the cheek I haven't got either."

The pen is mightier than the sword, but is it any match for chemical weapons? Novels cannot prevent a war, but a work like *Johnny Got His Gun* can portray its consequences in heartbreaking detail and description. Imagination remains a sovereign territory, beyond the reach of missiles. War takes the lives of our storytellers; literature preserves their stories.

"Every nation invents its own style of going to war — the myths that it plays in its mind when it marches off to fearsome business," writes essayist Lance Morrow.

Iraq keeps its propaganda machine well-oiled. In the United States, Morrow observed that "John Wayne, or possibly John Rambo, was still ghosting around some American imaginations." Myths of war flutter between the flags of Egypt, Britain, Syria, France, Canada, and all other nations stationed in the Persian Gulf.

Tragic and timeless, Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* explodes the myths of war. The echoes resound.

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***The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 1991**