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The Things They Cannot Say: Stories Soldiers won't tell you about what they've Seen, Done, or Failed to Do in War. Kevin Sites. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013. ISBN 9780061990526. Price $9.87.

Kevin Sites, a wartime journalist, chronicled twenty civilian casualty stories in worldwide active war zones in his first book *In the Hot Zone: One Man, One Year, Twenty Wars.* His new book approaches wartime casualties in a different way: by interviewing veterans returned from war about their experiences. As should be expected, most of the stories are gruesome and horrifying. However, it is Sites' hope that allowing the soldiers to unburden themselves of these stories may alleviate some of the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms the individuals face, as well as allow the audience of his book to better understand what soldiers in combat undergo.

Why take on such a difficult topic? Many soldiers, returned from their war zone, resort to "the numbing devices of alcohol, drugs, violence and empty sex" (xxii) rather than working through traumatic experiences through grief and mourning processes. By not addressing actions taken in the war zone, or perhaps by denying them altogether, Sites worries about the "crippling social and economic consequences for the United States, including substance abuse, domestic violence, crime and the staggering medical and mental health care costs of providing for those veterans after their return and into old age" (xxii). Further, there seems to be a presumption that many or most veterans suffer from psychological ailments, when some soldiers and veterans may simply accept the realities and harshness of war better than others. Sites ultimately believes the self-induced denial that soldiers feel is indicative of a larger, societal eschewal of the effects of war: "A society 'protected' from the reality of war can rewrite the narrative, shaping and forming it into something less terrible and costly by emphasizing only the heroism and triumphs rather than the dark, ugly deeds that occur with much greater frequency than we care to imagine or discuss" (xxxi). The purpose, then, of Sites' book appears to be as much a confessional as an indictment of society's complacency with what war entails.

The book's structure is divided into five thematic parts ("The Killing Business: What's It Like to Kill in War?"; "Things That Stain the Soul: What Can Never Be Forgotten") with two chapters within each section

representing a particular soldier's story, including a brief overview of the soldier before entering the Armed Services and his reasons for enlisting. The author gives details, often quoting from lengthy interviews conducted in person with the participant, about wartime experiences, then details how the individual responded to those events upon returning home. The contributors are almost wholly American infantrymen (one wonders why an author who spent so much time covering worldwide conflicts could only find one foreign soldier to contribute to his book) and most fought in the Middle Eastern wars of the early 1990s and 2000s. The complete absence of any female soldiers, whose experiences and coping mechanisms may be quite different from their male counterparts, seems a particularly glaring omission.

Another weakness, perhaps more obvious, are the very subjects Sites uses to compose the narrative of his book. Some instances described are verified with documents from the US Military and news reports, but early in the book, Sites indicates that his research subjects, even his status as a journalist ("just a few rungs above pond scum in the military hierarchy" (xxvi)), could significantly handicap his project. He admits that his participants, "will remember imperfectly, with omissions and additions and perhaps lost players and parts" (xxxiii). This, compounded by the fact that the stories, by their very nature, are difficult to tell, means that the reader must approach much of the material with a degree of skepticism.

Despite these drawbacks, Sites manages to procure compelling and varied wartime experiences and home front reactions from his participants. As expected, many turned to destructive vices upon their return home. Many suffer from PTSD, or other psychological disorders. However, some stories are particularly redemptive, such as First Lieutenant Thomas Saal's story from the Vietnam War ("Hung on a Cross"). After witnessing appalling acts by his countrymen, Saal returned to the United States. His status as a celebrated high school English teacher and married father to four daughters masked decades of substance abuse. News reports from the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts started to appear in the mid-2000s, and triggered remembrances of Saal's time in combat. He suffered a nervous breakdown, and admitted himself to a psychiatric ward. Upon his discharge, he began working with volunteer organizations that help Vietnam War veterans, including a homeless shelter for war veterans and Warriors' Journey Home, which "involves bringing Vietnam veterans back

to Vietnam to confront the war" (180). He now writes poetry as a means to cope with old memories. Instances such as these are when Sites' book is at its strongest: demonstrating that positive coping mechanisms yield healthier war survivors, and, by extension, more productive members of society.

Where the book falters is in its indictment of the public's complicity to do more to help returning veterans. Veteran healthcare reform, especially in mental health services, would seem to be an obvious fix for many of these men. However, Sites only mentions that problem cursorily in different chapters, and never directly addresses a remedy to these systemic problems. He does, however, plead with his readership to "implore and help" veterans, "not simply for their service, but for their willingness to help us understand [their experiences] just a little bit better" (278-9). While this is an admirable, perhaps even necessary, sentiment, this reviewer is left with a feeling of consternation as to how to open up such a dialogue. While this book successfully illustrates soldiers' trauma, it falls to the reader to imagine how one might practically enact the social change for which Sites so eloquently advocates.

Works Cited

Sites, Kevin. *In the Hot Zone: One Man, One Year, Twenty Wars.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007. Print.

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