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# REVIEWS

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Janis P. Stout. *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 296p.

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Janis P. Stout has written an incredible book, *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars*. She focuses on the poetry, visual art, and music surrounding the two world wars of the 20th century. Yet, the book is haunted by the specters of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent United States invasion of Iraq. Readers will again and again, as I did, find unspoken parallels between the past and the present.

Surely it was not a coincidence that the book's 2005 publication date is September 11. Yet, throughout her writing, Stout mostly avoids mentioning 9/11 and Iraq; the few references are made more powerful exactly because of Stout's understated prose. In particular, there is the epigraph, from an NPR interview with Maxine Hong Kingston, which Stout happened to overhear. Kingston said, "It is possible for people to come out of war and learn peace." This desire for a world without war is not so much a theme as a force driving her and the readers through the impressive scholarly examination and the unforced analogies between the mistakes of the wars and the present war, or perhaps wars, in which we find ourselves.

Stout limits her territory to the 20th-century wars, specifically WWI and WWII, examining the history of the wars through the lens of American and British poetry, music, visual arts, as well as the psychology of loss and grief. *Coming Out of War* follows a simple and chronological path through the land of war, and this very organization, enriched with historical, literary, and psychological analysis, tends also to reflect the purpose of the book, to show the needless repetition of war in an endless cycle.

The book begins with the romantic and heroic ideals of pre-war society, ideals crushed on the battlefields, and leading to disillusionment and irony. She then reviews the women poets of World War I, followed by a discussion of American and British reflection of the war that was to end all wars. The middle of the book occupies the middle space between the two wars, an "uneasy interlude." Then, the book begins to turn again to the same cycle of war and rhetoric, such as the heightened language asking young men to sacrifice and do their duty for their country, with all the same cant that betrayed young men in World War I. This chapter is followed again by a

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loss of innocence and feelings of irony and weariness, and again by the subsequent reflection of whether or not the price of human lives was worth the war. Stout ends with Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, and an examination of the chance for breaking out of the war cycle and living in a land of peace.

Stout has created a book that examines with a cold and critical eye the wheels of war. She implies that not only can we move to this warless land, but that we must. In her deft and economical style, and skillfully chosen quotations, she begins her examination of the prelude to World War I, when the war rhetoric mirrored the heightened and heroic language of the Greek and Roman epics, noting the sacrifice mixed with honor. Then, she selects poems and drawings in which the idealized war experience is blown to pieces on the WWI battlefields, notably the Battle of the Somme, resulting in the irony and disillusionment of modernism. Stout presents an impressive selection of poetry, music, and art, ranging from the idealist to the battle-realistic moment that modernism was born.

A major contribution from Stout is her challenge of the pervasive idea that only the battlefield soldiers can understand the realities of warfare. According to this perspective, only the soldiers would be qualified to voice an opinion on war, or to write a first-rate poem about war. In this hierarchy, the next layer of authenticity would be the battlefield medics, with the people at home comprise a sort of tertiary group, whose voice is often considered less authentic because these people were not in the trenches, so to speak. Stout rejects this hierarchy, and broadens the definition of authentic war voices to include those left behind as being just as affected by the war as those soldiers at the front. She views war as spreading its influence directly from the battlefield into society. Her thesis extends to all those who have experience any aspect of war:

War is a total and totalizing social experience. Anyone who has lived through any of its effects—loss of loved ones, a feeling for others' losses, economic disruption, political repression, horror and moral revulsion at the spectacle of cruelty—has experienced some aspect of the total experience of war. Authentic war poetry is written out of all these aspects of that total experience. (64)

Stout takes a common theme, that war is useless, that the pre-war rhetoric is a pack of lies to lure men to fight for dubious causes, that war ends up hurting the innocent the most, especially children who lose family, as well as their innocence and their limbs and lives. In her skilled prose, in her interweaving of summary, critical analysis, and only occasionally her opinion, Stout uses references from war poetry and art as if these pieces were evidence in a court of law, evidence that proves beyond a doubt that the heightened rhetoric betrays a population to war.

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There was another strange effect of the book. I was and remain totally captivated by her style, her introduction of poets whom Stout may have rescued from obscurity. Near the middle of the book, as the propaganda begins to distract the populations from their remembrance of WWI, I found myself reluctant to renew the cycle of war. Of course I did finish the book and of course Stout's knowledge and risk-taking offered whole new ways of viewing the 20th century. Yet, the upcoming chapters of a new war, arriving though no one really wanted it, at first seemed too psychologically difficult to trudge through. In this case, I believe my reluctance is a product of Stout's excellent writing and citations. She skillfully presents selections from war poets, whose simple understated language nevertheless forces us as readers to witness and carry war images that will never leave us. In a sense, she makes readers into veterans of all the 20th-century wars.

The 20th century was one of war, an endless and seemingly unstoppable series of conflicts. We know that war and hurting people is unjust and wrong, but no one on the planet seems to be able to stop the cycle. This is the challenge that Stout throws down. She indicts not only politicians, but also poets who led people to war with pretty phrases that masked the horrors of the trenches. She challenges the reader to change the scenario, the landscape of life, and more to a peaceful land. I found that again and again I was marking up parts of her writing and the poets' phrases, so that I could share them with friends and enemies.

The two World Wars of the 20th century formed an interesting if unfortunate and unnecessary doppelganger, mirror images of the same "calamities." As I was writing this review, there is news that the current presidential administration is now saying that Iran is causing trouble, with the same players as last time, such as Powell, arguing that Iran will cause us trouble. The repetition of a new war, when the Iraq war isn't even over yet, creates another troubling doppelganger, and the same feelings of futility and uselessness, the same tone of irony and disillusionment that was born out of the horrors of World Wars I and II. This time, however, we don't even have a lull between the wars, and the US planned invasion of another country carries the unspoken parallel to Nazi Germany.

Stout's book is not only a retrospective, but a call to action. The book is worth every penny. ✱