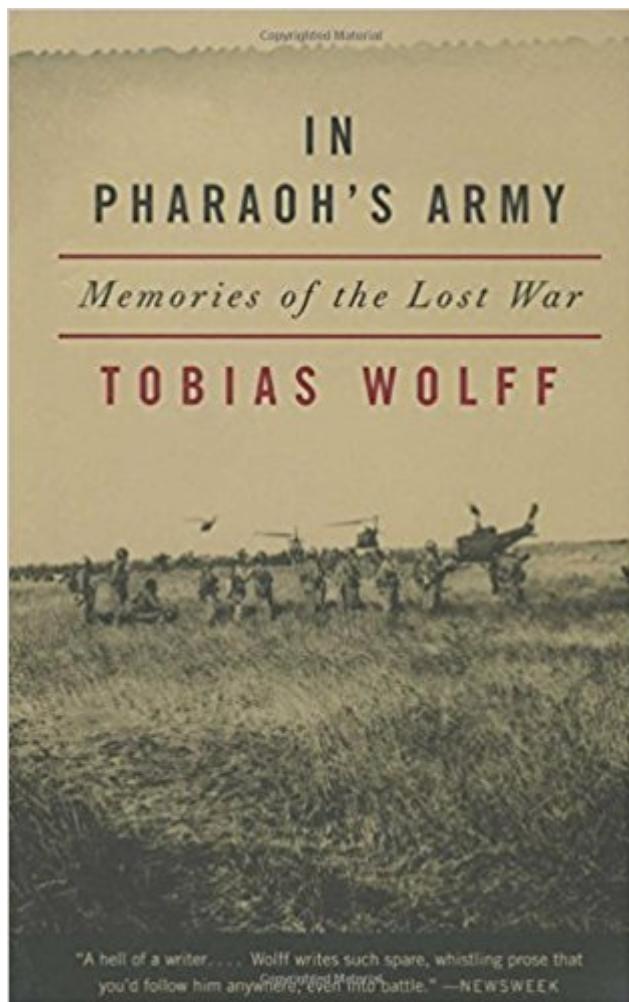


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In Pharaoh's Army: Memories Of The Lost War



Synopsis

Whether he is evoking the blind carnage of the Tet offensive, the theatics of his fellow Americans, or the unraveling of his own illusions, Wolff brings to this work the same uncanny eye for detail, pitiless candor and mordant wit that made *This Boy's Life* a modern classic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *This Boy's Life* Tobias Wolff created an unforgettable memoir of an American childhood. Now he gives us a precisely and sometimes pitilessly remembered account of his young manhood - a young manhood that became entangled in the tragic adventure that was Vietnam. Mordantly funny, searingly honest, *In Pharaoh's Army* is a war memoir in the tradition of George Orwell and Michael Herr.

Wolff's memoir of his disillusioning experience as a soldier in Vietnam was a finalist for the NBA.

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This is not as good as Wolff's other memoirs. It's a different style from his other books. The first chapter was a little hard to get into, and because of that I almost stopped reading it because it was taking me forever to get through it. But there are moments of pure brilliance that make the sluggish parts worth it. Like this "They were operating out of their own faith system; faith in the sanctity of Ho Chi Minh and his cause; faith in the perfidy of those who were unconvinced."

I served in the same area of Vietnam (My Tho and Dong Tam) a few years after the author's tour ended. For that reason, I found his descriptions of these particular locations to be fascinating. The only downside to Wolff's narrative (though not a major drawback, in my view) was his unfortunate adoption of the often overwrought theme of racial dissension within and among the U.S. troops. Yes, the military in Vietnam was experiencing the same stresses vis a vis race that our entire nation was experiencing back home during the late 60's and early 70's. At the same time, as even Wolff concedes, he and his black sergeant worked well together. To his credit, Wolff does not overly emphasize the race issue but the anecdotes about when his, and his sergeant's, skin color came into play were the least credible part of his story. Nevertheless, I highly recommend this book to every Vietnam veteran.

In Pharaoh's Army was incredibly interesting to read because it is a good book but also because of the comparison to This Boy's Life memoir. Both use interesting techniques but more specifically in this book Wolff grows up in his writing style and reflects a lot more inwardly. Throughout the book he gives hints as to why he decided to grow up, "I didn't want to be like him (his father). I wanted to be a man of honor" (Wolff 46). This idea of not becoming his father and wanting to have honor in his life becomes a theme that is consistent with his writing. In parts of his memoir Wolff reflects on his regrettable decisions he made, this kind of consideration and admitting is new compared to This Boy's Life. An example is when a letter comes from his friend "hook-up explaining she was pregnant and trying to find the friend. Wolff didn't respond and a year later his friend was killed in Vietnam, "I would have said I was sorry for sitting on her letter, because I was sorry, I am still sorry, God knows I am sorry" (71). The emotional toll of "sitting" on this letter and not telling his friend about his child is enormous and Wolff does not pass that over lightly. He admitted that this decision was wrong and writing that down for others to view is hard for anyone and Wolff does that in such a noble way. His apologetic tone indicates he still struggles with this in present day. This is unique because of course parts of his life has stayed with him but he has not so put that in such obvious terms as he does here. In Pharaoh's Army is a case of reflecting on one's life and the decisions made. This is not the typical Vietnam Veterans book but rather encompasses themes that many had to deal with not only in Nam but here at home.

Since I spent time in Vietnam as a helicopter mechanic/door gunner, I am always looking for the off beat books of the Vietnam experience. This book does not disappoint, it is about the most surprising turn of events that happened to an unmotivated young man. If your are looking for hilarity, this book is not for you, it is a somber, yet unique, look into one man's observance of absurdity.

Not quite as good as *This Boy's Life*, but well worth reading. In the earlier book there was a well-defined antagonist; in this book it turns out that Wolff is his own antagonist, and somehow it makes for less interesting reading. Still, it's a very good, very readable book and I have to say that Wolff is one of the most scrupulously honest and least sentimental memoirists around. Not a blood and guts war book if that's what you're looking for. Kudos to Wolff for surviving this ambiguous war.

There are those of us males who were on the leading edge of the baby-boomers - born in the late 1940s - for whom Viet Nam was an experience that forged our futures. After almost 40 years it is good to look back and try to make sense about what happen to ourselves - individually and collectively. Along with Michael Herr's "Dispatches", Tobias Wolff's "In Pharaoh's Army" captures the feeling of those of us who served. on the ground, in Southeast Asia and came home with no physical - and I must admit - very few psychological effects. Wolff captures the phenomenal sangfroid that Americans exhibited during that 95% of the time they were not being attacked - the other 5% was stark terror! Our inability to understand the Vietnamese culture or the war as it was being prosecuted by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong is starkly portrayed. No better scene has been written that the "sighting" of taller than normal, Vietnamese strangers in the village bar drinking beer before January 31, 1968. The Americans recognized these men as not villagers but did nothing about it. They were North Vietnamese regular soldiers in civilian clothes infiltrating the American "secure hamlets" in order to kick off the 1968 Tet offensive. Our technology superiority was only exceeded by our baseless arrogance. This book is a great read! Pick it up for one of your summer books. If your are of the boomer age or just interested in your parents' generation, you'll enjoy "In Pharaoh's Army" and get a feel for how hundreds of thousands of us lived a part of it.

Wolff and I seem to be about the same age and his book recalled the division between those fighting the war and those at home who were either opposing or ignoring it. This isn't a book about politics or the grit of war, yet it's here that I finally got a sense of what actually happened in the Tet Offensive. He's a terrific writer, smart and as observant of himself as he is of others. I've already bought more of his books.

Terrific read

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