



The Forever War

By Dexter Filkins. New York: Knopf, 2008. Hardback, 368 pp., \$25;
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Here is a reason that Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is the book most often cited as directly comparable to *The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins. When Herr wrote, "Our machine was devastating. And versatile. It could do everything but stop. As one American major said, in a successful attempt at attaining history, 'We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it,'" he managed to cut the heart out of the matter, and hold it up to the reader, still beating, and demand our reckoning of Vietnam. (Herr, 71)

Filkins does the same with the two wars we are currently—and forever—fighting, and when the word most used to describe the book is "visceral," there's a reason for that as well. Filkins himself admits: "There's been a lot of books written on Afghanistan and Iraq, a lot of very good ones, but most of them have been written from 10,000 feet up, you know, decisions made in Washington, decisions made in Iraq, and I've seen all this stuff up close. So I wanted to write a book that was kind of less intellectual than visceral and emotional." (World Affairs Council)

This is not to say that the book is gory; it's not all *viscera*, although that is certainly there: "The craziest thing about the suicide bombings were the heads—how the head of the bomber often remained intact after the explosion." (172) Rather, it is visceral in the way Filkins is able to situate the reader in the experience, how he makes us emote, relate to and see what he saw, smell the dust, diesel, and death, feel the heat and the fear and the concussion of B-52 bombs. His narration is not only immediate and sensory, full of HD quality detail, but it also demonstrates other characteristics of exemplary literary journalism, such as dialogue and point-of-view shifts. So much so, that the entire work does exactly what Wolfe described as axiomatic of the genre: creating the "social autopsy" (Wolfe and Johnson, 32). Only here, the metaphor of examining a corpse is no metaphor—there are plenty or real ones to describe.

The book is comprised of short, staccato vignettes taken from his *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* reports over several years, about a quarter of which are on Afghanistan, with one small episode back in New York on 9/11 (aptly titled "Third World"), and the remainder written from Iraq. Filkins is at his best when describing such things as getting shot at:

The wind from the bullets brushed my neck. Marines were withing in the street, tangles of blood and legs, while other marines were stooping and helping them and also getting shot. I kept

running, pumping, flying toward the other side as fast as I could with my seventy pounds of gear when I saw a pair of marines standing in a doorway and waving to me to come on, come on. I ran straight for them and I could see by the looks on their faces they weren't sure I was going to make it. (8)

Or the way it feels to be on the ground when a B-52 unloads its bombs on you:

It wasn't just the bombs they dropped that were so unnerving; it was the lumbering, dissociative way they let them go. One of the bombers would make an appearance, usually at thirty thousand feet, a tiny gray V in the sky, all the way from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean three thousand miles away. Gliding like a crane. Then, without warning, the sharp, titanic bursts, the clouds tumbling upwards, the ground moaning as if something crucial in the world had broken off and fallen away. (48)

What Filkins also does better than anyone currently writing about this perpetual war is offer a sometimes humorous, sometimes deathly serious reflexivity that most audiences of journalism had probably forgotten possible. The humorous side can be quite endearing, such as when he describes the many times he decides—for sanity's sake—to go running in downtown Baghdad: “I pulled on my running shoes and stepped into the street. It was a Thursday in July, twilight and well over 100 degrees. I was feeling a little reckless. If this ended badly, the only thing anyone would remember was how stupid I was.” (111)

The deathly serious side is however something altogether different, and in one of the most honest—and tragic—admissions of culpability in modern journalism, Filkins devotes an entire chapter (and indeed dedicates the book) to a Lance Corporal William L. Miller, who might still be alive were it not for the presence of Filkins and his photographer, Ashley Gilbertson. This episode should not be summed here in brevity, so I'll simply say that it certainly demonstrates the journalistic equivalent of Heisenberg's observer effect, and Filkins demonstrates courage, candor, and responsibility for including it in this book.

While there have been criticisms, it seems that most of what critics point to as weaknesses are in fact strengths, if they accept the book for what it is—an impeccable model of literary journalism—and cease faulting it for what it is not. Had Filkins, for example, offered a meta-analysis of why we are in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would have forced him to destroy his point of view, his subjectivity and experiential voice that are in fact the strength of the narrative. Instead of a lesson in why we fight, Filkins's vignette structure and his focus on contained moments add up to a greater truth: What it feels like to be there. Or, as he puts it: “I wanted to kind of take people with me, and show the reader what it felt like to go to a car bombing, or to sit across from a Sunni sheik who you think is lying to you, what it's like to be shot at in a battle. So that's what I'm trying to do, so it's a very strange book, it's not terribly linear, and it's got sort of pieces and glimpses.” (World Affairs Council)

Another accusation is that the book provides little context to the events because it fails to give time-specific cues as to when they occurred—there are few actual dates associated with the vignettes. Yet readers even vaguely familiar with the timeline of this war have enough context to understand the when of what happened; what led up to and followed, say, the siege of

Falluja, or the assassination of the Northern Alliance warlord Massoud. Further, the paucity of chronological coding provides what Filkins most likely hoped to achieve: a sense of the utter timelessness of this “forever war.”

Filkins might also be criticized (as with most Western journalists) for his reliance on interpreters to both translate and provide context for events outside his cultural and linguistic limits: “I didn’t speak Arabic myself,” (118) and, “Very few of the Americans in Iraq, whether soldiers or diplomats or newspaper reporters, could speak more than a few words of Arabic. A remarkable number of them didn’t even have translators. That meant that for many Iraqis, the typical nineteen-year-old army corporal from South Dakota was not a youthful innocent carrying America’s goodwill; he was a terrifying combination of firepower and ignorance.” (116)

In passages like this, rife with reflexivity and self-implication, Filkins not only suggests the disastrous potential consequences brought on by the limits of understanding, but he also widens his point-of-view to include that of the Iraqis (“how they view us”), something more important (and unheard of) in most war reporting. In addition, Filkins demonstrates the effects dramatically when, in Diyala, he happens across Omar, a young boy sitting “. . . on the roadside weeping, drenched in the blood of his father, who had been shot dead by American marines when he ran a roadblock.”

“‘What could we have done?’ one of the marines muttered.”

Then, in a line that demonstrates perfectly the consequences of mixing “firepower and ignorance,” a Corporal Eric Jewell says to Filkins: “We yelled at them to stop. Everyone knows the word ‘stop.’ It’s universal.” (116)

Ultimately though, the critics are nearly unanimous in praising *The Forever War* and it has repeatedly been awarded the best non-fiction book of 2008. Critics have fawned over the style, the tone, the scope, the structure, and the message, and note the precision of Filkins’s eye for detail, his exhaustive reporting, and even cite his subjective point of view as a strength, not a weakness.

However, they also unanimously fail to call it what it is: literary journalism. Baffling, really, how both professional critics and journalists alike laud the accomplishments of this work, yet fail to recognize the reason it is so strong: precisely in its rejection of conventional journalism’s staid objectivity. There is, inherent in the praise of this book, an unstated indictment of today’s standard journalism. Filkins shines so brightly because the rest of the writing on this “forever war” simply acts as foil to his star. Unfortunately for us, that may be the extent to which most contemporary conventional journalism is good for: making us know good writing when we see it. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote: “The dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits.” Today’s dull fool (journalism, especially war reporting) provides the whetstone that makes cutting-edge literary journalism seem so sharp.