



All Bleeding Stops

Michael J. Collins

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Michael J. Collins's historical novel *All Bleeding Stops* follows a soldier from the Vietnam War into the early 2000s.

Matthew Barrett is a young surgeon when he's assigned to a medical unit near an active war zone. He hears the war from a distance, but sees its damage up close as he works long, exhausting hours. When a surgical nurse, Therese, joins his unit, the two form a bond. Their wartime romance deepens and leads to future plans. But events intervene, steering Barrett in a dark direction.

Vietnam anchors the first half of the book, which focuses on the surgical unit and captures day-to-day life there, marked by unspoken empathy, negotiated challenges, and stress-relieving horsing around. Here, two secondary figures are detailed well: Packy, the unit's irreverent, hard-nosed coroner, has a breakdown after filling out one too many death certificates; and a colleague disappears in the rubble of his bombed clinic, only to surface months later, skeletal but alive. Both are fresh and lively in a way that Barrett and Teresa are not. Beside them, the couple's personalities, work identities, and story lines are too familiar to hold interest.

After the war, Barrett, who feels protective of Therese and others, stands trial alone for the crime of selling government supplies for personal gain. Technically he's guilty, but morally, the novel suggests, he's innocent, as the medical supplies he passed on were excess inventory. When Barrett is released, he's a changed man in a changed world. He doubts himself, the military, and the war's purpose, as well as having lost confidence in himself and his medical skills. He enters into further shady business dealings, and his new perspective is mirrored in the book's thereafter overblown style.

Prior to Barrett's trial, the novel is full of interesting people and actions, though the prose leans on sentence fragments and long descriptors. But as the book continues, its many tangential characters engage in conversations that impede the tale; many lapse into tough guy exchanges that are without narrative momentum. Further, a later development, in which Barrett finds his way back to medicine, is rushed through and unbelievable.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (July 10, 2021)

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