

★ Checkpoint

David Albahari

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A satirical take on war in the vein of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, Serbian author David Albahari's *Checkpoint* is shocking and comic in equal turns, skillfully pulled together by the force of Albahari's wit.

At an isolated guard post in the wilderness during an unnamed war, three dozen soldiers and their harried commander stand sentry—but what is there to do at a checkpoint that no one passes through? More to the point, is the war even still going on? No one can tell, as communications with the outside world have been cut off, and no one has the faintest idea how to get home—not that leaving is an option. The surrounding forest is inhabited by enemy combatants and possibly other malevolent forces, ready to pick off the soldiers one by one. As the ragtag unit's numbers dwindle and all attempts at escape lead to more bizarre calamities, it becomes clear that the only certainty in these soldiers' lives is that the senseless violence of war has no objectives or victors, just casualties.

The gritty, nightmarish storytelling pulls no punches; the atrocities that take place throughout the story are not for the squeamish. But even as events spiral out of control and the narrative focus shifts to the unit commander, who is caught between following orders and preventing a mutiny, Albahari consistently finds the absurdity and black comedy in his characters' predicaments. Peppered with literary allusions and pop-culture references, punctuated with slapstick (including a memorable scene with severed heads used as soccer balls), and culminating in a hallucinatory finale that calls into question what we have witnessed, *Checkpoint* ventures into far-out territory, spiced with a twisted sense of humor.

Whether attempting to fulfill their duty, philosophizing about their plight, or slipping into madness, Albahari's soldiers are, for better or worse, all too human in their drives and foibles. Their story may be fantastical, but Albahari makes them sympathetic to the end, even as he ponders humankind's impulse to destroy. Visceral, wild, and often hilarious, *Checkpoint* is a dark delight.

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