

Feathers, Beads and Bones

Lahoma Seabolt Cartwright

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In *Kerosene Cowboys*, retired tactical naval aviator Randy Arrington takes readers inside a drill weekend of the New Orleans-based VA-204 River Rattlers, a navy reserve squadron. The book takes place over the course of six months, beginning in late 1991, and has inspired a motion picture that will be released later this year. Unfortunately, the narrative contains too much minutiae for readers to easily pick out the worthy parts of the story.

The book begins as protagonist Brad “Teen Angel” Ackermann prepares to lead a training strike against the battleship USS Missouri. After a sluggish start, these action scenes turn exciting, and readers learn how pilots practice their techniques in these powerful A-7E Corsairs. The fighter jets dodge each other, swooping and diving until the announcement of “Guns, guns, guns!” indicates that a pilot has beaten his opponent.

After this sequence, the action moves inside the hangar where readers are introduced to a myriad of characters and shown how the pilots and crew interact with light-hearted banter and insults. The interactions are believable, but these first scenes are laden with mundane details about the décor in the skipper’s office, the brand of toilet paper used in the men’s room, and the origins of everybody’s call signs, including those of several minor characters.

The pilots then head to the officer’s club where they engage in flirting and pool. Next they attend a Christmas party at the home of one of the officers, and then it’s off to the golf course. More than 200 pages into the book, the Secretary of the Navy finally announces the mission that will become the focus of the book’s second half. The River Rattlers have been selected for a six-month deployment onboard the USS Enterprise as part of the “last ever carrier cruise for the Navy’s A-7E Corsair aircraft.” After this deployment, the jets will be retired and replaced by FA-18 Hornets.

Wordiness and excess information hamper Arrington’s storytelling throughout the book. Readers learn the mechanics of shutting down a jet engine and what kind of golf balls the airmen favor, but they don’t really get to know the characters until too late, and they never learn the motivation behind many of their actions. For example, when one plane’s engine shuts down mid-flight, Arrington never explains why the pilot doesn’t call for help or report the problem on the ground. The characters are called variously by their first names, last names, call signs, and ranks—often in a single paragraph—which can lead to confusion.

Additionally, the author provides too much information in dialogue tags, rather than letting the characters speak for themselves.

With a tighter focus on a few key characters, more action sequences, and fewer anecdotes that don’t advance the plot, this could have been a much more enjoyable, fast-paced, and exciting story.

WHITNEY HALLBERG (May 18, 2010)

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