

Marching as to War: A Love Story of Sorts

Scharlie Martin

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Marching as to War is an emotional historical novel in which a young relationship refracts the troubles of the Vietnam era.

A Vietnam veteran's war trauma plays out in his marriage in Scharlie Martin's historical novel *Marching as to War*.

Shep, a Montana native, already has an engineering degree and has completed tours of duty in Vietnam when he enrolls in the upper-level college English class where he meets Diane. Both repulsed by and attracted to Diane's devil-may-care attitude, he obsesses over her. They marry days after their first date.

Shep and Diane move into Diane's family home, where her father calls Shep by the name of his son, Ben, who was a Vietnam casualty. What Shep learns about Diane's past, her twin sister, and her free-love, war-protesting friends surprises and angers him. They fight, and Diane falls into a depression. The couple drops out of college. A fateful party marks a turning point in their relationship. Then Diane's father dies, and she inherits money with which they travel to Europe, hoping to escape their grief. But their problems follow them abroad.

The book's laser focus on Shep's messy romance with Diane personalizes its message that war pervades those whom it touches. Shep's relationship with Diane mirrors the war in its contentiousness. They act out their pain on one another: Shep spans Diane; she spills soda on him. Their feelings are described in visceral terms.

Shep's narration is casual and conversational; he speaks from the heart. Still, he acts on impulse, and his episodes with drinking, drugs, and sex result in tense moodiness. The book jumps from one lover's tiff to the next; the couple makes up again and again, moving between intentionality and mere sudden changes of heart. They seem determined to stick together despite their repetitive conflicts. They end up in love triangles, as with an ex-beau of Diane's and with new friends in Europe, suggesting wider-scale entanglements. Their conversations are layered, symbolic, and sometimes antagonistic.

When it comes to the era, the book sketches in its details. It touches on global political conflicts and popular culture. The Tokens' version of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" is quoted on almost every page, with its lyrics changed to reflect the different jungles Shep finds himself inhabiting. This constant reiteration drives home the book's ultimate message in a too-forceful manner, particularly since music does not otherwise play a key role in the narrative.

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MARI CARLSON (October 5, 2022)

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