



Old Silk Road

Brandon Caro

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A visionary novel of moral reckoning, destined to take its place among modern war classics.

Afghanistan itself becomes an indelible character in Brandon Caro's hard-hitting war novel, *Old Silk Road*. It is an ancient land, eternally contested by foreign armies, haunted by the ghosts of soldiers, at once alluring and unconquerable. A veteran of America's recent foray into the country, Caro provides a harrowing account of modern warfare run amok.

The novel is set in 2007 Afghanistan, when coalition forces are trying to train a fledgling Afghan National Army. The book's narrator is Norman "Doc" Rodgers, a combat medic whose father perished in the World Trade Center on 9/11. Caro fashions Rodgers into a powerful antihero. Addicted to morphine, sardonic yet vulnerable, he's a young, unraveling serviceman who takes readers into the center of terrible events.

Caro himself was a combat medic, and he equips the novel's combat scenes with realistic and grueling physiological details. "A great sinking feeling originating in my diaphragm started to take hold," Rodgers exclaims as his Humvee is trailed by a potential suicide bomber in Kabul traffic. "Butterflies, as though I'd swallowed a whole swarm. An elevated heart rate and mild to profuse perspiration. Symptoms I would cite in diagnosing the condition of shock."

Despite its gritty realism, the novel turns dreamlike in later chapters. Mythical figures wander in and out of the narrative. Caro's hallucinatory prose sears through the page: "The sky grew an even deeper red, until it looked as though the heavens were bleeding out." As the characters begin to question the war and its "official narrative," the book's tone becomes pointedly philosophical. "It's innate to our being, this desire to be deceived," Rodgers tells fellow soldiers. "But the deception must be somewhat plausible, otherwise we'll tear it apart in our minds."

Old Silk Road ends with an unexpected plot twist and an emotional wallop. Caro takes a risk in using such a twist, but the risk pays off. *Old Silk Road* becomes more than a documentary account of the Afghan conflict. It becomes a visionary novel of moral reckoning, destined to take its place among modern war classics.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Winter 2016)

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