

Sand Queen

Helen Benedict

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If only Specialist Kate Brady had the benefit of the Army's new "resilience" program, she might have been better equipped to handle combat stress more cheerfully and avoid all those hidden "thinking traps," like jumping to conclusions, over-generalizing, and blaming herself for setbacks, in this remarkable novel by Helen Benedict.

Not too many books have been written about women in war. This one takes place in Iraq, with prisoners guarded by a mix of soldiers caught up in a complex situation—not quite Abu Ghraib, but definitely a bad place to be stationed. The story is told from alternating points of view: the American "girl soldier" Kate and a female Iraqi named Naema, who's studying to be a doctor.

The author captures what it's like to be at the mercy of searing desert heat. The way women are treated in the military just adds to the misery. The term Sand Queen turns out to be one of the worst things a female can be called in the Army: "It means an ugly-ass chick who's being treated like a queen by the hundreds of horny guys around her."

Most of the plot turns around an incident early on, when Kate is assaulted by her commanding officer. Although rescued by one of the few good guys in her company, which functions more like a "band of snakes" than brothers, Kate wrestles with the dilemma of whether to report her attacker or not—in other words, whether to protect other women from future harm or to abide by the unspoken military code of honor that does not betray one of their own. She faults herself for cowardice even though when she does come forward with her story the consequences are fatal for her career, her sanity, and her "battle-buddy" (no females can walk to the latrines or anywhere else at night without another female soldier with them).

Even as Kate grows more disillusioned and hardened, her perceptions remain clear-eyed and her tone sharp. Another specialist in her squad has "an Adam's apple twice the size of his brain," the sun turns up the heat in the desert "like an oven dial," and at dawn the dirty gray sand blends "so exactly with the dust-filled sky it obliterates the horizon." When she's put on convoy duty, she rides in a soft-top Humvee with a useless flak jacket and a rifle clogged with sand: "I might as well be riding into war in a go-cart, wearing a bikini and waving a parasol." Kate remains a strong and compelling character no matter how bad her situation gets.

The same cannot be said for Naema. She too faces disaster after her father and brother are arrested. They are sent to the tent prison at Camp Bucca, where Naema pleads with Kate for news of their fate. This puts Kate in the awkward position of appearing to sympathize with the enemy, or hajjis as they call them, for, as in Vietnam, it's impossible to tell who's innocent and who's a threat.

This also puts the reader in a difficult position. Naema is as much a victim of the war as Kate, but she is also the enemy. Making her equally sympathetic with the heroine is problematic. It offends some inviolable pact that the villain not turn out to be the good guy or the dark side not so bad after all. Naema serves mostly as a mouthpiece for the opposition: "Are these the people the Americans have come to help? If so, how does it help to drop bombs on their houses and imprison their sons and fathers?"

... Or has the world gone mad for the taste of oil and blood?"

The real enemy may just be the climate (as it was in Vietnam), but for women in the military, the worst menace of all is possibly the predatory men they serve with. This is the private war females face, and one that Helen Benedict has written about before. She is a British-American novelist, journalist, and professor at Columbia University. Her books include *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes* and the novels *Edge of Eden*, *A World Like This*, and *The Sailor's Wife*. Her work on soldiers won the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism.

It won't be long before *Sand Queen* catches up. This novel will especially appeal to fans of military fiction and war stories, as well as literature by and about women.

TRINA CARTER (September / October 2011)

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