FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ GENERAL FICTION

Soldier in Paradise

John Mort
Southern Methodist University Press (August 1999)
Unknown $19.95 (192pp)
978-0-87074-440-2

Directionless, somewhat cynical young man experiences the horrors of Vietnam. Survives, but is wounded in body and spirit. Comes home more cynical. Struggles to make sense of what happened and rebuild his life. Not exactly an original story line, but don't be deterred. Mort's first novel is a gripping, honest tale of a soldier and his comrades, one that avoids cheap sentimentality and ideological moralizing about America's most unpopular war.

The protagonist, "Irish" Donnelly, is the quintessential anti-hero, rejecting his girlfriend's pleas to dodge the draft and flee to Canada—not out of any sense of duty to country, but because the war "was the greatest event of my generation, and I wanted to be part of it." Yet, once there, he shows not the least inclination to accomplish anything other than getting out alive. Back home, he marries, fathers a child, divorces, bounces from job to job and keeps in intermittent touch with a group of disillusioned veterans attempting to scratch a living selling artwork. In keeping with the rootlessness of the main character, the action alternates between past and present, Vietnam and the United States—underscoring the reality that for Donnelly and his friends the private, internal war continues long after the shooting stops.

We meet soldier Donnelly, who has avoided being returned to action by reopening a shoulder wound, as he is introduced to Norman Sims, a gung-ho patriot fresh from Oklahoma. Ordered to show the eager young private the ropes, Donnelly watches in befuddlement and, eventually, sorrow as Sims? Gomer Pyle earnestness gives way to disillusionment, madness and heroic folly.

Mort, himself a Vietnam veteran, spares no awfulness in his combat scenes. The reader feels the suffocating jungle heat, hears the screams of the dying, recoils at the senselessness, the brutality, the wastefulness. Less dramatic but equally poignant are the portrayals of aging veterans? quests for belonging in a society that has left Vietnam behind: men in faded green fatigues and Sixties haircuts, sipping beer and telling exaggerated war stories as they hawk paintings at cheap motels and highway rest stops. Amid the pathos, however, are nuggets of humor and at least momentary happiness. Together with the book's conclusion, they convey a sense that hope ultimately will triumph over despair. This is war fiction at its finest, but also a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit.
JOHN FLESHER (November / December 1999)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author provided free copies of his/her book to have his/her book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the author for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love and make no guarantee that the author will receive a positive review. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.