

## The Wars among the Paines

**John M. Millar**

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*The Wars Among the Paines is a thought-provoking novel about the lasting consequences of war on societies, families, and individuals.*

In John M. Millar's introspective and philosophical novel *The Wars Among the Paines*, a Vietnam veteran compares his military service against the illustrious service of his uncles, grandfathers, and ancestors, all from a legendary family, the Paines.

This historical novel encompasses a complex family history in an experimental way, through letters sent between characters, journal entries, songs, and epitaphs. The text is sometimes dizzying, but always returns to its center: Robert Treate Paine II, a decorated Vietnam veteran from a well-known family. Robert's experiences are shared in time with his consideration of his family history, especially that of fellow veterans from World War I, World War II, and Korea. Robert learns that the trauma of war never ends; for the Paines, who have served in every American conflict since the eighteenth century, its pain runs deep.

In Pennsylvania, the Paines are known as heroic, steadfast, and brave; under Robert's eye, their genealogy is taken apart piece by piece, working up to a dissection of his own service in Vietnam and the darkness of that conflict, including the veritable US civil war between the establishment and the New Left and internal conflicts experienced by veterans. The characters surrounding Robert are dynamic; they wrestle with their own concerns, issues, and experiences with life before, during, and after wars.

More about its character study of Robert than anything else, the novel is reflective. Robert spends most of its pages speaking to himself and about himself. He is an intelligent, meticulous, and obsessive narrator, if some of his ruminations are excessive and circular, particularly when it comes to how Vietnam changed his family and his relationships. Though they contribute to the book's mission of detailing the lasting impacts of conflicts, Robert's digressions—he thinks about old high school friends and far-flung siblings—don't always result in momentum. Action plays a minor role, despite the book's focus on war and its attendant horrors.

The novel ends with continued contemplations of the effects of war on Robert and his family, asking whether US involvement in Vietnam was worth it, and indeed whether warfare is ever worth it. Some answers are suggested, but more important are Robert's general musings about life, America, and the ways in which family and honor intersect to impact entire societies.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (August 21, 2020)

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