Clarion Review

Historical

Thunder Road: The Journey Home
Stuart Nicholls
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Five Stars (out of Five)

The enduring lesson of all wars, reinforced in Vietnam and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, is that tours of duty do not end with the return home. Indeed, as Stuart Nicholls shows in this compelling fictional memoir, home may no longer exist as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) turns painful memories into present, inescapable ghosts.

Nick Dwyer, the protagonist, is introduced as an eighteen-year-old gung-ho grunt who is anxious to do what the army tells him: “win medals and kill Viet Cong.” However, Dwyer gradually falls in love with the country and the South Vietnamese people.

Dwyer makes several trips to Vietnam following the war, years before the United States and Vietnam normalized relations. Instead of the hero’s welcome Dwyer hopes for when he returns to his Midwest home, he is assaulted by war protestors and deserted by his girlfriend. Dwyer makes his way to Hawaii, where he earns a degree in agriculture and Vietnamese studies. In 1987, he returns to Vietnam to help Amer-Asian orphans, the outcasts of Vietnam society. Two years later, when Dwyer again returns to Vietnam, his marriage to his Hawaiian wife, Malia, continues to deteriorate in part because Malia realizes that Dwyer loves Vietnam more than he loves her.

In 1991, Dwyer returns to Vietnam where he meets Hang, his soul mate, and gains the respect of Vietnam’s government and people because of his outreach with orphans, his work teaching English to government officials, and his respect for Vietnamese customs and language. Unfortunately, Dwyer’s happy life is shattered when the Vietnam government discovers that he has secretly been searching for MIAs.

This perceptive work is significant on different levels. Nicholls’s life so closely parallels Dwyer’s that the reader gains insight into PTSD, including how widespread and devastating it is. Some of the book’s most memorable chapters relate how Nick and his fellow vets band

together in support groups. In addition, the author provides illuminating descriptions of life in post-war Vietnam based on his actual experiences. Some moments, however, are bogged down with detail.

Nicholls is a fine writer who seamlessly employs a non-linear technique in which lengthy chapters about Dwyer's post-war trips are interspersed with horrific stories of combat that fuel his PTSD. This excellent work of creative nonfiction will find a welcome audience among those who favor wartime accounts, and will hopefully comfort those still fighting their own PTSD-induced battles.

Karl Helicher