



To Any Soldier: A Novel of Vietnam Letters

G.C. Hendricks

Kathryn Watson Quigg

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A college student and a soldier trade letters in this indelible coming-of-age novel.

G. C. Hendricks and Kathryn Watson Quigg's poignant *To Any Soldier: A Novel of Vietnam Letters* is the story of a yearlong exchange of letters between Ashley Beth Justice, a college freshman in North Carolina, and USMC Capt. Jay Fox, a combat pilot serving in Vietnam. Based on the authors' personal experiences, the novel shows how happenstance can unite two strangers in a bond of intimacy that forever influences their lives.

Ashley Beth and Jay's correspondence begins in 1968. Nineteen-year-old Ashley Beth learns that many soldiers in Vietnam do not receive much mail. Her sense of patriotic duty compels her to compose a letter "to any soldier" with news from the home front. She confesses that the war feels removed from her everyday life and wonders what it's like to be overseas and in constant danger.

Jay sees Ashley Beth's letter on the bulletin board at his headquarters in Da Nang. He replies with blunt accounts of the war, including that his job is to "destroy the enemy regardless of weather, terrain, or proximity of enemy fire." If he stays alive, Jay declares, he will feast on a breakfast of grits when he returns to base.

After the first letter swap, the two engage in an unwavering and candid sharing of secret fears and desires, innermost emotions, and viewpoints about the war.

The book is an epistolary novel. Only the prologue and epilogue, written from Jay's perspective, address the reader. Ashley Beth's letters appear in a script-like typeface, while Jay's are presented in Courier. These choices are initially distracting. So too is the decision to let the letters stand alone, without interconnected storytelling. But any such initial misgivings are likely to give way to the power of the story as a whole.

Ashley Beth and Jay are well-constructed characters. Ashley Beth's girlish writing is a strong reflection of who she is: a wide-eyed southern belle making her way through college life. Yet she also has depth, and her ambition and intelligence shine through as well. Jay's transition from parochialism to broadmindedness is interesting to engage with, and his precision and earnestness make for compelling reading.

Perceptive, well-written, and evocative, the letters offer an indelible portrait of coming-of-age in complicated times. Jay and Ashley Beth's self-reflections encapsulate the emblematic cultural shifts of the 1960s. Their missives discuss weighty topics like faith and religion, women's roles, sex, antiwar activism, and combat. They also trade carefree musings about music, tanning, favorite foods, and family. The letters are powerful in their ability to showcase two young people figuring out who they are.

The possibility that Ashley Beth and Jay will meet and transform their on-paper camaraderie into a full-blown romance drives the novel's drama. *To Any Soldier* is well worth the journey.

AMY O'LOUGHLIN (January 5, 2016)

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