

**Christopher Coker. *Men at War: What Fiction Tells us about Conflict, from The Iliad to Catch 22*. London: Hurst & Company, 2014. ISBN 978-18-49-04289-5. Pp. ix, 325. Hardcover. £25.00.**

‘Literature does not define human nature so much as exemplify it’ (p.183). In his latest book ‘Men at War’, Christopher Coker explores this theme, using war literature to elucidate key aspects of human nature. In so doing, he draws widely on both classical and contemporary works of fiction to examine what he calls the ‘existential codes’ that comprise war as a cultural phenomenon.

In spite of the material it uses, this is not a book about war literature. In a similar way to Charles Hill who examined the ideas and principles of statecraft in his book *Grand Strategies* (2010)<sup>1</sup>, literature for Coker provides a unique source of insight into the essence of war and the dynamics, struggles, and values that make it a fundamentally human experience. As he eloquently puts it: what war tells us about the men who fight is ‘that they are violent, but never fully in control of their emotions; that they are heroic but often only in the last resort; that they are weak, fallible beings but capable of moments of great strength of will’ (p.297).

These traits form five character types, each of which constitutes a separate chapter that is seen to represent the prominent and recurrent types of the great works: warriors, heroes, villains, survivors and victims. Within these categories Coker’s analysis of twenty-five characters incorporates familiar names including Homer’s Achilles, Ernest Hemingway’s Robert Jordan, Joseph Conrad’s Colonel Feraud, Joseph Heller’s Yossarian, and Kurt Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim. Among them, Stanley Kubrick’s Dr Strangelove is the only screenplay character to feature, though references to film adaptations such as *Master and Commander* contribute to the wider analysis of how war resonates within contemporary culture.

Each chapter begins with an articulation of what it means to be a ‘warrior’ or ‘villain’, and so forth, setting the context and rationale for the selection of the subsequent characters. Each character is given individual attention that sets the scene for their experience of war, the traits that defined them and the experiences that caused them to resonate with the author.

For none of the character-types is there a singular all-encompassing definition, as Coker writes ‘survivors take many forms’ (p.190). Indeed, for each type the reader may question the inclusion of one character at the expense of the other. However, this reflects the tone of the book and the author’s preferences and voice is evident throughout. As a result, the selection of works, the characters, and the traits they are shown to embody are, as the author readily admits, a personal selection (p.13 and p.304). Yet though readers may find their favourite figures missing in this book, they will likely be compensated by the discovery of new characters in its pages.

Nonetheless, the book is not an abstract study of characters, and it consciously connects them to contemporary themes. The chapter of ‘Victims’ touches on the long lasting effects of conflict, relating it to PTSD (p.244) and its treatment in history. Similarly, the chapter on ‘Warriors’ links the concept of warriors in Ancient Greece to what it means today in an age when technological warfare is growing and widening the distance between combatant and the battlefield (p.22). The work is therefore rooted in the modern experience of war and its continuing evolution. As part of this he highlights that it is typically men depicted at war, while women are its victims. This, however, is a trend that can be seen to shift slowly as more women join the armed services. Though it is a book of predominantly male characters, the traits it reveals are universal:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven and London, 2010)

heroism is no more masculine than victimhood is feminine.

Through the literature, and the context within which it was written, Coker reflects on the changing sensibilities to war over the years – from the epics of Homer’s time, when the virtues of war would have been lauded, to contemporary literature following the devastation of two world wars and ongoing operations.

The existential experience of warfare for both character and reader stands out from this work. The analysis of these characters is not just an examination of what makes them memorable, but is skilfully deployed by the author to highlight the feelings the characters and their stories provoke from the reader. This interplay between the real and the fictitious provides a compelling dimension to this book. These figures bring war to life, impressing on the reader the enduring experiences of both combatant and civilian.

In his book *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* Chris Hedges<sup>2</sup> argued that it was the exhilaration, addiction, and even the destruction that war brought which gave those involved purpose. As Coker demonstrates in this book, it is often through warfare that an individual is most tested, and perhaps most alive, at the extremes of one’s strength or vulnerability.

In the same way that human experience can be both bitter and sweet, so too, Coker argues, there is an inherent irony in war: that in spite of its destruction, it retains an appeal precisely because to some it is kind. Each character has a different experience and takes away something different from war: the same is true for each reader. In his conclusion Coker highlights the significance and transformative nature of literature on war. It is through knowing war and through connecting with experiences of warfare, real and fictional, that one can seek to transform it. In this manner, literature has an enduring relevance to how we understand it.

This is an absorbing and well-crafted work. Throughout its pages it weaves together literature, warfare, political philosophy, and an examination of self and what makes us human into its analysis. For this reason it has an appeal beyond academia. For lovers of literature, it is a book that will make you want to add further to your reading list and explore the wider canon of work on warfare. For students of conflict, it provides further insight into the human dimensions of war and its enduring legacy.

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, (Philadelphia, PA, 2002)