

H-Net Reviews

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Carol Ogg. *Fields of Fire*. Bloomington: Xlibris, 2007. 167 pp. \$20.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4134-8645-2.

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Searing Memories

Carol Ogg's book *Fields of Fire* is appropriately titled because it is a searing account describing incidents experienced by Gail Ann Westbrook as a child and later as a member of the U.S. Army. Gail Ann's story is presented as a series of vignettes that recount random events from her life. In addition to descriptions of her military experiences, she describes, in graphic detail, her brutal assault by a pedophile, various encounters with family members and friends, the loss of her mother, and several lesbian relationships. I assume that Gail Ann is Ogg's pseudonym: the book is written in first person and includes explicit personal details. However, the disclaimer notes that this is a work of fiction.

The writing throughout the book is mostly unexceptional, but one scene describing a tryst with a woman Gail Ann desires is written in lyrical language: "The long short journey begins. And I must be in a dream. She shows me without music what music sounds like. She takes the very essence of touch, gives it height and width and depth. She throws feeling against the wall, and we watch it shatter into little pieces before us. From that pile of broken pieces, she grabs passion and tenderness and stirs them up in my heart. She shows me how to reach the top, but not spill over until we are both ready, until we have played the full strain. She also shows me that if we hit the wrong note, it's okay—that it's fun to start over again. She shows me how to capture moments in time that are there for the making. In between, we sleep, sometimes apart, mostly together" (p. 92).

Chapters 6 through 13 include accounts of Gail Ann's time and various duties in the military, but I had the impression that these were only incidental to her story. She opens chapter 6, "Enlistment," with the pronouncement, "I always wanted to go in the military, my leaving nursing school just changed the date I would be going" (p. 42). As a former military member, I would like to know why Gail Ann "always wanted to go in the military," but, again, information that the reader might find enlightening is omitted. Ogg does not indicate whether Gail Ann enlisted for a specific Military Occupation Speciality. She states that Gail Ann auditioned and was selected to play trombone for the Women's Army Corps (WAC) band and later notes that she volunteered to go to radio school to learn a trade, but Ogg offers very little information regarding Gail Ann's day-to-day military duties. At some point, Gail Ann became a recruiter, but, again, Ogg does not give details. Did she want to be a recruiter? Was she ordered to be?

An entire chapter is devoted to Gail Ann's time in Vietnam, but unfortunately, Ogg does not indicate where or in what capacity she served there—was she a clerk, a radio operator? Gail Ann discloses that, upon her arrival, "they told [her that she] would be going to the old nurse's [*sic*] quarters instead of the WAC detachment" (p. 97). When she arrived at the quarters, Gail Ann learned that she would be the only inhabitant, but the book does not reveal why this is so. In this same chapter, Ogg discusses several distressing incidents, including Gail Ann's valiant attempt to save an injured puppy and her encounter with

a deformed child beggar, and here, as in other chapters, she describes another of Gail Ann's lesbian encounters.

The book omits information that should have been included. For example, the author's biography on the back cover notes that Ogg was awarded the Bronze Star in Vietnam, but that fact—which is worthy of additional detail—is not mentioned in the book. Also, the cover photo lacks a caption. The softly focused, sepia-tinted photograph might be that of a Native American or Vietnamese child, or perhaps it is a picture of Ogg as a child.

Gail Ann's pain is tangible. It is evident that Ogg has invested a great deal of emotion in this book, and her effort is commendable. It is unfortunate, therefore, that—as is often the case with self-published material—this book suffers from a lack of editing. The writing is marred throughout by numerous errors of spelling and punctuation, and in at least one instance, by an error of fact. In chapter 7, Ogg writes, "I can hear the strains of music. Samuel [sic], Paul, and Mary's *Blowin in the Wind*" (p. 72).

An observation written by William Zinsser for *Inventing the Truth* aptly describes my feelings regarding

this book: "The truth is that memoir writing, like every other kind of writing, comes in both good and bad varieties. That's the only standard that matters. Whether the authors ... *ought* to have revealed as much as they did, breaking powerful taboos and social covenants, isn't finally the issue. The issue is: Is it a good book or a bad book? ... Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events."^[1] Zinsser's last line is telling: Although presented in chronological order, rambling narration and lack of pertinent and transitional details frequently make Gail Ann's story difficult to follow. In several instances, Ogg alludes to insufficiently explained circumstances, leaving the reader with the feeling that there are holes in the narrative. Many passages left me with the sensation of seeing haphazard photographic slides flashed rapidly and without identification on a screen. My impression is that this is not a comprehensive chronicle, but rather a sharing of a sporadic series of incidents.

Note

[1]. William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 5.

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