

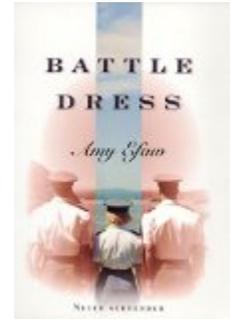
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amy Efaw. *Battle Dress*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000. 291 pp. \$15.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-027943-1.

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Surviving Beast

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Given that some of our country's most famous generals have been graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, many Americans have long been fascinated by the Academy's legendary program for transforming young people into Army officers. In one of the first fictional accounts of a woman undergoing this transition, *Battle Dress* portrays a new female cadet's first summer at the Academy as she struggles through Cadet Basic Training ("Beast Barracks"), the entry hurdle that all new cadets must jump in their quest to becoming Army lieutenants.

In the novel, new cadet Andi Davis makes it to the Academy despite having a dysfunctional family that is not exactly supportive of her career plans. Once at West Point, however, Andi has no time to worry about family troubles. Her days and nights are quickly crammed with the traditional military agenda of close-order drills, physical training, barked orders, and forced group bonding. Much of the novel is a careful account of Andi's efforts to overcome her self-doubts and get along with a diverse group of squad mates to learn the key lesson of "cooperate to graduate." Andi eventually conquers all obstacles, distinguishing herself as a cross-country runner and successfully avoiding the traps laid for her by peers and upperclass cadets. In the end, Andi has decided that "never surrender" is the motto that will take her through her remaining years at the Academy.

First-time author Amy Efaw was herself a 1989 grad-

uate of the Academy, which lends a distinctive authenticity to the dialog and characters. Unlike others who have published novels with an Academy setting, Efaw avoids scandalous plot twists and sensational crimes to concentrate on a realistic portrayal of how a new female cadet experiences Cadet Basic Training. In the end, Andi Davis finds that her experience is much like that of male cadets, with some extra added pressure thrown in as a result of being female in a traditionally-male institution. Through her characters, Efaw confronts some of the questions posed by sociologists and military theorists who have analyzed the integration of women at West Point: Has the Academy experience—and particularly "Beast Barracks"—remained as tough as some movies, books, and famous generals have implied it was in the past? Efaw's novel avers that it has. Has the Academy become less rigorous now that women are fully integrated into the Long Gray Line? Not if fictional cadet Andi Davis's experiences are accurate reflections of today's West Point. Do tensions exist between male and female cadets? Absolutely, and not only between the men and women, but amongst the women themselves.

In depicting the pressures on female cadets, this novel is both unique and interesting, for Efaw is not shy about relating how female cadets must live up to a special conduct code of their own. Through new cadet Andi Davis, Efaw voices the often-unacknowledged pressure on West Point women to become "one of the boys" by never relying on "the boys" for help. She also explores the resentment of fellow female cadets when some female cadets

use their sex to “get over.” When the majority of those who fall out of a run are “females, with a few recruited, overweight football players mixed in” (p. 147), heroine Andi Davis feels the humiliation shared by many Academy women when the failure of one becomes a public statement that women as a group cannot meet the Academy’s standards. “Those women dragged down the rest of us girls...who worked hard to prove we could be as tough as the guys” (p. 147).

The author candidly depicts the conflict amongst the female cadets who have accepted an unwritten code for women and those who have not. One of the unwritten rules, for example, is that female cadets must not look upon male cadets with romantic intent until the women have proven themselves able to excel in the Academy’s special environment. Although the author has the fictional heroine speak positively of a roommate who does not conform to this unwritten code, it is clear that Andi Davis disapproves of the roommate’s behavior and her willingness to let romance distract her from achieving the goals set for her at West Point. While the two women wait for a physical fitness test to begin, for example, Andi Davis finds herself irritated with her fellow female cadet’s comments about the attractiveness of the male cadets around her, finding “[g]uys were just about the last thing I needed to worry about right now” (p. 91). Andi is further annoyed by the same cadet’s desire to avoid solving problems herself by calling on male squad mates for help.

Published just shortly before the Academy’s Bicen-

ennial Celebration, *Battle Dress* is a positive statement about the Academy’s current Cadet Leadership Development System and its success at integrating women into Academy life. Throughout the novel, those women who fail at the Academy do so as a result of their own character flaws, while those who succeed adopt the Army values as their own.

Efaw writes well and the story line keeps the reader’s interest. The one flaw in the book, however, is that the initial plot line about Andi Davis’s family isn’t fully explored. The first chapter is an amazing and realistic account of a very real middle class American family where the parents play out all of their unresolved childhood conflicts before their children in a very negative way.

The heroine is driven to the Academy in an attempt to get away from this family and prove herself a success in spite of them. Efaw draws this dysfunctional family out through exceptional dialog, and then they disappear on R-day, rarely to reappear except as a minor sideshow, while the story shifts to Andi’s individual struggle to succeed in Cadet Basic Training. How did coming from this abnormal family affect Andi’s Academy experience, and how will her family background impact her future as an officer? The author never addresses this issue.

That criticism aside, Efaw writes a fine and realistic account of modern Beast, one that every prospective Academy cadet—male or female—will find worth reading. I recommend this book especially highly to any young woman who is considering attending the US Military Academy.

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