In a unique and timely addition to the literature on wartime romantic relationships, Susan Carruthers’s *Dear John: Love and Loyalty in Wartime America* throws open a surprising window on the inner workings (and consequences) of military romance gone wrong. Drawing on personal letters, veterans’ oral histories, psychiatric reports, musical lyrics, magazines, movies, and newspapers, Carruthers charts the history of the infamous “Dear John” letter from World War II through the “Forever Wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan to reveal how the US military weaponized GI romance to bolster war efforts, often with unintended consequences. Toward this end, the military surveilled mail—and later forms of communications technologies—as much as it did GI marriages and intimate relationships. Who should write to whom and how? was a question of great import because one ill-timed letter from a paramour could quickly corrode GI morale, according to the prevailing logic. Though the military prompted women on the home front to do their civic duty by writing letters to GIs overseas, proscriptive guidance on the “rules of engagement” made the art of letter-writing a fraught task full of gendered double standards. Women were pressured to be upbeat but sincere, reassuring but honest, friendly but not too flirty, and above all to delay breakups until GIs returned home—even if the relationships had passed their expiration dates. For the women who defied convention and sent Dear John letters anyway, if their letters weren’t publicized without their consent, their pictures might have graced any number of infamous “Walls of Shame,” public bulletin boards created by GI “Brush-Off Clubs” to ease the sting of betrayal. Though a seemingly innocuous means by which to build male solidarity and camaraderie, Brush-Off Clubs (and their modern counterparts—social media sites that post nonconsensual video footage of traitorous women in the act of cheating) often precipitated more overt misogynistic behaviors (from bad-mouthing women to intimate partner violence) that the hypermasculine military ethos likely did little to thwart.

What of the impact of “Dear Jane” letters on servicewomen since World War II? Did the men who penned these equally unpatriotic letters in wartime also face public censure? The absence of popular media and military attention to romantically jilted servicewomen suggests not, even though servicewomen in the Women’s Auxiliary Corps and their modern counterparts received ample Dear Janes from husbands and boyfriends who conflated women’s military service with infidelity. As Carruthers makes clear, the Dear Jane was not the simple inverse of the Dear John because “socially constructed gender roles don’t permit
straightforward role reversals and men and women are held to divergent standards that are antithetical and hierarchical” (p. 136). These divergent and hierarchical standards have and continue to privilege servicemen’s needs and prioritize their stories (of betrayal and beyond) at the expense of women. In perhaps her most compelling chapter, entitled “Severing Ties and Suicide,” Carruthers interrogates the common association between Dear John letters and lethal self-harm, persuasively arguing that “the prominence of Dear John letters in recent military messaging on suicide works to validate a widespread pre-existing assumption that whatever goes awry in military couples is the exclusive fault of women” (p. 233). The dangers of this messaging have had tragic consequences for an institution that has long struggled with high rates of domestic and sexual violence and spousal homicide.

The book’s unique organization, which Carruthers likens to an onion, contributes to its appeal. Where the first half of the book concerns how GIs and women were encouraged to get together, the second half deals with the fallout from wartime break ups. At its center is a fascinating analysis of veterans’ own stories about receiving Dear John letters and the issues women have attempted to bring to light in response—an analysis based on thousands of hours listening to oral histories from the National Archives’ Veterans History Project. Yet, the omission of same-sex relationships from such a sweeping narrative about love and loyalty in wartime America (an omission Carruthers attributes to the military’s historic criminalization of same-sex relationships and the absence of prescriptive advice targeting same-sex couples) leaves important questions unanswered about LGBTQ+ servicemen and women’s experiences with heartbreak. Future scholars might bridge this gap by scouring the archival holdings of the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society and the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, among other repositories of LGBTQ+ veterans’ oral histories, letters, and memoirs. Nevertheless, Dear John is a must-read for anyone interested in the weaponization of intimate relationships for militarized ends.
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