



War Porn

Roy Scranton

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“War porn,” n. Videos, images, and narratives featuring graphic violence, often brought back from combat zones, viewed voyeuristically or for emotional gratification. Such media are often presented and circulated without context, though they may be used as evidence of war crimes.

War porn is also, in Roy Scranton’s searing debut novel, a metaphor for the experience of war in the age of the War on Terror, the fracturing and fragmentation of perspective, time, and self that afflicts soldiers and civilians alike, and the global networks and face-to-face moments that suture our fragmented lives together. In *War Porn* three lives fit inside one another like nesting dolls: a restless young woman at an end-of-summer barbecue in Utah; an American soldier in occupied Baghdad; and Qasim al-Zabadi, an Iraqi math professor, who faces the US invasion of his country with fear, denial, and perseverance. As *War Porn* cuts from America to Iraq and back again, as home and hell merge, we come to see America through the eyes of the occupied, even as we see Qasim become a prisoner of the occupation. Through the looking glass of *War Porn*, Scranton reveals the fragile humanity that connects Americans and Iraqis, torturers and the tortured, victors and their victims.

War Porn Details

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From Reader Review War Porn for online ebook

Matt says

"Up out of the ancient garden of Sinbad's Baghdad and the nightmare of Saddam's Ba'athist dystopia grew the fiber optic slums of tomorrowland, where shepherds on cell phones herded flocks down expressways and insurgents uploaded video beheadings, everything rising and falling as one, Hammurabi's Code and Xboxes, the wheel and the web, Ur to Persepolis to Sykes-Picot to CNN, a ruin outside of time, a twenty-first cyberpunk war machine interzone."

Marie says

I wholeheartedly agree with this review by Joshua Buhs. The writing in this book wasn't terrible, but despite outward appearances when I dug beneath what was on the page I came up empty. There is no subtlety in the story or the characters, which is something I expect from good literature (and yes, I judge this on a literary scale when the book is marketed as such).

My most generous thought for this book is that the whole book is intended to be "war porn" for readers. And yet, I don't know that that conclusion really adds anything to the text – other than annoying me. As the above review (linked) states, this is an adolescent novel with nothing new to say about war or the human experience of war.

Kathleen O'Nan says

A very difficult book to read but one that seems to be very truthful and accurate. The ending is devastating. Not for casual reading.

Shaw says

This book ends with an anal rape.

Mark says

Hardcover. A brutal, honest, and awfully sad look at the Iraq conflict.

Hossein says

The best thing about War Porn is the narration of the politics and War, and to achieve such goal, it never makes the war sentimental. The sentimentality of dark sides of the war is narrated within the background of observable political views. I loved the notes at the beginning of each chapter describing the author's view in a half-independent way from the story. Another good point is that the violence among soldiers is surprising. You will become amazed by the patriarchal language among the soldiers. A good novel, its easy to follow, but not so complex in order to elaborate on serious philosophical issues.

Joan E. Seeberger says

War Porn

This is the first book I have read that tells the truth about Iraq and the continual war there and in Afghanistan.

Daniel John says

As a veteran of the Iraq War, I laud Roy Scranton's War Porn. Finally, an ambitious book from the pen of an ex-enlisted grunt that actually dares to engage the polemical -- and does so with searing artistic depth. The book, in theme and title, is very similar to the one I'm working on (on and off these days) so I had a bit of a fit, but of course it is also very different. Excellent, research at any rate, for me. But it was more than just that....Scranton captures the fetishized ugliness of war with a honed hyper-realism that damn near triggered some dormant PTSD in me, I must say. But it wasn't a negative reaction, though the stimuli were negative -- but rather, an awakening to the muddled stasis that we're all in, a realization of the sins of our collective past. Deftly, Scranton maneuvers between multiple scenes and points of view staggering his sequences with truth-telling prose poems -- themselves riddled with holes of white space, non-sequitur allusions, anaphoric military cadences, general orders and facts about the way of the stereotypical Arabic man, for instance, which I found to be very true. On this note, most impressively, Scranton shows us a frightening, yet somehow endearing, and tragic portrait of an Iraqi family on the cusp of the invasion, dealing with Saddam's despotic regime before Shock and Awe dashed such so-called sovereignty. To me, this part is very interesting. This character Qasim seems to be on the brink of some great mathematical discovery and Saddam's thugs are at the door looking to arrest him for some trumped-up "spying" or "coding" allegation and suddenly the Americans start bombing, sending "a line of Crusaders..tossed along the road like broken bottles, a crater" (Scranton, 202). In this vein, Scranton is highly symbolic, appropriately absurdist, allegorical, and yet he mixes all this into an unflinching, often profane, vernacular not just from the grunt's perspective but also from the Iraqis: "And will it be worth it? / It had to be. We have to get rid of Saddam and his goatcunt sons" (209). Though the true nuanced Army profanity does come from Specialists Wilson's chapters, Scranton accounts for all horrid loss of innocence and life in Iraq: "A child's arm poking from the rubble, smooth, purple-gray skin sticky with half-dried blood" (208). I remember viewing and reading about the collateral damage of Shock and Awe myself but hadn't thought about it till I read War Porn. Scranton will not let the American consciousness escape unscathed. Nor the Iraqis'. Nor anyone who believes that war is the answer. Scranton delves even deeper to a time when he had no answers and was wandering. He details the internal struggles of a character desperately looking for meaningful work and to fit in. I can relate, and I wonder if something might be done domestically in education or in the workforce to make civilian life more tenable for such wandering souls so as to channel their talent towards something less ugly than war? But then again, perhaps, as Scranton uncompromisingly denotes, it is a dog eat dog world where the warriors must continue

ever more to "rage forth" despite any and all foreknowledge of a pending bullshit war with "no legal recourse in re: administrative decisions on the matter of / torture TV rage the / rockets red not singly but in global consensus: vanquished / by my spear" (3). On second thought, perhaps war is necessary to produce such literary art. Scranton distills it so finely and perturbingly, it slips under my skin. heightens my focus to the point at which I must consume the entire thing for that artistic high emitted only by the forbidden substance of truth. As Wilson goes from all sorts of trite pop-culture titles, consuming them no doubt on portable DVD players, which was my experience, to Chomsky's *For Reasons of State*, we witness the warrior poet who "hates freedom" come into his own. If only his friendship with Qasim could have flowered under better circumstances. Think of the poetry and math they might've been able to produce. Scranton plants this hypothetical in the back of my mind as I recall also his dedication: "to the interpreters." Thankfully we have Scranton to interpret to true mess of the Iraq War for us laymen. He accounts for all the menial details even, the search for lost sensitive items, (LT's pistol) even, the brainless praise for killing a protesting kid; relentless, ruthless, true. Finally, although I can tell this is one of those novels written by a poet rather than a novel written by a novelist or more of a prose writer or prose stylist, if you will, I can appreciate the novelistic aspects of the book, particularly pertaining to how Scranton merges the narratives of Qasim, Wilson and Aaron. The way he does so weaves a horrifying net of fetishized ugly truth -- truth, that pillar of great literature, gleams, again from this novel with poetic pitch-perfect diction and prose that strangely marauds into one's consciousness. I must admit the ending grew to a point where I absolutely could not stop reading in spite of myself and I had to analyze the whole perfectly symbolic ugliness of it: At first, I was enticed by the relief that this war-torn perverse veteran might experience romantic love with this free-spirited young lady as their initial hook-up is romantically and poetically described. But then, just as the War Porn ugliness of the war imbues with great unflinching clarity, just as so many patriotic young people became so filled with purpose after the world gave them a reason to fight and partake in the horror of war, the book's denouement couldn't be anymore symbolically appropriate. One can almost see it coming but not quite. And when it comes one thinks: oh, yeah, this is all it was all about anyway. Interestingly enough, Abu Ghraib was used by Saddam to torture and do unspeakable things as well, so I finally learned from this book (I've been reading other things). In final summation one can learn much from this book, as a cautionary tale, as a history, as an examination of human-made horror, the undeniable effects of fear, violence and sheer ugliness, the result of a failure to think, to communicate. One thing it is not is a romance, though certain aspects of camaraderie are fetishized, it is not that. It is purely a rare, truth-telling book, taking in all angles. And finally, I feel for the civilian character Matt who laments: "What's the point of fighting anything? Nothing. I've never done good things. I've never done bad things. What's worth hurting for?" (330). Let us now choose rightly and fight peacefully, intelligently for good, for romance, for brother and sisterhood, for respect for our elders and our fallen warriors, all. - DJU (pronounced: Jew) ;)

Joshua Buhs says

This is an adolescent novel.

More than fifty years ago, Leslie Fiedler argued that American literature was essentially adolescent, obsessed with escape, uninterested in dealing straightforwardly with sex and death. The thesis applies exactly to this book.

In "War Porn." Roy Scranton wants to deal with America's most recent, and most nonsensical war, the invasion of Iraq during the early 2000s. He tells three nested stories: of a barbecue in Utah where a vet meets a clan of hipsters; the experiences of a different soldier during the early part of the invasion; the life of an Iraqi mathematician in the period just before and after the invasion. The book starts with the barbecue,

moves to a long section on the soldier; the pivot is the mathematician's story; the novel then moves back to the soldier and concludes with the barbecue.

In between each of the sections are interludes titled Babylon, which are fragments of conversations, reports, books, and newscasts; these reflect the chapter headings, which are similarly excerpted from various war-related items, such as the soldier's creed and informations on Iraqi culture provided to soldiers.

The book is described, repeatedly, on the front and back cover and the inside flap as brutal, as penetrating, as telling hard truths. But, really, no. There's nothing here that hasn't been said before; indeed, what it mostly does is apply old tropes to the Iraqi war--old, adolescent tropes, as it were. The structural razzmatazz doesn't have much purpose. We get some different views of the mathematician, but these are mostly glancing. The fragmented sections add little: ok, war makes no sense, got it. Even the title is obscurely related to the novel. "War Porn" is supposed to be about the fetishization of war, but that's never really a theme here.

Instead, the book is more interested in how war ruins sensitive men, and the only way that they can deal is through sex. Hello, Hemingway.

The other sections, though they sit at the center of the book, and are often the longest, are really just set-up for the barbecue scenes. Scranton was involved in the war as a soldier, and there are ways in which the soldier during the middle sections--Wilson--is similar to him: at loose ends when he joined, from Oregon. And perhaps this material would have been done better as a memoir: a report on what happened in a place inaccessible to the reader. But it fails as literature, even as it is often stark. All of the power seems to come from it as being possibly real; otherwise, the characters are never clear, the point of the various stories never obvious.

The mathematician's story seems to be there to give the book some political edge: that the Iraqis who were so often the subject of bad American actions weren't evil masterminds, but just people in the wrong place at the wrong time, everyday people trying to make their way in a world that no longer made sense. I think an expansion of this section into an entire novel would have worked better, but it is also clear that Scranton as less sure here, had less to say.

The barbecue scene is the one that carries the themes, and these are tired. The soldier returns, and cannot fit into civilization any more--like John Wayne or Rambo, he'd sacrificed his humanity to preserve civilization. He's a bad boy in the way teenage boys like to think of themselves as bad boys: that no one really understands how special they are; that they can see the real truth of the world and, assholes that they are, must speak that truth. So he goes to the barbecue and instantly susses out who wants to cheat with whom, and starts telling them about it.

And because he's a bad boy he is, of course, irresistible to the women. There are two non-lesbians in the group, one already fucking him, and the wife of another man who is instantly attracted to him. He's a real man, comes on to her, and the goody-too-shoes husband cannot stand up to him. He's weak.

[spoilers]

Of course she cheats; but he's damaged, remember? So what starts out as a seduction turns into rape and sodomy, with the soldier then hopping on his motorcycle (!) and riding into the distance, the woman left crying. The last bit of gobbledegook in the final Babylon section puts the finishing touches on this, with fragments about the need to fill holes.

Ugh.

It's hard not to read this as the woman getting punished for her sexual desire. Perhaps one could argue that it shows the damage of war brought home, but that it would require the book to take the women characters seriously, when they are only ever ciphers or props. This is a boy's book, where the best thing in the world is seeing a woman's tits.

The ending is meant to seem stark and harsh and telling the truth; really, though, it's just exploitative.

Which is a shame. Scranton writes well as the level of the sentence and paragraph. He has real talent. It's just been shunted into an old, cramped story that never gels or makes more than a very mundane point--and badly.

It's a teenage boys book idea of shocking.

Jill says

Pornography is usually synonymous with smut, filth and vice; certainly, that definition has increasingly broadened to encompass war efforts. The image of the heroic soldier fighting purposefully for a noble cause has been superseded by traumatized young men who are forced to endure repeated tours of duty because of the hubris of our leaders. Anyone who disagrees with the above statement probably is not a good reader for War Porn, written by a war veteran, which does not sugar-coat the reality of modern-day wars.

Roy Scranton interweaves three separate narratives: a soldier, Private Wilson, who joined the National Guard and soon finds himself encased on the madness of Baghdad, and tries to survive admit the chaos, hidden dangers, stray bullets, and overall craziness. There's also Qasim, an ordinary mathematician who simply wants to live an everyday life, who is forced to modify his dreams because of senseless raids and rumors that keep the Iraqis off balance and afraid. And then, there's the homefront: typical middle-class liberal Americans who must face their own biases and delusions about the war when an angry veteran reveals the savagery of what really happens "over there."

This book isn't meant to assuage our consciences or buy into the "we're there to help them achieve their freedom" mentality. It's authentic and it's harsh and it's real. It's written to give us a new blueprint on how to think about war and to show us that everyone -- our citizens, our soldiers, and those we purport to save -- are all affected by the horror of war. I'm not big into reading "war books", since the mechanics of war are so often the same -- wars ordered by megalomaniac leaders resulting in the deaths of far too many innocent men and women soldiers. This book doesn't shy away from that reality.

Dan Downing says

If one measure of a book is the reaction it provokes in a reader, then "War Porn" gets 5 Stars. The story is told in a number of voices, set in a number of geographical locations, over a period of a few years. Much of the book cries out, albeit indirectly, for George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, their sycophantic liars in the CIA, the journalistic community and Congress, to be tortured and slaughtered, not as the Coalition soldiers were, or the Iraqi civilians or the Iraqi armed forces were, but in the case of the American leaders their

suffering and death would be well deserved for what they inflicted on the rest of the world. That the wrath of the survivors or the heavens has not rained down on them demonstrates only that we are on our own and evil answers only to itself.

Some passages are kaleidoscopic---movie references, evening news snippets, cocktail party chatter. Mostly the story is told from the viewpoint of an Iraqi mathematician caught between Islamic forces and what is really the United States' exercise of unbridled power, and

we see the 'war' mostly through the eyes of an American soldier. We have a subplot, or perhaps better, above plot, taking place in the yard of an American couple having a few friends over for food, drinks, and a few blunts. In this segment, a comeuppance of sorts---a metaphor---moves from one veteran to a few civilians. Sadly, we have too much truth, too much reality here, and it is

Highly Recommended

Michelle says

In War Porn, Roy Scranton looks at the second Iraq war from the perspective of three very different people at three different times in the war. The stories are extremely powerful. Moreover, it makes you look at the war and its impact in a whole different light.

Mr. Scranton has a way with words. He introduces each change in narrator with a hybrid stream of consciousness and poetry vignette that make for some of the most powerful sections of the entire book. Within each narrative, he paints a picture. Depending on the main character of that interlude, this picture is by turns idyllic, ominous, and downright frightening. The characters he creates are equally intense and realistic. Moreover, he does a fantastic job of explaining life in Iraq before and during the war.

The best part is that somehow Mr. Scranton never takes sides when it would be so easy to do so. He presents the corruption and fear of Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a matter of course. He captures the fear of the impending occupation. He describes the US military presence and its attempts amid the confusion and bigotry that exists. He shows the impact the tension, fear, and confusion have on returning veterans and their struggle to assimilate to society as well. Through them, he places the reader into the action and creates an entirely new method of experiencing the war.

Mr. Scranton's scathing look at the second Iraq war from various perspectives should end up being the definitive novel of that war. In it, he spares no one or nothing from his fierce gaze. The fact that Mr. Scranton spent fourteen months in Iraq with the Army only serves to lend credence to his characters and their experiences. The reading experience is brutal and uncomfortable but extremely important to understand both sides of the conflict. War Porn is not a novel that one can recommend on the basis of reading enjoyment but rather for importance to current events.

switterbug (Betsey) says

In this lucid, disturbing, subversive, and powerful work, Roy Scranton, an author I had never heard of before, has made it to my top shelf of contemporary American writers. He's got the nature of Denis Johnson---the attitude and sensibilities, but with his own handcrafted lingual charisma, a book that forces you to pay

attention without condescending or pandering to anyone. He writes about lives unwinding even as they coil together, and about worldview opposites whose hypocrisy's overlap.

Scranton created an inscrutable, intransigent loner and war photographer, Aaron, returning from the heart of darkness in Iraq to tell others how the world really is. But Aaron is mired in an exhausted, static velocity of dread that he pours on the uninitiated pot-smoking social activists/graduate students that scorch his blistered war-torn poet's soul, and all of them are going nowhere at accelerated speeds.

The novel centers on soldiers in the Iraq war in 2003, and is bookended with 2004 in Moab, Utah, where a group of friends have been “temporarily” living while they figure out their lives. Preceding and following the Iraq chapters are passages of fever-dream poetry-prose--surreal, hypnagogic verse that make visceral sense, especially when I read out loud (without overthinking its meaning). The chapters in the body of the book are war and its metaphoric war porn—the vulgar, brutal, glimpses of soldiers in wartime and its “illicit” predatory images, which Scranton conveys in his ingenious two-toned manner. We watch the context of war, but the author’s master control of war horror’s portrait is also dispatched with garish mordancy-- shattering, stout, bleak, oblique, and hell-bent for outer darkness. A robust chunk of pages are also dedicated to the point of view of Iraqis caught in the middle of the American “War on Terror.”

The façade of wartime protocol masks a haywire world that is no less absurd than the moral superiority of civilians, which Scranton subtly exposes in sardonic twists that could escape recognition if you’re not receptive.

One couple, Matt and Dahlia, may be desperately holding on to their relationship past its shelf-life, even while Matt lusts after their single friend, Wendy, and Dahlia has urges that appear out of the broken mirror of her mind. She wants to put her education to use back in the northwest, and be stable, but she also conceals a mercurial nature. Matt is stuck on stars and constellations and an esoteric computer program he created that will rate rates of change and may indirectly give authoritative answers to global economic questions. Or not.

The friends are having a midsummer party, and Wendy brings Aaron, her current sexcessory, who’s an outsider to the group. Things get heated when Aaron’s motivations for joining the National Guard is attacked by feminist/lesbian Mel, to the point where she calls him a Nazi in shrill, expletive salvos, and he imprecates back with spitting rancor. As bowls are smoked and stars in the sky are observed, the reader is led to the gripping, shocking finale in the last chapter.

But, between the short Moab chapters, we are submerged in military speak and wartime peril, which will twist whatever lens you have been observing battle from the distant comfort of TVs, computers, newspapers, and other forms of media. I almost didn’t get this book, because the cover turned me off. But, as they say, don’t judge a book...and, at the close of it, I can’t think of a more appropriate image, one I could not accept initially, but, after the searing narrative, can’t contradict.

“Up out of the ancient garden of Saddam’s Ba’athist dystopia grew the fiber-optic slums of tomorrowland, where shepherds on cell phones herded flocks down expressways and insurgents uploaded video beheadings—everything rising and falling as one, Hammurabi’s Code and Xboxes, the wheel and the Web, Ur to Persepolis to Sykes Picot to CNN, a ruin outside of time, a twenty-first-century cyberspace war-machine interzone.”

Snotchocheez says

3 stars

Author/ex-GI Roy Scranton really must have *cojones* of steel to take his solidly written take on the Iraq War and plant a ginormous IED for the reader to detonate (with but a few pages to spare) to all but destroy the preceding 350+ pages. Gutsy move (to give an unsympathetic perspective of the returned soldier, one that I'd not quite encountered yet in other novels I've read about the Iraq/Afghanistan conflicts), but it damn near killed *War Porn* for me. The ending (which I'm sorry I'm complaining at length about) utterly infuriated me, but I'm trying my damnedest not to grade this based on my kneejerk reaction. Ultimately, it (view spoiler) should not have any bearing on my overall feelings about the book, but the scene's reverberations *are still* echoing through my brain, wreaking havoc on my objectivity. The story, I reckon, needs to be told (but I'm not entirely convinced it needed to be told in that fashion).

Every book I've read thus far about the war experience (notably Phil Klay's National Book Award winner *Redeployment*, and the superb *Fives and Twenty-Fives* by Michael Pitre) have tap-danced around the soldiers' PTSD potential after returning home from service. Scranton's novel is the first (that I've encountered, anyway) that has attempted to tackle the subject head-on (though, to be honest, I still hate the way he did it, but glad he "went there" anyway.)

In addition, another gutsy move on Scranton's behalf was to try to give an Iraqi perspective on the war, achieved through the eyes of Qasim, a maths professor at a university in Baghdad. His story (a story of a newlywed scholar straddling the exigencies of war and his career, with his clandestine translator role for the US on the side) was by far the best part of the book.

Of the 3 1/2 novels I've read about the war (counting half of the rather curious *War of the Encyclopaedists*) this was stylistically the riskiest. (It doesn't help matters that each of the sections of the story is divided by a "stream of consciousness" narrative that's all but incomprehensible). Yet, it's a story that needs to be told (despite my revulsion at the ending) and hope it (despite my middling rating) receives an audience it deserves.

Karel Baloun says

It's important that Iraqi veterans right books of their experience, and that these books are harsh, honest, and full of the pain of war. So we know not to do it anymore. Yet, this book intentionally left me mentally raped, drained of all human. So, why the fuck would I read a book like this? I'm angry that his English PhD and a decade of carefully crafted effort could leave me nothing of value.

I really liked the depictions of American Grunt life, the futility. This struck me as true, as from his experience. However that could be just my bias, and since it's fiction, I have no idea what's true. And that annoyed me throughout the book. I wish he had written truthfully to his experience.

Especially when he delves into Iraqi life for the middle third of the book, that struck me as untrue -- yet since this is fiction, it had no value, because as just pure fantasy it is only vile and disgusting.

The PTSD style stream of consciousness sections didn't work for me, and felt just force on me as signature author unique.

The ending is unforgettable, but again, I hated it. It pulled me and hard, but just left me feeling disgusted,

with civilization, soldiers and humanity. And both of those deserves much more, because they are us, and they serve us.

Three stars? I hated it. I wish I had not read it. And I'm not a soldier. 4 stars? The author achieved his purpose, albeit a misconceived one. Skillfully written. Brave, and unique.

Scranton quotes the *Hagakure*, where samurai are advised to live as if they were already dead. This book tries to do that to me, and I object and resist. That much I can control, and I'm not ready to spend belief that I can, like Mandela or Frankel, create my own mental reality.
