On Distant Ground Short Guide

On Distant Ground by Robert Olen Butler

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Contents

Characters

Unlike many main characters in fiction drawn in the context of war, David Fleming does not see himself as a weapon or a war machine, a betrayed hero, or a victimized veteran. He thinks deeply about his deeds and his feelings. He, in large measure, goes along with conventions of his society, yet he recognizes, often in retrospect and not in prospect, the ways in which he lives on the fringes.

He makes major moves on impulse —impulse that he does not always understand. Freeing Tuyen took several complicated actions and violations of protocol, but the actions fulfilled a nearly inexplicable impulse. Similarly, once discharged and facing unemployment and disgrace, he bypasses a job offer because he feels he must find Suong—who may or may not be alive—and her son—who may or may not exist at all, and who, if he exists, may or may not be his. Fleming "finds himself by finding and accepting his son, and taking the child of war who faces a bleak future back to a new family in a more prosperous and more peaceful land.

Jennifer Fleming, a caring wife, gives David his first child within their marriage.

Butler portrays his lead female character with sensitivity. He shows her desires to be supportive of her husband in the stress of the legal proceedings, yet he realistically portrays her own need to be free of David's moodiness and irritability.

She is hurt when David discloses his wartime affair with Suong, but Butler does not show her working through the shock in a detailed fashion. Rather, he develops her still as the supportive wife who appreciates David's commitment to fatherhood which contrasts with their memories of their own fathers: "Do you think we'd be as close to each other as we are if we didn't both have such hateful fathers?" The past can be put behind them, and the prospect of another woman's son coming into the family is not raised as a possible cause of conflict. A reader might construe Butler's rendering of Jennifer, even with her honest assertions about when she is not ready for lovemaking, as a female character drawn a shade more to a male's expectations than might be the case were she portrayed by a female writer. In the plot development, for example, the reader follows David's travails before the law, but sees nothing of Jennifer's labor and delivery of the baby in the hospital.

An important minor character, Nguyen Thi Tuyet Suong comes to the reader as a lovely, graceful and tender young woman, proud of her heritage and culture and unwilling to be seen as a manipulator or a gold digger. As her love for David deepens, she takes him to places the upper class of South Viet Nam would frequent; and she accepts the risk of misjudgment—the common assumption that any Vietnamese woman seen with an American must be a prostitute. While an important character, Suong is only active in Fleming's memories. During his return visit to Saigon, she is nowhere to be found. At the last, Fleming sees her ashes which have been turned over to her grandmother after the new authorities review the records of prisoners of the fallen Thieu government. Suong merits posthumous favor from the new government because she in some fashion

opposed the former government. She is not a living threat to David's marriage in the U.S., but she produced the child whose life is one positive force to counter the numerous negative forces at play in a society at war.

Pham Van Tuyen, the mysterious highranking Viet Cong prisoner, attracts Fleming's attention first through his endurance of suffering. Passed through increasingly brutal interrogation and then to prison on Con Son Island, Tuyen is exhausted from malnutrition, abuse, and the stress of an incomplete escape when Fleming finds him. Tuyen accepts help via the jeep and the helicopter Fleming commandeered, but does not understand why he is helped. When Tuyen holds Fleming captive near the end of the story, he contrasts the view he should take as a high level security officer—that Fleming is most likely a spy—with the view his father would have taken, "My father would say that you are clearly not a human being but a spirit creature ready to reshape itself at any moment into a tree or a rock or a tiger." Ultimately, repaying Fleming one mercy for another, Tuyen arranges for Fleming's departure for Bangkok with documentation certifying Khai as his son.

Social Concerns

Repeatedly, warfare presses far too Rmany human beings into starkly inhumane actions. Much pulp fiction and macho video has been generated to replay the Viet Nam war so that once-betrayed warriors can win some compensatory slice of honor by defeating evil communists or freeing forgotten prisoners of war. Similarly, other popular treatments of the Viet Nam war era pose antiwar activists as obvious heroes struggling to end what they view as an obviously evil conflict. Robert Olen Butler's fiction which deals with the Viet Nam war era carries the reader into the social, political, military, ethical and moral chaos of the times, reflecting the divergent views of Americans and Vietnamese, but without making simplistic propaganda tools of his stories or characters.

In time of war, when soldiers are expected to destroy the enemy, humane behavior becomes a rare phenomenon.

With On Distant Ground, Butler poses one man's search to understand himself and his reasons for humane behavior when customary responses to duty and to self-interest should have led him not to care about enemy prisoners or a possible child produced from a brief affair.

Butler sets U.S. Army Captain David Fleming before a court martial, unable to interpret clearly why he had, in Viet Nam, gone to great lengths to find and set free a Viet Cong prisoner who had been sent to the South Vietnamese government prison on Con Son Island. Fleming's record showed no antigovernment or antiwar leanings prior to the incident. He was an exemplary officer in a military intelligence unit operating in the Saigon area. He could not help his defense attorney with any particular line of argument for substantial defense against the charge of aiding and abetting the enemy, and he could not explain to himself or his wife why he had released Pham Van Tuyen.

The action fit no rationale of war protest, conscientious objection to war, or a personal scheme of befriending a Viet Cong officer in order to make a mole or double agent of him. It seemed an irrational, gut impulse that just created trouble for the young Army officer and his wife, Jennifer.r.

The birth of a son brings David Fleming a strong "biological" sense of fatherhood, a paradoxical sense of himself continuing in another person and, concurrendy, a sense of the child's isolation in his first days of life—separated from mother, and primitively responding to vague shapes and sensations. Numerous recollections of people and events and feelings of his days in Viet Nam bring Fleming to recognize that he may have another son there, a child borne of a brief affair with Nguyen Thi Tuyet Suong, a lovely young upper-class woman who broke off the relationship and disappeared without explanation or farewell.

Punished with a dishonorable discharge but not a prison sentence, David Fleming makes use of an old CIA contact for unofficial help in returning to a collapsing South Viet Nam in April of 1975. Although hurt by David's admission of the premarital affair,

Jennifer supplies her bemused yet fixated husband with some money from her father to help finance the search for the other woman and child. Butler develops an extended plot taking the reader through multiple moral dilemmas via one man's personal quest for understanding himself and for living up to his moral and ethical obligations.

However, in David Fleming's perspective, his search for Suong and her child is not termed a moral imperative. It is, rather, an instinctive response of fatherhood, of recognizing connection to another human being.

In the early 1990s the United Nations High Commission on Refugees issued a report saying that one in every eight people on Earth were "displaced" from home territory in some fashion, whether migrants resettled by choice, or refugees fleeing famine, warfare, religious or political oppression, or economic hardship.

Setting Fleming's search for Suong and her child in the last days of South Viet Nam's existence, Butler reflects the fears, hopes, and divergent opinions of people who lived through the losing and the winning of that war, exposing reasons to flee and reasons to stay in the homeland.

A reader could well feel more sympathy for refugees who have resettled in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere through glimpsing in fiction the multiple losses of many who fled Viet Nam and other wartorn nations. Butler does not, however, take his character slowly through the mounds of paperwork, the strictures of bureaucracy, or the years of refugee camp life which have been a painful reality for several million refugees in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Rather, Fleming's act of mercy that caused the U.S.

Army to disgorge him serves as leverage for Tuyen, as part of the new government security apparatus in Saigon, to arrange for Fleming's swift documentation and departure with his son.

Techniques

Early in the novel, Fleming reports that in extensive reading he did during his Viet Nam tour, he found a quote from the English Renaissance playwright Christopher Marlowe that T. S. Eliot used as an epigraph to a poem: "Thou art guilty of fornication. But that was in another country. And besides, the wench is dead."

The quote summarizes the primary plot line with which Butler entwines the tale of the release of Tuyen—the remembered relationship between David and Suong, and his compulsive search for her and her son.

The preparation for a hearing and then a court martial logically requires that Fleming search his memory for details of his activities in Saigon and in his pursuit of Tuyen. At times, Fleming analyzes his remembered actions in the format of a lawyer questioning a witness and interpreting the answers, in reverie mirroring the events of his "time present" in the story. The series of witnesses and depositions the prosecutor presents covers David's actions in chronological order.

Consequently, the shifts from the time line of the court room setting to Fleming's memories of Viet Nam give the reader a generally—but not strictly—organized sequence of events from his tour of duty in the Saigon area. At other times, Fleming's recollections of Viet Nam are more stream-of-consciousness tangents triggered by shapes or sensations from television news of the war, or from life at home with his wife and newborn son.

While The Alleys of Eden (1981; see separate entry) is clearly divided into Book One and Book Two, with a few breaks between one scene and the next marked by a couple lines' worth of white space, Butler presents On Distant Ground as a single unit, not divided into books or chapters, but composed of many scenes, varying in length: some consist of a few paragraphs, while others run to a dozen or more pages in length. Separated from one another only by white space, or occasionally by ellipses, this arrangement of scenes reflects the contemporary influence of film and video-—and Butler's formal training in play-writing before he turned his efforts to fiction.

Butler's characters do express themselves in dialog from time to time, but the bulk of the narrative consists of description of events and action blended with Fleming's repeated efforts to make rational interpretations of his own and others' instincts and emotions. The dialog brings good information to the plot in some situations: David Fleming can choose to act on some of the information he learns via conversation. In other situations, conversation with others only brings Fleming confusion and uncertainty.

Themes

Three themes are tightly entwined throughout the novel: the need to define the self when conventional sociocultural frames of reference are lost; the need to retain a sense of humanity amid the savageries of war; and the need to carry on life in the face of death.

Through flashbacks, Fleming allows the reader glimpses of his experiences as a young military intelligence officer working in and near Saigon. When one of his enlisted men, Wilson Hand, was captured, Fleming raided the location and readily killed the VC guarding the imprisoned American. Thus, as a young American officer, he did not shrink from the need for combat. In questioning prisoners, he was not above employing moderately abusive techniques to persuade people to divulge information, though he preferred to leave the harsher methods to South Vietnamese interrogators rather than use them himself. The conventions of patriotism and the U.S. military operations in Viet Nam shaped his views of himself and his work. Still, when he sees a motto ve-sinh la khoe "hygiene is healthful" scratched on the wall of a prison cell recendy vacated by Pham Van Tuyen, he becomes obsessed with a desire to find and meet the man. Ultimately, Fleming recognizes that, in releasing Tuyen, he had reached to preserve his own sense of a humane self rather than a self irretrievably coarsened by life in the combat zone.

One reality of military service in general is that men away from home and the expectations of parents, friends, and spouses or potential spouses quite readily seek out female companionship. Concentrations of troops require a wide array of support services, and outside the perimeter fencing for bases or camps, there grow up local establishments, from barber shops and laundries to bars, brothels and massage parlors. Class distinctions often prevail, and while many places cater readily to enlisted personnel, certain ones may serve officers only. Since Fleming is an officer, he is not shown carousing with bar girls on Tu Do street, but he meets Nguyen Thi Tuyet Suong at a formal party that includes military officers and higher ranking civilians. The two are drawn to each other in a gentle, sweetly passionate courtship, eventually becoming physically intimate on several occasions. Then, Suong abruptly disappears from Fleming's life. As he racks his brain to explain himself to himself during the legal proceedings, Fleming recognizes he must have impregnated Suong, though he cannot deduce her motives for disappearing. In the context of war which brings death so readily, he believes he has helped bring forth a new life, a child, and he must at least try, though he risks capture and death himself, to find that part of him which has been left a half world away.

Finding the boy, Khai, with his grandmother, Madame Trung, does not immediately resolve Fleming's anxieties. In fact, he visits and leaves and visits again, debating whether or not the boy truly is his son, or whether the grandmother is just looking for a way to get the child to a better life in America.

Suong's family had been well-to-do and had good connections in government prior to the presidency of Nguyen Van Thieu. All members of the family could well be at risk of oppression by the incoming communist government. The grandmother could expect that a child of the old ruling class would have few opportunities for education and employment under the new regime. Fleming, therefore, debates whether the grandmother is deceiving him about Khai's paternity. After all, the boy looks far more like his mother than like Fleming.

The son born in America showed several obvious likenesses to his father. At last, Fleming's instincts of fatherhood shape his reasoning. He concludes Khai is his son, and follows the grandmother's plan of escape. His expected CIA contact has not appeared a second time. Saigon is occupied by Peoples' Army troops, and he is using false identification documents.

He had been an intelligence officer and, if captured, could be even more harshly treated by the conquering forces than someone from the infantry or the artillery corps might be.

Retrieving Khai clinches Fleming's discovery of self as father, as human who cannot, in the face of war and loss, surrender his own humanity to the hardness of heart that often results from prolonged exposure to combat or prison conditions.

Key Questions

Butler does not, in On Distant Ground, use terms such as "half-breed" or "bui doi"—the Vietnamese phrase which translates to "Child of the Dust" or "Dust of Life" which is applied to Ameriasian children born of Vietnamese mothers and American GI fathers—all too often "short-timers" who lived with, or carried on relationships with, Vietnamese women for a few weeks or months, then returned to "The World," the United States. Nor does Butler broach in detail issues of how well David Fleming expects to deal with the implications of a biracial family, or the implications of Jennifer, still coping with postpartum depression, needing to accept not only her own infant with the expected feedings, diaperings, sleepless nights with colic and such, but needing also to accept her husband's attention to the older son born to another woman. Butler does include David Fleming's angry reactions to seeing television news stories about losses in South Viet Nam and the evacuation of orphans in Operation Babylift—including the crash of one flight that killed most of the children "rescued." The attentive reader, however, will not only assess the personal, social and cultural conflicts explicit in the story, but will also recognize the broader, long-term implications of David Fleming bringing an Amerasian child back to an America in which Anglo and European ethnicities dominate the cultural mix.

1. During the Viet Nam war and during the more recent Persian Gulf war, some officers and enlisted personnel were court martialed for refusal to obey orders. In certain cases, the individuals claimed conscientious objection to war in general or to the specific war in which the U.S.

was engaged at the time. Does David Fleming qualify as a conscientious objector to warfare? Does he deserve to be sentenced to prison for what he did?

Why was he not given any time in prison?

2. In American society, what are the consequences of a person receiving either a general discharge or a dishonorable discharge from military service? What effects might the dishonorable discharge have on David Fleming's economic future? Does he show any signs of caring about his economic future?

3. Since World War II, several million Americans have served overseas. Thousands of men have married women from other countries and brought them home to the U.S. Thousands of men have fathered children—knowingly or unknowingly—and have left them behind. In many cultures, a child "belongs" to the father, and the fatherless mixed-race child is often a social outcast. French policy has been that children of French personnel born of overseas liaisons have a right to claim French residency. U.S. policy has only provided immigration preference or assistance to the children left behind by U.S. military personnel if a specific program was established to facilitate migration of a defined group. There is otherwise no standard policy that children borne of casual or

short-term relationships between U.S. military personnel and nationals of other countries have any right to come to their "father's country."

Should the U.S. establish a policy facilitating the immigration of the children sired and abandoned by U.S. military personnel overseas? What proofs of eligibility should be required? Should the basic fact that the person is of mixed race be sufficient proof?

4. During the Viet Nam war, some of the strongest support for the war and opposition to communism came from conservative religious groups. Generally speaking, the ideals of piety that conservative religious groups in America emphasize would condemn casual premarital and extramarital sex. As Butler portrays David Fleming's relationship with Suong, are there any references to religious or cultural taboos? Does either member of the couple raise issues of "right or wrong behavior" for discussion in the relationship? In the broad sweep of the novel, does the writer seem to shape the reader's view toward particular opinions of right and wrong, or does he present actions and situations in an objective or "value neutral" manner?

5. In presenting Jennifer Fleming, Butler gives the reader views of a woman in the last stage of pregnancy dealing with her husband's problems and occasional outbursts of temper, and then brought home from the hospital with a new son and post-partum depression or "baby blues." If a woman writer covered the same time span in the Flemings' lives, what more might the reader see of Jennifer Fleming's experiences, thoughts and feelings? Could more be given on Jennifer's response to David's admission of the relationship with Suong and his desire to search for the son he suspects may exist without moving the plot away from being David's story? How believable is Jennifer's acceptance of David's apparent passion for fatherhood? What are the long-term implications of bringing a mixed race child into a "white" American family?

6. What motivates the interactions between Trask, the CIA agent, and Fleming? What help does Trask actually provide to Fleming? What is Fleming expected to do in return? How much success does Fleming have in fulfilling his end of the bargain with Trask? What affects his ability to operate back in Saigon?

7. How many places does David go in search of Suong? What facts does he learn about her life after she broke off the relationship with him? What does he learn about her political activity? What consequences come of her political activity under the presidency of Nguyen Van Thieu? What consequences of her position come during David's return visit to Saigon?

8. What aspects of Vietnamese culture and decorum does Butler reveal as Fleming encounters Suong, Tuyen, Madame Trung and other Vietnamese people?

How easily does Fleming communicate with Suong, with Tuyen, and with Madame Trung?

9. While still in the U.S., David has an irrepressible desire to seek out Suong and the son he thinks she may have. What does he feel when he actually meets Khai? Why

does he debate whether or not Khai is his child? Why does he decide to trust Madame Trung's plan of escape?

10. What does David know about or learn about Pham Van Tuyen in the first part of the story? How important is Tuyen believed to be? Why isn't Fleming in charge of Tuyen for a long period of time? After the fall of South Viet Nam, what role does Tuyen play in the new government bureaucracy?

11. How often, after his return to Saigon, does David Fleming see or encounter Tuyen? When does David Fleming first recognize Tuyen? When does Tuyen first recognize Fleming? Since Tuyen's bureau has located and executed other CIA operatives in the Saigon region and elsewhere, why should he let Fleming leave Viet Nam, and why does he arrange documentation for Khai as well?

12. Butler has given the reader a main character who is a U.S. Army officer, and has set the plot lines in the Viet Nam war era. Still, the plot involves little combat and much exploration of identity and relationships. Is On Distant Ground really a "war story"? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

Often readers comparing more recent literature to earlier "war stories" look back to classics such as Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage (1895; see separate entry) or Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (1929; see separate entry) for models of soldiers struggling to understand themselves as they react to privation, boredom, desperation and horrors of warfare. In On Distant Ground, Butler portrays a minimum of violence, focusing far more on the soldier laboring to interpret his feelings and actions, and to choose to act righdy. In this regard, this novel shows more parallel to Ernest Hemingway's several short stories that feature his moody, inarticulate World War I veteran, Nick, attempting to understand his place in the world and not fitting in well with his family after he has returned to civilian life.

Related Titles

Among his works, Butler uses reference to one small military intelligence unit working near and in Saigon in several ways. His first published novel The Alleys of Eden (1981) follows the life of Clifford Wilkes, an enlisted man from the MI unit, who deserted and lived in hiding with Lanh, a bar girl in Saigon. Fleming, the captain of the MI unit, is the lead character in On Distant Ground, and Wilson Hand, the enlisted man held for a week by the Viet Cong, then freed when Fleming raids the hut in which Hand is a prisoner, appears briefly as a witness at Fleming's court martial, but is the main character in Sun Dogs (1982)—not "a Viet Nam war novel"—in which he is a New York based private eye hired by an oil company to investigate the theft of documents from a records center on an Alaska North Slope oil pipeline site.

Butler's novel The Deuce (1989; see separate entry) does not overtly include any of the characters whose stories form links in the three novels just cited. It does portray a Vietnamese-American teen who runs away from his American father and who frequently ponders his identity. In that regard, Butler explores in The Deuce the issues of the mixed-race child in a "white" family which would logically follow in the future for David Fleming and his son Khai.

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