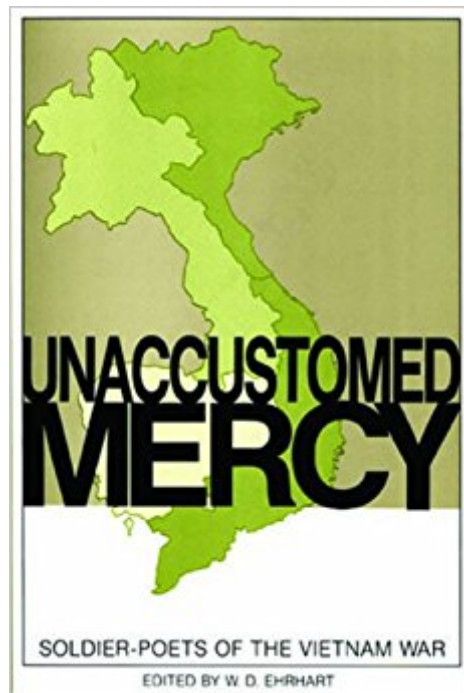


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Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets Of The Vietnam War



Synopsis

Every poet in this anthology represents the terrible beauty that Vietnam engendered in sensitive hearts, the curious grace with which the human spirit can endow even the ugliest realities. "No one will get out of this volume without being hammered in the heart and singed in the soul. I could touch the tears on page after page." —Wallace Terry

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W. D. Ehrhart holds an Honorable Discharge from the US Marine Corps and a PhD from the
University of Wales at Swansea. The recipient of the President's Medal from Veterans for Peace, a
Pew Fellowship in the Arts, two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowships, a Mary Roberts
Rinehart Foundation Grant, and an Excellence in the Arts Award from Vietnam Veterans of America,
he is the husband of Anne and father of Leela, and teaches English and history at the Haverford
School in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he also coaches winter track and sponsors
the school's student journal of literature and art. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I know poetry. I teach the stuff. I don't know war. Firsthand, that is. But I suspect I've come as close
as I'll get by reading *Unaccustomed Mercy*. I very much enjoy poetry, but I don't like - really like -
many poems. So much poetry is solipsistic slop and slobbering encased in fine technique. This
book is different. This book is real. Ehrhart offers us slice after slice of war, of being right in the
middle of it, of it being right in the middle of you, physically, emotionally, and years after it was
supposedly over. Ehrhart's editing is masterful. He's earned the right to choose who goes in the
book, and he's chosen well. Some critics have said that what these works lack in poetic technique
they make up for in gut-searing impact. Half right. The necessary technique is there. Whether
studied or intuitive, form fits content in poem after poem. I have a PhD in literature. I write and
publish this stuff. Well, not this stuff. I've not lived this stuff, thank God. Every poet in this book has
though. And they've let me get close. We all know the war was bullsh*t. Still, readers will thank the
poets for their poems and their service.

War poetry, as opposed to poetry written by veterans, is certainly not new. The "Iliad" comes to

mind. Most English literature classes also throw in poetry from World War I, which produced the likes of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Not since Vietnam has American Literature produced such fine poets. Thanks to the best-known Vietnam War poet Will Ehrhart, often described as the "Poet Laureate of the Vietnam War," we have a number of such poets being published. Ehrhart (Marine) is known for early work such as "A Relative Thing," an angry statement reminding America that we returned veterans did "your" work ("accomplices in this travesty of dreams") and that "we are your sons, America, and you cannot change that." In "Letter," we see hope on the horizon. Bruce Weigl (Army) is my second favorite poet. It is from his "Monkey" that the title of this collection comes from. "Burning **** at An Khe" speaks to us Vietnam veterans on more than one level. "Song for the Lost Private," about the death of a friend, and "Anna Grasa," about his reaction to a family "welcome home" truly capture some of our inner feelings. Walter McDonald (Air Force) can write some varied poetry, from people to places. "For Kelly, Missing In Action," and "For Harper, Killed In Action," are about obvious topics. Likewise, "After the Noise of Saigon," and "For Friends Missing in Action" should be read in tandem. His "Interview with a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army" is simply too witty for description. Bryan Alec Floyd (Marine) writes one of the most poignant poems in this book. All his poems in this collection are named after individuals. His "Private First Class Brooks Morgenstein, U.S.M.C." is the one poem all should read. Brooks has a wife at home, and this is the sole reason for his being and his survival. "He only knew as he held his rifle/during a sweeping operation/that next year he would hold her/and when he kissed her/his tongue would touch hers/and she would feel/as though a piece of the sun/was in her mouth." I know I am leaving out all the other fine poets represented in this book, not least Jan Barry, a close friend of Ehrhart's. We all owe our gratitude not just to the poets of the Vietnam War, but most certainly to Will Ehrhart for ceaselessly working to bring us this exceptionally beautiful form of expression.

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