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REVIEWS

Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point,
by Elizabeth D. Samet. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 259 pp., $23.00 hardbound.

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Perhaps no one was as surprised as Elizabeth Samet at finding herself a professor of literature at West Point. It seemed an unlikely turn for a young woman raised in what she agreeably calls the People's Republic of Massachusetts and educated at left-liberal Ivy League schools ("You mean they read?" her mother's acquaintances ask upon hearing of Samet's work [178]), but the Academy is where she landed for her first serious and still current academic position. And given that her new book describes how she brings literary dimension to military education during a time of war, perhaps no one was as surprised as I to find that despite its virtues, I could not bring myself to like it very much.

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"Soldier's heart" is an old term for what has also been called shell shock, battle fatigue, and most recently post-traumatic stress disorder. Since Samet's major contact is with cadets who have not yet seen combat, the phrase becomes a kind of metaphor for what she calls the "multiple contradictions of their private and professional worlds" (11), by which she means, in part, the complexities in reconciling liberal education with preparation for warfare. The term also becomes a metaphor for her own ambivalence about her work and how it serves the military.

To be sure, in many ways Samet admires the military culture around her at the Point. After all, she had always revered her father's service in World War II. Moreover, coming from the studied "doubt and disenchantment" instilled in her from years of American higher education, she found that "West Point won me back to a kind of idealism. Having been coached by professionals to cultivate ironic detachment, I allowed myself to be seduced by esprit de corps—by the worth of community and commitment, and by the prospect of surrendering myself to a shared mission" (55).

But those years of cultivated skepticism were evidently hard to overcome and early in the book she blasts us with

these nihilistic cautions from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (Houghton Mifflin/Seymour, 1980):

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest proper models of human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (cited on 39)

Whew! Samet thus finds herself navigating a "treacherous terrain," as her feelings of admiration for bravery and self-sacrifice (she reproduces Audie Murphy's Medal of Honor citation in full) are continually punctured—"punctuated by those moments of shuddering recognition and reversal that confront the objects of seduction as surely as novelty and shining armor captivate it" (55). This results in a tentativeness that pervades the book and, although such a stance is favored by contemporary tastes that reject "absolutes" and "black and white thinking" in favor of "uncertainty" and "shades of gray," the back-and-forth can become tedious and tense by turns, without benefit of catharsis.

Indeed, when the tension grows too great, by her own admission Samet often escapes into literature. Confronted with Brad, for example, a cadet who is experiencing doubts about his vocation, Samet reminds him of Tolstoy's Prince Andrey, who hastens into battle and never confronts the complexities of his feelings about it. Samet wants Brad to see that a thoughtful soldier will sometimes question his task. But then she reflects that

> even as I know that fewer wars would be fought if the Andreys of the world stopped feeling that primal urge to go to battle, I also realize with breathtaking selfishness that even more wars would be lost, and that on occasion we might be lost, if the Brads of the world decided to sit them out rather than to serve. Once again I have retreated—or advanced—to literature perhaps because I'm more comfortable analyzing it than I am my own relationship to war and to the people who wage it. (169–70)

Aside even from these unresolved conflicts, Samet might consider why it is "selfishness" to recognize that our civilization would be doomed if there weren't some men willing to fight for it when necessary. Is it less

selfish to bequeath a world of barbarism to those who follow us?

As I've indicated, however, the book does offer some pleasures. The author believes in the importance of literature in the education of military men and women, and in this she contrasts with such as David Hackworth, the highly decorated Army colonel who saw the teaching of poetry at West Point as part of the softening up that prepared the way for American defeat in Vietnam, where he had served as a brigadier commander. (Samet points out a nice irony here—the title of Hackworth's book, *Steel My Soldiers' Hearts*, comes from *Henry V*.) She brings Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Wallace Stevens, Randall Jarrell, and many others to bear in her interestingly planned courses, and commends to our attention a lot of valuable prose literature as well, from Plutarch to Matthew Arnold to William Golding. In her classes she conscientiously tries to provoke thought and discussion, both of the texts themselves and of their potential relevance to the military profession. She forms connections with her students and stays in touch with many after they graduate and move into the theatre of war.

We also learn something of the history of West Point; that Pershing and MacArthur were both first captains who led the Corps of Cadets, and how literature and the humanities came to be taught there. We learn of the wide diversity of students—the cadets' backgrounds range from families with a long tradition of military service to parents who protested the Vietnam War. We see something of everyday life as well, hear a little of the lingo (a discussion of *hooah*, for example), and are perhaps surprised to come upon pizza parties, movie nights, and readings from visiting poets such as Jorie Graham and Robert Pinsky, especially if we were thinking of West Point as a kind of well-manicured world still redolent of the 1950s (there is that, too). A student favorite is *Patton*, and many cadets have the general's speech to his troops as rendered in that film's opening by heart—as does Samet, although she also rather condescendingly suspects that he was the kind of soldier her preferred General Grant characterized as "always aching for a fight" (39).

And we learn something of the history of the military via interesting details and anecdotes. While the Austro-Hungarian Empire awarded a medal for soldiers who achieved victory by disobeying orders, for example, the United States military has no such medal because individual judgment is expected. And during World War II, over one hundred

million books were distributed to the GIs, everything from the classics to Zane Grey. “Books are weapons” was the motto printed on Dell War paperbacks, and soldiers even read in their landing craft on the way to Normandy.

But none of this can quite make up for the overall lack of clear and focused argument in the book. Samet opposes the war in Iraq, for example, and states that she never accepted any of the justifications for undertaking it, yet neither does she ever fully explain her objections nor confront the enemy we face in what West Point calls the “Long War,” namely Islamic jihad.

A similar lack of dimension surrounds her discussion of women in the military and at the Point. We gather that simmering below the surface there is a belief that sexual integration has weakened the Corps, that the Army has been feminized, and that the presence of women has created problems, among them, evidently, that no one can talk openly of his misgivings. Samet seems to think these objections are unwarranted and purely the result of residual misogyny, but never really meets them head on or presents a cogent picture of her own views. The mocking criticism of “diversity” initiatives as “sensitivity training,” for example, Samet dismisses with only an offhand observation—“as if a more thorough understanding of his troops couldn’t enhance an officer’s combat readiness” (100). Or she wonders why the United States Army can’t be more successful at integrating women, as have been the militaries of other countries, but never thinks that other armies are not tasked as is ours. She is miffed at any suggestion that women are more emotional, but several pages later rather unthinkingly recounts how a female cadet fled her office in tears after receiving some strong criticism.

Likewise, regarding military malfeasance, when reports emerged of “crimes in Iraq and Guantanamo,” Samet suddenly found that “a group of cadets I already knew to be humane and thoughtful metamorphosed in my imagination into budding war criminals” (127), and her teaching grew strident and shrill. But she doesn’t consider what actually led to Abu Ghraib—pie-in-the-sky expectations of what the Iraqis would be capable of immediately following the fall of Saddam, insufficient planning, poor leadership, lack of discipline, all crowned by what was no doubt the “diversity” appointment of a female general to head the prison and allowed to stay in charge long after her inadequacy had become clear. For Samet, Abu Ghraib simply exemplifies the potential for brutality ever lurking among soldiers, even as she must

acknowledge, if somewhat meagerly, something ineffably good in her cadets:

> The belief held by many West Pointers that the Army is one of the last repositories of honor, selflessness, and virtue in a fallen world is a troubling one in the light, for example, of the revelations from Abu Ghraib. The marvel of it is that there are still moments [arising from contact with some of her students] when this proposition seems to me to contain a shred of truth. (171)

The lack of evaluative analysis affects her approach to teaching as well. She makes little distinction between the worth of the cynical outlook of an Ambrose Bierce, for example, vis-à-vis the sublimely tragic vision of Shakespeare or Tolstoy. And while she of course wants the literature to connect to the students' lives, this connection seems to be almost entirely personal and seldom rises to a sense of the larger whole—the culture, heritage, and tradition to which her students belong, the civilization and way of life that they have enlisted to defend.

In the end, Samet makes a kind of peace with her doubts and divisions. She believes literature can help her students to develop a "deliberative" kind of courage, something more durable than being "merely brave"; and a "mature knowledge"—"an ability to know more than one truth, to rest in uncertainty when uncertainty is required, and to change one's mind when the evidence demands" (234). This sounds good, but one can close the book with a feeling that it is not nearly enough.