

An interview with Roy Scranton, author of *War Porn*

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Roy Scranton, the author of the newly released novel *War Porn* (SoHo Press). Scranton enlisted in the US Army in 2002 and served with the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad, first as a Private Second Class before ultimately being promoted to Sergeant. His novel treats both the experiences of American soldiers in Iraq and at home, but, unusually, also attempts to present the reality of the war from the point of view of Iraqi civilians.

After returning from Iraq, Scranton received an MA from the New School for Social Research and a PhD in English from Princeton. He presently teaches in the University of Notre Dame Department of English.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reviewed *War Porn* earlier this month and noted that it “expresses and helps advance the profound social anger that is emerging amidst the rumble of a society devastated by imperialist war.” In the eyes of this reviewer, it is the most memorable and aesthetically rich anti-war novel to have emerged in response to the “war on terror.”

To a certain extent, Scranton reflects in literary terms the same objective opposition to imperialist war and conspiracy that finds expression in figures like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. For all three, their experiences in the “wars of the 21st century” shattered the veil of lies regarding the democratic and humanitarian character of those conflicts.

The emergence of such a novel indicates that the objective realities of war and economic hardship are increasingly coming into conflict with the stale and largely subjective intellectual and artistic trends that have dominated in recent decades. Serious writers have the responsibility to employ their skills and sensibilities to break literature from the prejudices and upper-middle-class conformism that still carry such weight.

The WSWS is grateful to have spoken with Roy Scranton and publishes an edited text of the conversation below:

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Eric London: An early section of *War Porn* portrays the deeply reactionary climate amongst the American occupation forces in Iraq, expressed in the harshness of the language and the official encouragement of a culture of brutality.

Roy Scranton: That’s the easy part of the genre. The “war novel” genre in America today is typically some version of a quest narrative. A young man goes to war with whatever vision or ideals he has and then finds out war is hell and when he comes back there is typically a moment of redemption or recuperation.

This can be done in a complicated, aesthetically interesting, and beautiful way like Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* [1990]. This is the canonical work in this narrative and working against it was one of the key motivations I had in writing *War Porn*. The story of the soldier going to war had to be one of the main parts of the book, but I tried to turn this formula on its head while also trying to work with the genre in some ways.

For example, the war is often the flashback in this type of narrative, but in the sections following Wilson [a prominent character] in the book, the war is the present tense and his civilian life is flashback. Before he ever

joins the military he is living in a trailer on the Oregon coast.

EL: The US has been at war for twenty-five years and imperialist war has been a central feature of political and cultural life for over a century. There is a passage in your book where you seem to mock formulaic patriotism and its dominance in popular culture. You mention here “the stories of previous wars.” How has this affected American society more broadly?

RS: We’ve been at war since the United States was founded. If you go back even past 100 years you get to the wars against the Native Americans, and the story of the US is the story of soldiers killing brown people and clearing land for businessmen and farmers and bankers. That seems to be the way we do it. It was the same in Iraq. There is a certain language that the American story is a war story. It’s the story of empire.

Interestingly, the artillery unit I served with in Oklahoma when I got back from Iraq had an insignia with two crossed swords on a red sun. One of the swords was wavy and the other was straight. That unit insignia commemorated a battle the unit fought, which was called the Battle of Bud Bajo [in March 1906]. This took place in the Philippines after the Spanish-American war.

It was a massacre. This battalion and some other units climbed up this dormant volcano to a village of mostly women and children, armed with swords. They came up the side and just shot down into the bowl of the volcano where the villagers were. The red sun commemorates how the field ran red with the blood of the so-called “insurgents.” That’s deep inside the culture of the US military, this history of imperial conquest. It’s the living heart of the American military.

EL: It was out of the imperialist bloodbath of the First World War that some of the greatest American literature emerged: John Dos Passos’ *Three Soldiers* [1921], E. E. Cummings’ *The Enormous Room* [1922], of course Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* [1929], and somewhat later Katherine Ann Porter’s story *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* [1939].

RS: Dos Passos is a great example. Nobody reads *Three Soldiers* today. That kind of anti-war novel has continued to be written, but often it is shunted aside by later critics and by more recent writers. This is a huge question: when did the trauma narrative become the main way Americans talked about war? This is a version of the quest narrative I was talking about earlier where a soldier learns something true about the world. You have [English poet] Wilfred Owen and Tim O’Brien. And these books can be pro-war, as with Ernst Junger’s *Storm of Steel* [1920].

For that matter it is not just World War One, it is also World War Two. You have James Jones and John Oliver Killens...

EL: Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* [1948] ...

RS: Right. Now, Jones and Mailer come out of the proletarian novel tradition and Killens out of the Richard Wright tradition. These are authors who are trying to make sense of World War II. In the ’60s and ’70s this method was superseded by books like [Joseph Heller’s] *Catch 22* [1961] and [Kurt Vonnegut’s] *Slaughterhouse-Five* [1969] and [Thomas

Pynchon's] *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973], which changed the focus to the individual traumatized soldier.

I would argue there is a complicated process developing here, where writers are trying to work out the problem of how to reconcile the official narrative of nationalist sacrifice with the logic of capitalist exchange, where it is not about sacrificing bodies but rather it's about turning human labor into a commodity, turning everything into an exchangeable commodity.

EL: *War Porn* has been described as an angry novel. At one point, you describe a soldier receiving the bronze star after shooting a mentally retarded Iraqi child in the chest. One of the most effective moments in the novel is when you quote, in its entirety, George W. Bush's speech announcing the beginning of the war in March 2003. Why did you quote the whole speech and why does it work?

RS: I quote that speech from the point of view of the Iraqi family in Baghdad waiting for the invasion. That's part of the idea behind the concept of the book structurally, is that truth is always in the eye of the other. Truth is dialectical. I think this is one of the great things that the novel as a form has to offer as opposed to television and film, because the novel can still express a dialectical consciousness and engagement that no other art form can do.

We get to see not just how people see each other but how different worlds are constructed and how they are constructed in relation to one another's worlds. It's one thing listening to Bush's speech here in America. There is the classic literary moment of the calm before the storm. It is a conventional dramatic moment. To put that in the setting of America's moment, it is like thinking, "What will happen to our boys?" It is Pearl Harbor or 9/11.

But I wanted to dramatize what would 9/11 look like to the people of Iraq? 9/11 was just a little clink compared to the devastation that we unleashed on Baghdad. We blew that city the f--- up. I wanted that sense of drama and I wanted that sense of impending doom from an Iraqi point of view. I wanted to establish what Bush was saying would have sounded like to an Iraqi family waiting to be bombed. It's one thing to be critical of Bush's rhetoric and we can all do that, but I wanted to push it. None of it was legitimate. Even if there are people in Iraq who were hoping for the US invasion and hoping to get rid of Saddam, even for them the speech is a moment of total crisis.

EL: The idea that the "truth is dialectical" is also expressed in the descriptions of Baghdad, which seem so aesthetically beautiful in part because you contrast the ancient city and its inhabitants with the devastation unleashed by American imperialism.

RS: I wanted Baghdad to be alive. Wilson's Baghdad is very different from Qasim's Baghdad. They both lived there, Wilson for one year and Qasim for many years. The Baghdad I saw as a soldier was a ruined place torn by war. It was hostile. The city wanted to kill me. The city and the people merged into one giant hostile environment where the only place I felt safe was behind the walls and inside the wire of the most protected US bases, and even there you'd still get mortared.

But I knew even then that this was a city that people lived in, it was their home, and part of what I did going back in 2014 with *Rolling Stone* was to try to uncover or understand or to see Baghdad more from the point of view of someone for whom Baghdad is home. I wanted to make that idea and that place live. I wanted to humanize it, to make it beautiful in places. I wanted to make it mean something that we destroyed it.

EL: To what extent did you undertake a study of the modern history of Iraq as part of your research for *War Porn*? Did you study the fact that Iraq once had a mass socialist movement, and that in the mid-20th century its Communist Party was among the most powerful in the region, with over 100,000 members?

RS: I did take these historical questions up as part of my research. I was trying to understand Baghdad and the situation there. Of course, once you

start reading the history you come to understand how deeply the US has been involved in manipulating and intervening in the region over and over again, particularly against socialist and workers parties.

The US and Great Britain have been profoundly antipathetic and hostile to any kind of real democratic and socialist organization in Iraq specifically, but across the Middle East. You see it again and again since the discovery of oil and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. You also see at moments how the Soviet Union is involved in the great power politics of the region.

EL: It has now been 25 years since the fall of the Soviet Union. How has this impacted the cultural level of humanity and how can writers approach this question? The October Revolution had an immense impact on several generations of writers.

RS: First, Russian writers have been talking about the fall of the Soviet Union since it happened. I'm not as conversant with that work as I would like to be but I do know there is a vibrant, complicated literature being written dealing with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its transition to wild west capitalism and then to the rise of Putin.

Second, from an American point of view, the fall of the USSR is a moment of American imperial victory. The greatest enemy of 50 years or so finally fell apart and we have people like Francis Fukuyama saying it's the "end of history." And that is most definitely worth trying to understand through the novel and through literary terms, this complicated global moment.

EL: I'm reminded of Edmund Wilson's essay, "The Literary Consequences of the Crash," or really the entirety of "The American Earthquake," again, going back to the impact of the Russian Revolution and the 1929 economic crisis on literature.

RS: When you mentioned Edmund Wilson, I thought of the crash of 2008, the Great Recession, and how since then there has been a change in the way people talk about socialism and capitalism. That may eventually make more of a mark on American culture than I think the fall of the Soviet Union did, although in a way it's all of a piece and it's all connected. The most interesting work would be one that could connect the Clinton years and the fall of the Soviet Union to the war on terror and the Great Recession and this hellish moment we're in now. And moreover it would have to deal with the crisis of climate change.

EL: You have a situation today where the class struggle has essentially been suppressed for almost 40 years, since the PATCO strike and Reagan's firing of 11,000 air traffic controllers. Yet the class struggle had an immense impact on the post-First World War literary scene.

RS: The fact of the matter is that literary fiction is predominately a leisure entertainment of upper-middle-class people and a few wealthy people. As a result, it's going to largely reflect the ideological predispositions of those people. These are the books that editors are going to push and that agents are going to sell. The institution of the MFA program serves to house and protect a sort of literary production within the universities. Ideologically, it is middle-class even if so many adjuncts now are more working class.

I don't have an easy answer. To talk about class conflict in the US is always profoundly difficult because of the way it has been repressed and deflected and the ways in which it is projected into race. There is supposedly no such thing as poor people in America, just people who haven't gotten rich yet. To talk of class consciousness in America, to think about American culture in a Marxist way has been a longstanding problem.

There is a new graphic novel by Maximilian Uriarte called the "White Donkey." It's really good. It is a class conscious work and it is a very strong story, a very astute work about the American occupation of Iraq.



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