

Seeing Backward: An Interview with Whitney Terrell



In the novels [The Huntsman](#) and [The King of Kings County](#), Whitney Terrell tackled politically charged problems like housing segregation and institutional racism. Both novels are set in his hometown of Kansas City, Mo., the near epicenter of the United States, where these issues have erupted on a national stage. Terrell's third novel, [The Good Lieutenant](#), features a protagonist from the same landscape, Emma Fowler, who attempts to escape it and the burden of family by becoming an officer in the United States Army. The Good Lieutenant is a bravura performance in terms of form and style, restoring what Adam Johnson has called "one of our most encrusted literary forms—the war novel"—[through the tropes of some of its most venerated practitioners](#) (Conrad, Heller, O'Brien). With doses of black humor and irony, the fragmented narrative unspools backward from what would traditionally be the climax of a war novel—the "crucible of combat"—back toward the snow-swept fields of Kansas, but Terrell doesn't let the reader off the hook. The Good Lieutenant is a devastating novel—unflinching in its commitment to telling the truth, to the principle of the artist as Akira Kurosawa defined it: "to never avert one's eyes." We spoke to Terrell about war novels, embedding as a reporter in Iraq, and the long tradition of the Army as a source of absurd humor.

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Zac Gall: John Freeman recently said, "*The Good Lieutenant* is one of the best war novels I've ever read. It's as if Emma (Woodhouse) went to war." Is this a comparison you anticipated or had in mind while writing the book?

Whitney Terrell: The idea of naming Emma was in my mind, but maybe it was just because I like the form and shape and sound of the word “Emma,” and so certain parts of her personality when I was originally conceiving her felt like that word fit it. And maybe the word felt like it fit because of that book, but in terms of drawing didactic connections between the two, I didn’t really spend a lot of time thinking about that.

ZG: Besides the use of the name, I suspect that Freeman made that leap because of Austen’s famous use of irony. Because of the structure of *The Good Lieutenant*, there’s a lot of dramatic irony, which is decidedly not funny, but there’s a lot of humor in the novel as well. How important was it to consider humor for this novel and for this story in particular?

WT: Well, first of all, you have to realize—and I’m sure that most people do—that the Army is a reasonably funny place. Jane Austen’s characters *are* funny, they have a dry wit and are smart and sharp very often. My character Emma has to learn to be funny in the way that the men are funny in her platoon. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with her sense of humor, it’s just a different kind of sensibility, and many of the women I spoke with when I was interviewing them and embedded [in Iraq] referenced that need—you’ve got to be able to banter or bullshit with the guys in the platoon. And if you can’t have that sense of humor, if you can’t make fun of yourself, if you can’t make fun of them—efficiently, when you need them to be quiet—you will lose control. That humor is a form of leadership. Humorless leaders are not very widely respected.

ZG: And one of the central conflicts in *The Good Lieutenant* is Emma’s constant struggle for the respect she needs to do her job well—within her platoon, but in the larger contexts of the Army as well. Captain Masterson, an infantry officer, essentially targets Emma and makes it his project to disrespect her.

WT: In an early version of the Captain Masterson character, he was a much more Kurtzian character in the sense that he was spouting off supposedly deep, meaningful philosophies of war to Emma Fowler’s inexperienced self, and one of the very good changes of the book was to make him not that person anymore, which is a cliché, and I had to write through those clichés to discover that Masterson was just a regular guy, that his ideas are not that complicated, but they’re powerful.

His fundamental idea is “my job is to create a group, and to have a group you have to have people who aren’t in the group. I will create that situation in order to protect my soldiers, so I will make you, Fowler, someone who is not in my group. And I am going to trash you and give you shit because it’s going to make my soldiers stronger.” It’s hard to argue with that perspective—that’s how every football team works.

ZG: So it’s a team-building exercise when Masterson’s platoon stacks 400 pounds on Fowler’s back while she’s doing squats and they all walk out of the room.

WT: Yes. Of course. Exactly. This goes on in every environment from grade school on up. I know for a fact that groups of women do the same thing, but in this case we’re not dealing with groups of women, we’re dealing with groups of guys, and they’re looking for the outsider, the

person to pick on, the person that they then can align themselves against and become stronger. Emma is a good target for Masterson.

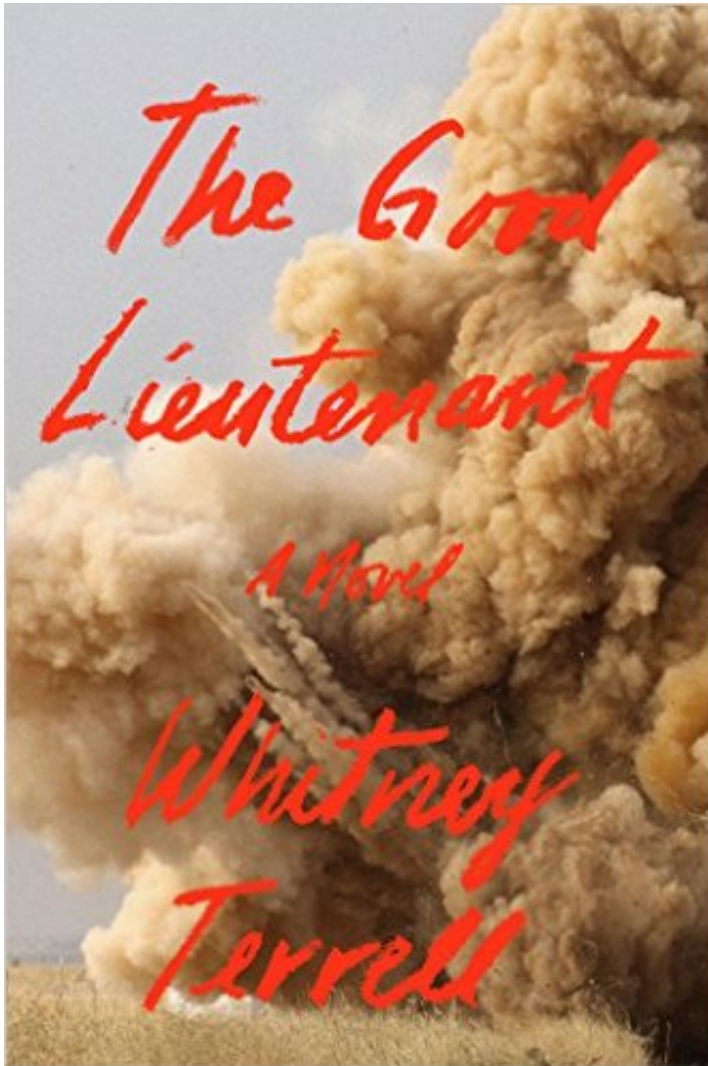
ZG: In addition to the characters' use of humor as a ploy or tactic, you use it, too, as the author. This is a pretty funny book, given the material. A lot of war novels—recent ones, historically significant ones—are . . .

WT: Not funny?

ZG: Yeah. They're severe, or they're dour. In one scene in your novel, Emma's CO tasks her with finding a dress for his wife—something he obviously wouldn't ask his male lieutenants to do, and something Emma herself isn't remotely interested in figuring out—and while she uses the standard euphemisms around him to decide what kind of dress she needs to buy, the language is more direct when she farms out the task to another LT, who writes in an e-mail, "What kind of dress looks good on a fat woman?" So, why is humor like this so important in this novel? What tradition does this come out of, or did you look to particular models as you wrote it?

WT: Well, one of the things that was difficult for me in the early drafts of this book was that it felt too serious and too one-note. You know, "Oh my god, this is terrible," and that was the only note I could play. Nobody wants to read a book—and, in fact, life in the Army, even in a really stressful period like [the one] in the book, isn't that one-note the entire time. And I've always liked to use humor in novels. For instance, I'm a big fan of Richard Russo. I think he's very funny. I'm a fan of Lorrie Moore. She's very funny. She's written about the Iraq War in *The Gate at the Stairs*, and I think of her as an important influence. It just depends on what war novels you're looking at if you want humor. Tony Swafford's memoir *Jarhead* uses humor extremely well. It's dark humor, but it's funny. And so it wasn't until I figured out how to get that into the book that the book felt more accurate. I also think that going backward helps, because as you get away from the kind of places that aren't funny, there's a little bit more space for the characters to breathe. So that scene that you're referencing with the dress, that's at the beginning of her time in the Army, but it's at the end of the book. There's more space for goofing around there. That made me happy. I wanted the book to get lighter instead of darker as it retreated.

ZG: The landscape writing in this book is excellent. We're in a place that is creating terrible situations for the characters, and yet at the same time it's an interesting place to describe and for them to look at. The environment is strange to them but still beautiful. How important was it to see that for yourself and maybe, too, its effect on the soldiers you embedded with?



WT: Landscape has always been incredibly important to me. I've spent a lot of time writing about the landscape of rural Missouri and then the urban landscape of Kansas City. Getting the landscape of this place right was part of making myself feel comfortable about writing about this space. If you look in my office, there are tons of hand-drawn maps of the area of operations. There is a patchwork of Google Maps shots; I created a visual overhead of the area of operations out of screenshots of where we were from Google Maps and pinned them all together. I have hundreds and hundreds of photographs of that area, and so I drew visually on all that material. The other thing that was helpful and interesting to me—[the landscape] felt so familiar. That area of the country west of Baghdad is pretty verdant, it grows crops, there are irrigation canals. The difference is there are date palms, but if you were looking at western Kansas and you replaced the cottonwoods with eucalyptus trees, you would be looking at very similar landscapes. In an odd way, and a way that very much surprised me, when we went outside the wire on patrol, I felt like “whoa, huh. Look at this. I've seen country like this before.”

ZG: Contemporary fiction writers often rely on Google Maps for details like those you mentioned. Can you get the same effect going to “street view” and navigating a site?

WT: I don't think you can get a feel for a place, and there are so many complicated things going on during an embedded reporting mission. You can't do it through photographs. As much as I like to argue that, if they do their research, a writer should be unlimited in the number of things they could write about, I feel very strongly that I would not have been able to do this without having been there. So, yeah, I feel like the immersive experience is important because there's sound, there's smell, there are so many things that aren't captured in photographs. And sometimes there are just the feelings of a place, you know? For instance, I remember one of the most stark, mournful things that I ever saw was taking a long convoy from Balad up toward Mosul and coming into Forward Operating Base Marez. It was early in the morning and it was foggy, and we came in and we passed through their tank graveyard where all of these blown-up vehicles were sort of sitting out in the fields at the outside of that base. That's not in the book anywhere, but there's something in the feeling of loss and the sort of spooky nature of what that looked like that, knowing that Marez had a really bad bombing inside its wire that had killed a bunch of people, seeing the plaque for that, and I'm not sure where the front lines are in the fight against ISIS, but imagining later that entire base being overrun after we left—all of that just contributes to your sense and feeling about what that war was like even if it doesn't appear in the book.

ZG: You're a professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and during the writing of this book you taught there as well as at Princeton University as a Hodder Fellow. What affect does teaching have on your writing, or what opportunities has that career afforded you as a writer?

WT: I have a very, very clear memory of there being a period of time when I was figuring out how to write this book the second time—anytime after 2011—when I would be in class saying something about a student story and then would be hit by this sudden wave of cold nausea, and the statement would come into my mind, "You are not doing this in your *own* novel." And I would suddenly be filled by this incredible desire to run home and try to figure out how to do the thing that I was recommending the student do in my own book. So, in a sense, teaching allowed me to externalize in a very systematic way things that I had been doing instinctively as a writer. I had instinctively been able to write my first two novels by just finding my way until it felt good but not really knowing *why*.

With this book, I couldn't find my way instinctively even though I knew the material was good, and so I had to develop a philosophy that would help me explain why it wasn't working and help me figure out how to make it work. That was extremely helpful, and one of the keys was this very simple idea that novels are made up of ethical conflicts. They're composed of many versions of characters with different ethics arguing out their ethic, and that ethical conflict has to be balanced. In other words, there have to be good arguments on both sides. You can't have your ethical conflict be between one character who thinks that civilians should not be murdered in cold blood and one character you says, "Yes, they should be murdered in cold blood." That's not a fair argument. You have to have fair arguments on both sides, and I didn't have that established, especially between Emma and (her boyfriend and fellow lieutenant) Dixon Pulowski, when I was writing the book the first time. Their ethics were too similar.

ZG: You write from the perspective of Ayad, an Iraqi character, and those are some of the

most powerful sections of the book.

WT: Thank you.

ZG: **And you learned Arabic while you were writing this.**

WT: I think learned would be the wrong word [*laughs*]. I think “studied” would be the right word.

ZG: **Okay, so why?**

WT: I did a lot of things for this book that now seem slightly unnecessary. Well, but they don't really. I think it's helpful if you're going to write from the point of view of an Iraqi character who speaks Arabic to at least have some familiarity with the language. And I did study it for a couple of years until I got to the point where I could write reasonably well and could read at a very, very rudimentary level. All of that's gone now, by the way. But I learned the alphabet and I could read signs. I don't know. If you're going to write about somebody and you have no idea how their language operates, you're missing something. Similarly, I took a class on digital signals processing, which is what Dixon Pulowski does, and it gave me a just a couple of lines [in the book] about what it means, but without it I wouldn't have had those lines.

ZG: **Other Iraqi characters play an integral role in the novel. In your drafting of this novel, did you try out any other perspectives?**

WT: Ayad's was the only point of view that I tried to inhabit, and he was present there from the very beginning. I wrote those scenes very early on, and they were easier than the scenes with Emma.

ZG: **Why?**

WT: Because Ayad is a much more likeable and simpler character. His situation was one that the reader's immediately empathetic with, and he was also the first sort of funny character. He had a sense of self-deprecation. I just had a sense of his personality, and it was very easy to get across. His motivations were clear—that's the thing. I had a sense of Emma's personality early on but I didn't understand her motivations, and it took me a long time to understand them. Ayad's motivations were always very clear to me. He wanted to prove that he could be the man of the house; he had never gotten to be that before because of his disability. He was attempting to show that he could be in charge, and at the same time he's a moral person—for him, being in charge doesn't involve violating his moral code. That's a compelling situation to be in.

ZG: **I love this line in particular. It's from an early part of the book from Ayad's perspective when Emma's platoon encounters him for the first time: “What he wanted to do was warn them [. . .] Against this was his awareness of how difficult, and possibly incriminating, this would be to explain, not to mention his fear of prison and arrest, the simple, unreasoning desire to remain free.”**

WT: Imagine what it is like to see a platoon of American soldiers in Humvees drive up on you in

an open space. It would be terrifying! Those guys are trying to be frightening. They're supposed to be scary and intimidating—and they are. And they would be, and I think it's important to see that from the other side. That wasn't hard for me to imagine.

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[Whitney Terrell](#) is the author of *The Huntsman*, a *New York Times* notable book, and *The King of Kings County*. He is the recipient of a James A. Michener-Copernicus Society Award and a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts. He was an embedded reporter in Iraq during 2006 and 2010 and covered the war for the *Washington Post Magazine*, *Slate*, and NPR. His nonfiction has additionally appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The New York Observer*, *The Kansas City Star*, and other publications. He teaches creative writing at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and lives nearby with his family.

Zac Gall is a writer and teacher. His interviews, book reviews, and essays have appeared in the *Kansas City Star*. He lives in Independence, Mo., with his wife and their children.