

Review of *Shooting Wars* by Arthur Goldhammer

Shooting Wars is a brilliant novel, one that I found deeply engaging on a variety of levels: for starters we get informative analysis and insightful historical fiction that captures and reveals the sexual and political dynamics of the second half of 20th century America as well as any novel I know of. The American Vietnam experiences, both in Southeast Asia and on the home-front, are convincingly rendered, as are dimensions of our electoral politics, the film industry, journalism, academics, high-tech fortunes, the American national character, and class relations. More broadly, we get compelling reflections on universal themes-- the sciences and humanities, love, sex, and, death-- a cornucopia of subjects, woven into an expansive but fully coherent tale.

Shooting Wars is also a novel of great characters, many of whose psychological complexity is matched by their philosophical sophistication. The central character, Alex, has the kind of appeal that Hamlet has: in Alex we are obviously confronted by a tremendous intelligence, whose reality is palpable, who nonetheless eludes simple categorization. His fundamental motivations remain opaque, not because we don't believe he would act as he acts, but because truly complex psychology never has fully transparent motives. I think readers, like Alex himself, will be absorbed in trying to figure out what makes Alex tick. The character of Alex makes the book the kind of existential fiction we associate with Sartre and Camus. Although central, Alex is only one of many intriguing characters. In addition, historical figures, notably LBJ, are brought to life and persuasively interpreted.

A novel of memory and a novel self-consciousness, the book is very well served by its structure, wherein we have characters commenting on their own and others' characters, and representations that represent other representations within the novel. All of this is done in the most natural, unstrained way. Multiple perspectives give us no privileged center, and yet are fabricated into a completely believable world, that holds together without a privileged center.

The book could be read as a compilation of wonderful aphorisms alone; “his vision was clouded by clarity,” “the beauty of families: there is no escape so you must cover up,” “most things peter out, that is why it is so damn hard to know when maximal effort is required.” A small sampling of gems on every page.

The book is a beautifully written, great read, indeed a page turner. But not because it is plot driven, but rather because the reader wants to continue to indulge in the pleasures of intelligent talk and acute observation. This is a magnificent book that deserves more than just a wide readership—it deserves a place in our national imagination.

Mitchell Silver