

BOOKS

"Snow is democratic, it buries fences, you can see one field blow into another."

- Patrick Anderson, *Canada With Love*

War correspondent provides new insights on early US involvement in Vietnam

PAT FITZPATRICK
THE BRUNSWICKAN
Once Upon a Distant War
by William Prochnau
(Vintage Books)
546 pages

In 1961, American reporters arrived in Vietnam full of enthusiasm for the latest cold-war battle, expecting, according to renowned author and journalist William Prochnau, "an exotic little war in a land of elephants and tigers." *Once Upon a Distant War* is principally the story of three such reporters, tracking their reports and off-the-record activities as they were slowly transformed from the archetypal Cold War Warriors into harsh critics of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Prochnau, himself a veteran of two combat tours as a reporter in Vietnam, has since served as a national correspondent for *The Washington Post* and has freelanced for most major American news magazines. This combines to give him a unique perspective from which to tell the basic story in *Once Upon a Distant War* as well as performing the attendant analysis of the reporting as it reflected on high-level decision makers. In so doing, his own experiences as one who has heard weapons fired in anger in the streets and jungle of Vietnam with the political savvy of a Washington insider.

While Prochnau's book accomplishes this, it is actually far more as he combines what could have been

an unweildy political and media analysis into the primary narrative, all with the style and flair of a great novel.

Central to the story are Peter Arnett of the Associated Press, Neil Sheehan of United Press International and David Halberstam of the *New York Times*.

Through Sheehan, we learn of the daily struggle of meeting the tight



deadlines demanded by the ultra-competitive upstart UPI. Though relying principally on Sheehan's time in the early days of the war, Prochnau nevertheless ventures afield to track the career of a man so consumed by his experience in the war that it would, over a twenty-five year period, turn him from a hawk into a dove, culminating in the publication of a series of analytical books dealing with Vietnam, such as the study of Col. John Paul Vann in *A Bright Shining Lie*.

Halberstam is introduced to the reader as the brilliant, large, hulking,

often sulking *enfant terrible* of *The New York Times*. The leisure he had as a correspondent for a newspaper as opposed to a wire service, where success is often separated from failure by mere seconds, serves as a fantastic counterpoint to Sheehan. His politician's approach to reportage balances nicely against the brutal, at-the-front approach taken by New Zealander Peter Arnett.

Arnett, who worked for UPI's rival AP, is described by Prochnau as having been the "perfect reporter for a war without heroes" and quickly distinguished himself in Vietnam with his no-nonsense, brawling, in-your-face reportage. In contrast to the other members of the self-titled "band of brothers" in Vietnam, Arnett was to remain after the withdrawal of American troops, lingering in-country until the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese troops. In fact, when NVA

troops marched into his office that fateful day, Arnett greeted them with cigarettes and Cokes, turned his back and continued to file his copy.

Set against the dramatic events of the period, ranging from firefighting to political intrigue and crises, the story of the three protagonists is further

complimented by the detailed account of their involvements with major American and South Vietnamese civilian and military officials, all without ignoring the perspective of the "grunt" in the field.

Despite, or perhaps even because, of the fact that he focuses so heavily on these three individuals, their employers and friends in the press, Prochnau does what has been previously impossible - he has brought new light to the ongoing and often repetitive analysis of the origins of America's involvement in counter-insurgency warfare in Vietnam.

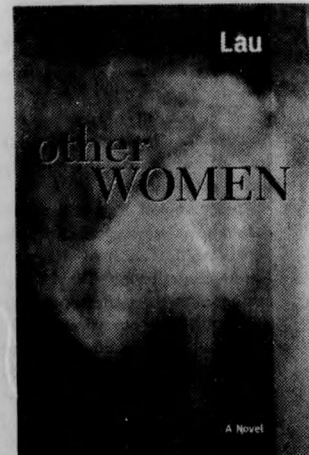
Whether their focus is on the media, the military or on political affairs, readers with any interest in this time period will find *Once Upon a Distant War* to be an insightful, eminently readable account of the early days of the war, both from the media's perspective and from the manner in which politicians of the day reacted to the media's efforts. It's a great addition to any historian or media-watcher's holiday stocking.



Buddhist priest Quang Duc immolates himself in protest of the Diem regime in South Vietnam. This Pulitzer Prize winning photo was taken by Malcolm Browne, AP Bureau Chief in Vietnam and Arnett's immediate superior.

Image and description add lyric quality to novel

CATHERINE AHERN
THE BRUNSWICKAN
Other Women
by Evelyn Lau
(Random House)



Well worth reading, Evelyn Lau's novel *Other Women* is an excellent addition to Canada's literature. Lau has a unique style which flows well and is exceptionally vivid in her descriptions. Lau is first and foremost a poet, and this is easily recognizable in her prose style. In careful, lucid sentences she draws a scene of a young love-starved artist who has fallen in love with an older married man. He warns her frequently that he will not leave his wife as her love for him takes her further and further from reality. There is little history to the lead character, Fiona, except for a few brief memories of her mother and her childhood. Yet still she is a three dimensional character as we watch her life and her affair through her stilted eyes. Raymond, the focus of Fiona's obsession, is a wealthy businessman who puts his work before all else. He denies Fiona himself, as he won't love her, either emotionally or physically.

While there is no easily discernable plot as the novel moves in the same pattern as Fiona's thoughts, there are some plot points though most are merely memories. The story begins the night Raymond leaves her, and almost the entire book is memories which eventually rejoin the present. The story jumps from one surreal image to another, memories replayed so often they have started to fade into a few vivid scenes against a blurry background.

This is not an action novel by any means; the plot is ill defined and there is almost no dialogue. The other characters flit in and out of Fiona's life without explanation and without history. Lau gives little obvious explanations for the choices she has made, and nothing is spoon fed to the reader. This causes the book to be somewhat esoteric, though increases the quality. This is obviously not a book for all audiences as there is no action and very little "happens."

It is not "what happens" that makes this novel stand out, however, but Lau's writing. Her poet's eye has caught the subtleties of many human interactions and she has managed to write them without pretense. For example, she is one of the few who has successfully

written about sex. Having once worked as a prostitute on the streets of Toronto, Lau writes without euphemism or glorification. She realistically shows the interplay of power and manipulation by which people often make use of sex.

As a poet, her descriptions are also particularly effective. Certain images and scenes are simply *right*, such as her description of when Raymond is dumping Fiona: "The phone starts ringing again; he leaps up from the couch, as if he has been saved." Or her description of a sex shop: "I wonder if you have ever come here with your wife, to this store which is as gorgeous and shameless as a voluptuous woman wearing inappropriate clothing. Romance is bottled row on row on shelves, among boxes of condom lollipops and suckers shaped like genitals, porn videos in packages gilded as antique novels." These are images and descriptions which will stay vivid in your mind.

Her true power with words is in her comparisons and connections. The novel flows from thought with the physical world being the link. She writes with accuracy the associative way we remember things, one thing which brings on thoughts of another. With Fiona, thoughts always return to Raymond.

Other Women is a short novel, just under two hundred pages. However, it does not need to be any longer as it is rich enough to be satisfying though short. It's also not too cheap, \$14.95 for the paperback, though the money would be well spent. Since it was supported by Canada Arts Council, it is not a novel which will even make enough to pay for itself financially, but one which will greatly add to Canadian culture.

Book offers comprehensive cultural history of China

MARIA PAISLEY
THE BRUNSWICKAN
China: A History
By Arthur Cotterell
Pimlico
341 pages

China: A History is a knowledgeable and comprehensive survey of the "oldest surviving civilization." It is a cultural history book that covers from prehistoric to modern times. From the disunity of Pre-Imperial China to the renaissance of the Sung and Tang dynasties, from the Mongol conquest to Tiananmen Square and the 1989 student revolt, Arthur Cotterell places the modern China in historical perspective. As a result he shows how

many continuities there are within the Chinese civilization. The book is divided into three sections by using three eras: Pre-Imperial from c. 5000 - 221 BC, Imperial China (which is subdivided into three time periods, The Early Empire from 221 BC - 316 BC, The Middle Empire from 317 - 1279 AD, and The Late Empire from 1279 AD - 1911), and The Post-Imperial China from 1912 to present.

China: A History informs the reader about Chinese culture, its religion, the Chinese view of war and military, the discovery of other cultures and attitudes towards them, and the development of society from the early pre-historic time to what China is now.

In the early times China was considered the Greece and Rome of East Asia and therefore China was the



civilized world. Therefore, when one of the regional rulers begged for independence the emperor asked "What wrong have your people done to be excluded from the Empire?"

China: A History's author, Arthur

Cotterell, has an extensive interest in other civilizations. Cotterell combines a career in education and training after school. He has written a number of books on other civilizations including: *The Minoan World, A Dictionary of World Mythology, The Penguin Encyclopedia of Ancient Civilizations, The First Emperor, East Asia: From Chinese Predominance to the Rise of the Pacific Rim, Origins of European Civilization and The Penguin Encyclopedia of Classical Civilizations*. Currently he is working on *The Pimlico Dictionary of Classical Civilizations*.

The task of covering the history of China is a daunting one considering the large subject matter and Cotterell has done a very good job. I found that it was an excellent and comprehensive short guide to the history of one of the world's oldest civilizations. It was very readable and the history of each era was brought to life and not dull and boring. The photographs, illustrations, and maps added to the book as they add to the understanding of present-day China. I would recommend the book to those who enjoy history and other cultures.

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Taking Baking Orders up to Dec 20th

Recommended gifts and reading for the holidays

1. Canada With Love/ Canada Avec Amour
by Lorraine Monk

This is a book of photographic images of Canada coupled with statements that Canadians have made about our natural landscape. It is beautiful and insightful, and never fails to show me something new. As Margaret Atwood states in one of the captions, "By discovering your place you discover yourself." This book aims to communicate a deep passion for the country Canada that exists beyond geographical borders. It is about sharing a bond as inhabitants of a wild and breathtaking place. Recommended for anyone who loves Canada, the natural environment or literature.

2. The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism
by Katie Roiphe

Roiphe wrote this book while she was a student at Harvard and Princeton. It focuses on her impressions of and experiences with the feminist movement. It is both controversial and thought provoking. Recommended for any young person, male or female who is interested in gender, politics of sexual equality or feminism.

3. Polaroids From the Dead
by Douglas Copeland

The latest from the author who brought us the term Gen X, this is a witty and penetrating examination of both the decadence of pop culture and the decomposition of community in society. If you liked his other works, you will definitely enjoy this. If not, don't buy it. Recommended for anyone born after 1960.

Other than that, get your work done for school then go play in the snow. Take a well-deserved opportunity to expand your mind with a good book. If you don't have one, we have many available for review. Drop in to the Bruns for info.

FREDERICTON SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY

Monthly Meeting: Dec 5th 8pm
Room 203 SUB

New and old members welcome! FMI.
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