

WHY IMAGINATION MATTERS

By Helen Benedict, author of *Wolf Season*

My novel, *Wolf Season*, comes out at a deeply disturbing time in history, when the leadership in our country, and too many of its followers, are suffering a serious crisis of compassion. This hit me particularly strongly this past August, when I happened to be in residence at the Virginia Center for the Arts at the same time as white nationalists held their now infamous and deadly rally just down the road in Charlottesville. I and another writer went to counter-protest, and to bear witness.

As I watched self-appointed militia men toting enormous assault rifles, the hate-filled faces around me, and the young and angry chanting Nazi and racist slogans, I realized that I was witnessing a colossal failure of imagination. These white nationalists had clearly never given a moment's thought to what it is like to be an African American or an immigrant, a Muslim or a Jew, or anyone else they were targeting. On the contrary, they were invested in *not* thinking about these matters, the better to demonize the people they wished to hate.

I thought about this because, as a writer, my business is imagination. When I began researching my novel, *Wolf Season*, and my other books about the Iraq War, women soldiers, and Iraqi refugees, I had never met a soldier, never known an Iraqi, and never lived through a war. What enabled me to surmount these obstacles was research, listening, thinking – but above all, exercising my imagination. And I don't mean only to invent characters and think up plots; I mean using my imagination to understand the experiences of soldiers and Iraqis in war well enough to put them in novel.

The use of imagination is the most precious gift fiction offers to both readers and writers, for it opens a door into worlds and lives we might otherwise never encounter. The very act of becoming absorbed in a book takes us out of ourselves and puts us inside the skins of others. We don't merely sympathize with Anna Karenina or Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist or Huckleberry Finn -- we *become* them. And we do this not by passively reading alone, but by hooking our imaginations to the characters and allowing them both to lift us out of ourselves and plunge into the lives of others.

The main reason I love to write and read literary fiction is because of this – because of the way it helps me to see the humanity in people, no matter how different they might seem on the surface. This is also how fiction teaches compassion, the very emotion that is missing in prejudice, let alone hatred. The racists I saw in Charlottesville, the anti-Semites, Nazis and Islamophobes, were all refusing to use their imaginations. And when you won't use your imagination, you cannot feel anything for anyone but yourself.

No writer can work without using imagination and compassion; not if she wants to bring her characters alive and make her readers empathize with them. This is true even for nonfiction writers, but even more so for those of us who write fiction. I certainly found this the case in my writing of *Wolf Season*. For no matter how much research I did, the research by itself was not enough.

Let me explain. I spent more than three years listening to dozens of women veterans who had served in Iraq, as well as reading and watching all the history I could. But even though the veterans were generous with their stories, there were times during our interviews when they would fall silent, hands shaking, eyes filling with tears, unable or unwilling to speak further. The memories were simply too painful, or too personal. Eventually, I came to understand that the true story of war lay within those very silences; the private, internal experiences hidden deep inside a soldier's heart.

I needed to reach that heart, but to do so I had to go beyond my reading and interviews, and rely on my imagination. And where did this imagination come from? All I had learned; all I knew about human beings; a willingness to look for what all humans have in common, no matter how different our backgrounds; and finally something more – taking the leap out of my own shoes and into those of my characters. In short, imagining what it is like to be someone else.

Soldiers' experiences are, of course, only one side of what goes on at war, so I also wanted to tell the other side -- that of Iraqi civilians. Thus, I found some Iraqi refugees to interview, just as I had soldiers. They, too, were generous and eager to help me. They, too, wanted to be heard. But given the traumas they had lived through, they also had their limits as to what they were willing or able to tell me. And so, again, I had to go beyond research and imagine myself into their lives.

In *Wolf Season*, the stories of Rin, Naema, Beth and their children, and of the men Louis and Todd, all reflect what I found in the silences and tears of soldiers, and in the lonely eyes of Iraqi refugees; those secret places in the human soul that have always been the subject of fiction. But they also reflect the way I used my imagination to penetrate those secret places and make of them a story.

Much has happened in the world since I began my work on *Wolf Season*: the civil war in Syria, the explosion of refugees, the starvation and cholera in Yemen – I could go on and on. Even as I write, the president is sending more troops to the endless, unwinnable war in Afghanistan. And, here, too, I see a failure of imagination, for the voices of the victims of these wars continue to remain virtually unheard. Many among those Syrian refugees we read about in the news, for example, are in fact Iraqis who fled to Syria to escape the war we had inflicted upon them at home, only to have to flee war again. And yet, as responsible

as we Americans are for what has happened to Iraq, very few American writers address the Iraqi point of view, and very few American publishers publish Iraqi writers.

This is yet another failure of imagination on our part; a fear of going beyond what we know to explore what we think we don't. And where does this fear come from? I suspect from the assumption that a Muslim from the Middle East is so different from a Christian or Jew from America that we cannot hope to understand each other. I find this tragic. For if we used our imaginations, we could overcome this fear and recognize the myriad desires and needs, wishes and hopes we have in common instead.

If only the white supremacists and fascists I saw in Charlottesville would embrace imagination and compassion rather than hatred. If only everyone in this country read more literary fiction. For it is not only history and science we need to understand if we are to feel for our fellow human beings, as essential as those are – it is the human heart. And nothing explores the human heart with more compassion than a novel.

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