

Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace; edited by Maxine Hong Kingston; Koa Books; 614 pages; \$20 paper

reviewed by Gerald Nicosia

In 1991, Maxine Hong Kingston, best-selling author of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, lost her home in Oakland to a forest fire. Inside her house was the only copy of a nearly completed book about war and its aftermath, called *The Fourth Book of Peace*. The prospect of having to write that lengthy book all over again was overwhelming to her.

Already a member of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh's *sangha*, she knew of his efforts to enlist Vietnam veterans in Buddhist meditation and discussion groups as a means to heal from the war. She decided that if she also gathered Vietnam vets—not just to talk and meditate—but also to *write* with her, she would be able to overcome her own block to rewriting her lost *opus magnum*.

Thus began a series of meetings which continue to the present day, and whose participants would eventually come to number close to 500 people. The Veteran Writers Group, as it is usually called, gave birth not only to Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*, published in 2003, but also to numerous works by the individual participants—among the more notable, John Mulligan's PEN Award-winning novel *Shopping Cart Soldiers* (1997) and James Janko's recent, highly-praised novel *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo*. Now, at last, we have a massive collection of the works—stories, poems, memoirs—generated within the group by

almost a hundred of its members. The result, *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, is simply astounding.

Very quickly, the group came to encompass veterans of other wars besides Vietnam, and eventually almost all wars since World War II would be represented therein, including the Korean War, the Six Days War, and both Gulf Wars. The group also soon opened to people who weren't technically veterans, in the specific sense of soldiers seasoned by combat. Deserters showed up; then war resisters who had never worn uniforms; then war widows and other family members of someone who had fought.

Now, as Kingston writes, “members of the Veteran Writers Group embrace everyone who identifies himself or herself as a ‘veteran.’ The definition of ‘veteran’ keeps evolving. Our group is made up of people who realize that war does indeed affect everyone; they want to do something about the violence, and so gather with like minds to create peace.” **[letter of MHK to GN, 11-20-06]**

Because of Kingston's well-publicized proclivities—not long after receiving a National Humanities gold medal from Bill Clinton, she was arrested outside the Bush White House as part of the Code Pink women's demonstration against the Iraq War—it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* is just one more dreary antiwar compendium. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a vastly profound work on what war does to human beings, and how they manage—just barely—to survive it again and again.

The great range of writers is the key to this book's tremendous impact. To be sure, a few familiar names flash by—Grace Paley, Larry Heinemann, Wayne

Karlin, Barbara Sonneborn—due mainly to the fact that Kingston would sometimes invite known writers and artists as guests to co-lead the group with her. But even these handful of famous folk are represented in ways one would not expect. Paley, known for stories of gritty, ethnic urban realism, presents us with a wonderful fable of a race of people who each sacrifice their index finger to be rid of war. Chicago's National Book Award-winning novelist Larry Heinemann, who always swore he couldn't write poetry, contributes a war poem stunning in its stark grace. Heinemann writes of a Vietnam vet quietly spending Passover in another vet's lonely Indiana cottage, where nature itself begins the healing he had found nowhere else:

Hold my coffee
with both hands
and sip deep,
sweet as brass,
sun and moon,
both large lights,
opposite
and poised
on the horizon.
An amazing moment,
even I know that.
When such a light

touches such a heart,
what happens? [pp. 146-147]

Yet the real marvel of *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* is how powerful and finely written are the pieces by almost everyone, even those (the vast majority) who are non-literary, ordinary people. Perhaps some of this achievement is due to Kingston's own substantial ability as a teacher, and part due to the caliber of people she attracts. But, as someone once said, everyone has at least one great story in them—and the key is that Kingston has magnanimously given all these writers the space and the support necessary to tell theirs.

There are stories in this book you simply cannot find anywhere else, stories that anyone concerned with war needs to read—and that any young man or woman should read before joining the military. Vietnam veteran Robert Golling, Jr., tells of the terrible responsibility of escorting a dead veteran's body home to his family in Massachusetts. Without ever speaking a word against the Vietnam War or any war, Golling makes you feel America's betrayal of this workingclass family's essential goodness—as they offer him sumptuous meals and a room to sleep in, in gratitude for the dead son and brother he's brought home to them. Then, in the story's eerie finale, Golling relates what it is like to sleep in the bed of the lost young soldier, who is like a reflection of himself:

... a peek in each drawer saw socks, underwear, and cigar boxes

of childhood treasures. The bottom drawer held sweaters and a shoebox full of baseball cards. To the left was a stack of comics. Should I look deeper beyond *Mad*? Nah, I thought. The *Playboys* would be in the closet, beneath something his mother wouldn't touch A guest will look, will look to find the familiar, he will try to be at home. But still I felt strange. I couldn't put my finger on it. I can barely see it now, thirty-nine years later. It was like seeing a life that was not my life, but was my life. His life cut short, while mine was still in front of me. [p. 129]

So clearly here, as in many of the other stories, the complex layers of survivor guilt are revealed, as is the necessity for those still alive to speak for those who are not.

The other side of the same coin of grief is exposed by Pauline Laurent, who tells what it was like as a 22-year-old woman, seven months pregnant, to get the news three days after Mother's Day, 1968, that her husband had just been killed in Vietnam: "The room is spinning. I can't think, I can't hear anything. I'm going to faint. Alone ... I must be alone to sort this out. Leave me alone. Instead, I sit politely as they inform me of the details ... funeral ... remains ... escort ... military cemetery ... medals ... No medics come, no helicopters fly me away to an emergency room. I struggle to save myself, but I cannot. I die. Half an hour later, a ghost of my former self gets up off the bed and begins planning Howard's funeral." [p. 259]

Even the highlights of *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* are too numerous to do all of them justice here. But I will just mention a few.

Army deserter Michael Wong tells of the dilemma he faced at Fort Sam Houston in 1969: “If we went and fought, half the country would call us murderers. If we refused to go and fight, the other half of the country would call us cowards.” [p. 584]

Eddie Heinemann tells how easy it was to be seduced into becoming, and how impossible to ever escape being, “the wife of a Vietnam veteran.” [p. 144]

Charlie Sherdyl Motz tells of the terrible paranoia of night patrols in the Mekong Delta on a small riverine force gunboat, when what at first looked like a floating palm tree suddenly opened fire on them: “It took me a long time to trust a tree again. The world had become a sadder place.” [p. 359]

Dan Fahey tells what it was like as a U.S. Naval officer to stand watch on the bridge of a warship in the Gulf of Bahrain just after the first Gulf War, committed to protecting his men yet all the while tormented by the knowledge that his country “is characterized by sublime idealism as well as profound hypocrisy.” [p. 95]

Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace also contains a wealth of Asian voices. Novelist Ho Anh Thai, who lived under the American bombing of Hanoi when she was a small child, writes a story about the persecution of the numerous husbandless women veterans in Communist Vietnam—most of whom missed their chance for marriage and children while working in the jungle to keep the Ho Chi Minh Trail network open and in other support roles during the war. Le Minh

Khue, a war veteran herself and another well-known Vietnamese writer and editor, tells an amazing tale of a Vietnamese woman who felt close to only one man in her life: the American soldier and prisoner of war over whom she was assigned to keep guard. And perhaps most heart-rending of all, the Cambodian teacher Chanpidor Janko (now a transplant to the United States and married to novelist James Janko), writes of watching Pol Pot's Communist zealots lead her lawyer father away to one of the many prison camps for professional people, where he disappeared forever along with millions of others marked for the notorious "killing fields."

Perhaps my two favorite pieces from the collection, though, are two quite different, but equally extraordinary tales of courage. One is Vietnam veteran Richard L. Stevens' thrilling story of capturing the notorious Viet Cong raider Hoang Thi Nu, a petite, 28-year-old woman dubbed by the Americans "Annie Oakley." As the American intelligence officer describes her to Stevens: "We call her 'Annie Oakley' for the two guns she carries, and her magical ways. We've tried to catch her before ... but she never shows, gets away, or ambushes us! And ... several times she's been reported in two places at the same time! ... she's from a long tradition of Vietnamese women warriors." **[galley, p. 489]**

The night of her capture, Stevens witnesses her courage firsthand, as, attempting to escape, she swims directly into a fusillade of American bullets. When his own bullets fail to kill her, his admiration for her begins to turn to love. And in the story's surprise ending, Stevens—still haunted by his love for her—finds her again in Vietnam some 30 years later.

The other story, by ex-nun Clare Morris, is about the equally great, but quiet, courage it takes to break unjust laws. It also proves that courage comes in all sexes, ages, and denominations. Recounting the day she and her septuagenarian mother Edith were arrested at an antiwar protest at the Lockheed Martin missile division in Sunnyvale, California, and the five subsequent days they spent together in a women's prison, Morris insists that—whatever our political views—it is the courage we display during the hard times that will be our most important legacy.

As the Sunnyvale police prepare to handcuff both of them, Morris turns to her mother and says, “Besides the gift of life itself, you have given me nothing of greater value than this moment.” **[galleys, p. 319]**