International Journal of Social Inquiry *15*(2), 2022, pp. 251−261
journal homepage: https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijsi

International Journal of Social Inquiry
International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Electronic Journal
E-ISSN: 1307-9999
Volume 15 Issue 2 December 2022

RESEARCH ARTICLE / Araştırma Makalesi
https://doi.org/10.37093/ijsi.1107933

Negotiating Heroism in Ben Fountain's Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk

M. Ikbal M. Alosman* Yasser Sabtan**

Abstract

This paper examines Ben Fountain's Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk apropos heroism/post-heroism within the context of the 2003 Iraq War. The paper aims to uncover the novel's approach to soldiers' behavior on the battlefield, their perspectives on war, and how the American public interacts with their endeavors. While heroism celebrates acts of bravery and chivalry, post-heroism signals the decline of heroic ethos in the context of war, where soldiers are left to question the actual value of sacrifice on the battlefield. We make the argument through two constructs: "unheroic actions," which addresses soldiers' behavior in war, and "clash of perceptions," which discusses soldiers' versus the public's perspectives on heroism and war. Though the novel's setting serves to celebrate soldiers' gallant feet in war, Fountain ridicules such heroic rhetoric throughout the novel and demonstrates how soldiers are reluctant to accept the public overenthusiasm about war and their status as war heroes.

Keywords: heroism, Iraq War, post-heroism, war novel, Ben Fountain

Cite this article: Alosman, M.I.M., & Sabtan, Y. (2022). Negotiating heroism in Ben Fountain's Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk. *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, *15*(2), 251−261. https://doi.org/10.37093/ijsi.1107933

1. Introduction

The United States led a war on Iraq in 2003 under various pretexts, such as ensuring national security, spreading democracy, and promoting the well-being of Iraqis (Gregory, 2004). The U.S. media romanticized the war, presenting it as a benevolent endeavor to liberate the persecuted people in Iraq and introduce them to the free and virtuous world (Gregory, 2004). However, on the ground, the situation was quite different for both Iraqis and Americans. The reality of war took over, with ever more despicable stories floating worldwide and overwhelming the picture of war.

It took the literary milieu years before producing serious works addressing the questions raised around one of the most controversial wars in modern times. The war finally invoked several narratives, such as *Fobbit* (2012) by David Abrams, *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin

* Assistant Professor, Dhofar University, College of Arts and Applied Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Salalah, Oman (Corresponding author). E-mail: meqbal1980@yahoo.com, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3798-5347

** Assistant Professor, Dhofar University, College of Arts and Applied Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Salalah, Oman. E-mail: ysabtan@du.edu.om, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4389-285X

Article Information
Received: 24 Apr 2022; Revised: 01 Sep 2022; Final Revised: 29 Sep 2022; Accepted: 29 Sep 2022; Available online: 30 December 2022

Powers, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) by Ben Fountain, *Redeployment* (2015) by Phil Klay, and *War Porn* (2016) by Roy Scranton. Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) received critical acclaim from diverse voices and was considered by some to be one of the finest contemporary war novels (Dyer, 2012; Tait, 2012). It received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and was the finalist for the 2012 National Book Award. Fountain brought the Iraq War home by setting his novel in what is exclusively American, such as American football, Thanksgiving, and TV (Dyer, 2012). The novel was described as a grand, fierce, exhilarating, intimate, terrific, eloquent, angry, funny, and poignant book that reads like a single fantastic scene (Dyer, 2012; Tait, 2012). It unfolds the Iraq War through Billy, the American soldier who observes, contemplates, and interacts with the enthusiastic American public celebrating the Bravo Squad's valor in Iraq.

Roy Scranton (2015) contends that American war literature on Iraq obviates the questions regarding the motives behind American soldiers' presence in Iraq and their part in killing thousands of Iraqi civilians by turning a murderer into a victim, a war hero into a trauma hero. Yet Adam Kaiserman (2021) argues that Fountain's novel departs from the war novel tradition Scranton criticizes, as it does not deploy the figure of the trauma hero to the same ends as exemplified in other war narratives. Recent American literature on the Iraq War manifests a considerable complication to these works by presenting conflicts between "an American public conditioned by a myth of innocence and what Ben Fountain calls 'the war made flesh.'" (Barta, 2015, p. 79). The interactions between the Bravo Squad and the public in the novel reveal the critical incoherence between mythic consensus of the public and those involved in action (Barta, 2015). The United States prepares the public for "an emplaced cultural politics" of eternal war that works as legalization for a lasting war economy and the making of adversaries (Beck, 2009, p. 17). Americans maintain their innocence by deflecting their complicity in a war they have authorized. They are naïve regarding the realities of war and soldiers' growing disinterest in the Iraq War (Johnston, 2017). Americans are either ignorant or stunned that the Bravo soldiers ought to redeploy in Iraq after they have proven their gallantry in a courageous firefight there. Billy recognizes the absurdity of the heroic and patriotic narratives spinning around him and admits that he desperately needs someone to help him come to terms that either America or he is thoroughly damaged (Johnston, 2017). Brian Williams (2017) claims that the novel illuminates how much the public patriot rhetoric builds on "individual civilian desire, specifically civilian feelings of guilt and inadequacy" (p. 528). Nevertheless, Adam Kaiserman (2021) disagrees with Williams's (2017) reading of the football fans' psychology and contends that the characters of the fans are too flat to have the type of interiority that Williams's reading presumes. Instead, Kaiserman notes that the popularity of the Bravo Squad – celebrated by the Fox News footage, as William rightly highlights – is the outcome of the founded conservative media structure they occupy.

Carrie Johnston (2017) considers the novel a post-war reentry narrative since it follows "the predictable tropes of the western and follows the deterministic logic of the West as a point of destructive origin rather than a productive point of reentry" (p. 409). Fountain's postmodern style responds to war by countering the ideological spectacle of endless war with sincere disillusionment (Blazer, 2015). This offers readers a new way to think about posttruth in the present moment (Kaiserman, 2021): the truth is not there, but the chance to take into account the complexity of approaching the truth and making it "persuasive at a time when money and wealth have such power to distort our perception of reality" (Kaiserman, 2021, p. 574).

Zeng Yanyu (2017) believes that by recounting Americans' trauma, Iraqis' trauma is also illustrated in Fountain's work. Yanyu declares that the novel challenges the biased notions on

war, highlights the unequal power relations among nations, exposes the nature of war as a consumption landscape, and emphasizes the role of wider political and economic processes. However, Sarah O'Brien (2021) argues that even though Fountain's novel addresses the marginalized lives of soldiers as individuals who contribute to the traumatic work of an empire, it engages chiefly with American people, ignoring the narratives of those affected by the imperial violence (namely, Iraqis). Even though women provide glimpses of hope for Billy and offer opportunities to get a way out of this sterile and unproductive hero atmosphere, the novel prevents these prospects, as it precludes female characters from speaking for themselves (Johnston, 2017).

This paper examines Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* apropos heroism/postheroism within the context of the 2003 Iraq War. It aims at uncovering the novel's approach to soldiers' behavior on the battlefield, their perspectives on war, and how the public interacts with their endeavors. The paper argues that Fountain's novel exposes the gulf between the way soldiers regard their part in the war and how the public romanticizes it.

2. Conceptual Framework

People's perspectives on wars seem to change as everything else in the twenty-first century (Coker, 2014). In his prominent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Edward Luttwak, popularized the term "post-heroic warfare" in 1995. He contends that there is currently a need for a new concept of war and a new mentality that would instill unheroic realism into military efforts to overcome the unreasonable timidity in using military means. It would require both a patient and modest temperament to accept the achievement of partial results, as achieving more would be too costly in American lives, and achieving nothing would be too damaging to the world order and U.S. self-respect.

In the past, war casualties were not reasonably a crucial consideration (Luttwak, 1995). There was generally a tendency to accept war casualties, even in large numbers, when it is fought for a great purpose. In addition, a certain level of tolerance for casualties was consistent with the demography of preindustrial and early industrial societies, whereby it was typical for families who had many children to lose some to disease (Luttwak, 1995). Though the loss of a young man in warfare is tragic, it is essentially less unacceptable than for the families at present, who have one, two, or at most three children. Each child is expected to grow and reach adulthood and thus embodies a substantial part of the family's emotional economy. Even more, in the past, the United States never supplied expendable soldiers who were the fuel of discretionary wars waged by the great powers for colonial expansion or yet more abstruse motives (Luttwak, 1995). Notably, there is hardly a supply of expendable lives at present, as all other low-birthrate, postindustrial societies do not permit casualties of any battle that could have been avoided (Luttwak, 1995). Great powers avoid combat in case there is a risk of heavy casualties, even in victory. People are less concerned about heroism and social recognition when losing their dear ones.

Sibylle Scheipers (2014) argues that the extent to which the assumption of a "post-heroic condition" in Western societies and their avoidance of casualties in warfare has become accepted as common knowledge in political commentary and policy circles is impressive. Military ethos has declined in the past decades, and societies no longer celebrate death or injury in warfare, as they strive to avoid combat deaths (Coker, 2002). Nowadays, death in war is less meaningful than it used to be in the past. Loss of life has become a waste, and heroes are now considered victims (Coker, 2007; Scheipers, 2014).

It was only recently that war was positively dealt with from a realistic perspective. When Jane Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, went to Europe after World War I broke out to witness events commentary for herself, she was horrified by what she saw there (Ryan, 2014). Coming back to New York, she described how soldiers were encouraged to drink alcohol to keep their spirits up before waging major battles (Ryan, 2014). Although she was not talking about American soldiers, she was immediately reviled in the popular press (Ryan, 2014). People who told stories about wars were compelled to embellish all the unspeakable realities in the warfare and make them appear more heroic and romantic.

Most American writers on heroism deal with the demise of heroism and its threats from the dominant social forces and ideals (Ryan, 2014). In his influential essay "The Moral Equivalent of War," first published in 1910, William James (1971) recognizes the decrease in Americans' enthusiasm to go to war, as he thinks that individuals are to go to war only when compelled to. Even though military impulses are still robust, genuine reviews challenge them, which profoundly curtail their old liberty (James, 1971). More journalists are uncovering the brutal part of Army service. Justifications for wars are examined, as people are more familiar with its appalling truths. Heroism appears to lose its old glamour when people overglorify war heroes and adorn their perfect images.

Despite all their differences, Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, and Kant shared the assumption that the reasons for which soldiers fight are undoubtedly significant (Ryan, 2014): "They must cohere with the other kinds of reasons that motivate them as rational individuals, and they must cohere with the other kinds of roles they occupy as members of society" (Ryan, 2014, p. 131). Indeed, what justifies a soldier's actions on the battleground begins with the reasons that justify their nation's going to war (Ryan, 2014). Cheyney Ryan (2014) holds that soldiers must examine the reasons for which they act and whether they are consistent with their own self-respect. Killing and dying in war are interrelated. Killing for one's country, ideals, and loved ones equals dying for them (Ryan, 2014). However, what a soldier witnesses in the warfare may make him reevaluate his viewpoint of war irrespective of their incentives. The argument is made in this paper through two contracts – namely, "unheroic actions," which addresses soldiers' behavior in war, and "clash of perceptions," which discusses soldiers' versus the public's perspectives on heroism and war.

3. Unheroic Actions

Soldiers are primarily human beings whose actions and reactions are intuitive, no matter how trained they are. They can be vulnerable to extensive degrees of fear where they overreact. On the frontline, "[e]verybody's scared" (Fountain, 2012, p. 98); fear is "the mother of all emotion. Before love, hate, spite, grief, rage, and all the rest, there was fear, and fear gave birth to them all" (p. 114). Every soldier on the battlefield knows the "many incarnations and species of fear (. . .) Spend any amount of time in the realms of deadly force and you will witness certain of its fraught and terrible forms" (p. 115). Some soldiers shriek "with the burden of it, others can't stop cursing, still others lose their powers of speech altogether. Loss of sphincter or bladder control, classic. Giggling, weeping, trembling, numbing out, classic" (p. 115). An officer rolls under his Humvee during a rocket attack and refuses to come out when it is over. A captain's "brow flaps up and down like a loose tarp in a high wind" when under attack (p. 115). Bravo soldiers have posttraumatic stress disorder (Kaiserman, 2021); only few soldiers stay calm under such circumstances. Soldiers do not possess unique qualities that differentiate them from other people and make them exceptional; they are susceptible to unsought traits such as fear.

For American soldiers, serving in Iraq is the most severe punishment any soldier might receive for violating rules. When Billy buys a beer at Papa Johns while in uniform, he is not worried though they are not supposed to drink while in uniform: "But what's the Army gonna do, send us to Iraq?" (Fountain, 2012, p. 21). He later wonders, "how the hell are they [Bravo Squad] going to get through eleven more months of it [war]" (p. 27). Being redeployed in Iraq appears to be the worst scenario a soldier might face, even though they are famed as war heroes. Though some members of the squad are slightly positive about being called heroes, the overall atmosphere is carelessness. The idea of going back to Iraq overwhelms soldiers throughout their tour and makes celebrations less appealing.

Soldiers do not feel like heroes but rather as survivors of lethal encounters. Billy is asked about what it is like to be on the battlefield, "[b]eing shot at, shooting back. Killing people, almost getting killed yourself. Having friends and comrades die right before your eyes" (Fountain, 2012, p. 40). As he answers the question, a second voice comes from his head, and a stranger starts talking, "whispering the truer words that Billy couldn't speak. *It was raw. It was some fucked-up shit. It was the blood and breath of the world's worst abortion*" [original emphasis] (p. 40). Witnessing such a deadly encounter is the last thing a soldier wants; it is unbearable to take part in the useless killing of people. The argument is concluded with a clear-cut statement: "Billy did not seek the heroic deed, no. The deed came for him, and what he dreads like cancer in his brain is that the deed will seek him out again" (p. 40). He finds himself forced to act as a hero (Johnston, 2017). Billy is horrified by the thought of witnessing such an occurrence that reflects his rather survival perspective. The circumstances are forced on these soldiers to behave in such a seemingly heroic manner.

Most soldiers participate in war without any motive but their own and their comrades' "survival" (Fountain, 2012, p. 97). They do not think "about accomplishing anything, [they] just wanna get through the day with all [their] guys alive. So then [they] start to wonder why we're even over there" (pp. 97–98). What is of paramount significance for them is to come back home alive. While Americans consider Bravo Squad's behavior in the footage to be heroic, it seems to Billy, a soldier in the squad who took part in the episode, "a flat-out miracle that any of them are still alive" (Fountain, 2012, p. 26). Soldiers are traumatized by the reality of death stalking their lives; "they've lost Shroom and Lake, *only two* a numbers man might say, but given that each Bravo has missed death by a margin of inches, the casualty rate could just as easily be 100 percent" [original emphasis] (pp. 26–27). The imminence of death makes their lives miserable; "the freaking *randomness* is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace on the way to chow (. . .) Random. How that shit does twist your mind" (p. 27). On the other hand, the public is unaware of the underlying suffering soldiers go through; they are only mesmerized by the cinematic presence of "war heroes".

Though the public is highly interested in their epic endeavor, the Bravo Squad is not very thrilled about it but primarily keen on rather normal pursuits. What is of interest for them while taking part in the halftime show is to personally meet "Destiny's Child" (Fountain, 2012, pp. 9–10) and interact with the cheerleaders, which makes Billy quite excited (Johnston, 2017). As soon as Billy meets Candance, a cheerleader, he wants, "just to disappear down there, vanished by a kind of reverse-rapture action into chasms of sheltering female flesh (. . .), to say *I love you. I need you. Marry me*" [original emphasis] (Fountain, 2012, p. 140). What soldiers like about being famous and well-known, if there is any, throughout the United States is the fact that they can make money out of it; "[*t*]*hey're gonna make a movie about us*! [original emphasis] (p. 9). What they are all for is getting a sum of money by selling their story for a potential movie.

Throughout the Victory Tour, Billy seems to be interested in reconnecting with ordinary life in the United States. He wants to enjoy everyday life where his safety is not threatened on a daily basis, like that in war. The praise and celebration he receives do not attract him; he is rather disinterested in the whole idea of heroes. As he meets another cheerleader, Faizon, he becomes fascinated with her. He "feels light inside, refreshed, a physical state of hopefulness. Talking to this beautiful girl makes him realize just how precious his *unremarkable life* is to him" [emphasis added] (Fountain, 2012, p. 150). Later, he ponders on their brief intimate sexual intercourse: "He made Faison tremble, he made her come, surely there's *meaning* in that (. . .) Maybe there's hope for his *love life* after all. Maybe it didn't end with Shroom [his comrade who was injured and died in his lap]" [emphasis added] (pp. 209, 224). Billy hopes Faison will help him make sense of the violence he has witnessed in Iraq and the nation's enthusiastic response to it (Johnston, 2017). Faison provides him with what he badly lacks: a normal life without heightened degrees of fear and stress. Billy is instead interested in life – giving life through reproduction rather than confiscating people's lives, as exemplified in war. Returning to everyday life means reclaiming his own body since "[p]art of being a soldier is accepting that your body does not belong to you" (Fountain, 2012, p. 206). While war represents futility and death for Billy, Faison represents the opposite –that is, fertility and life, the opposite of war.

Like those in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, and Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, soldiers in Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* are primarily killers (Alosman, 2020; Alosman, 2021), not peace-loving knights. They are trained to harm people, exposing their lives to danger and killing them; they "aim for the face" (Fountain, 2012, p. 177) because war is mainly about "[w]ho can manufacture the most death? (p. 221). Dime, the Sergeant in charge of the Bravo Squad, addresses the rich oil-investor who raises the argument after praising Bravo's feet in Iraq, war is "by definition an extreme situation, people trying very hard to terminate each other" (p. 65). Dime further denounces the idealistic public view of soldiers: "We *like* violence, we *like* going lethal!" [original emphasis] (p. 65). Then he sharply confronts the investor, "Isn't that what you're paying us for? (. . .) If we didn't like killing people then what's the point? You might as well send in the Peace Corps to fight the war" (p. 65). Bravo "is the most murdering bunch of psychopaths you'll ever see (. . .) They're killers (. . .) Bravo always has the ace of bloods up its sleeve" (p. 65). Soldiers are not peacekeepers but rather trained killers; Fountain admonishes the romantic view of the military and shows the horrible reality of war. Soldiers are required to terminate the enemy by any means in war; they are first and foremost merciless killers, not the humane nice guys.

4. Clash of Perceptions

In the first pages of the novel, Fountain draws a sharp contrast between the way American soldiers perceive their role in the war and how they are presented in the U.S. media – more specifically, at Fox News. Most of Fountain's novel takes place in Texas – more specifically, at the Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving game. The Bravo Squad is invited to appear during the halftime show with Destiny's Child to celebrate their heroic feet in the Battle of Al-Ansakar Canal, Iraq, which is videotaped by a camera embedded by Fox News crew. In the media, these soldiers are, "eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo squad (. . .), but the Fox embed christened them Bravo squad and thus they were presented to the world" (Fountain, 2012, p. 4). Fountain satirically shows how the U.S. media use the footage to promote a conservative pro-war agenda. He further illustrates the other side of the narrative; inside the same C-130, that carries the soldiers in the middle of night from Baghdad to the

United States lies their late colleague in the squad, Shroom, "in a flag-draped coffin at the back" (p. 4). Celebrating the surviving soldiers, "heroes" who are accompanied by their deceased colleague contradicts the whole idea of the tour. The celebrated heroic narrative of the media is countered by the tragic reality of war where soldiers come home in coffins.

Soldiers are concerned with the many dangers surrounding their lives on the battlefield rather than what appears for Americans as gallantry. Billy remembers these moments: "Everything was blowing up and they were shooting our guys, and I just went for it, I really wasn't thinking at all" (Fountain, 2012, p. 3). He disproves the reporter's expectations as she asks what he was thinking when the footage was taken; he does not provide a romantic description of his act, though heroic, but prefers to find more sensible words related to the situation: "His chief fear up to the moment the shooting started being that of fucking up. Life in the Army is miserable that way. (. . .) a fuckup so profound and all encompassing as to crush all hope of redemption" (pp. 3–4). He tries to explain the despicability of the situation, while the reporter is more concerned with showcasing the soldiers' heroism. He feels it is "sort of weird. Being honored for the worst day of your life" (p. 149). Soldiers are rewarded for the most horrible moments in their lives, for the memories they want to overcome and obliterate.

The difference between how people and soldiers view war is further deliberated as one man "almost touches, Billy's Silver Star. 'That's some serious hardware you got'" (Fountain, 2012, p. 39). Billy thanks him, though that never appears to be the proper response. As he touches Billy's medal, Billy feels it "lewd" to do so (p. 40). The man adds, "[B]e proud (. . .) you earned this," and Billy thinks without rancor, "*How do you know?*" [original emphasis] (p. 40). As Fountains mocks the man's overenthusiasm, he presents Billy's counterperspective since he was there and knows better the circumstances. Billy's skepticism dismisses the whole argument of heroism; there seems to be a gulf between how people view soldiers' acts and how soldiers themselves understand them.

The war in people's imagination is quite different from the real one witnessed by soldiers. Fountain's novel shows how politicians' and media stenographic coverage of the Bravo Squad is one of the chief sources of fantasy (Kaiserman, 2021). It demonstrates how the soldiers, on the other hand, speak from their experience: "They are authentic. They are the Real. They have dealt much death and received much death and smelled it and held it and slopped through it in their boots, had it spattered on their clothes and tasted it in their mouths" (Fountain, 2012, p. 66). Fountains questions the statement, "*Why we fight,* yo, who is this *we*? Here in the chicken-hawk nation of blowhards and bluffers" [original emphasis] (p. 66). He derides hypocrite Americans who advocate the war and claim it to be theirs, though they do not take a real part in it.

There is a gap of perceptions between those who serve in the military and the public. While most of the crowds, who are largely Texans, are thankful for the soldiers, Billy is curious to know their thoughts: "What are they thinking? What do they want? Do they know they're alive? As if prolonged and intimate exposure to death is what's required to fully inhabit one's present life" (Fountain, 2012, p. 21). Being alive is one of the luxuries soldiers appreciate much and feel that most people do not recognize the bliss of being alive, the comfort of staying out of dangerous zones. Billy enjoys the crowds moving past because they prove that there is still life on earth. Being safe and sound is his ultimate objective after being involved in battles.

There is also a gap between how the families of soldiers react to their relatives' service in war zones and those who do not have relatives, those Americans who depend on a secondary source of information (such as TV). As Mr. Whaley visits his supervisee, Denise (Billy's mother), to welcome Billy's return from Iraq, he calls American soldiers "*Heroes*" [original emphasis]

(Fountain, 2012, p. 88). He offers his help to Billy regarding the movie on the Bravo Squad: "[I]t's the least I can do. You've made us all proud, not just your family and friends but all of us here, the entire community. You've given this whole town a tremendous boost" (p. 89). He adds, "[E]verybody's so damn proud of you (. . .) if word got out you were home today there'd be cars lined up from here to the airstrip (. . .) but next time you're home we want to have a parade in your honor" (p. 89). Moreover, Mayor Bond wants Stovall, their town's mayor, to honor Billy in the way he "deserve(s)". However, Kathryn, Billy's sister, is not concerned about the public reaction as she is aware of the dangers her brother will be exposed to when he is back to war. She protests to Mr. Whaley, "He has to go back (. . .) To Iraq (. . .) So they're gonna get another shot at him" (p. 89). She does not heed her mother's scolding. Mr. Whaley attempts to justify the action, "It's fine young men like your brother who are going to lead us to victory" (p. 89). Yet Kathryn protests again, "Not if they're dead" (p. 89). For Kathryn, the issue is a personal one as her dear brother's life seems to be at stake. Billy's elder sister reminds him as she says her farewell to him sobbing: "Don't do anything crazy. Just get your butt home." (p. 106). Families are afraid to lose their dear sons in war. Though they consider soldiers heroes, they are still reluctant to see them back to war.

Though Kathryn is proud of her brother, she is afraid of his redeployment in Iraq. She tries to dissuade him from returning to Iraq by illustrating how the most pro-war politicians have avoided military service in Vietnam. Politicians know the cost of war, but still, they encourage Americans to send their offspring to war zones: "[T]hose people want a war so bad, they can fight it themselves. Billy Lynn's done his part" (Fountain, 2012, p. 98). She cries as she asks, "What about *us,* Billy? Think about that. With everything this family's been through, what do you think it'll do to us if something happens to you?" [original emphasis] (p. 98). Kathryn's protest against her brother's return to Iraq takes things to another level. She urges him to escape the service through a group in Austin: "[T]hey help soldiers. They've got lawyers, resources, they know how to handle these things (. . .) So if you decided … look, I'm just saying, you'd have some help with this" (Fountain, 2012, p. 99). Though he declines to accept such an idea, she contacts this anti-war group, gives them Billy's number, and asks them for help. The families of soldiers are the ones who pay the dearest price of war. Their siblings' involvement implies their potential death or injury; therefore, they are not enthusiastic about their heroic reputation but rather about their safe existence.

Fountain mocks the idea of "American heroes" as exemplified in the Victory Tour, where he shows how the American public fluctuates between extreme enthusiasm and total negligence towards American soldiers. Though being part of the Bravo Squad means "inhabiting a state of semi-celebrity that occasionally flattens you with praise and adulation (. . .) you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude" (Fountain, 2012, p. 28), yet at other times, it "is like you're invisible, people just see right through you, nothing registers" (p. 28). American soldiers know that the Victory Tour is a farce and that they are merely objects for a deliberate purpose. They are used: "[M]anipulation is their air and element, for what is a soldier's job but to be the pawn of higher?" (p. 28). They are advertised as products, "*produck*" [original emphasis] (p. 34). Publicizing American soldiers as war heroes is meant to promote pro-war agenda and gain more public support for their operations in Iraq.

The novel approaches the concept of "American heroes" in a rather sarcastic tone – as it relates its extensive use to those well-to-do American bigots whose only contribution to war is their hypocrite words, not actions or money. Norman Oglesby, the multimillionaire and owner of Dallas Cowboys, addresses the Bravo Squad, "[T]hese true American heroes (. . .) are the best our nation has to offer, and our best is absolutely the best in the world, as they proved on

the battlefields of Iraq" (Fountain, 2012, p. 129). Though he is quite enthusiastic about their feet in Iraq, he seems to be very careful as he offers each Bravo soldier only $5,500, instead of the 100,000 they suggested, for the rights of their story. This shows that Americans are very generous in words and miserly in acts.

Fountain ridicules the way the American public demonstrates their appreciation of what they consider to be soldiers' heroic feats at war: "Americans fight the war daily in their strenuous inner lives (. . .) Often it's in their literal touch, a jolt arcing across as they shake hands, a zap of pent-up warrior heat" (Fountain, 2012, p. 39). For many of these enthusiastic citizens, Billy's "ordeal becomes theirs and vice versa (. . .) They stammer, gulp, brainfart, and babble, gum up all the things they want to say or never had the words to say them in the first place" (p. 39). Though soldiers are celebrated throughout the tour, some of their basic needs, though trivial, are not catered. When Billy's headache worsens and he asks for painkillers, he is not provided with any medication – despite the seemingly luxurious setting of the place where expensive drinks and food are served generously, which proves the hypocrite nature of the relationship between soldiers and the public. Fountain's satirical representation of Americans' interaction with soldiers decries their rather romantic view of war as well as their hypocrite stance towards soldiers.

Fountain's sarcasm extends as he ridicules people's acts of gratitude towards soldiers. Thanking soldiers for their service is meant to produce such satisfaction for people; they become complacent that they have done their part. They thank soldiers repeatedly "with growing fervor, they know they're being good when they thank the troops and their eyes shimmer with love for themselves and this tangible proof of their goodness. One woman bursts into tears, so shattering is her gratitude" (Fountain, 2012, p. 40). Fountain's cynicism questions the truthfulness of such feelings and exposes its ingenuity.

Even though Billy is from Texas, a state known for its historically conservative standing and staunch support for the Iraq War, he seems to question the operations in Iraq. While meeting the president, "[a]t some point Billy realized he was expecting the president to act, well, embarrassed? Ashamed? For how fucked up everything obviously was. But the commander in chief seemed well pleased with the state of things" (Fountain, 2012, p. 113). Soldiers realize the difficult situation in Iraq and find it astonishing how those in power are reluctant to acknowledge this fact. They realize that they pay the most expensive cost of war – that is, their lives; therefore, they are unwilling to celebrate their involvement. Thus, Billy tells his toddler nephew not to "ever join the Army." (p. 106) because he realizes the reality of war and declines to accept it as a stage for heroic acts. There seems to be an ocean of difference between how the public views the war and the soldiers' perspectives.

5. Conclusion

Although most of the novel is set in the Dallas Cowboys stadium, where the Bravo Squad are honored among a predominantly pro-war audience, the sarcastic tone of the novel belittles the whole heroic rhetoric used to glorify the soldiers. Fountain's novel uncovers the gulf between the way soldiers regard their part in the war and how the public romanticizes it. It mocks the hypocrisy of the nationalist, conservative, and religious discourse employed to evoke the war. It also ridicules the hypocrisy of the ultra-rich Americans who advocate the war but are unwilling to sacrifice either their money or lives for such battles. War seems to be an endless abyss for soldiers, not an arena for heroism. Yet the American public is voluntarily trapped into a

misleading aura of war heroism created by the U.S. media. The heroic war narrative is ironically exploited to prolong the war and extend soldiers' agonies.

The rhetoric of heroism is primarily related to pro-war propaganda, which is mainly concerned with enhancing public support for wars and making battlegrounds more appealing. The hero tradition, in this context, serves as a plastic surgery that functions as a cover and distraction from the catastrophic conditions of war, its disturbing repercussions on the lives of all those involved, and the disappointing outcomes on the battlefield. Wars cannot be benign; they stand for all that is sterile, wasteful, and lethal. They are the opposite of life. In wars, there are no heroes but rather killers, victims, and survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
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FUNDING
No financial support was received from any person or institution for the study.

ETHICS
The authors declare that this article complies with the ethical standards and rules.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION
M. Ikbal M. Alosman | Concept/idea; Literature review; Design; Data Collection/Analysis; Interpretation of data/findings; Supervising; Critical review; Funding; Final approval and accountability. Contribution rate %85

Yasser Sabtan | Design; Drafting; Critical review; Final approval and accountability. Contribution rate %15

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Extended Abstract

In 2003, the United States led a war on Iraq under various pretexts, such as ensuring national security, spreading of democracy, and promoting the well-being of Iraqis. It took the literary milieu years before producing serious works that address the questions raised regarding that war. Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) is one of the most acclaimed literary works on the Iraq War. It received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award. We examine the novel in terms of heroism/post-heroism within the context of the 2003 Iraq War. We aim at uncovering the novel's approach to soldiers' behavior on the battlefield, their perspectives on war, and how the American public interacts with their endeavors.

While heroism celebrates acts of bravery and chivalry, post-heroism signals the decline of heroic ethos in the context of war where soldiers are left to question the actual value of sacrifice on the battlefield. People's perspectives on wars seem to change as everything else in the twenty-first century. Edward Luttwak (1995) contends there is currently a need for a new concept of war and a new mentality that would instill unheroic realism into military efforts to overcome the unreasonable timidity in using military means. This would require both a patient and modest temperament to accept the achievement of partial results, as achieving more would be too costly in American lives and achieving nothing would be too damaging to the world order and U.S. self-respect. In the past, war casualties were not reasonably a crucial consideration (Luttwak, 1995). There was generally a tendency to accept war casualties even in large numbers when it is fought for a great purpose. In addition, a certain level of tolerance for casualties was consistent with the demography of preindustrial and early industrial societies, whereby it was typical for the families who had many children to lose some to disease. Though the loss of a young man in warfare is tragic, it is essentially less unacceptable than for the families at present, who have one, two, or at most three children. Each child is expected to grow and reach adulthood and thus embodies a substantial part of the family's emotional economy.

We make the argument through two constructs – namely, "unheroic actions," which addresses soldiers' behavior in war, and "clash of perceptions," which discusses soldiers' versus the public's perspectives on heroism and war. Although most of the novel is set in the Dallas Cowboys stadium, where the Bravo Squad are honored among a predominantly pro-war audience, the sarcastic tone of the novel belittles the whole heroic rhetoric used to glorify the soldiers. Fountain's novel uncovers the gulf between the way soldiers regard their part in the war and how the public romanticizes it. It mocks the hypocrisy of the nationalist, conservative, and religious discourse employed to evoke the war. It also ridicules the hypocrisy of the ultra-rich Americans who advocate the war but are unwilling to sacrifice either their money or lives for such battles. War seems to be an endless abyss for soldiers, not an arena for heroism. Yet, the American public is voluntarily trapped in a misleading aura of war heroism created by the U.S. media. The heroic war narrative is ironically exploited to prolong the war and extend soldiers' agonies.

The hero tradition serves as a distraction from the catastrophic conditions of war, its disturbing repercussions on the lives of all those involved, and the disappointing outcomes in the battlefield. Wars cannot be benign; they stand for all that is sterile, wasteful, and lethal. They are the opposite of life.