



Perfume River by Robert Olen Butler

This is the story of the Quinlan family. Robert and Darla met at the time of the Vietnam war. Robert had been a serving soldier and Darla was a protester against the war. They have been married for over 40 years and both lecture at Florida State University. Now Robert's father is dying and there is a need to contact Robert's estranged brother Jimmy, who went to Canada rather than serve in a war in which he did not believe. There comes into the story a disturbed homeless man, also called Bob. How will the family be affected by him?

This is a simply but beautifully written book, which I found to be a real page-turner. The characters are finely drawn and the family secrets reveal themselves page by page. This is the first book by Robert Olen Butler that I have read, but it will not be the last. His style is plain but elegant. The horrors of the Vietnam War are not dwelt upon in an unpleasant way, but nonetheless are clearly implied. As someone who can remember the Vietnam War, and the effect it had on those who served in it, those who died because of it, both soldiers and civilians, and the outcome, when one could not help but wonder why the Americans chose to intervene, the book brought back a lot of memories. The sadness of all involved is evident throughout Perfume River.

I am pleased to recommend this book.

Angela Stephens

Perfume River is an elegant, poignant, and masterful novel, dealing with war and its human consequences. In the tradition of the 'great American novel' it bears comparison with the work of Roth, De Lillo et al. It is a family saga spanning half a century in the lives of the Quinlan's under the shadow of the Vietnam war. Nothing

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is as it seems on the surface, the incident at the Perfume River (beautiful name), is the heart of darkness for Robert and a pivotal moment in the narrative. History is not the past but perception of the past, distinct to each character.

The epic origin of the novel is the century defining Vietnam war and it's profound influence on the Quinlan clan: dogmatic patriarch William, (WWII veteran) and his 2 sons Robert (Vietnam soldier) and Jimmy (conscientious objector - draft dodger?). Also a strong cast of women under the shadow of the past.

Robert's small kindness for a homeless man Bob (vet?) has a devastating impact on the family. William's death dominates the present but memory is the key to the novel - lines are drawn, bonds forged, and fractures opened. Memory is heavy with self delusion, untold feelings and hidden truths that colour relationships.

There is a dark intensity to this very personal study of family set against the toll of time and unyielding posturing. Ultimately there is truth if not redemption and reconciliation. I expect this literary novel to stay with me for a long time.

I had previously read Olen Butler's 'Kit' Marlowe Cobb mysteries, 'The Hot Country' (14), 'The Star of Istanbul' (15), and 'The Empire of Night's' (15) [all published by No Exit Press], enjoying these thrillers but Perfume River is a literary novel and must be one of the best books of the year. Highly recommended.

Paul Burke

I usually have a problem with American male fiction writers. Seeing that the author, who had himself served in Vietnam and, according to his biography, has been married five times I felt this might be a full blown macho war mongering read. How wrong I was!

Robert Quinlan and his wife Darla seem stuck in a small academic American town bubble, but when Robert's father William falls and ends up in hospital near to death both his family and wider relationships reveal a vast emotional hinterland. The author references Vietnam and its war links with honesty and warmth because of the Vietnamese themselves and of the tragic impact the conflict had on countless 'veterans' and their families at home. Of course the view is jaundiced and the suffering is all on the shoulders of the Yanks; soldiers like Robert who has nightmares of one incident during the conflict, Calvin - the violent father of the other character, homeless Bob who becomes integral to the plot and the replaying of the effect of war generally. But Robert Olen Butler shows a sensitivity to his female

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characters , particularly Darla and Robert's mother Peggy. They blossom in front of us like the flowers which perfume the river near Hue in Vietnam from where the novel takes its title. As tragedy in Robert's family brings tensions to the fore, the interplay between lost siblings, grandchildren, wives, lovers and passing friends are passionately and often thoughtfully brought to the surface. There is love in abundance.

There is also strong insight into the workings of war ravaged troubled minds and how regrets, deep seated fears and unspoken emotions play out for men particularly. It is heartening to see such depth of feeling in a gun culture country still spouting the 2nd amendment.

This might be a bit heavy going for a book group but it will certainly evoke discussion. "Is this why men make wars?" asks the mother. I would answer that from his experience of war this is why Robert Olen Butler writes so well. I will look for other titles by him with enthusiasm.

Philipa Coughlan

I have read three of Robert Olen Butler's previous works and I enjoyed them immensely. But they were all Christopher Marlowe Cobb mysteries. They were deceptive works, easy accessible as historical novels of intrigue, war and adventure but written with an intelligence that I often feared might be overlooked. So I was delighted when Real Readers send me this copy of Mr. Butler's new book. And it isn't a Kit Cobb mystery which excited me even more.

Butler takes themes partially explored in his previous works; relationships on several levels from filial, to lust, to love, to loyalty, to compassion and here they are developed with a more cerebral and philosophical style. War remains a kind of additional character, if you will. Here it is both the second World War and the Vietnam War. Possibly those aspects are more accessible if you are an American but that in no way dilutes the impact of the book for those of us of other nationalities.

It is a poignant, sensitive tale centring around Robert Quinlan and his wife Dorla. Their relationship is the catalyst to explore Robert's family relationships and his past. There's plenty here for people to identify with; guilt, regret, secrecy, anger, disappointment and resentment.

I hesitate to comment on the Perfume River of the title as it could amount to a

spoiler which is to do a disservice to the book.

The characters are flawed and needy in some respects which allows the humanity of the book to shine through. The pace is languorous sometimes but it perfectly captures the way we sometimes hesitate in both our thoughts and our deeds.

The writing style is competent and flowing. As a narrative it reminds one of a symphony where all the parts combine together as one for the finished work. The final denouement was not unexpected and I don't think the writer intended it to be. All the clues were there. It was more of a case of how and when will this act occur.

This is one of the books that can leave you thinking long after you've finished it. And in my book (no pun intended) it doesn't get any better.

Gill Chedgey

Robert Olen Butler in my mind is one of the best American authors of the moment, whose novels and short stories are second to none and easy to see why he is a Pulitzer Prize winner. Once again Olen Butler tackles a subject many would like to shy away from, our personal relationships, and especially amongst those in our own families. The reaction to a family member that you have not seen in nearly 50 years, with a background of the Vietnam War, that has torn your family apart.

Robert Olen Butler has woven together a complex but beautiful story, where many years after the Vietnam War, along with the PTSD of the former combatants has caused a rift in the family. With an elderly parent dying one brother still refuses to come to his father's bedside in his final hours. While at the same time a homeless man, with mental health issues, has a devastating impact upon the entire family.

Robert Quinlan and his wife Darla both teach at Florida State University, is now starting to bear the scars of over 40 years of marriage, stuck in a rut and with their own separate studies in the house, things do not look good. Coupled with Robert's flashbacks to the Vietnam war, his past always seems to disturb the present.

Even though this is a short book, and some may say read quickly and easily, it is not an easy read as it is thought provoking, challenging. Our perception of war, how a

family can divide over it, one going to war, the other escaping to Canada. How one child lives up to a father's expectations and another does not attain the same level of respect in the father's eyes.

Some may say that this book is rather too melancholic but I think that adds to the atmosphere of the book. The book named after a river in Vietnam reflects the symbiotic relationship Americans have with the country, in part to the war and its legacy. It also questions the dysfunctionality of family, and that memories can be timeless whether we like them or not.

A challenging and emotional book, and this is yet another book in the Vietnam related fiction, a welcome and fresh addition.

Paul Diggett

A rather morose tale of family relationships and how a meeting with a homeless man affects them. Robert (70) and Darla, his wife, are settled into their 50 year marriage which although companionable seems to have lost its passion. While dining at the New Leaf Co-Op restaurant a homeless man (Bob) slips in and sits at the table facing Robert. He seems to be very short of cash and Robert eventually approaches him and offers to buy a meal for him - he is of the opinion that the homeless man is a Vietnam veteran as he is, although despite having gone to Vietnam, he did not get involved in the fighting having been confined to the administration area behind the lines. He does however, harbour secrets from his time there.

Robert's younger brother, Jimmy escaped conscription at the time of the Vietnam war and fled to Canada with his girl-friend and is estranged from his family. When the boys' father (William) has a fall and is hospitalised, Robert immediately goes to his bedside where his mother tells him that she has tried to contact Jimmy but has only managed to leave a message on his answerphone. All this comes to a conclusion when William loses his battle for life and the family gathers for the funeral. Bob is also on the scene.

I found this book very difficult to appreciate at first as it seemed that the family were all rather gloomy, ageing hippy types! Bob, although instrumental to the story didn't really appear to take much part but did in fact, have a great effect on the outcome. A great deal of his story was taken up with providing background to his

life - this was of course, essential to the story but was very wordy and I feel could have been more concise.

The writing, unsurprisingly was rather American and went into great details regarding the characters' thoughts and moods. At first I found this to be very distracting and during the first pages I struggled to continue reading!! However, once I got into the rhythm of it I understood the necessity of the mood-setting especially between the main characters. Robert and Darla were very intense with each other - this struck me as being very 1960s but then of course that is when they first became acquainted. Similarly, Jimmy and his wife Linda were also of that era which probably led to their open approach to their marriage (which didn't actually take place until about 20 years into their relationship).

This is the first I've heard of Robert Olen Butler and although I ultimately quite enjoyed reading it I'm not sure that I will actively seek out any of his other writings! I'm sure he is a very good writer but just not my usual genre of choice!

Dilys Killick

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It took me a long time to get into this book, to enjoy it and not just persevere with it for the sake of wanting to submit a review so that I might keep requesting more to review. I'd say about half way through the book was the point at which I stopped putting it down every few pages and finding something else to do. There was no pivotal twist in the plot but an enlightenment in my own mind that whilst the Vietnam war, the after effects of which this story hinges on, is a piece of history I know very little about, there were parallels for me to the Iraq war, in my lifetime and with familial ties - a brother part of the military based there for a number of years. After this realisation, I felt more able to identify with the characters and their sentiments, emotions and conflicts. The story reflects what I imagine many families can relate to - family secrets, lies and charades designed to demonstrate content family life. Each character is woven together intricately towards the end of the book, and written in such a way that the exploration of their inner thoughts feels intimate and at times uncomfortably honest.

Some of the writing, whilst recognisably beautiful, feels inaccessible. I like to think myself well read and well educated but spent time defining words that feel used for the sake of creating an unnecessary grandeur at times. There is a simplicity to the novel that I feel could have been better reflected with less complex and 'flowery' language still conveying the same message in a way that doesn't feel above the

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average readers head, in my view of the average reader. I do recognise however that the book is elegantly written generally, just for me with the odd clunk owing to superfluous language and choice of word.

What I liked most about this book was the curiosity it has piqued in me to find out more about a period of history I know almost nothing of. Butler gives no mention of the war's details but the way each character mentally and emotionally copes and deals with their role, or lack of, in the war and their relationship to it and each other, has ignited a desire to know more about the undercurrent of this book.

Being frank, I wouldn't read this story again, and I'm not sure I would recommend it to a friend. I am pleased to have had a chance to read it; it's not a book I would have bought off the shelf, but that I could relate it to my own life and more recent family conflict over the Iraq war encouraged me to spend time reflecting on my own emotions and the way I dealt with my family's involvement with the Iraq war. This in itself has been challenging but hugely beneficial and has brought me to a level of closure on it that I've never reached before. For that I am grateful.

Katie Mclean

*I wasn't sure what to expect from this book as I've not read anything by Robert Olen Butler before. But I was hoping for good things as Butler won the Pulitzer Prize for his short story collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. I was not disappointed in this simply written short novel about the effects of serving in the military in the Vietnam War on Robert, a seventy year old academic. The book tells of how his memories of that time are revived when he comes across a mentally disturbed homeless man in a café and, thinking he's a fellow Vietnam veteran, buys him a meal. Robert is already at a difficult point in his life. His long-standing marriage to Darla, a fellow academic has become stale and they're leading mostly separate lives, his father falls and breaks his hip and his thoughts return to his brother Jimmy long estranged from the family since his flight to Canada to avoid the draft.*

It's essentially a book about memories and how the past affects us all. As well as Robert's memories and regrets about what he did in Vietnam, there are also Darla's memories of first meeting Robert, and Robert's mother's recollections of her early life with her husband. But one of the main themes is that of fathers and sons, of Robert trying, and failing, to live up to his father's expectations and Jimmy, his brother, opting out by leaving the country and starting a new life. Bob, the

homeless man, also has felt the impact of a damaging relationship with his father.

There is, however, so much more in the novel than this. It's a book where every word counts and is impossible to read quickly without losing so much of the impact. I found myself thinking about it long after I'd finished reading it, as it reveals the lasting effect of the Vietnam War on the American psyche. Butler is a highly accomplished writer and I'll certainly read more of him.

Sue Glynn

Perfume River by Robert Olen Butler is a thought provoking look at how a family are torn apart by the aftermath of the Vietnam war years. Two brothers at odds with each other, one seemingly successful, the other caught up in his demons caused by PTSD.

The reality of flashbacks to the battlefields for Robert cause a rift with his wife who cannot begin to understand what he has been through. Jimmy, who refuses to attend his father's bedside when he is dying, has his own problems. A homeless man is thrown into the mix, he has his own sufferings but is drawn to the Quinlan family for some reason.

It is difficult to write a review about this book without giving too much away. Robert Olen Butler is a talented writer who is a worthy winner of the Pulitzer prize.

Glenda Worth
