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Death Takes a Day Trip - Wayne Karlin's Rumors and Stones: A Journey

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Death Takes a Day Trip
Wayne Karlin's Rumors and Stones: a Journey

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The book entitled **Rumors and Stones: a Journey** (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 199) by *Wayne Karlin* is an interesting, if vexing, example of how what has become known as "Viet Nam War literature" functions in American literary circles and loops continuously in the background of American popular culture. Its intentions are perfect for examination at a panel of the Vietnam Area of the Popular Culture Association that in turn is focused on the Jewish Holocaust. This book appears to be purposively straightforward but is not; it is circuitously intentional - though perhaps unintentionally so - it is about at least 4 major themes existing in American public perception

Simultaneously a memoir and a novel, the details of the plot and structure of the book depend on the machine-gunning of 2000 Jews during the summer of 1941 in Kolno, Poland. Enthusiastically complicit in the murders were many of the town's majority Polish citizenry. Previous to that event the reader learns that Karlin's mother had left Kolno and immigrated to the USA. The reader is shown that through the course of Karlin's life she told her son conflicting tales about herself and life in Poland. In 1993 Karlin traveled to Kolno in search of a more concrete sense of his Jewish identity (arguably the true meaning of the book,) and to tease out the realities that had been hidden from him by his mother as she often reconstructed and recast her own identity after fleeing Poland. That dissection of the process of HOW personal narrations of

certain traumas are constructed is an equal structural member with the author's insinuation of his combat veteran's status as a means to operate within the book's "Billy Pilgrim" world of alternating decades and war settings. The book proceeds by a series of jump-cuts back and forth in time, while at the same time he weaves into this physical journey a meditation on the literary journey of the Vietnam War as it has been written by veterans of that conflict - both American and Vietnamese. Interleaved with the author's physical and literary journeys are inserted explorations into the American massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai.

Thematically, though, the book becomes almost fugue-like in its conflation of The Jewish Holocaust; the My Lai Massacre; how the public is to perceive "unimaginable" trauma; and, running like a barely noticeable steel thread through it all, is the problematical reality that truth comes in various versions. Wayne Karlin representing himself is not always a unifying device. Sometime the narrator acts as simple historical context and sometimes the narrator changes to Wayne Karlin's "pure" voice. That shifting authorial perspective is both a convenience and a conundrum. In any case, the narrator's dominant voice is that of *both* a Viet Nam war marine veteran and a first generation descendent of Holocaust victims and survivors. The figure of a lethally powerful warrior twinned with the outsider, harassed Jewish descendent of hapless victims makes for an odd protagonist indeed.

It is not, though, the literary substance and structure of **Rumors and Stones** itself that I am concerned with today. The substance is considerable and anyone wise enough to read Karlin's work will be rewarded. Among the subjects of this book, as I said, are the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the nature of atrocity. However, underpinning the these subjects is a fictive after-image left imprinted upon the reader's psyche by invocations of My Lai in what seem to be ever-proliferating contexts of American popular culture.

In terms of American popular culture it seemed only a matter of time before two of the most powerful generators of cultural images the society has ever viewed became

associated with one another in the public imagination. Now, to be sure, both of these historical events - the Holocaust and the Vietnam War - have been written about and analyzed through the multi-lensed scope of statistics, geopolitics, military strategy, academic history, and all flavors of psychology. But as with most historical events, the events themselves do not become "real" to the American public until the historical events are recast into a cultural edifice without a lot of angles and levels. In order for popular culture to comprehend an historical event it seems to have to first atomize the details of the event by wielding the sledgehammer of commercial media revision. Once the details of the original event are sufficiently pulverized, they are then mixed into a slurry of about equal parts accurate data, manufactured data, observers' imagination and participants' memory. All of this viscous fluid to be eventually reconstituted into media-polished slabs of wholly synthetic building stones forming what the public finally comes to know as, for example, "The Vietnam War", or the "The Holocaust," or which ever other set of historical realities must present themselves for destruction BEFORE they can be reconstituted into a suitable memory. America has to destroy the reality in order to save it. Or, as the author says on page 43, "Making up the lies that lies come from." In the context of that observation Karlin is speaking about the process by which the public truths of the Vietnam War - such as they are - have been manipulated into being what the public wants them to be in order to "make itself feel better." However, that very same process, in roughly the same way that I have just so fancifully troped facts into synthetic construction materials, is homogenizing the American public's perception of the Holocaust as well. An example? Perhaps the finest is the regular delivery of tourists on the "**Schindler's List** tours", busload-after-busload - day in, day out - to the location of where Spielberg created the film Ghetto and concentration camp scenes of **Schindler's List**, instead of taking the same tourists to the location of the actual Holocaust sites themselves. As Tim Cole has observed in his book **Selling the Holocaust: from Auschwitz to Schindler** (NY: Routledge, 1999) "Indeed for some, **Schindler's List** has almost the status of a primary source. It is not seen as simply representation, but as the 'real thing.' Spielberg has spoken of **Schindler's List** as being a document rather than a film, and his role as being that of witness rather than film director" p. 75

What is problematical about Karlin's Rumors and Stones is that he yokes the My Lai Massacre as a reductive and defining Vietnam War experience to the genocidal murder of 2000 Jews in one Polish village as a reductive and defining experience of the Holocaust. A careful reading of the book provides adequate qualification of this artistic association, but the book, like most books, exists without a guarantee of such assured explication. The affect of this kind of conflation is a nearly perfect example of the inexorable process of popular acculturation of events that, otherwise left to themselves, are either too complex or too unimaginably ugly to stand naked in the public gaze. It would be unfair and inaccurate to accuse Karlin of not knowing that these metonymic reductions were simplistic and dangerous.

Nevertheless, and still problematical, is the author's propensity to drape the mantle of Holocaust victim or survivor on his mother's manipulation of reality and thus cast her in a light that is redemptively (and forgivingly) rationalized. He stands unwilling to grant this kind of dispensation to a larger American "society, also of substantially immigrant sensibility, as it struggles still to assimilate its defeat and humiliation in the Vietnam War almost as a counterpart to the evolving, proliferating varieties of generational Holocaust survivor - in this case, his mother. That is, segments of the American public in the guise of its real and imagined veterans, endlessly retelling their tales, appears to stand almost as a counterpart to Karlin's mother. But the one is allowed the grace of creative dream-like memories and the others are portrayed as tattered angry liars muttering on subways or well-dressed insouciant fools making movies of what should have been. Of course it would be presumptive to represent Karlin as actually believing that an individual's motives and behaviors could be accurately equated with those of an entire society, but even the long-term affects of this kind of perceptual experimentation is what eventually allows the erosion of public perceptions that form popular "knowledge". I believe that is the result when imaginative representations of trauma like the Vietnam War and the Holocaust are appropriated for affect by lesser artists than Wayne Karlin. And believe me, most artists who attempt this appropriation are very "lesser." The concern then always ends up being whose trauma is the most essential as though the enormity and nature of a particular trauma doesn't matter as long as it is viewed in only personal terms. That is to say, unlike the Holocaust, to claim for any purpose that My Lai is delimited evil is absurd.

Karlin certainly voices this worry in a scene where the author has been reunited in an annual week-long confabulation of professional novelists and poets as they all teach Vietnam War writing in a University of Massachusetts Summer institute. Here is how American society is fastened to what has become, through a vast and complex array of media representation, the "story" of America's Vietnam War

"That the war was being rewritten in order to present the country with what it wanted to hear about itself: it had engaged in a defined and noble mission against an evil inhuman enemy. I'd read how Tom Clancy and Tom Selleck had become good buddies, writer and actor, print and screen; they twined in my mind and nightmares into a leering Janus figurehead for the Age of Convenient Illusion: neither of them in the war, both shaping it to fit a picture in their minds as unchallenged by experience as the rest of the country: America as Jack Ryan and Thomas Magnum, the Vietnamese as cruel inhuman slime. The country outside the porch on which we sat seemed entangled in a conspiracy to make up stories that would make itself feel better, the never was's and wannabes selling the country the myths it wanted out of the war, rewriting it to order, the usual." P.43

This is the language of indictment. It is implacable in its unforgiving accusations of a nation's inability to comprehend its own misguided embarrassments and confused humiliations - its need to flee what it was too late to fix, or even to draw from the endlessly repeated images of the long war some fair - if excruciating - psychological equilibrium.

Quite intriguing in these comparative assessments by the author is that the figure of the Vietnam War veteran "wannabe" emerges as a prominent character in the author's analysis of how the war's true nature had become so distorted - a distortion so canted as to be in peril of becoming more evil than the event it so badly described. The figure of

the combat veteran wannabe appears prominently again in the book when the author and his professional writer colleagues are riding on a late-night subway and encounter two menacing drunks:

The train stopped and the door opened and . . . [they] stepped through it into the world, both unshaven and staggering, one thin and hawkish in a stained black raincoat, the other dark-jowled, foul-smelling. The fat man glared around the car, burped, stared straight at Weigl and me.

'When I was in the Nam,' he bellowed to the car.

Weigl smiled at me, his face damaged in the harsh light.

The man looked at him blearily.

'You saying you were in Vietnam?' Weigl asked.

Fat Al knit his forehead, belched as if that was the thought he'd drawn from it. 'What the fuck all you know about it?'

'Just wondering, bro. I was there with the First Cav.'

'Bullshit. You never were.'

' . . . Bullshit?' [Weigl] said.

[The thin one was tugging at the fat one's arm] "Hey man," he said very carefully, "we got to get off at Savin Hill. Otherwise we miss our last connection."

'Who were you with?' I asked him. 'In Vietnam?'

He glared at me, 'Marines,' he said, and laughed, surprised at this own history.

'Where were you?'

'Where the fuck was I? Where the fuck were you?'

The Haitians had fallen silent and were stirring uneasily. '

'Where the fuck was I?'

'My Lai' the drunk sneered. 'I was at My Lai.'

'Bullshit,' I said. 'There were no marines at My Lai,' I said, feeling a sharp rise of rage, that he was only able to call up those two words to

mean the war, that he'd leaked off my pages, that he wouldn't leave me the fuck alone.

He glared at me. "What'd you say?"

"I don't think you were there. At all."

The train stopped. [The thin one pushed his friend out of the door. The fat one] stood uncertainly on the platform, still glaring. The doors closed, severing him from me." PP .41-42.

Now previously, a different notion of the experiential "wannabe" was injected into the book in an extraordinary way. This time it is in the sense of those who feel a need to experience trauma vicariously as identity. The author reveals the following: "She [his Mother] had left Kolno when she was twelve or thirteen or fourteen; as far as she knew we had no relatives left in the town during the Holocaust, a fact which was a bitter disappointment to me when I was a child . . ." (p. 20)

Variously connecting the passages just quoted comes the author's narrative of his mother's early life as he remembers it from his youth growing up with her in New York. As early as page 2 of the book the author is wondering at his Mother's veracity. Among his speculations is one he makes about his Mother's chameleon-like status as a refugee from a Polish village whose entire population is later murdered in the Holocaust, when he realizes that she often manufactures, even lies, about her past:

"My mother lived in similar shells of identity . . . She'd come to America when she was fourteen, but the year of her arrival and her age at the time both changed fluidly as she got older --the former advanced while the latter retreated. After her death I found papers in her safe deposit box . . . The papers not only added ten years to the age she'd claimed, but also placed her actual day of birth in a completely different month. There was no reason for the latter deception I could think of except as a refugee's tic, an automatic and compulsive need to create a fictional identity. (Pp. 2-3)

I wondered what other elements in the stories she'd told me had been changed and distorted, though I was not particularly shocked or disillusioned by her action--I was, after all, a writer of fictions, by definition someone who lied in order to tickle out some sort of truth. (p. 3)

Perhaps some of the motivations behind my mother's flawed remembering--conscious or not--were obvious and commonplace. She wanted to be younger, richer; she wanted to be a dispossessed princess; she wanted me and others to sense an echo of doomed and tragic glamour under the tediousness of her life. She wanted, mainly, to change the past so that she could be forgiven and could forgive herself for the present: that is, she wanted what everybody wanted. Her parents had been rich, she told me: her mother never lifted a finger, even sent all her children to a Polish wet nurse. The family was so poor, she told me, they had to beg potatoes from the peasants and nearly starved one winter. Her father, she told me, was a man who, while not a religious fanatic, was so learned in the Talmud that rich men and rabbis would come to him for advice. Her father was a kind of doctor, she said. Her father was a smuggler, she said . . . the village of Kolno was near the German border. . . How could Kolno be near the German border? My own birth certificate listed my mother's birthplace as Russia, which meant the village had to be located in The Pale, that area of eastern Poland that had been under Russian sovereignty until the 1930's . . . (pp. 3-4)

The introduction of the 3 or 4 distinct uses of the phenomenon of the experiential Wannabe - the growing number of people who appear to crave a vicarious experience with the inexpressible trauma of certain death experience - is a troubling presence in a book that couples Vietnam veteran combat with Nazi atrocity, or genuine Holocaust

survivors and those who might simply traffick in tragic affects. The good news is that in a book like Rumors and Stones the yoking together of certain aspects Vietnam War experience with the existential truths of the Holocaust might be useful to certain sophisticated readers. But the bad news is that I believe it signals a category of inevitable precursor to a dilution of the Holocaust into a ready source of conveniently shocking narrative plots, atmospherics, easy grotesqueries for the use of media production, and a general locus for what may be seen in growing instances in contemporary American popular culture as "grief envy." Growing numbers of people appear comfortable - even greedy - to want to possess grief that is LEARNED rather than grief that is earned. Of course, all of that and more has already come to pass to a profound degree in terms of the Vietnam War experience. Given the right circumstances it is inevitable in a culture whose primary defense against unspeakably traumatic experiences is to devise a way to "feel better about it," that the Holocaust will become a cultural shorthand - a "grammar of motives."

Fortunately, In Karlin's hands, we have a little time left. Gordon O. Taylor, in his 1996 review of the book, believes that

"After such knowledge, in the case of Vietnam, Karlin still struggles with the question of what forgiveness, and for whom. He continues here, as in his earlier books, to write himself out from where the war took him. In the case of Kolno, however - despite being 'the son of refugees who'd fled fire and massacre' - he feels a need to write himself into deeper awareness and understanding." ("Nation". Vol. 263, #13, Oct. 28, 1996. p. 28)

Unfortunately, Karlin's hands are not going to be around forever.

So, in the context of this conference and from the details of this book, which truths are masks and which masks truths? Is it the Holocaust draped in Vietnam, is it a Nazi atrocity cavorting, if allowed, as an American atrocity, is it about a Jewish American Vietnam

veteran trying on someone else's trauma, or his bloody garments being thrown over the shrugging shoulders of non-Jewish, non-veterans of neither the Vietnam War nor the Holocaust? And, as it turns out, his mother - the pivotal center of the whole tale - is not a Holocaust survivor at all and, possibly, not even a genuine victim.

What makes Karlin's narrative so damnably difficult to deal with in terms of the Vietnam War is that it seems to be constellated around the American Vietnam War experience. But that complicated experience in the book is valid ONLY as it stands in SERVICE of the Holocaust, as though the Holocaust requires courtiers. This does not mean that Karlin confuses the two events in either magnitude or meaning. "His point is not that Kolno and My Lai are identical - he sees the disparity between 500 killed at My Lai in 'what was considered the worst American atrocity of the war' and 2,000 killed in Kolno in 'what was considered a small, almost casual "action," a tiny thread in the tapestry of murder." (Olson, p.29.) "But" Karlin insists " the link reasserts itself, because it [My Lai] had happened, because it had happened in my war, because everything in that war had led to it, because I was standing here [in Kolno] now, compelled to make a journey as if I were a line completing a pattern written in my heart. . ."

In the now robust parlance of aficionados of the Vietnam War -- "There it fucking is." It will be hard for many combat veterans of the Vietnam War to comprehend that their "terrible Knowledge" is, according to some, simply in the nature of a footnote - albeit a well-written one. A collateral affect may be, though, that Americans might start to realize just how grotesque the Holocaust is when the entire vicious monstrosity of the Vietnam War can assume the position of a mere adjective for one of the Holocaust's smaller atrocities.

Presented with the perplexing juxtaposition of My Lai with the colossal evil of the Holocaust, I suppose it matters more than in most books whether one expects, going in, that the book be about the Vietnam War or the Holocaust. I think an index of how operative this assumption is can be found in the fact that the official Library of Congress catalogue subject headings assigned to Rumors and Stones are all related to the

Holocaust - not one to Vietnam. That means that forever more, in that grand organization of knowledge undergirding research libraries the world over **Rumors and Stones** will be classified exclusively as Holocaust literature. In the very influential classification system imposed by the Library of Congress and used everywhere, there is not a single reference to even the My Lai massacre itself, without which the book could not have been written in the first place -- let alone that there is no mention of either the Vietnam War or Vietnamese characters who are named in the book! The way that this contention between comparative atrocities plays out in this book is unintentionally (at least to Wayne Karlin and the Library of Congress Subject Cataloguers) emblematic of how the Vietnam War has become for American popular culture an understated but ever-present rhetoric of collective identity. The unsuspecting reader will pick up **Rumors and Stones** thinking it will be about the Holocaust but it is about the Holocaust only in a parallel universe of the American experience of a certain war, and thus the possibility of American complicity in atrocity assumes the cloak of Received Knowledge. American Vietnam War atrocity becomes merely an ambient truth - gunfire as elevator music. The gaudy threads of the American war experience appear to get woven into the background fabric of astonishing numbers of narratives consumed by the public. Whispers of My Lai, sniggers of "Rambo", endlessly repeated images of baggy pants, paunchy, middle-aged veterans appropriated (unbeknownst to them, usually) to sell everything from tacky jewelry to tourist packages, and of course the ever present black MIA-POW pennant flapping atop post offices, car aerials, motorcycles, and front porches - all these myriad signs run silently in America's manufactured memory of itself. Within the shimmering chimerical media of popular culture EVERYTHING eventually has something to do with the Vietnam War experience - and now, EVEN the Holocaust has to do with Vietnam. That is an astonishing realization. In a book that is "officially" about one man's search for his own Jewish identity within the Holocaust no fewer than 4 whole chapters and a quarter of the book are about the place of the Vietnam War in the American psyche. The Vietnam War experience has now become a "literary device." The intellectual appropriation of the Vietnam War has evolved into a commonplace. The Vietnam War experience has become so ubiquitous that although a book cannot exist without the association, the association itself no longer merits official classification, or even mention. In the case at

hand the author employs the Vietnam experience as distilled into the single droplet of horror suspended in the words "My Lai" as a heuristic for examining everything from the nature of Jewishness, to uses of the inexpressible "forbidden knowledge" of atrocity, all the way to the description of the strategies people perfect to manipulate truths in order to create acceptable personal (and national) identities. In the following defining scene we get the ultimate Vietnam treatment that Karlin once warned us about. Karlin actually conjures himself into a vivid set of highly cinematic images in order to reify the author's climatic sense of terrible vengeance against the viciously anti-Semitic Poles and murderous Germans. In this passage, in a weirdly surreal evocation of some of the very same legendary imagery that earlier came under the author's harsh judgement, Karlin imagines, while standing in the erstwhile killing ground of the Kolno market square, that he is again the Marine helicopter door gunner that he had been, only this time he writes:

"I came down in Hugh Thompson's Helicopter, landed hard in the center of the [Kolno] market square . . .and I was between the Jews and the mocking, hate-filled faces . . .and as my finger tightened on the trigger I could see that all of the soldiers among them were wearing my uniform and I knew I should have chopped the toes off my foot rather than go to that war."

One atrocity in the service of another. One atrocity to comprehend another atrocity. One atrocity speaking for another atrocity. This is a bad idea--especially when both happen to have been real. And if ever you wonder if these speculative exercises in comparative atrocity will go awry, or that my warning in this essay is itself the kind of exaggeration that is the lifeblood of panels in popular culture, I invite you to examine a book by John Sack entitled **An Eye for an Eye** (NY: Basic Books, 1993). It, and the controversy it has generated, was predicated on the alleged atrocities systematically perpetrated on tens of thousands of non-military German civilians by Jewish survivors of Auschwitz in 1945! This book was eventually suppressed and its legitimacy, veracity, and authority have since been placed in proper perspective by reputable scholars of both history and the Holocaust. So what, you may ask is the harm then, if reputable scholars

were quick to limit the damage of such sensational journalism? Well, the harm was, and is, that the book was taken up (and gleefully so) by the most virulently commercialized gang of Holocaust Deniers in existence - none other than the infamous Institute for Historical Review. And what is most ironic about this phenomenon of using one atrocity to somehow moralize another atrocity is that the writer himself is a sincere Jew who probably does, as he claims, reviles the Nazis and anti-Semites. But his book by vexing one atrocity with another one has the affect of claiming that - at bottom - Jews were capable of genocidal murder but just a LITTLE bit. And there are more of these kinds of insinuating literary experiments going on in the public culture. There are at least three novels by well-known and quite competent best-selling authors who have literally constructed entire novels upon the supposed dual identities of the Vietnam War and the Holocaust even though the reality of that supposition is utterly preposterous. Moreover, preposterous or not, these three novels have been read by millions who have had no other intelligent introduction to either the Vietnam War or the Holocaust. Their knowledge will then be what it will be.

Occasionally a superior explicator of moral ambiguities such as Wayne Karlin will, for some interesting purpose, set to spinning such a clever juggling exercise - one midget atrocity twirling on the finger of a giant one. Still, one must wonder if it can be a useful purpose except on the most intimately personal level of a certain pedigree of spectator. The balancing act possesses too much elegance, approaching, perhaps, a kind of preciousness. Karlin himself testifies that "Eventually the ditches of My Lai would extend in my mind to the ditches of Kolno, a cicatrix just under the skin of the brain." Under these circumstances, I prefer to see the artist, even the very good one, in the metaphor of a "butterfly feasting on a dead baby's hand" (p. 28).

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