



Don't Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Vietnam

By Susan O'Neill

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In this powerful story collection—the first such work of fiction by a woman who served in Vietnam—Susan O'Neill offers a remarkable view of the war from a female perspective. All the nurses who served there had a common bond: to attend to the wounded. While men were sent to protect America's interests at any cost, nurses were trained to save the lives of anyone—soldier or citizen, ally or enemy—who was brought through the hospital doors. It was an important distinction in a place where killing was sometimes the only objective. And since they were so vastly outnumbered, women inevitably became objects of both reverence and sexual desire.

For American nurses in Vietnam, and the men among whom they worked and lived, a common defense against the steady onslaught of dead and dying, wounded and maimed, was a feigned indifference—the irony of the powerless. With the assistance of alcohol, drugs, and casual sex, "Don't mean nothing" became their mantra, a means of coping with the other war—the war against total mental breakdown.

Each of these tales offers new and profound insight into the ways the war in Vietnam forever changed the lives of everyone who served there.

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Editorial Review

Review

"With remarkable restraint and uncommon poignancy, O'Neill . . . delivers assertions of humanity from the depths of a barbarous war."? *Boston Magazine*

"Offers startling glimpses of absurdity and transcendence at three Vietnam field hospitals where, against a background of blood and testosterone, young female officers and nurses are made simultaneously into saviors, survivors, and sex objects. . . . as entertaining as it is harrowing."? *Los Angeles Times*

"Dialogue plastered with soldierly 'trash talk' may offend some, but she has nailed the Vietnam argot?obscene talk for an obscene war. . . . This is writing of a virtuoso who continues to engage, teach, and amaze her readers."? *Louisville Courier-Journal*

"The real star, which seems like the missing piece to a puzzle we've been working on for decades, is the female point of view on loss, desire, and mercy in what the Vietnamese call 'the American War.'"? *Arizona Republic*

"It's a pleasure when a new writer has something to say and says it well. Former army nurse O'Neill's debut story collection captures the physical and psychological tensions of her 13-month tour of duty in Vietnam with refreshing maturity and a profound sense of compassion. The title, she explains in her penetratingly honest introduction, is "an all-purpose underdog rallying cry a sarcastic admixture of cool,' comedy, irony, agony, bitterness, frustration, resignation, and despair." It addresses the need of the Americans in Vietnam to harden themselves while maintaining their humanity a battle that often seems as unwinnable as the war. O'Neill presents a portrait gallery of nurses, soldiers, and natives, grouped into three sections reflecting the three hospitals where she worked. In "The Boy from Montana," a veteran nurse recalls a casualty of war along with her naive assumptions about medical conditions under fire; "Butch" details the attachment an American soldier forges with a little Vietnamese boy. "Monkey on Our Backs" follows a nurse's efforts to rid the world of her commanding officer's annoying pet, and features a bizarrely funny confession and some unexpected entrepreneurial ingenuity. In another darkly humorous tale, "Commendation," an archetypal schemer named Scully provides a cynic's guide to bureaucratic logic. While many of the images Bob Hope's USO show, the secret war in Cambodia, the music of the times are familiar, they are made fresh through the nurse's viewpoint. O'Neill's stories are both entertaining and thought-provoking, especially when she depicts feigned indifference to all kinds of pain. Focused and sympathetic, this is a valuable contribution to the mostly macho literature of Vietnam."? *Publishers Weekly*

"Adult/High School-O'Neill served as an operating-room nurse in Vietnam from the spring of 1969 till early summer 1970. At the time, her anger and the need to forget kept her from writing about her experience. Now in middle age, she has the perspective to see the situation more clearly and offers a stark, often darkly humorous picture of her Vietnam War. Her stories are fictional accounts of her recollections from three very different hospitals in which she served. O'Neill reminds readers that while soldiers suffered the guilt of killing, the nurses felt the pangs of survivor's guilt. They faced dying and maimed soldiers, many of them in their teens, as well as Vietnamese men, women, and children caught in the war's destruction. Possibly most complex of all, as the only females in a world of battle-charged young men, they faced unrelenting, strident cravings for sex from the men with whom they served. Some women were used, abused, and even raped. These stories offer snapshots in the lives of a series of characters facing war's bloody results and dealing with it as they can-through drugs, through sex, through flaunting the rules, or even by putting a hit contract out on

a monkey. Most of the players are barely beyond their teens and their attitudes and actions will strike a chord with most young adults. This is a fascinating glimpse of the Vietnam War from a very different perspective."?School Library Journal

"This collection of short stories is unique in its representation of a group from whom we rarely hear in the literature of the Vietnam War: the women who were sent there. Of course, these are not stories of combat, since at that time women weren't involved in the battlefield. But they were in nurses' uniforms and they were USO aides, and in other ways, too, they served in the war. Consequently, O'Neill's stories are of people who fight their battles outside the combat zone: a hapless grunt falls from the height of seven feet and now doesn't feel anything from the waist down, a nurse determines the future of her out-of-wedlock child, and another nurse finds both the privileges and the perils of rank. Don't mean nothing is actually a term that, along with other expressions, had meaning to those who were "in country" in Vietnam. That the war haunted so many who participated in it is shown by the fact that O'Neill waited 30 years to give voice to her feelings in these stories."?Booklist

"A new voice has risen to join those with stories of America's war in Southeast Asia. Susan O'Neill writes bravely, with human decency and compassion. . . . Powerful characters, original stories. Some of them are simply magic."?Larry Brown

"We've heard these Vietnam tales before, but never from this point of view. . . . A valuable addition to the literature."?Stewart O'Nan

From the Publisher

The Vietnam War as seen through the eyes of an Army nurse.

About the Author

Susan O'Neill served as an Army nurse in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. Don't Mean Nothing is her first book, written nearly thirty years after the experiences it depicts.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sally Watts:

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