



## Wynne's War

*Aaron Gwyn*

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When Corporal Elijah Russell's superb horsemanship is revealed during a firefight in northern Iraq, the young Army Ranger is assigned to an elite Special Forces unit preparing to stage a secret mission in eastern Afghanistan. Elijah's task is to train the Green Berets — fiercely loyal to their enigmatic commander, Captain Wynne — to ride the horses they will use to execute this mission through treacherous mountain terrain. But as the team presses farther into enemy territory, the nature of their operation only becomes more mysterious and Wynne's charismatic power takes on a darker cast. Ultimately, Elijah finds himself forced to make a choice: on one side, his best friend and his most deeply held beliefs; on the other, a commanding officer driven by a messianic zeal for his mission.

Based on the author's extensive interviews with Green Berets, Army Rangers, and other veterans, this taut page-turner brilliantly fuses the war novel and the Western into a compellingly original tale.

## Wynne's War Details

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Author : Aaron Gwyn

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# From Reader Review Wynne's War for online ebook

## Dan Downing says

I liked this adventure yarn very much. Without writing in the same style, Gwyn gives us the kind of story Desmond Bagley, Hammond Innes or Alistair MacLean used to entertain us with. Recently I read and enjoyed "Suspects", by Robert Crais, which has a police dog as a central character. In this outing, Gwyn takes us far away to Afghanistan and introduces us to a special Special Forces group which has snatched up a soldier with a knack for working with horses. The training and uses of the animals is intermixed with a possible love story, a buddy story and a putative mission to hunt down a POW camp. In Afghanistan one never knows.

Riveting and well written, this is a page turner par excellence.

Recommended.

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## Pep Bonet says

I'm fairly sure I'm being unfair with Gwyn. His is the first book I read on the decades-long Afghan war. And I must say that it's probably a good war book. There's action, there's values, there's manhood, there's blood and fraternity. And there's a nurse. There's always a nurse. The kind of action is quite different from other books I've read, situations are new and Talibs are not Congs. On the other hand, the overuse of acronyms is a constant in US military stories!

My problem is that I don't like war books, that's it. I hate heroism, I dislike the Manichaeism involved in war action, I get goosebumps when the good guys (our boys) have nuances and degrees of goodness, while the others are plain bad, I get bored with combat descriptions (it's worse with films where the good and the bad fight for hours on end). And then, why a virile world, a man's universe must include a single woman, not a company of them, just one, so that there's romance and a happy ending?

Anyway, the book is well written. You smell the creative writing student in the author, you spend a good time and, even though you don't come out wiser, you do it the more entertained.

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## John says

A 4.5

This was a powerful and intense book, the most intense I have read in some time. It so affected me, that I had dreams (luckily not nightmares) about it. The subject of war obviously added to the intensity, but I have a feeling that if Gwyn were writing about butterflies or buttercups, the intensity would still be there. His writing is very dynamic.

I feel fortunate to have stumbled upon the book. The author was recently on Minnesota Public Radio, and I happened to tune in. I was so impressed, I had to pick up his book.

The horse breaking scene was breathless. After finishing the book, I went back and reread those 10 pages.

They are amazing. Forget about being able to visualize what the author is writing, I was there! I was alongside Russell in pen. In the middle of it is my favorite line of the book:

“He wasn’t going to hurt her, but the horse didn’t necessarily believe that and, like all creature, only knew what she knew.”

I have never been around horses, but I was very drawn in by their presence in the book. Their physical descriptions in the book are captivating, but their spiritual nature even more so. The horses are a continuation of the men who ride them. They are a fragile representation of the men’s souls. And because of their fragility, the horses are kept out of harm’s way. The horses are kept from seeing the evil that surrounds them.

Spoilers ahead:

I am not a fan of war stories, or the glorification of war. So I was pleased at Gwyn’s perspective. He does not hide the horrors of war, nor hide the horrible things they do to people. The ending is so finely balanced, that as much as I agree with Russell’s actions, I can’t fault Wynne’s principles. Russell wants to save Wheels, his brother. But Wynne wants to save countless others he has never met. The actions of both men leave plenty of room for debate about “the greater good,” and “ends justifying the means.”

Gwyn’s writing taps into a powerful truth about life, that we are all broken and less than whole. We are all only fragments, looking for other fragments to gain a sense of whole. Russell is at times hypnotized by Wynne, because he is able to offer the sense of wholeness he craves. But ultimately he rejects what Wynne’s wholeness offers. Instead he will try Sara, and hope their fragments can be bound together into something greater.

Bravo Gwyn!

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## **John Benschoter says**

I imagine Aaron Gwyn sitting in a room listening to soldiers and former soldiers telling their stories. Perhaps it's a barbershop and he's getting his hair cut short like he believes the men in the room had when they were deployed. He listens to one of the men talk of being stationed in the mountains of Afghanistan. His hair is long and he wears a beard. It becomes clear to Gwyn that this was how the men groomed themselves in Afghanistan, and he wishes he wasn't getting the cropped military cut. The man tells a story of how Special Forces used horses to patrol the mountains. A few of the men laugh, but the man continues with his story. He says these men would ride in coated in the dust of the trails like ghosts, their beards and hair the color of the mountains, their horses as gaunt as the men, grizzled, muscled, hard as their stares. Gwyn hears this and imagines a story like one written by Cormac McCarthy, but the borderlands in this story are the mountains between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is Wynne's War, and Gwyn doesn't shy from it, his epigraph being from McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*. Gwyn could have easily fallen into the trap of mimicking McCarthy, but he has crafted his own story and it's a good one. I discovered Gwyn in the novella anthology *You and Me and the Devil Make Three*, which is the name of Gwyn's story in that book. He held his own with Jess Walter and Luis Alberto Urrea. Wynne's War may not be as original or as good as his shorter fiction, but it is very good.

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## **Jerry Caldwell says**

One of the best, if not the best, novels I have read this year. This is now one of my favorite military books. This author is a great writer, and this book is a great story. I am personally tired of books about war, but this one is different. It is unique, engaging, and the writing draws you into the characters.

Highly recommended to my friends who know the types of books I enjoy; this is one to keep.

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## **Michael says**

My review for this book was published in the 2/15/14 issue of *Library Journal*:

For his latest novel, Gwyn (*Dog on the Cross*) spoke with military personnel, including Green Berets and Army Rangers, and his efforts show: the book pulsates with a verisimilitude that places readers in the war-torn mountains of Afghanistan. When Cpl. Elijah Russell unwittingly reveals his expert horsemanship during a firefight in Iraq, he and his best friend are reassigned to an elite Special Forces unit. He soon realizes why he was summoned: the team, led by its beloved and enigmatic captain, needs Russell to get its stable of horses in riding shape for a covert mission. As the squad approaches the Afghan-Pakistani border, Russell begins questioning this stealth operation. Is it really, as the captain says, about rescuing prisoners of war? What about all this treasure they keep finding? And who exactly is this Captain Wynne, a former hedge fund manager, and what are his true motives? The battle scenes are unabashedly graphic, but readers will be too caught up in their vivid realism to mind. VERDICT Many folks have wondered when American authors would begin producing memorable fiction about the Iraq-Afghanistan wars; with this well-researched, heart-pounding novel, Gwyn stakes his claim.

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## **Rebecca says**

**(3.5)** A modern war story crossed with an old-fashioned Western, this novel set in Afghanistan and Iraq should appeal to fans of Kevin Powers and Cormac McCarthy. Corporal Elijah Russell, a late-twenties soldier from Oklahoma, is following in his father's (Vietnam) and grandfather's (WWII) footsteps as an Army Ranger. He gained 15 minutes of YouTube fame in Iraq for undertaking a risky rescue mission – to save an Arabian stallion from the crossfire.

His reputation as a horseman gets him sent on to Afghanistan, where he is responsible for breaking a set of half-wild horses and getting a band of Green Berets ready to ride into the Pakistani hills in search of American POWs. His leader in this mission is the mysterious Captain Wynne, a charismatic blond reminiscent, peculiarly, of both Jay Gatsby and Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*.

Gwyn's action sequences are particularly gripping and will keep you racing through the long chapters despite some rather gruesome material (he's good at describing pain, as it happens). As the novel proceeds, it becomes less of a Western and more like a conventional war novel; eventually, when Russell becomes

separated from his fellow soldiers and has to get by on his wits, it's more like a classic adventure story – I was reminded of H. Rider Haggard in places – or even a survival tale. I'm not much of a horsy person myself (haven't ridden in 16 years), but I enjoyed the lyrical descriptions of horse training:

“You didn't whip the horse. You did nothing to hurt him. You brought only discipline, and discipline done right was an art form in itself. You had to be an artist. You made the wrong thing feel like work for the horse and the right thing feel like relief. Wrong thing difficult, right thing easy. Wrong thing pressure, right thing release.”

A romance subplot was somewhat less successful for me, as was the attempt at “hayseed” Southern and Western dialect, but in general both the writing and the plotting are quite strong. Gwyn is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. He researched this, his third book and second novel, by interviewing dozens of veterans, including Army Rangers and Green Berets. You'd never know he hadn't been in the Army himself. (He *was*, like Russell, raised on a cattle ranch in rural Oklahoma, though, so that explains his familiarity with horses.)

**Also recommended:**

*The Son* by Philipp Meyer

*Butcher's Crossing* by John Williams

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**Benjamin Percy says**

I haven't had this much fun as a reader in a long time. Wynne's War is a great adventure story, impeccably researched, masterfully plotted, with chapters that blur by like a hail of bullets.

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**Jack Haren says**

This was a tough read.

Poor character development except for the lead Ranger and his buddy Wheels. I believe the editing team worked a lot of OT to bring this book to the finish line.

Very slow start. I found there was an unnecessary overload on how to break a horse to saddle.

The Female character (nurse) was also very undeveloped in character and just did not fit well inside the narrative. Her place in the story is so superficial.

Second half of book was much better. Narrative moved fast and created good tension and interest.

Overall, The plot seemed forced. My mind wandered back to my youth.....Alan Quartermaine linking up with the Green Berets.

Finally, unless things have changed since I wore an Army uniform there is no corporal rank in the army.

Went out after Korea.

If this was author's first book I will give him a passing grade.

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### **Philip Alexander says**

I typically avoid citing or repeating the comments of another reviewer when I review a book, however, Philipp Meyer (author of the excellent *American Rust*) summed up Gwyn's novel as follows:

"This novel feels like Cormac McCarthy meets Tim O'Brien. I could not stop reading it."

Imagine McCarthy's (arguably) most accessible work, *No Country for Old Men* perfectly fused with O'Brien's thundering, yet poignant war stories, and you'll have some idea of what to expect in the pages of Wynne's *War*. With this novel, Aaron Gwyn manages a powerful, pictorial adventure tale and a taut, dark war story, a good vs. evil tale with an enigmatic Green Beret and a principled Army Ranger at its centre. Gwyn has always approached his stories bravely and uniquely, as evidenced by his short fiction collection *Dog on the Cross*, and his surreal crime novel *The World Beneath*. He is an under-appreciated master. His storytelling is by turns gut-wrenching, playful, humorous and, above all, painfully honest, and it's always wrapped up and delivered in highly readable yet literary prose.

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### **Cropredy says**

The central conceit of this book started with the protagonist and his training of horses to be used on an unknown mission in Afghanistan. The author lovingly goes through great detail about horses and their paraphernalia - an interesting parallel to other authors of wartime stories who lovingly write about weapons (especially sniper rifles). Anyway, the book veers off course into a sort of *Heart of Darkness* vector.

Bottom line, there are many other books that do a much better job of telling a story of the war in Afghanistan - and I'm only thinking of the non-fiction ones. Book lacked a good sense of being 'there' for the reader.

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### **Dale says**

Wynne's *War* is a war story and a western with a bit of *A Few Good Men* thrown in as well. It starts out in Iraq where Army Ranger Elijah Russell is filmed rescuing a horse during a firefight and becomes a YouTube sensation. Russell and his buddy are taken out of Iraq to a remote base in Afghanistan. Russell is tasked with training horses for a special forces unit to use against Taliban fighters. They want horses because they are quiet compared to any motorized vehicle, can go places where four-wheelers can't and never need to be re-fueled so long as there is available grass.

Russell grew up breaking horses and a great deal of the first third of the book is about Russell thinking about his childhood and detailing his "horse whisperer" style of breaking horses.

The charismatic leader of this special forces unit, Captain Wynne, is a mystery and so is his real goal with these horses. Russell can't quite figure him out and when he and his buddy are drawn into their first real mission with the horses he just has a feeling that there is more to this mission than meets the eye and that is not good.

I enjoyed the "horse training" part of this book and I admire author Aaron Gwyn's ability to describe a firefight but, on the whole, I felt the book fell short. It left me with a lot more questions than answers and the ending was way too abrupt considering the time and care taken to even get to the heart of the story. I just felt like asking, "Is that it?"

<http://dwdreviews.blogspot.com/>

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## **Travis says**

Engrossing war narrative told from perspective of unlikely central character. The novel relies heavily, at times too much so, on some of its predecessors--Conrad's HoD, McCarthy's ATPH and BM, and O'Brien's TTTC. Interesting repositioning of Western genre plot devices, but doesn't break new ground there, really. The motivation is still vengeance and justice, the enemy is still shadowy, savage, and clad in black. The Afghan scouts and hostlers are as unknown as McCarthy's Delaware scouts or Mexican hands. The love story with Sara is a bit forced, a little too convenient maybe. Wynne ends up being more interesting than Russell, unfortunately. There are far more Russells than Wynnes in the world. Pacing is rushed in a few places, and doesn't always have the gravity a story of this type often strikes in other writers' hands. Still, action-driven and thoughtful (don't always get both). Likely easily adopted for an upper level lit course.

Themes and devices: ethics of war, cowboying, grandfather paternalism, Western genre plot devices, mental health, realistic battle scenes through description and lingo, post 9/11 patriotism, heroism and warrior mystique, life after military service.

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## **Cheryl says**

Do "children of adversity" make exceptional warriors?

This was a different type of war book, tying horses and warfare together in modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. I tend to think of armored vehicles, such as humvees when I think of conflicts in the Middle East, not Appaloosas.

Corporal Elijah Russell, an Oklahoma ranchman and a skilled horseman, sold off the family ranch after the grandfather who raised him dies. He decides to become an Army Ranger like his grandfather and father before him.

He ends up rescuing a horse and happens to be filmed by BBC, which puts him on a path that he would have never guessed when he joined the Army.

The military jargon rang true but some of the horse events (and military conflicts) were a little unbelievable. But I enjoyed this tale. I enjoyed the horse whisperer side of Russell, his battle-buddy Texan "Wheels" and the side romance with nurse Sara.

Parts of the adventure/war novel brought back memories of the George Clooney movie "Three Kings."

I recommend this tale to anyone who likes war novels or horse stories or fast-paced action tales.



NOTE: I received a copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

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### **Eric Klee says**

"Set in the mountainous terrain of eastern Afghanistan, the story follows a Special Forces unit on a mission by horseback." If you: (a) love war stories AND (b) love training horses, then WYNNE'S WAR is the book for you. Unfortunately, that genre is so specific and neither truly appeal to me, so I cannot say that I really enjoyed this book. However, other than the subject matter, the book seems well-written descriptive-wise, but the story wasn't engaging enough to truly grab me as an "outsider." It felt slow-paced without a lot of character development. 100 pages in, I still couldn't identify with any one character. It's a modern-day WAR HORSE without the emotional impact.

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