

The Histories

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 6

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Recommended Citation

Bischoff, Sarah () "A Review of McAfee's Slow Walk in a Sad Rain," *The Histories*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

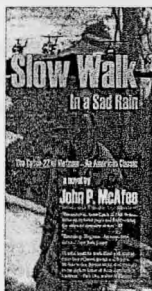
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Book Review I

Slow Walk in a Sad Rain

By John P. McAfee



Reviewed By Sarah Bischoff '08

The cynical narrative voice in *Slow Walk in a Sad Rain* by John P. McAfee offers sarcasm and wit as a conduit to gaining some understanding of a war that is not understandable. Written in a style very similar to that of the absurd novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, this fictional account of a soldier's participation in the Vietnam War is perhaps more accurate in depicting the experience of that war than any other nonfiction work. Filled with darkly comedic episodes that cannot but force the reader to laugh out loud, *Slow Walk in a Sad Rain* employs various accounts of absurd events to illustrate the idea that war is absurd. After completing the novel the reader inevitably flips back to the Author's Note, which clearly states "I have seen most of these events," unsure of whether to be amazed, amused, or horrified.

The Author's Note is particularly useful as a reminder that, while the events are often unbelievably absurd, they do have more than just a base in reality. As McAfee explains, "Fiction has been described as truth-and-a-half. So it is within these pages." He has taken his own experiences in the Special Forces, as well as stories which Vietnam veterans have related to him over the years, and created a novel that portrays reality in an artistic form. This is especially important to keep in mind at several points throughout the novel, such as when McAfee describes his base in terms of the Emerald City of *The Wizard of Oz*, or when natives of Laos chase after the American soldiers, firing their bows and arrows. Some of these events could not possibly have occurred, yet they are not entirely fictional but based on actual events witnessed by McAfee during the war.

While there is certainly a great amount of humor in this novel, that humor is always relevant to the main theme: that everything about war is absurd. The ridiculousness of the military bureaucracy is one key facet of this theme. One of the orders given to the soldiers by the U.S. command states that certain Vietnamese villages have been "pacified." The U.S. military wants McAfee and the other soldiers of the camp to sleep in the villages, to make sure they really are pacified, and to "Report immediately if information is incorrect." The report contradicts itself because it states the villages are pacified, and then orders the soldiers to go into them to see if they really are pacified. Upon first reading this line the reader smirks at the absurdity of the order. As the narration continues, however, he realizes the seriousness of the predicament the

soldiers face, simply because the U.S. army is giving out such ridiculous orders. The soldiers going into that village may all be killed because it really isn't "pacified" at all.

An entertaining, exciting novel that forces reality upon the reader in a nonsensical way that makes complete sense, *Slow Walk in a Sad Rain* is an account of the Vietnam War that should be read by everyone. Its dark comedy reaches out to all people, from the most laidback to the most serious. More importantly, it provides an interesting way to understand a war that continues to impact so many people, even today. Especially considering the American involvement in the Iraq War today, it is necessary to examine war and its many wide-ranging effects. *Slow Walk in a Sad Rain*, without reserve or apology, exposes the very essence of war for all to see.

New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1993