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Book Report: The Fighter

The book, “The Fighters: Americans in Combat in Afghanistan and Iraq” by C.J. Chivers vividly conveys the emotional and physical memory experiences of war. The author tells a story of the experience of six United States service members in Afghanistan and Iraq. Chivers uses the service members to run the audience through the wars' progression bigger picture. The author mentions that his mission involves the demystification of individuals who have served in the front lines. However, he unapologetically hopes that their stories reveal something bigger, to demonstrate the failure of misguided policies that sent them to Iraq and Afghanistan. The author notes that the lives of US service members got harnessed to war that ultimately failed because it ran past the pursuit of justice. In the war with Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, ‘old thugs fell, new thugs rose, and new enemies emerged and multiplied.

In the book, the author pulls back the curtain on the various Americans, more than 2.7 million, who served the wars since 2001, 11th September. Chivers provide detailed chronicles of the journey endured by servicemen in the middle and lower ranks. The book follows six combatants, some of whom engaged in wars in the early days, and returned home after metastasizing into counterinsurgencies, while others joined the war as idealistic recruits. The six characters focused on by the book are a Green Beret sergeant, an F-14 pilot, a helicopter pilot, a corpsman for the Navy, a marine lieutenant, and an infantryman for the army. Chivers briefly narrates the reason each combatant joined the army and their lives back home after the missions. Chivers portrays the Navy fighter pilot, Layne McDowell, as being high above the war facing moral conflicts of whether to drop bombs on targets with probabilities to hurt civilians. The Special Forces soldier, Leo Kruszewski, must handle attacks that he not well-prepared for, while the Army aviator, Mike Slebodnik, always had to be in control of the aircraft. Dustin Kirby, the Navy corpsman was in the thick of battle, the Army infantryman, Jarrod Neff, was an intelligent officer, while the radioman, Robert Soto was an aspiring actor. The author brings to life the stories of ordinary marines, sailors, and soldiers through a pose that reads like a book. Chivers focuses on the lives of ordinary individuals in the thick of battle but briefly encounters with President Bush in the book's last chapter.

Every character in the book represents a timeline in the wars since 2001, 11th September, as well as the mission in the mountains of Afghanistan in the search for Osama bin Laden. The story covers through 2003 after ending major combatant operations by President George Bush’s declaration till 2013 after the expansion and growth of the Islamic State of Iraq into the current ISIS.

In one Chivers’ story arc, he focuses on the life of a Navy carrier pilot after the September 11 attack. As a young Navy lieutenant, the character was among the first aviators bombing Afghanistan, through his twelve years of services until Chivers presents him now as a commander of a squadron and still flying missions over Afghanistan and Iraq. The character's journey from an enthusiastic junior officer to a leadership position commanding other young aviators demonstrates the impact of serving a wide range of combat tours.

Through Chivers' focus on the particular, the stories start to feel universal, by representing the unfathomable impacts of war to many Americans. All the combatants, have their distinct weaknesses, but are largely self-sacrificing, competent, and seeking to do the right things for their fellow troops. Fatal errors in the stories seem to originate from unknown and unseen entities, often at higher ranks, baffling individuals in harm’s way.

For most Americans, the cost of war is not always in a good way and is more immediate. The story of the young Marine lieutenant leader in his first combat platoon is both tragic and heroic. The young enthusiast has reservations about the short training duration with his platoon and whether he can command them in combat. However, he rises to the challenge and succeeds in leading his platoon despite his uncertainties, between 2010 and 2011 through the biggest Marine operations in Afghanistan.

In the first Marine's major action, the combatants learn the hard way that their tasks are full of unintended death and uncertainties after the destruction of a house occupied by Afghan refugees by a mistargeted American missile. The accident killed several children and women. The Marines were in horror for the mistake and its consequences but had to carry on with their mission. The consequences affected the new lieutenant considerably because he had to deal with personal regret and grief as well as ensure his platoon maintained a focus on completing their mission while looking after one another and staying alive.

Chivers' book demonstrates the battlefield bravely and the grief and triumphs for wounded soldiers on the home front. The author spent a considerable amount of time on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2013, and his reporting, especially his accounts with the detrimental impacts of war on the combatants and civilians caught in the crossfire, rings chillingly true. For instance, he presents the corpsman Kirby’s agony after being shot in the face. He does not spare any detail of frustrations and pain experienced by the various wounded veterans who had to deal with their psychological and physical wounds for months or years. The author reminds his audience that most of the veterans still battle their traumatic injuries or post-traumatic stress years after their service. Some of the brave combatants died in the battlefield or sustained fatal wounds, leaving their families questioning the worthiness of their sacrifice. Like many combatants throughout history, the soldiers find themselves fighting for their colleagues on either side, rather than on a grand strategic plan or some great cause. The soldiers serve with courage and honor in wars with ambiguous ends, and the citizens they swore to serve never understand them fully.

Works Cited

Chivers, C. J. The Fighters: Americans in Combat. Simon & Schuster, 2018. ISBN: 1451676646,9781451676648.