

PREFACE to *GETTING OUT*

by Morton Redner

“So funny . . . so painfully accurate,” The New York Times said. Critics compared *GETTING OUT* with “The Graduate,” “Goodbye Columbus,” and its main character to Holden Caulfield. Harlan Ellison described it as “a magical, entrapping web-footed wonder of a novel”. The Philadelphia Enquirer called it the “funniest reading since Catch-22”.

There were of course skeptics. One critic suspected me of writing the book with a Hollywood sale in mind. To him I said “From your mouth to God’s ears”. Some reviewers tossed me into the bin they reserved for Abbie Hoffman and other left-wing radicals. I was against the Vietnam War. But married with two kids, I was hardly a radical. Nor was I alone in opposing the War, you may recall.

Neither the reviewers, nor for that matter my editor, publisher, or agent had any idea where I was coming from, or why I wrote *GETTING OUT*, and no one asked. Which is exactly the way I wanted it. Years have passed since then, and I’ve decided in this edition to tell you.

GETTING OUT is a love story about a young man drafted to go to Vietnam. The hardcover was published in 1971, the paperback in 1972. In January 1973 the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords with North Vietnam and Simon & Schuster took the book out of print. They probably decided most people had grown so sick of the War they weren’t interested in reading another word about it. And they were probably right.

The last remaining copies of *GETTING OUT* soon disappeared. I put the experience behind me and, in the 30 years that followed, hardly gave it a thought. Until one day in 2006 when I googled myself and noticed something new on the web. It was an article in the Yale Journal of Criticism about literature of the Vietnam Draft.¹ Its author Rachel Adams discusses *GETTING OUT*, and the novels of Tim O’Brien and John Irving.

What I liked most about her article is that, although I intended *GETTING OUT* as black comedy, the quotes Ms. Adams selected for her essay were not ha ha funny.

I couldn’t count the friends, editors, and film people who have said to me over the years, “Hey, I heard you published a book! I’ve looked but I couldn’t find it anywhere. Is it possible to get a copy?”

I'd grown tired of seeing the look on their faces as I handed them one of my dog-eared personal copies. Oh yes and one other thing: Iraq. All of the above have prompted me to release this new edition.

I majored in English at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, and graduated in 1961. Remember Senior Week? That Black Hole between final exams and Graduation Day? That last best hope to get blind drunk before they sober you up to graduate and throw you out the door to face the cold cruel world?

I was by no means opposed to drink and mirth but I spent Senior Week alone. Perhaps I was paralyzed with fear of the world that lay in wait for me after graduation. Perhaps I had so loved that green campus on the shores of Seneca Lake I was determined to savor it to the very last moment.

I spent Senior Week sitting under trees, reading a few novels that had accumulated on my bookshelf over the past few years. I read two by Thomas Mann: *Dr. Faustus* and *Confessions of Felix Krull: Confidence Man*. I also read Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik and His Fortunes in the World War*. (Not to be confused with Ford Madox Ford's masterpiece *The Good Soldier*.)

Hasek died before completing the entire novel he had envisioned. Still, *Good Soldier Schweik* is more than 700 pages. The first of four volumes was published in 1921, soon after World War I. The book has since been translated into over 60 languages and deserves a front-row seat alongside the great works of antiwar fiction including *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Naked and The Dead*, *Catch-22*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

I remember laughing out loud as I turned the pages of *Good Soldier Schweik*. The main character Schweik is a bumbling numbskull, crazy like a fox, who pretends to his superiors that he is proud of being a private in the Czech Army.

It takes Schweik more than 700 pages just to travel to the front-lines. Somehow or other he manages never to show up for battle. He always concocts some excuse about why he was absent or late, and always begins each excuse by saying "Beg to report, sir, but . . ."

The following is not a quote. Instead, I've paraphrased bits from several scenes, to illustrate:

Beg to report sir, I had no other thought in mind than to rejoin my regiment and fight alongside my comrades. But the train was delayed . . .

[or] a woman started screaming in the next car. It turned out she was giving birth. They had to stop the train and fetch a doctor. I got here as soon as I could . . .

[or] the train got stuck and, while they were repairing the engine, I decided to have a drink at the bar and, before I knew it, I had downed one too many drinks, and passed out and I awoke only to learn the repairs had been completed and the train left without me.

In the late 1960s I was writing TV commercials on Madison Avenue for major consumer brands -- Chrysler, Jell-o, Texaco, Revlon, General Electric, among others. Writing advertising was ideologically painful for me, but easy money. I had a clever way with words and they paid me well to think up cute headlines that convinced people to buy things they didn't need and do things they'd never have done on their own.

To add insult to injury, many of my friends were out of work. Yet despite their struggle to survive, they crusaded on for their beliefs, marching in antiwar rallies, protesting the Draft. And there I was: draft-exempt simply because I was married with children. I'd fly from one coast to the other to film commercials at the Hollywood studios. Life was good, or it should have been. Actually it wasn't that way at all for me. Instead of happy it made me feel guilty.

TV stations and magazines are required by law to allocate a percentage of their air time and print space to run advertising in the public interest. To fulfill this obligation, and to nurture their image as good corporate citizens, the Advertising Council works with the agencies to produce pro bono advertising for worthy causes, such as American Cancer Society, UNICEF, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. It's a good thing to do and everyone involved -- the agencies, photographers, actors, and studios -- donates their time for free.

My agency Young & Rubicam asked me to write the national recruitment advertising for the Peace Corps. It was a kind of honorarium and I felt privileged to do it, but I couldn't have foreseen the effect it would have on me. Y&R may have thought we were advertising the Peace Corps but I seized upon it as an opportunity to advertise peace.

The asked us to create a poster. The art director and I came up with what we thought was a sure-fire headline:

End the War in Vietnam. Send in the Peace Corps.

A photograph above the headline showed Peace Corps volunteers carrying backpacks loaded with medical equipment, books, farming implements, and such. A “swords-into-plowshares strategy”, the account exec called it.

We presented the campaign at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington. One of the Peace Corps officials took me aside as we walked to the dining room for lunch. I was so naïve not to see this coming:

“You can’t mention Vietnam,” he said to me quietly.

“Why not?” I asked.

“The same Congress that approves our budget also approves the Military budget. The hawks in Congress *want* us to be in Vietnam. We can’t afford to alienate them.”

“I see.”

He shrugged. “Just find a different approach.”

We returned to New York, put our heads together, and came up with a line guaranteed not to offend:

Make America a better place. Leave the country.

We placed the headline next to a photo of the Statue of Liberty. But instead of holding the torch, she’s pointing off into the distance.²

They loved it in Washington. The campaign was a stunning success. The New York Times reported in a front page story that Peace Corps recruitment that year was up 80%. The poster now hangs in the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution.

We had found a way to promote the Peace Corps without mentioning the War. Yet who could fail to see the irony? To me it was Orwellian double-think. Any fulfillment I might have reaped from the experience slipped from my grasp and left me wanting to do something more for peace than just a poster.

I could do it with a novel, I thought. Instead of advertising Jell-o or the Peace Corps, I’d advertise peace. Or at least tell some story that might in some way help end the War. Or perhaps help end the War sooner. Even if only by just one soldier’s life.

I got it into my head to write a novel about an American soldier who was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. I decided to tell his story in the form of a journal smuggled out of his POW camp. I banged out a rough draft of the first chapter and knew immediately that it would never work. I wasn’t qualified to

write a war story. All I knew about war was what I had learned watching movies like “Back to Bataan”, “Guadalcanal Diary”, “Battle Cry”.

For weeks I pondered this riddle: “Write a story about Vietnam without fighting.” Until I realized the answer had been part of my life all along. I started asking everyone I knew about the Draft. It was amazing: virtually every draft-age male in my world had somehow engineered a way to get out of being drafted, and was only too happy to tell me how he did it.

I was an ad man and I knew that if **GETTING OUT** was to have any impact, it would have to read like a commercial. If there’s a cardinal rule about commercials it’s this: You want people to watch it. You don’t want them running to the kitchen for a beer. I had to forget about profundity, five-dollar words, ponderous prose. My hero could not be a goody two-shoes or a long-haired soap-boxer like Abbie Hoffman who would put people to sleep.

I needed to create a hero like my readers. My target audience was draft-eligible males. My guy had to be likeable, clever, filled with all the flaws for which the Sixties are notorious: sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Not a hero therefore but an anti-hero.

Looking back now, I’m certain that, whether or not I was consciously aware of it, I cast my main character Danny Mordl in the image of Good Soldier Schweik. Despite Mordl’s trivial sins, like smoking dope, I took painstaking care not to leave a shred of doubt in the reader’s mind about his fundamental moral, ethical, and patriotic values. He’s not a turncoat. He loves America.

Danny Mordl and Good Soldier Schweik share one trait in common: They see through that phony competition among Military people to outdo one another with displays of patriotic fervor. They both know that in reality no one is that gung ho. They know it works only if everyone plays along. They just decide not to play along. In the end they both simply walk away.

Maybe I did too good a job and, as a result, many readers just couldn’t take **GETTING OUT** seriously. They, and more than a few critics, mistook it for a throwaway dime-store novel written to cash in on a topic of national interest.

I can only hope there will always be inside of me that earnest college freshman who stays up until two in the morning arguing with my roommates about the concept of just versus unjust wars, whether or how killing your enemy in war is different from murder, whether killing for peace is a contradiction in terms, and whether God exists.

For me, refusing the Draft was the existential “No” of Albert Camus, who viewed modern-day man as a cipher, helpless before capricious natural and human forces infinitely more powerful than he is. To fight them is like spitting in the wind. Then what do you do? You say *No*. It’s all you *can* do. It is for each of us a private declaration of independence. You do realize, of course, this logic works equally well whether or not there is a military Draft.

Never underestimate the power of No. For if everyone in the world acted exactly the same way, there would be no just wars, no unjust wars, no wars. Period. Of course we’re not like that today, are we? We who are so worldly wise and at peace with ourselves that we feel entitled to look down our nose at that idealism of the Sixties and find it laughable, pathetic, naïve.

The main character of ***GETTING OUT*** Danny Mordl is neither a coward nor a pacifist, neither left nor right, neither a joiner nor a lone pioneer. What is his problem? It’s the same problem most people had with Vietnam: We simply did not believe the Government’s rationale for sending us there to fight. Like those imaginary weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, no one had ever shown us proof beyond doubt that the North Vietnamese had fired on us unprovoked in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Mordl is an ordinary person like you and me who sees an undeniable causal link between donning a military uniform and death and, while that might be acceptable for other people, it’s just not for him. What about this do so many people find so difficult to understand?

It’s time now to set aside all that intellectualism and philosophy. Turn the page. You won’t find any of this in ***GETTING OUT***. It’s just a fun read.

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Simi Valley, California
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- 1 “Going to Canada: The Politics and Poetics of Northern Exodus”, by Rachel Adams, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, volume 18, number 2.
- 2 If you look closely you’ll find a small picture of this Statue of Liberty illustration on the back cover of this book.