

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (Fountain)

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Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk

Ben Fountain, 2012

HarperCollins

320 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award

A ferocious firefight with Iraqi insurgents at "the battle of Al-Ansakar Canal"—three minutes and forty-three seconds of intense warfare caught on tape by an embedded Fox News crew—has transformed the eight surviving men of Bravo Squad into America's most sought-after heroes.

For the past two weeks, the Bush administration has sent them on a media-intensive nationwide "Victory Tour" to reinvigorate public support for the war. Now, on this chilly and rainy Thanksgiving, the Bravos are guests of America's Team, the Dallas Cowboys, slated to be part of the halftime show alongside the superstar pop group Destiny's Child.

Among the Bravos is the Silver Star-winning hero of Al-Ansakar Canal, Specialist William Lynn, a nineteen-year-old Texas native. Amid clamoring patriots sporting flag pins on their lapels and Support Our Troops bumper stickers on their cars, the Bravos are thrust into the company of the Cowboys' hard-nosed businessman/owner and his coterie of wealthy colleagues; a luscious born-again Cowboys cheerleader; a veteran Hollywood producer; and supersized pro players eager for a vicarious taste of war. Among these faces Billy sees those of his family—his worried sisters and broken father—and Shroom, the philosophical sergeant who opened Billy's mind and died in his arms at Al-Ansakar.

Over the course of this day, Billy will begin to understand difficult truths about himself, his country, his struggling family, and his brothers-in-arms—soldiers both dead and alive. In the final few hours before returning to Iraq, Billy will drink and brawl, yearn for home and mourn those missing, face a heart-wrenching decision, and discover pure love and a bitter wisdom far beyond his years.

Poignant, riotously funny, and exquisitely heartbreaking, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is a devastating portrait of our time, a searing and powerful novel that cements Ben Fountain's reputation as one of the finest writers of his generation. (*From the publisher.*)

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Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (Fountain) - Author Bio

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Author Bio

- Birth—ca. 1958 or 1959
- Where—Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA
- Education—B.A. University of North Carolina; J.D., Duke University
- Awards—Pushcart Prize; O'Henry Award; Hemingway/PEN Award; Whiting Writers Award
- Currently—lives in Dallas, Texas

Ben Fountain is an American fiction writer, whose 2012 novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, was selected as a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award.

He is the author of *Brief Encounters With Che Guevara*, a collection of short stories. He has won numerous awards, including the Texas Institute of Letters Short Story Award for 2002 and 2004, a Pushcart Prize in 2004, an O. Henry Award in 2005 and 2007, and inclusion of his work in *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best 2006*. In 2007 he won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for a distinguished first book of fiction, and a Whiting Writers Award, a prestigious award for emerging writers, from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation.

Fountain earned a B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1980, and a law degree from the Duke University School of Law in 1984. After a brief stint practicing real estate law at Akin Gump in Dallas, Fountain in 1988 quit the law to become a full time fiction writer. He lives in Dallas, Texas. (*Adapted from Wikipedia.*)

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Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (Fountain) - Book Reviews[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)**Book Reviews**

[An] inspired, blistering war novel...Though it covers only a few hours, the book is a gripping, eloquent provocation. Class, privilege, power, politics, sex, commerce and the life-or-death dynamics of battle all figure in Billy Lynn's surreal game day experience.

Janet Maslin - New York Times

Brilliantly done...grand, intimate, and joyous.

New York Times Book Review

A masterful gut-punch of a debut novel.... *Catch-22* is about to be updated for a new era. In his immortal classic, Heller was lampooning the military's attempt to bureaucratize the horror of World War II. In Fountain's razor-sharp, darkly comic novel—a worthy neighbor to *Catch-22* on the bookshelf of war fiction—the focus has shifted from bureaucracy to publicity, reflecting corresponding shifts in our culture... There's hardly a false note, or even a slightly off-pitch one, in Fountain's sympathetic, damning and structurally ambitious novel.

Jeff Turrentine - Washington Post

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk is not merely good; it's Pulitzer Prize-quality good.... A bracing, fearless and uproarious satire of how contemporary war is waged and sold to the American public.

San Francisco Chronicle

Fountain's strength as a writer is that he not only can conjure up this all-too-realistic-sounding mob, but also the young believably innocent soul for our times, Specialist Billy Lynn. And from the first page I found myself rooting for him, often from the edge of my seat.

Minneapolis Star Tribune

While Fountain undoubtedly knows his Graham Greene and Paul Theroux, his excursions into foreign infernos have an innocence all their own. In between his nihilistic descriptions, a boyishness keeps peeking out, cracking one-liners and admiring the amazing if benighted scenery.

Cleveland Plain Dealer

[W]ickedly affecting...Billy Lynn has courted some Catch-22 comparisons, and they're well-earned. Fountain is a whiz at lining up plausible inanities and gut-twisting truths for the Bravos to suffer through.

Philadelphia City Paper

Fountain's excellent first novel follows a group of soldiers at a Dallas Cowboys game on Thanksgiving Day...Through the eyes of the titular soldier, Fountain creates a minutely observed portrait of a society with woefully misplaced priorities. [Fountain has] a pitch-perfect ear for American talk.

Malcolm Gladwell - The New Yorker

Ben Fountain combines blistering, beautiful language with razor-sharp insight...and has written a funny novel that provides skewering critiques of America's obsession with sports, spectacle, and war.

Huffington Post

A brilliantly conceived first novel... The irony, sorrow, anger and examples of cognitive dissonance that suffuse this novel make it one of the most moving and remarkable novels I've ever read.

Nancy Pearl - NPR, Morning Edition

Seething, brutally funny...[Fountain] leaves readers with a fully realized band of brothers.... Fountain's readers will never look at an NFL Sunday, or at America, in quite the same way.

Sports Illustrated

Billy Lynn is a member of Bravo Company, which acquitted itself heroically in a deadly confrontation early in the Iraq War. An embedded reporter captured the battle on widely broadcast video. Now, on the last day of a victory tour, an insane PR event put on by the army, the company is at a Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving football game. Native Texan Billy has been deeply affected by the death of squad leader Shroom, who gave him books to read and challenged him to think about what he was doing with his life. During a brief stop at home, Billy's sister urges him to refuse to return to Iraq. Billy also meets one of the fabled Cowboys cheerleaders, with whom he improbably forms an immediate and passionate connection, something that has opened a door to the possibility of a new, more hopeful life. But though Billy has had his eyes opened, in many ways he and his company are happier and feel more purposeful as soldiers. *Verdict:* Employing intricate detail and feverish cinematography, Fountain's (*Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: Stories*) vividly written novel is an allegorical hero's journey, a descent into madness, and a mirror held up to this society's high-definition TV reality. Tragically unhinged, it also rings completely, hilariously true. —*Jim Coan, SUNY at Oneonta*

Library Journal

[T]he shell-shocked humor will likely conjure comparisons with *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*.... War is hell in this novel of inspired absurdity.

Kirkus Reviews

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Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (page numbers refer to the hardcover edition):

1. Do the young men from Bravo meet your expectations of what war heroes are...or should be? Given their behavior—drinking, trash-talk, hyper-sexuality, and brawling—are they what you think of when the word "hero" comes to mind? Do you find Ben Fountain's portrayal of them funny ... offensive ... realistic...?
2. Talk about the individual members of Bravo, especially Billy and Dime—what do you think of them? What other member of the team stood out as you read the novel?
3. What kind of character is Albert? Most books and films are scathing in their portrayal of Hollywood and its values. How does Albert, a three-time Oscar winner, stack up to the stereotypical Hollywood producer—what do you make of him?
4. Talk about the other characters—in particular Billy's family and, of course, Norman Oglesby.
5. Billy feels it's obscene to talk about Shroom's death...

and he wonders by what process any discussion about the war seems to profane these ultimate matters of life and death (p. 137).

Is it possible for any noncombatant to understand the depth of Billy's grief? Is it "profane" to talk about Shroom...or is there a way, as an outsider, to talk about war and death without cheapening it? Billy thinks there ought to be a special language to do so. Do we have such a language?

6. *Follow up to Question 5:* The book seems to take aim at civilians who talk to the Bravo team: their questions, comments, and references to patriotism, 9/11, terrorism, God, and war are over-the-top—their words are even presented in a vertical-diagonal format. But much of the outpouring of gratitude seems genuine, even if inane. How does a civilian talk to a combatant, someone who faces the constant threat of death and witnesses violence on a scale unimaginable to most of us? What can any of us say? What have you ever said to a returning soldier?

7. The book abounds with parallels between the world of football, especially the Cowboys, and the military. Talk about how those similarities evidence themselves throughout the book? What is the author trying to get at by setting up comparisons between the two?

8. Albert tells Bravo that they are true heroes for the twenty-first century. He says that their heroism "has really touched a nerve in this country" (p. 56). What "nerve" has been struck...why is the public so enamored with the young men? Why the deluge of attention and adulation? What is it based on?

9. *Follow-up to Question 8:* Billy, on the hand, pities the Americans and their frenzy to connect with Bravo. He refers to them as children (pp. 45-46). Why is he so disproving of his fellow Americans? Do you consider Billy cynical? Or does he realize something about the nature of his fellow citizens? If so, what does he see in them...in us?

10. *Follow-up to Question 9:* Billy thinks that Americans have no conception of the "state of pure sin toward which war inclines" (p. 46). What does he mean? How does war incline to sin if one is fighting for one's country?

11. What do you think of the oilman engaged in fracking shale oil who, during lunch at the Statium club, tells Bravo...

So it's a personal thing with me, boosting domestic production.... I figure the better I do my job, the sooner we can bring you young men home.

Is the oilman genuine in his desire to cut foreign imports? How do you see him—is he a patriot? Why is Dime so angry with him? Is Dime's reaction disrespectful, unfair, even spiteful? Or is he dead-on? Do you find the entire exchange offensive or funny or sad?

12. How does religion, or religiosity, fare in this book? What is Billy's attitude toward God and prayer?

- Is God watching out for the young men of Bravo? Should they be more prayerful?
- Or is the difference between life and death, as Billy contemplates, completely random, a matter of chance?
- Or, again, is it a matter of impersonal, preordained fate? When Shroom tells Billy of an Inuit Shaman who could foretell the day of your death, Billy understands Shroom's point that "if a bullet's going to get you, it's already been fired" (p. 27).

How does Billy engage with religion or spirituality? As a soldier, what form would your (or do your) religious beliefs take?

13. Much is made of class distinction in *Halftime Walk*. Talk about the many references to social class—starting, perhaps, with Mango's comment that what awaits him on his return from Iraq is a job at Burger King (p. 72).

14. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is considered satire, a type of literature that takes a sardonic view of societal conventions. What is this book satirizing—what are its specific targets? By definition, satires are humorous, even absurd...are there sections in *Halftime Walk* you found particularly funny? Are there parts that angered...or saddened you?

15. What is Billy's "long halftime walk"? What is the significance of the book's title? (See also another book issued shortly after Fountain's: Brian Castner's *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Long-Walk-Story-Follows/dp/0385536208>) . The "Long Walk" is a reference to Iraq.)

Spoiler Alert for the remaining questions.

16. Bravo refuses to participate in further discussions of the film project. Why—especially when they're offered a cut of the profits? Is the decision to withdraw a sound one? Why is Dime, in particular, so angry with Norman Oglesby?

17. *Follow-up to Question 16:* Is Oglesby right when he says that the country needs the film, that it will give a much needed boost to national pride? In other words, is the film greater than Bravo—does its need to be made transcend the needs of the squad as Norman suggests? Is that a valid or a bogus argument?

18. When Billy tells Faison at the end of the book that he would be willing to go run away with her...

She lifts her head, and with the one look he knows it's not to be. Her confusion decides it, that flicker of worry in her eyes? What is he talking about? (p. 305)

What's behind Faison's negative reaction? Does she genuinely fear the consequences for Billy if he goes AWOL? Or is she is attracted to Billy, not for *who* he is, but for what he is—an acclaimed national hero, a status he would jeopardize if he were to desert? Is there a genuine, heart-felt connection for either of them?

19. Why does Billy decide to return to Iraq? Should he have taken the way out his sister offered him? Were you hoping he would...or hoping he would return and face possible death? If Billy were your brother, son, husband, or boyfriend, what would you advise him?

20. What does Billy come to realize by the end of the book as he settles back in the limo that will take him back to base and from there to Iraq? What is his state of mind?

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Awards:

Pushcart Prize, 2004, and 2007, for "The Lion's Mouth"; O. Henry Prize, 2005; Whiting Writers' Award for fiction, 2007, for *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*.

Personal Information:

Born c. 1959, in Chapel Hill, NC; married; children: two. **Education:** Duke University School of Law, J.D., 1993. **Addresses:** Home: Dallas, TX.

Career Information:

Writer, attorney, and short-story writer.

Writings:

- *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* (short stories), Ecco (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Ecco (New York, NY), 2012.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Harper's*, *Paris Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and *Southwest Review*. Fiction editor, *Southwest Review*.

Sidelights:

In his debut collection of short stories, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, Ben Fountain offers eight short tales characterized by "pointed prose, nimble revelation, some stunning description of flora and fauna, and a rueful generosity toward a string of well-intentioned bumbler who get in over their heads," commented Michael Upchurch in the *Seattle Times*. Fountain's characters "navigate the moral minefield of doing good deeds while being very human," remarked Prudence Peiffer in the *Library Journal*. In "Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera," graduate student, conservationist, and bird researcher John Blair ventures into the forests of Colombia to do research on small parrots. Blair is confident that his academic mission and earnest concern for the birds will protect him, but in short order he is captured and imprisoned by guerilla fighters. When he finally convinces them of his motives, they allow him to continue his fieldwork, where he is delighted to discover a population of very rare birds once thought extinct. His joy turns to horror when he discovers that his captors are in negotiations to sell portions of the forest, including the birds' habitat, to American timber interests. Sonny Grous, protagonist of "Asian Tiger," is a washed-up golf pro making a living teaching putting skills to wealthy, corrupt generals in Burma. His life steadily spirals out of control as he is first talked into deliberately losing games to please the generals, and then is drawn into a dangerous, morally bankrupt oil deal. Melissa is the young wife of a special forces captain in "The Good Ones Are Already Taken." She is dismayed when her husband returns from an assignment in Haiti and declares that he has entered into a spiritual marriage with Erzulie, a voodoo goddess, and that he will be unavailable to his flesh-and-blood bride on Tuesdays and Saturdays, when he has spiritual sex with his Haitian bride.

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"The Lion's Mouth," set in war-ravaged but diamond-rich Sierra Leone, "is the subtlest, most complex story in the book," commented Fritz Lanham in the *Houston Chronicle*. Humanitarian aid worker Jill arrives in Sierra Leone full of energy and idealism, but the reality on the ground soon dulls her spark. She organizes a sewing cooperative for women whose arms were cut off by rebels, hoping to give them some opportunity to support themselves. When she suggests to her boyfriend, a diamond broker, that she smuggle a shipment of diamonds out in one of her relief convoys, with her share of the proceeds going to support the cooperative, he agrees. The convoy gets caught in a battle between rebels and villagers, however, and Jill must decide between giving up the diamonds or letting a group of innocent people be slaughtered by the rebels. The final outcome drives home the cold reality and brutal unfairness of life in Sierra Leone. Lanham called "The Lion's Mouth" the "best story in the book." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic called the book "an impeccable debut collection." Fountain's stories "have the texture and heft of novels: heavy, sensual atmosphere; the leisure of unhurried telling; characters drawn in detail," observed Bryan Woolley in the *Dallas Morning News*. "Short-story collections don't come much better than this," Upchurch declared.

In Fountain's debut novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, a group of soldiers attend a Dallas Cowboys football game on Thanksgiving. They are on a government arranged media tour after having survived a deadly shoot-out in Iraq. One of these soldiers is nineteen-year-old Billy Lynn, who falls in love with a cheerleader over the course of the day. This social commentary satirically depicts Billy and his fellow soldiers being bombarded with all sorts of attention, as they have become celebrities overnight.

New York Times Book Review contributor Geoff Dyer said of the work: "Everything is brilliantly done. Within the tight schedule of Bravo's three or four remaining hours of liberty, and without leaving the gigantic confines of the stadium, Fountain keeps the reader's plate piled high. It all happens in tandem; by the time Billy falls for his cheerleader we are in love with the book, and that love finds expression in more and wilder laughter." Jim Coan, a contributor to *Library Journal*, wrote: "Tragically unhinged, it also rings completely, hilariously true." *Booklist* contributor Julie Trevelyan lauded: "Fountain's most recent work of fiction delivers a brilliant, powerful examination of how modern warfare affects soldiers back at home."

Related Information:

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- *Salon.com*, <http://www.salon.com/> (August 22, 2006), Tony D'Souza, review of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*.

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