



## The Healer's War: A Fantasy Novel of Vietnam

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**The Healer's War: A Fantasy Novel of Vietnam** Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

A novel of the Vietnam War, with a magical, mystical twist.

Lt. Kitty McCulley, a young and inexperienced nurse tossed into a stressful and chaotic situation, is having a difficult time reconciling her duty to help and heal with the indifference and overt racism of some of her colleagues and with the horrendously damaged soldiers and Vietnamese civilians whom she encounters during her service at the China Beach medical facilities.

She is unexpectedly helped by the mysterious and inexplicable properties of an amulet, given to her by one of her patients, an elderly, dying Vietnamese holy man, which allows her to see other people's "auras" and to understand more about them as a result. This eventually leads to a strange, almost surrealistic journey through the jungle, accompanied by a one-legged boy and a battle-seasoned but crazed soldier and, by the end of the journey, McCulley has found herself and a way to live and survive through the madness and destruction.

## The Healer's War: A Fantasy Novel of Vietnam Details

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# From Reader Review *The Healer's War: A Fantasy Novel of Vietnam* for online ebook

## Paul, says

This book takes a long time to get started, as far as the plot goes. So, it doesn't get really high marks for "being interesting". However, the beauty (and shame) of this book is the picture that it paints of a Army nurse's experience of the Vietnam war. The lostness, cynicism, and hopelessness are characteristic of this type of novel, and understandably so. I imagine that the writers who return from Iraq and Afghanistan will write the same kind of literature. Scarborough does an excellent job of showing the Vietnam war from a Vietnamese perspective. A good read.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes.

Giangelo, a doctor who had somehow managed to escape ascending to deity when he gained his M.D., was better known as Geppetto by the nurses, because of the kindness with which he deployed his carpentry skills.

It probably didn't make much difference to them if they were growing rice for South Vietnam or for North Vietnam, as long as they were able to eat it themselves. Some of the senior officers I'd talked with said America should have supported Ho Chi Minh to begin with. And some of the guys with a couple of years of college claimed that the war was not about communism and freedom but about boosting the economy and making Southeast Asia safe for the oil companies and the international military-industrial complex, whatever that was. While that sounded pretty paranoid, it was less hokey than saying that the whole war was strictly for the sake of political ideals. The only people who said anything about political ideals recited their lines in the same way church ladies said "blood of the Lamb" and "fallen from grace," or the Communists reputedly talked of "imperialist running dogs."

But promises were being broken all around. Most of us in Nam were the children of the last war that was ever supposed to be fought anywhere in the world. All of the baby boys were promised that they would grow up and become successful and all of the baby girls were promised that someday their princes would come. Then along came the goddamn government and bingo, it sent the princes off to battle communism and issued them the right to hate anyone not in their unit. Then it sent them home in body bags, or with their handsome faces melted or blown away, their bodies prematurely aged with disease or terrible wounds, and their idealistic souls turned into sewers. And those were the survivors. Where the hell did that leave me and all the other women?

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## Berni Phillips says

I read this book when it first came out and debated with myself about whether to nominate it for the Mythopoeic Award. It is an amazing book, in my opinion, but I didn't consider it mythopoeic. After, I regretted not nominating it, but it won the Nebula Award, so that's even better.

I find it as powerful today as when it first came out. I still can't quite consider it mythopoeic, but it is a tremendous story of change and struggle. Scarborough drew on her own experience as an army nurse in Viet

Nam, and this book has the ring of truth. The book starts with Kitty in panic mode, trying desperately to save a young girl she accidentally overdosed because she (Kitty) was resentful at the doctor who had prescribed the meds. We see Kitty grow from a rather truculent and somewhat careless young woman into a compassionate healer. This is accomplished largely through the magical amulet which a dying patient gives her. Learning to use the amulet, Kitty learns about it and herself. I don't want to say more because it would require spoilers, but I found Kitty's journey to be quite believable, especially her reactions after she returns to the States.

This book could so easily have been written today about an army vet who did a stint in Iraq. It's timeless and priceless. Check it out.

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## **Suz says**

I had been seeing this book crop up in various book clubs I belonged to, and discussed by people I follow, but I had never gotten around to reading it. Because it is narrated by the incredible Robin Miles, I picked it up to give it a try. While I found the novel interesting, I didn't really latch onto it very well.

Kitty is our main character and the story is told through her eyes. She's a nurse in Vietnam, during the war, just trying to survive and have what life she can. Along the way, she gets an amulet from an older, dying shaman-like Vietnamese man and learns to see, read, and heal through auras.

Eventually bad things happen, she is captured, and then transferred back to the States.

The author did a phenomenal job, I thought, of transporting the reader to the Vietnam war and the proverbial hell of war is well represented. All of the "bad" and "good" guys were all very grey, so there were no evil vs good comparisons - one could understand the motivations of any of the characters, even the bat-shit crazy ones.

Kitty, herself, was amazing in that she was not. She was a regular nurse, essentially tricked into the joke of a war, and she was trying to learn how to survive with what skills she had in that kind of atmosphere. I found her trials of dealing with being captured and then further trials of returning to civilization very well done. It could have been a lot darker (and maybe should have, but then I would have probably not finished), but I'm glad it was not. I think it gave a great look into PTSD and the loss of self for a soldier without being incredibly dark.

Was it worth the read? Absolutely. Did I like it? Absolutely not. It was a fine book, and I think that someone like me, a Gen-Xer who has never seen the war, but has absolutely been tangentially exposed to the brutality, betrayal, and horror that was the Vietnam war would absolutely appreciate it, but it's not necessarily a trip I want to take too often.

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## **Nicholas Whyte says**

<http://nhw.livejournal.com/698312.html>[return][return]This was one of those years when the Nebula system managed to recognise an exceptional novel that would never win a Hugo. The Healer's War is a somewhat autobiographical account of the Vietnam war as seen by an American military nurse, with precisely one sfnal

element: a magic amulet, with slightly healing powers, which gives the narrator the power of empathy with the Vietnamese of all sides and of none (and indeed with her fellow Americans as well). It is a fair comment that the magic amulet is a literary device that enables the author to tell the story she wants (Scarborough herself says so in an afterword). But I think it's still entirely legitimate to count the book within the genre, and to acknowledge its merits accordingly.[return][return]It's a stark contrast with other war stories I have read, which tend to concentrate on the view of the individual soldier (eg, *Catch-22* and *War and Peace*). The *Healer's War* concentrates on the non-soldiers involved in war, and indeed its military characters tend to be pretty unpleasant, whether Americans or Vietnamese of either side. But I felt that none of them slipped into caricature; the narrator's commitment to empathy helped to avoid that trap. It was a gripping and moving read.

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## **Contrarius says**

This won the Nebula in 1989. On the one hand I can see why, but on the other hand I'm left scratching my head a bit. It's an often grim and brutal portrait of the reality of the Vietnam War, and it has a ring of authenticity given that Scarborough was herself an army nurse there. The fantasy component -- an amulet -- is almost incidental to the essentials of the story. That's the part that makes me scratch my head about the award -- this is barely a fantasy at all.

As you might expect from a realistic war story, few people here are all bad or all good, including the bad guys (with one exception near the end). One surgeon is a virulent racist but a kind and dedicated doctor to the American wounded; the narrator herself cares deeply for her Vietnamese patients but is shallow and self-centered in other ways; a Viet Cong colonel is a barbaric warrior but also intelligent and rational, and so on. And, as you might also expect from a Vietnam story, there is no happy ever after and no tidily tied-up plot threads. During the course of the book, the first-person narrator moves from completely overwhelmed to competent caregiver to head nurse to the depths of hopelessness and desperation to prolonged shellshock and betrayal to a dawning awareness that life continues, the pieces need to be picked up, and she can help with the healing process. No tidy story arc here!

Over all this is a moving and gripping account. And though the fantastical elements were a distraction at times, I can see that Scarborough was using them as a vehicle to think about empathy, interpersonal connections and understanding, possibilities for healing, and so on -- a physical manifestation of the need to reach out and cross boundaries. So the amulet and its consequences did have a place.

As for the narrator -- this was narrated by Robin Miles, an excellent narrator who has done a boatload of books. The use of Miles is interesting in and of itself, in fact. You see, Miles is black -- but neither the author nor the MC are. Miles has narrated a lot of "black" books -- black authors and/or MCs -- and I've previously enjoyed books she's done for NK Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor. But you would never guess her race here, except possibly for her authentic portrayal of a black Southern soldier in the later parts of the book. So -- am I being racist to even notice that she is black? Is it a hopeful sign that a black person is narrating a non-"black" book? What if a white person narrated a "black" book? Why do we even still care these days? Things to ponder in our unsettled age.

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## **Bill Blocksom says**

This was a good read. Action, adventure, fantasy. A good story. It helped me see a little more clearly the complexity of the Viet Nam war through the eyes and experiences of an Army nurse. I really enjoyed it and it has left me with a lot to think about.

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### **Tamora Pierce says**

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, first known to me as the author of bawdy, funny fantasy, was a nurse during the American war in Vietnam. *THE HEALER'S WAR* is what came of her time there, and it is every bit as gut-wrenching and real a Vietnam memoir as the best of the other Vietnam books I've read: Tim O'Brien's *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED* and *LOOKING FOR CACCIATO*, Jim Webb's *FIELDS OF FIRE*, Lynda Van Devanter's *HOME BEFORE MORNING*, and Michael Herr's *DISPATCHES*.

There is a fantasy element to *HEALER'S WAR*, one that is passed to the nurse hero by a Vietnamese hero that helps her to survive, but for the most part it is a learning device for the nurse as she allows herself to think about the things she sees. She is a very real young woman, as are the men and women she encounters, military and civilian, American and Vietnamese alike. No one gets off the hook here.

Anyone who is having trouble understanding their own war or their own veterans could do a lot worse than reading this book as a way into this bleak country. Scarborough is a kindly guide, but she doesn't lie to you.

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### **Megan Baxter says**

Still, we spent most of our beer-drinking time talking about the book, so I'll count it as a win. And one thing that kept coming up for both my husband and I was that this really wasn't a fantasy. Yes, there's an amulet in the book with a few magic powers, but it's in some ways such a minor part of a straight-forward Vietnam novel. The most magical power it seems to have (other than, you know, healing) is as a plot pass to get a white woman in among the Vietnamese people and then the Viet Cong without long-term injury.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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### **Megan says**

I would never, ever suggest censoring any piece of literature, especially one as honest as this despite the fact that it's fiction. However, I would have given it four stars if only I could have stomached the brutality. That's my own failing, of course, but I wasn't exactly prepared for it, as about 75% of the book was probably about to my limit of violence, and then the jungle happens...

I do realize this was written in 1988 and as such does not reference anything happening in today's world, but good literature is often relate-able through the years, and I think the reason I had such a gut-wrenching reaction (really, to the point of nausea) is because of what is happening in the Middle East right now.

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## Stuart says

### **The Healer's War: Harrowing tale of a Vietnam combat nurse**

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

This is another Nebula winner I've had on the shelf ever since it was published in 1998, but hadn't got around to reading. So when I found an audio version on Audible narrated by Robin Miles, one of my favorite female narrators after listening to N.K. Jemisin's phenomenal *The Fifth Season*, that was enough to pull it to the top of my TBR list. Elizabeth Ann Scarborough is mostly known as a writer of humorous fantasy novels, along with several collaborations with Anne McCaffrey, so it was quite a surprise to discover that she was a combat nurse in Vietnam, and *The Healer's War* is a fictional treatment of her experiences there, complete with fantasy elements.

*The Healer's War* is the story of Lieutenant Kitty McCulley, an inexperienced young nurse who feels it's not fair for just young American men to go off to Vietnam and risk their lives, so she signs on for a stint as a combat nurse at China Beach. The first third of the book is about her struggles with the stressful conditions, away from home, fending off constant sexual advances from the soldiers (though not always), and trying to come to terms with the chaos and brutality of war.

Though she is not on the front lines dodging bullets, land mines, Viet Cong soldiers, hostile villagers, and punji-stick traps, she treats the young soldiers that have to deal with these conditions every day, frequently suffering horrendous physical injuries, and just as often psychological trauma like PTSD along with the anger and suspicion that come from distrust of the South Vietnamese and questions as to why the hell they are halfway across the world fighting Communism when their supposed allies don't seem to want them there.

*The Healer's War* pulls no punches when describing the dreadful injuries of war, but what stands out is that Kitty treats Vietnamese civilians as well as US soldiers, and actually forms closer bonds with her Vietnamese patients, who are just caught in the middle. Everyone is a victim, sacrificed for a larger Cold War political chess game between the US and Communist powers like China and the Soviet Union.

So whether her patients are American soldiers, South Vietnamese civilians, or even Viet Cong POWs, her mission remains to treat their injuries and bring them comfort. One of her patients is an old man named Xe with a mysterious amulet that he refuses to surrender, even when going into surgery. Despite being a double-amputee, he seems to have a strange power and aura of strength that draws her to him. When the amulet comes into her possession, she discovers she can see and shape the psychic auras of others, which helps her in her treatment of patients.

The first half of *The Healer's War* is hardly science-fiction or fantasy at all — it is a memoir of a young nurse treating soldiers in Vietnam, and also about her private relationships with the soldiers, all of whom are desperately horny for the company of an American woman. It's quite funny how they all try to pick her up, some with crude comments, others with more finesse, but frequently they are married and concealing it. After all, they are far from home and could be killed any day. It's both flattering and insulting to her how much attention she gets. Eventually she does meet a handsome and fairly charming chopper pilot named Tony, and they are able to share some intimate moments amid the stress and misery.

However, when Kitty is transferred to a new medical facility and assigned a new head doctor, his virulent racism and hatred of all Vietnamese people (because his younger brother was killed in Vietnam) leads to an

insurmountable conflict due to her close bonds with her Vietnamese patients. One day he simply orders her to discharge all of them, saying he'd be damned if he devotes a single resource to helping "the enemy." This includes many of her close friends, and sending these amputees to local Vietnamese clinics amounts to a death sentence. It's a very emotionally-wrenching situation, very finely described.

The final third of the book is the only part in which the fantasy element becomes prominent, as Kitty is stranded in the forest with a one-legged young Vietnamese boy and a crazed black American soldier who has lost his entire company. As they wander through combat zones, hoping to avoid the Viet Cong and find friendly US forces, Kitty discovers just how much psychological damage the war has inflicted on both herself and her companions, assisted by the aura-sensing power of the amulet. When they are then captured by Viet Cong soldiers, things get very complicated. The resolution is dramatic but morally-ambiguous, as any treatment of the Vietnam War must inevitably be. It did remind me of Vietnam war films like *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, and even *Coming Home* and *Born on the 4th of July* at the end.

*The Healer's War* is a memorable Vietnam War memoir with a unique female perspective, and though its fantasy elements are not really crucial, they do add to her ability to try to understand and heal the wounds of war. I would recommend it to anyone who wants some perspective of this war, though it is a visceral and gut-wrenching experience and not for the faint of heart.

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## Ryandake says

it's pretty rare to read a war novel by a woman--and despite the sf trappings, that's what this one is. for that reason alone it's worth a read.

our protag, Kitty, is a Vietnam-era nurse in a seaside base camp, relatively safe from being bayoneted but not immune to rockets. she cares for both American GI and Vietnamese civilian patients--with thorough professionalism for the former, and actual care for the latter, as the Vietnamese patients are there for a longer haul, and she has time to get to know them. one such patient is an old monkish sort (unfortunately, in this time) named Xe, who has an interesting amulet that allows people who touch it to see auras.

ok, so the whole aura thing is pretty dated in 2013, and would have been fairly woo-woo in 1989 when this novel was published, but it's actually best to ignore it except as emotional radar in this novel.

Kitty has adventures behind the lines, which one must in a war novel. but they aren't the usual war-novel adventures, which lay on thick one's heroism and fortitude. Kitty is not the Queen of Fortitude, and that's what makes this novel interesting. she hasn't got that aw-heck-this-sucks-but-it's-a-war-bad-things-happen attitude. because even in a war, bad things don't just *happen*. people *choose* to do bad things, and even when the choices are few to none, it's all still a choice.

the book also covers some interesting psychological turf--the destruction of the self; the ubiquitous failure and feeling of failure that war sows like an endless, bleak harvest; the ravages of PTSD; the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life after. in a way, it's a pity the author chose to do this book as sf; as Rumi says, "don't avoid the knife." one senses that the author in this case dodged quite a bit. but only someone crueller than i could really blame her for that, and i do believe she tried to face the experience thoughtfully.

always a plus: there are no purely good guys here, no purely bad guys, and even the crazy guys are pitiable. another: she writes the times exceedingly well. i kept feeling i had fallen through a hole into the 1970s.



Kitty's sense of betrayal is something that I fear younger readers will miss, having been betrayed before they were born and growing up knowing it, but it's a sad coda to the novel, and quite true to life.

a good read. quite worth the time, in particular for those interested in Vietnam-era war literature.

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### **Sineala says**

This is a very well-written book that I am never, ever going to read again.

I think possibly I said the same thing about Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and for similar reasons. There's only so much brutality I can take.

Everything else I have read by this author has been relatively light and fluffy formulaic SF/F. This is not one of those books. This is an actual war novel about being an Army nurse in Vietnam, informed by the author's actual life experience being an Army nurse in Vietnam. There's not a lot of magic in this particular fantasy novel -- there is a magic healing amulet, but mostly its purpose is to give the main character some kind of minimal boost up by being able to impress people with her healing abilities so that she survives large sections of the book.

I had thought this was going to be some kind of quest-focused fantasy but nope. It's a war novel. I mean, it's a very good war novel, but you should probably be aware of that, going in.

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### **Anna says**

*The Healer's War* is a great example of a book I shouldn't have liked for at least two reasons. One, it's set in the Vietnam War, a downer topic if ever there was one. Second, it's yet another example of the pseudo-fantasy genre. In other words, fiction that's been classified as a fantasy due to some minute, barely discernable use of fantasy elements in the story. In this case, the fantasy part is an amulet that allows an army nurse to read people's auras. So disappointing! As far as I'm concerned, only pseudo-science-fiction is a bigger travesty. That said, once I got over the idea that I was reading a fictionalized memoir instead of a fantasy, I found *The Healer's War* a moving and worthwhile read. The author is skillful in portraying the horror and human cost of war in so many ways, big and small. The characters are compelling and surprising in their complexity, given that many have only a brief role to play in the narrative. I got caught up in the madness of war, the madness it brings to otherwise decent human beings, and the impossibility of ever knowing who is truly friend or foe. This is a book that deserves to be read for what it is and not for what it pretends to be.

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### **Herman says**

Have not read very many books on the Vietnam war, so the only book I can compare this too would be Norman Mailer "The Naked and the dead" I would also say it's a bit like Octavia Butler's books in the fantasy social issue elements but I can also say it was a very effective book, one that capture the horror and absurdity of war the conflicted nature of people trying to survive it in the only way they can. I was thinking 4 stars but really it earns itself 5 such an honest portrayal from a women's viewpoint of war, of being a non-

combatant healer a witness to the lives of Vietnamese and US military of betrayal, and PTSD, so many cross streams of stories going on here this is really deep I completely enjoyed it. Highly recommend this book.

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## **Michael Burnam-Fink says**

In theory, this should be right up my alley. A fantasy novel set during the Vietnam War. I can neither confirm nor deny that I've run that D&D campaign multiple times. I'll even go for Magical Realism Vietnam War a la *Apocalypse Now* or *Going After Cacciato*. In some ways, given the shambles of the actual war, it serves well enough as a playground for psychological drama above logical sense.

The first half plays it pretty straight. Lt. Kitty McCulley is a nurse in Vietnam in 1969, much like our author. Her life consists of 12 hour shifts on the ward, treating a rotating cast of wounded GIs and a long-term group of Vietnamese patients. Americans don't stay long, either well enough to head back to their units or hurt enough to be medevaced to Japan. The Vietnamese lucky enough to get care at a medical facility are there for quite a while. There's a lot to be said about Xinhdy, a cheerful woman with a hip wound; Ahn, a little boy who lost a leg; and Xe, a holy man who lost two legs. When she's not on the ward, Kitty is dating helicopter pilots and suntanning at the beach. The memoir is pretty solid, as far as these things go. I've read a lot of memoirs from the soldiers perspective, and for them a date with an American nurse was the white whale-holy grail of things to do in Vietnam, and it's fascinating to see that sexual environment from the other side. The never very pretty Kitty has her pick of sexy, charming, crazy liars.

The second half of the book, the fantasy part, is where it comes apart. Xe bestows an amulet on Kitty that lets her see auras and heal by touch, and then dies. When a new surgeon comes in and begins kicking the Vietnamese out of the ward to die, Kitty finagles an evacuation for Ahn. She and the boy are shot down in the jungle, where they wander through an increasingly unlikely series of encounters. They meet a crazy GI who's the lone survivor of his squad, and gain the loyalty of a village by fighting a giant snake and healing the victims of an airstrike. Then Kitty is captured by the VC and rescued by the Americans, only to have a General propose to kill her in case she's been subverted. At the end, it's back to The World, only to find America unusual and strange. Kitty drifts around in a nurses version of a PTSD fugue, working night shifts and edging towards suicide, only to find salvation when her flight to LAX arrives at the same time as a planeload of boat people refugees.

The memoir worked well enough, and I'm a fan of the 'lightly fictionalized' memoir genre, since few people have lives that nicely match a three act structure. But I didn't much like the magic. Auras are a cheap trick to tell readers the emotions of characters rather than showing. The ability to heal by touch is a power fantasy for a nurse, in the same way that to kill by will is a power fantasy for a warrior, but Kitty doesn't do much with it. And while the parts of the story set in the hospital felt very grounded, the parts set in the hinterlands of Vietnam felt very floaty and imaginary. You can be there, without being *there*.

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