



Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI

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In this extraordinary and harrowing memoir, follow one GI's tour of duty as Ryan Smithson brings readers inside a world that few understand.

This is no ordinary teenager's story. Instead of opting for college life, Ryan Smithson joined the Army Reserve when he was seventeen. Two years later, he was deployed to Iraq as an Army engineer.

His story—and the stories of thousands of other soldiers—is nothing like what you see on CNN or read about in the *New York Times*. This unforgettable story about combat, friendship, fear, and a soldier's commitment to his country peels back the curtain on the realities of war in a story all Americans should read.

Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI Details

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Halei says

Wow... I just finished "Ghosts of War [My tour of duty:]" and am stunned at how it ambushed my emotions!

I picked this up in the YA section of the library. My husband is a Army Infantry Vet with 2 Iraq tours under his belt, and he hardly ever speaks of his experiences, so I read anything I can get my hands on.

At first I didn't expect too much out of it. The writing isn't profound, but as the story progressed, so does the style. Before I knew it I found myself swept into the dry deserts and laughing along with Ryan Smithson on his excursions. This book is pleasing in that it is not too gory, as he is just a "Joe Schmo" equipment operator. Yet, he is experienced in Iraq and has a lot to share with the rest of us.

This book is written for America. It has helped me to understand more about this War that has now lasted the good part of eight years and has become a very disconnected event from everyday life, even for a OIF Veteran's family! I have photographs hung on my wall and a map of Baghdad in my garage. A husband whom I live with... and this has given me an even greater gratitude.

He points out different aspects of the meaning of life in his view, which I respect and value. I highly recomend this book for anyone, and especialy for someone who has lived not knowing what its like to not be able to freely express their voice and opinion. For anyone who wishes to better themselves as human beings. It's not easy to get through my thick-headedness sometimes, but I greatly respect this work of current human existance and its lessons to our youth.

Leeanna says

Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-Year-Old GI, by Ryan Smithson

Not often does a book leave me speechless, but the difficult subject and beautiful writing in "Ghosts of War" did. Ryan Smithson was 19 when he was deployed to Iraq as a member of the Army Reserves. He tells the story of his platoon and so many like it overseas, the ones who are working to rebuild the country and make it safe for other troops and citizens, the ones who interact with villagers and the poorer people of Iraq. Not the ones who are busting down doors, searching for weapons caches or other types of activities that make the news. Smithson and his fellow soldiers are the unsung heroes of the war.

Smithson writes a moving memoir, that starts with his reaction to September 11, 2001, and his decision to join the Army Reserves, to his year long deployment overseas. The book ends with his return home and the difficulty in adjusting to life again, after living in a combat zone, and how he used writing as therapy for PTSD. The bulk of the book is about his year in Iraq, a year in which he saw the human side of war. Many of the most moving parts of the book are when he describes encounters with Iraqi children, who were almost pathetically grateful for something as simple as clean water. "Ghosts of War" is also a power emotional and mental journey for both the author and the reader, as Smithson ponders what freedom really means, what is faith - questions that are answered during training, missions, and reflection.

I just can't say enough about this book. I've always been against the war, but it was a general feeling. Reading "Ghosts of War" made me think about the individual soldiers, people who joined the armed forces because they want to do something, they want to protect American freedom. A particularly enlightening part for me came near the end, when Smithson went to a high school with another recruiter. On the way to the high school, the other recruiter told Smithson that the kids they were about to see wouldn't really care to hear them, wouldn't listen - they'd think he was just one more brainwashed grunt. I know I felt that way when I listened to recruiters in high school; but as I said, now my opinion is very different. I will now appreciate and thank the soldiers I see. Thank you for opening my eyes.

"Ghosts of War" is an excellent book for adults or young adults, especially teenagers who are considering joining the armed forces. Smithson's memoir gives an accurate picture of army life, from basic training to deployment and back, that may answer questions they didn't know they had. It's also a great book to open discussion between parents and their children, about the war, about the army. I had my own father look at it, as he had been in the Reserves during Vietnam, and the book prompted many questions for me to ask him.

The writing is moving and will suck you in; I didn't want to put it down once I started. Some of the experiences related left me tearing up, and some had me cracking up with laughter. Overall, a wonderful book.

5/5.

Aaron says

Using simple prose, Ryan Smithson shares with readers his experience of serving a one-year tour as an engineer in the Army in Iraq in 2005. He starts by recounting his experience of 9/11 as a 14-year-old in Albany New York, and how that persuaded him to join the army reserves years later upon finishing high school. He continues through the ups and downs of boot camp before bringing readers along as he traveled through Iraq.

Smithson didn't serve on the front lines, and he is clear in the fact that he spent most of his time using large equipment to move landscape. At the same time, that did not mean that he was out of danger. He shares the heartbreaking experience of dealing with the loss of a colleague he served with but can barely remember when his platoon is reassigned elsewhere in Iraq. He talks about the edge of his seat experiences in avoiding IEDs, some real and some fake. He also talks of the difficult living conditions.

The real strength of the book is in the personal details. He talks about how he and the guys he served with changed through their experiences. Not only did they grow up, but they became brothers as a result of their shared fears, boredom, and weariness.

He talks of seeing the poor Iraqi children and their families and not being able to follow the rules about not giving food to them. He also talks about the kind words and gestures he received from many Iraqis in the course of his travels throughout the country.

It is a story of war, and the horrors men can cause each other. But it is also the story of the little touches of kindness he receives in care packages from homes and cards and letters from children he never had or will meet.

I was really reminded about my own brother as I read the book. He is a Marine who served two tours in Iraq. He is not really one to talk about his experiences, though he did receive a Purple Heart for an injury he received. He used to send us pictures of some of the most beautiful scenes in Iraq, and would describe how if it wasn't for the reminders of the war, it would be a really beautiful place to visit.

Alicia says

A YA lit memoir of a 19 year old in Iraq... while most wouldn't stop to appreciate the emotion behind his adventure, it is an eye-opening story, made more fascinating because I've been corresponding with the author since he lives in my area.

While Smithson tries hard to get you in the mindset with plenty of military jargon, the biggest mistake was waiting until the end of the book to get to the heart of his experience brought to light through italicized 'storytelling.' As his buddies travel back from Iraq, they begin to tell stories of humorous events that brought them closer together in a war zone. I would have rather seen the good with the bad, not the bad, then the good.

I appreciated the fact that he was able to heal from his experience through a creative writing class which became his book, which could send a powerful message to kids that writing can be therapeutic.

James Siebers says

Ghosts Of War by Ryan Smithson is a kind of a suspenseful, heart jerking, and touching. This book really teaches us what war really is.

Ryan Smithson is a 19 year old boy that has enlisted into the army reserves. He was deployed right away to Iraq for one year. A year he will never forget. When in Iraq he meets battle buddies and does a lot of missions as a GI Joe Schmo (average maintenance guy on equipment.) Ryan goes through life changing experiences which he has lived to write in this book. An excerpt from the book that illustrates staying strong is, ""You guys all right?" I ask them. "You didn't hear?" says Hernandez. I shake my head. "Sergeant Conklin died today," he says." (212). This quote illustrates staying strong because throughout the book no one has died, and when the Sergeant died Ryan stayed strong.

If you liked this book, you may also like Vanished: The Sixty-Year Search for the Missing Men of World War II by Wil S. Hylton because it is about war, it is thrilling and mystical. I rate Ghosts of War a 5 out of 5 stars because the book told about the war that changed many lives forever. I gave it 5 stars because it really changed my perspective of war, which kept me on the edge of my seat.

Will Kolck says

This book has a really good way to see what it's like in a everyday life as a US Army Infantryman in his tour of duty. The Ghosts of War has really impacted the way I feel about the young brave men who puts there life on the line for the people who don't have the courage, or protect the people of their beloved country. This

will also help you greatly appreciate what your sons, fathers, daughters or mothers do for you and your family, even how they changed the world in ways that you wouldn't think of. It also shows the hardships of being a soldier, what you'll have to sacrifice, what the dangers you'll face being in the military, and especially when you're half a world away from your loved ones. I enjoyed how it showed what the training phases were like, and what it did for the recruits and drill sergeants. To me, this book can be read by people who are the ages of 17 to 23 years old, and you could read this book to see what the US soldiers were doing and how they were feeling during the war in Iraq. Even if you're remotely interested in joining the military, I'd read this book to help you understand what there is to expect when you start your years in training. If you are looking into reading this book, or if you want to read a non-fiction / autobiography, I would highly recommend doing so.

Derek says

The author's purpose of Ghost's of war is to entertain and inform. I think the author's purpose is to entertain because Ryan Smithson is the main character and the author. Since he is the author he is sharing his own life experiences and entertaining the readers who read this book because he was there and no one can explain it to the reader better than the person that was there. I think another one of the authors purposes was to inform because he is letting all the young readers of this book know what the army is like and what it is like to go in combat. So overall the author's purposes were to inform and entertain.

The theme of this book is about the army and how a man can go through hard times on the opposite side of the world as his family. I know one of the themes of this book is about the army because he is a soldier and he is in war on the other side of the world and he goes through basic training and has stugles but pulls through all of it and ends up being an amazing soldier and representing the USA.

The style of the book was written in third person and the main setting is in Iraq in the two-thousands after 9/11. Since this book was written in third person I think it made it very descriptive and added some of the entertainment to the book. The author writing this book in third person made it more entertaining because writing it in third person made it more realistic and action packed, it make it more realistic because if the author who wrote the story about himself would've wrote this book in first person it would've made me feel like it didn't really happen. Since the story of this book took place in the two-thousands after 9/11 we can all relate to when it took place because we are here at this time and we always heard it on the news so since we all have heard about the Iraq war we can all relate to it.

My opinion on this book overall i would probably give it a ten out of ten if not a one-hundred out of one-hundred because I am really interested in the war and what happens during it. I think overall this book was really entertaining and very informing on the war because he talked about basic training and how you're taught and what you do when you enroll into the army. I disliked how there were so many abbreviations for code talk in the army because I see the abbreviations a lot and I can't ever remember what they mean and every time I see one multiple times in a row I have to go to the back of my book to see what it means. But other than that i think the book was an amazing read and I would recommend it to any of my friends who like the army and want to read a good book about it.

Julia says

Who should read this memoir of a young man's first tour in Iraq? Young men and women who are contemplating joining the military. People who are in the military, military families and Americans who think they have no connection to the military.

Smithson was a junior in high school on 9/11 in East Greenbush, NY. He'd never even been to New York City, three hours away, until just before he goes to Basic, but he joins the Reserves, an engineering unit. His unit is responsible for driving convoys, for fixing Humvees and other materiel that has been blown up, filling in IED craters, fixing water systems for agriculture projects.

“After a while in a combat zone you start to think of everything as fateful. Something blows up, and it's fate. Get lucky when an IED is a dud, that's fate, too. Jim Conklin dies in a simple LOGPAC mission, you guessed it: fate. And if today's the day, this last mission, well then f*#k it. At least we know God enjoys some god old- fashioned irony.”

Jason says

This is honestly one of the best books about war I have ever read. This book gave a great description about the life of a soldier during war. It gives the perfect description of a soldier's life after the war. It talks in depth about the training that comes with being in the Army. I like how in the beginning it talks about some of his reasons for joining. “For me, the future was a complete paradox. On one hand teachers were pushing that 'know what you want to do for the rest of your life' attitude. Yet, on the other hand I wanted to stay a kid. Parents and teachers were so intimidating when they talked about the 'real world' and taxes and mortgages and bills and insurance. With freedom comes responsibility and I wasn't sure if I was ready for all that”(20). He didn't feel like he was ready to enter the “real world” yet and wanted to escape from it for a while. He also felt kind of obligated to join the Army after the 9/11 attacks. “I joined the military at age 17 in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Not wanting to completely devote myself to the military, I joined the army reserve as a heavy equipment operator”(24). Even though he just wanted to be a reserve, he still felt like it was the right thing to do. He wanted to protect his country. Many other books leave out the life after the war, but not this one. He constantly thinks about Iraq. He can't sleep at night because he's paranoid. This is how soldiers' lives really are and it describes it so well.

Arminzerella says

Ryan Smithson wasn't sure what he wanted to do after high school, but after seeing ground zero in Manhattan, he decided to join the US Army Reserves and protect the freedoms that so many Americans take for granted. When Ryan returned home after spending a year in Iraq, he suffered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (night terrors, in particular). To work through his feelings about the war, he started writing about his experiences in the army - basic training, Iraq, and his homecoming. Readers will likely be familiar with the tropes of basic training – the crazy drill sergeants, the exercises that beat you down and then rebuild you army-style. But modern warfare is something a lot of people haven't experienced and Ryan's insights are down to earth and don't tend to over-glorify the dangers or the violence. He has compassion and feeling for the people he's trying to protect and liberate – the Iraqi citizens who are just trying to live their lives, as well as his fellow countrymen – and develops a real camaraderie with others in his unit and those he meets through various missions.

Looking at the photos of Ryan, one is immediately struck by how very young he is. And depending on how old *you* are you might think, “Wow, he’s my age,” or “He’s just a kid.” You may even feel something like embarrassment because you’re letting a 19-year-old fight for your freedom. Ryan’s reasons for choosing the army have nothing to do with a love of violence or the military life. Becoming a soldier and going to war change him in ways he couldn’t have imagined, but they also reinforce his determination to make a difference in peoples’ lives and his belief that he is doing the right thing. You may not support the war in Iraq, or violence of any kind, but after reading Ryan’s account you will understand his motivation to do something – to be the change that he wants to see in the world. A moving account of a young man’s loss of innocence.

Ryan M says

Ghosts of War overall was a pretty good book. Personally, I am a fan of war books, and since this was about the Iraq War, it took place recently. This made it more interesting to read because the events in the story also took place during my lifetime, something a lot of other books don’t have.

Ryan Smithson, the main character of the story, decided to join the Army Reserves after graduating from high school. He does this following the 9/11 attacks to help his country fight the war on terror. During his time in training, he chose to become an Army engineer, or someone who helps build structures in the war zone. Throughout the story, Smithson travels to Iraq, where he serves a tour and helps build things the army needs. He witnessed things that most humans could never imagine seeing, forever changing his perspective on life. During his time there, however, Smithson thinks on many occasions, about the true heroes that protect their countries. He says they will never receive the credit they deserve from the papers and news, but they are true American heroes.

One thing that stood out to me throughout the book was how brutally honest Smithson was in his experiences. He states how he does a very boring job in the Army, one that won’t receive much praise or the headlines in the paper. Most books about wars are about the heroes who managed to dodge death and accomplish some unthinkable goal. I liked how he didn’t pretend to be someone he wasn’t and instead, uses his own words and emotions to describe how horrible the Iraq War really was.

For a rating, I would give this book a 4 stars out of 5, mainly because it started off pretty slow. Eventually, once things got going, the book got very good. Constantly when he wrote about the effects of the PTSD towards the ending, it got very tough to read, but was also fascinating at the same time. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys reading about wars and things of that nature.

Khornberger says

Ghosts of War is the story of Ryan Smithson, a boy who joined the military upon high school graduation. Ryan was moved by 9/11 (which occurred during his high school years) to enlist. However, he only enlisted in the reserves thinking (and being told) that he should be safe not to be stationed overseas. Ironically, Ryan was sent right away and worked with a group on heavy equipment. His chronicles are not only enlightening as to what it was like to be a soldier in Iraq, but he has worked on some entries to be strong in the literary sense (The House that Achmed Built). Even though Ryan did not see a lot of death of his unit, the scars are

deep and adjustment back into civilian life was difficult. This book is a testament to that time in which he found writing was allowing him to heal contrary to speaking directly with people. This is an excellent suggestion for people who love military narrative nonfiction.

NoahK says

I liked this book because it incorporates a true war that went on.

Deanna says

Realistic fiction, Iraq war.

If I was a High school English or history teacher I definitely would have students read this memoir--of 19 year old Ryan Smithson, who shares his one year deployment in Iraq. Some of the chapters are short stories and could also be used/read alone. For example, A Town that Achmed Built (p. 96) shares the realities of war. A teacher could photocopy this chapter and have students use a number of strategies to read it and discuss in small groups. Actually I think every college student should read this book too (for ages 14-22).

This is a book that will cause students to really think about war/peace; freedom; America; etc, and ask many questions. After I finished reading this book I needed someone to talk to about it, so I made my husband read it.

I have new respect for men and women who enlist in the Army, Navy, etc. I do not like war and I avoided reading this book because for some odd reason I thought my reading it would show that I was in favor of war (sounds crazy). After reading what servicemen/women do--they are definitely heroes and I am ashamed to admit that I haven't done anything for any servicemen during this war. I haven't sent a letter or a care package, nothing. I have ignored them because I didn't believe in the war.

There were many places in the book where I wanted to skip or stop reading--such as when Ryan described driving along a road and seeing an IED (land mine) and how he kept his foot to the floor and drove by it (p. 185). Another chapter titled Satan's clothes dryer is about the horrible dust storms and heat in Iraq (p. 173). The conditions of the farming children in rural Iraq (p. 201). When one of his colleagues is killed by an IED (p. 210).

One of my favorite sections of the book is on p. 295 when he shares that literature is what set him free while he was in Iraq. Books were his escape. He read most nights in Iraq to get away from the war. "Every book was alive as I read it, lying in my sleeping bag. I wasn't in the godforsaken Middle East fighting a war. I was in my own country: a country of the mind. I wasn't a soldier...I was the words on paper." He goes on to share how certain novels helped him.

Ryan admits that the "innocence of his childhood" was lost in Iraq. Only the soldiers he was with truly understand what he went through. This is a novel that I am thankful I read.

Aidan McPhillips says

I really enjoyed the book. I like Ryan's bravery and courage. It was an overall great book. I liked it so much I'd read it again.
