

After the War: Surviving PTSD and Changing Mental Health Culture

Stéphane Grenier with Adam Montgomery
University of Regina Press

THE BODY of the little girl lies bunched on the ground, her arms splayed forward. A few feet away is the bloated body of a man who could be her father or possibly her grandfather. The dead man's arms are open to the heavens. His clothing suggests they might have been on their way to church when they were killed. The army officer who has stumbled across the scene looks back to the girl. His thoughts skip to his own children. With a jolt, he notices that a third of the little girl's head is missing and the earth around her is stained crimson.

The two corpses are among the 800,000 victims of the genocide that threaded through Rwanda's civil war in the 1990s. When he discovered the grisly scene, Canadian Armed Forces Lieutenant Colonel Stéphane Grenier had many months still to go in his tour and umpteen horrors yet to face. Nevertheless, this single image would remain in his mind like a psychological snapshot – a hallmark of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Grenier deployed to Rwanda in 1994 and served in the Canadian military until 2012. His book, *After the War: Surviving PTSD and Changing Mental Health Culture*, describes how his subsequent life was shaped by the psychic wounds he incurred during his tour of duty in the afflicted African nation. Co-authored with military historian Adam Montgomery, the book delivers an honest, visceral account of Grenier's struggles with PTSD, from onset to recovery, and ultimately his experience as a mental health advocate.

Early chapters detail the context behind Grenier's psychological affliction; they offer a superb look at both the tragic events of the Rwandan genocide and the inner landscape of psychological trauma. In rich clarity, Grenier outlines the building blocks of PTSD, culminating in his own personal tipping point, beyond which he no longer cared whether or not he survived.

The chapters set in Rwanda are expertly told. The writing is crisp, and Grenier offers a different perspective on tragic events that are similarly described in Roméo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Elsewhere, Grenier's observations about recovering from PTSD ring absolutely true: "On the surface things were fine, but I was exhausted from constantly having to apply coping mechanisms. I could never

just be myself – or at least my old self."

Later chapters trace Grenier's evolving passion for mental health advocacy; the most evocative of these describes his founding of a peer support system for members of the military. Although the narrative loses some of its power when it turns its focus to Grenier's civilian work, the author's experiences are very much worth reading.

One can appreciate that, for many, the peacekeeping mission in Rwanda remains a nightmare that will never end. Still, there is inspiration to be found in reading about positive changes that can emerge from the heart of evil. With *After the War*, Grenier has contributed a most useful addition to the growing body of work on psychological trauma in the military. –John Conrad

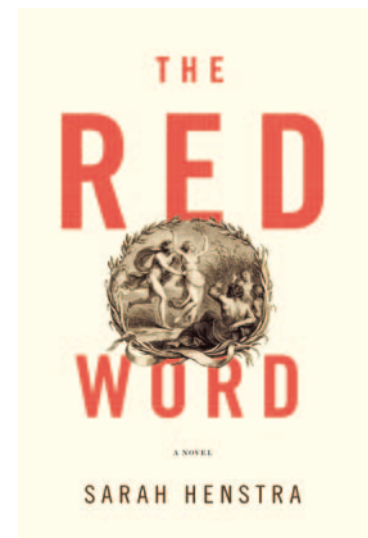
★ The Red Word

Sarah Henstra
ECW Press

IT IS NOT often easy to identify the ways cultural myths imbue our daily behaviour; a byproduct of any widely accepted mythology is the extent to which it embeds itself in our social consciousness and is often mistaken for truth. The same myths repeat themselves in different forms over and over: the myth of the hero, the myth of the villain, myths about social and gender roles, gods and demi-gods. Our social and ethical evolution has been based in a reliance on the same basic stories. The job of cultural criticism is to examine the world and its stories, picking apart what is problematic and shining a light on unconscious or unexamined biases and attitudes.

In *The Red Word*, Sarah Henstra, a professor of English at Toronto's Ryerson University and the author of the young-adult novel *Mad Miss Mimic*, explores the connections between 21st-century ideas of gender roles and rape culture on one hand, and myth on the other. She does so in arguably the most poignant setting of all: a college campus, the locus for both the promulgation and deconstruction of cultural mythology.

Karen Huls, a sophomore, learns the extent to which the personal is inextricable from the political after she answers a housing ad seeking "committed feminists only." Her new roommates, acolytes of a particular women's studies professor and disciples of feminist, queer-friendly discourse, broaden and enrich the young woman's cultural outlook (not to



mention her social life). But when Karen gets romantically involved with a member of the notorious GBC fraternity – nicknamed Gang Bang Central – her stance and ethics are called into question. Though she witnesses first-hand how toxic and sexist frat culture can be, Karen nevertheless finds herself making excuses for the brothers. The stakes rise when Karen's roommates take drastic action to confront and expose the sexual violence at the frat.

Henstra uses dialogue as a creatively effective mode of conveying feminism and gender theory to readers: "Brotherly bonds depend on our debasement. The homosocial contract hasn't changed since the Trojan War. It operates the same way in the military, with sports teams – anywhere men get together in any organized fashion." Elsewhere, one character opines, "It's exactly like in the *Hippolytus*. Any overt display of female agency automatically calls down violence."

The writing in *The Red Word* is undeniably gripping and at times beautiful, seamlessly weaving the Greek mythology Karen is studying in class into her own personal story and creating realistic, complex characters the reader wants to root for despite their flaws. (Henstra is sensitive in her portrayal of flawed characters who are representative of the unavoidably complicated, troublesome nature of the subject matter.) The timely, relevant topic of campus rape culture is addressed bravely; there aren't enough works of fiction that tackle the material so honestly and prudently. The novel concludes somewhat tragically, but the ending also allows for learning and growth. The only thing wanting in the resolution is a true feeling of hope that the sad realities underpinning sexual violence can change. –Becky Robertson