

## **Interview with Don Body, Author of *F. N. G.***

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Don Bodey, who is here to talk about his autobiographical Vietnam War novel, “F.N.G.”

*Don Bodey was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana in an army barracks where his father was assigned during World War II. He went to college to avoid the draft, but after graduation in 1968, he was drafted anyway. He served as a mortarman in Vietnam and returned home weighing 45 pounds less than when he was drafted. He got married and got a job in a Florida restaurant. It was while washing dishes at work that he got the idea for “F.N.G.” He went on to earn an MFA in the writing program at University of Oregon. For the next few years he built houses in Oregon, taught university classes and bought a bar in Chicago. He now works as a carpenter in his native Indiana, where he lives, near his wife and son.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Don. I’m glad you could join me today. To begin, will you tell us what the title’s initials “F.N.G.” stand for? Why did you choose this title?

**Don:** It didn’t matter what you did in Nam. You were there to replace somebody. Even when the troop buildups were massive, you still reported to a unit that had been there awhile. You were new. To the guys who were already there, and would be going home—if not soon, at least before you—you were a replacement. Nobody knew your name, nor cared, when you first got there—you were the “fucking new guy.” It wasn’t a totally derogatory label, but you had to earn your way out of wearing it; you had to *become a part* of the society. In my case, in the field, it was a matter of getting real dirty, doing your share of the shitty work, but it worked the same way in the Rear. New guys there had to prove they could be a part. Until then, I think, you were put into a category; Fucking New Guy. It is probably not anything like that in today’s troops, because one thing the government learned about war, in Nam, is it’s better not to send a lone soldier to war. Send a whole unit together; bring them back together.

**Tyler:** What made you decide to write a novel about the Vietnam War and especially one individual’s experiences during it?

**Don:** Do you have a sense of how deep that question is? First of all, I don’t ever remember making such a decision. I didn’t decide to become a writer, I just became one. Writing, for me, is like riding a fast horse. Hold the fuck on! I mean, a story is organic, grows itself, and even though my novel is about my own experience, the story is a creation. I wrote a story about a guy in Vietnam. The fact that I wrote it in the first person makes it read from an individual viewpoint. That is the writing part of telling a story. I had to learn how to do that.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us about the main character, Gabriel Saurers? Who is Gabriel before he leaves for the war?

**Don:** Me.

**Tyler:** Without giving too much away, how would you say the war changes Gabriel?

**Don:** War has a way of removing innocence. I'm not sure what I mean about that, other than I think the only guys who come back feeling mostly like they did when they went are those guys who got wounded the first day, never to go back. There is a character like that in "F.N.G." (not for long, of course), who represents those innocents.

The troops in Vietnam were saturated with draftees. Guys who didn't want to be there. But once you're there, like Gabe, what you see and do and learn is a kind of shedding of innocence, because you want to come home, intact, so badly. Gabe compromises a little of his soul, and he is aware of it.

**Tyler:** Don, I mentioned above that you tried to avoid the draft, but you ended up going to Vietnam anyway. Do you still wish today that you had not had to go?

**Don:** I look at that question from a couple perspectives. The truth is, I didn't have to go. I have two friends who went to Canada, and one who went to jail, instead of going. I considered those alternatives, but I chose to go. Reluctantly. Instead of reporting when my orders said I had to, I went AWOL, finally surrendering a month later, on crutches, from a motorcycle wreck.

I admit to some kind of sense of duty, though. My family would never have understood nor accepted not going, and I thought that my having a college degree would get me a good job. I honestly thought I could fight from inside the army, but they were way ahead of me.

Nam changed my life. When I got home I was totally lost and couldn't pick my life up where I had left it. Those guys who didn't have to go were two years ahead of me in every sense—families, jobs, careers, self-confidence. Among other feelings, I carried a great deal of bitterness, and the proverbial chip on my shoulder, all of which alienated me and eventually contributed to various personal crises, including divorce.

On the other hand, had I not gone I don't think I would have written the book I did, which has been good to me, and good for some other people, according to what some have told me. I don't regret going, I guess, but I regret the fact that there are still people going, to Iraq, to Afghanistan. In a sense, that belies the futility we took part in.

**Tyler:** Can you see any advantages to your having gone to the war?

**Don:** If I hadn't gone I wouldn't know the Hell. I've been there, and I know what "war is hell" means. And I know that war is a crime. These are not empty platitudes; rather they are descriptions of my true self. When the invasion of Iraq was imminent, I hung a sheet on my house, whereupon I'd painted WAR SUCKS. Some neighbors objected to my phraseology, but they all knew how I felt, feel, and the fact that I have been to a war gave it all the credence I needed. That's one advantage. Another advantage is that I would do everything in my power to prevent my son, and other sons from being led falsely. War DOES suck. It sucks young men into the draft, when there is one; it sucks men and women away from their lives, and it sucks the heart out of mothers and fathers of KIA's. All for no good reason. And as I say, I KNOW this, which gives me an advantage.

**Tyler:** The Vietnam War has received so many treatments in films and books. Do you think most of these treatments are realistic or overly sensational or even wrongfully glamorous?

**Don:** I have read quite a few books on it. I have only seen part of one movie about it because I still can't handle the sounds. I went to "Born on the Fourth of July" because I know Ron Kovic, the author of the novel. But, when the shit hits in the movie, its sound comes from in front of, and behind, and everywhere in between. I "hit the dirt" in the movie theater and left the movie. I once did the same thing at Wrigley Field when someone popped a drinking cup right behind me. As for the realism, I have seen some scenes from the popular movies, on TV, and they are real enough—"Apocalypse Now" comes to mind—to foster a kind of recall, and it makes me uncomfortable. Just as a novel depends on "sensationalism" to reign in a reader, the movies need it to ratchet up the sense of it happening *at this time*, so I feel it is a legitimate use of the art of movie-making. I've read some books that go over the line, but that's poor writing, pulpish, and it will always be a part of literature on the subject. Someone once compared "F.N.G." to "Red Badge of Courage," and I consider that a super compliment. There is no sensationalism or glamorousness in that book.

**Tyler:** Don, what was your reason for having the novel include, not just Gabriel's time in Vietnam, but his grandson, Seth, having to go off to fight in Iraq?

**Don:** Understand, Seth never GOES "off to fight in Iraq." But, I think I know what you mean.

When they announced the imminent deployment to Iraq, I hung a sheet/curtain on the outside of my house that said "WAR SUCKS" because I know. I don't want to see my community sucked dry of the kids. I don't want my son to go to war for any reason. War is a crime. I have had to worry about what my father had to worry about. He had to worry that his child would die in "a pattern called war." [Amy Lowell]

**Tyler:** The recently published version of "F.N.G." is the revised edition. The original version was published in the 1980s. Why did you revise the novel, and what is different about this version?

**Don:** I had never read the book until I got the chance to revise it, and was given some good advice by my publisher, Victor Volkman. He suggested writing a prologue. Once I got started editing, I changed some of the original because I had the advantage of not "seeing" it for twenty-some years. In the original, there were guys smoking dope on patrol. We smoked plenty of dope, but it is a disservice to the grunts who were there to insinuate we were careless enough to smoke in the Bush. I'm glad I got the chance to correct that mistake. When I was writing it, a dope-smoking scene was something I would use to get from one place to the next, a kind of *deus ex machina* that isn't worth the cost of veracity. Too, when I read I could feel certain pulls of emotion, and I tried to further those emotional reactions, because I think it makes the writing better.

The "prologue" is now the first chapter, aptly called "Present Day" (again, thanks to Victor Volkman) and helps integrate the present into the past, helps to connect generations of a family to the "pattern called war."

**Tyler:** Without giving away too much of the story, at one point, Gabriel "flips out." I read this to mean he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, although it wasn't defined as such yet. Can you tell us more about what Gabriel suffered from, and if you had our own personal experiences with similar trauma?

**Don:** Indeed, sir, indeed. War is this surreal. I remember a guy holding another guy at gunpoint, and we all pretty much let it work itself out. It was like theatre: two guys in the middle of a ring of other guys, and death was omnipresent. At the time, I didn't much care what would happen. If he had blown the other guy's head off, I don't think I would have been very affected, after being out there for 350 days.

War sucks out innocence. Gabriel is aware of this, of the erosion of his values, his ideals, his soul. This comes as a result of realizing you'll never be the same if you get home. And that basic realization is rather organic, constant, almost tangible. For me, it crystallized when the LZ I was on got overrun. We killed three sappers, and we hung their bodies on the concertina wire. And left them there. So every morning when we got up we looked at three dead human beings, and we scooped one guy's brains into a shovel, and left the shovel beside him. I left that literal scene out of the book, but I can still find it in my mind. If the book is written right, then Gabriel, wherever he is now, carries like scenes with him.

**Tyler:** Don, I am familiar with many autobiographies by Vietnam soldiers, but not as many novels. What do you hope your book will add that is different or unique about the Vietnam War?

**Don:** I hope it will add more guys' experiences to the literature, because it is a story instead of a biography of any kind. Both genres are limited, but storytelling is universal, thus adding audience, by its sheer informality.

**Tyler:** In reading the novel, I was struck by your writing style. Your sentences are often short and crisp but powerful. Do you think that's because you wrote the book in first person? Did you ever consider writing it in third-person, or was first person natural to you because it was autobiographical?

**Don:** First person was natural, but it's a hard point of view to maintain. I tried switching to Third, but it removed me too far. I think the voice is more natural. When I veered from what was true (autobiographical), I was able to substitute Gabriel's point of view because I had gotten to know him. His background and mine are very similar. My mother wrote some letters that sound a lot like the letters Gabe gets, and it is true that my kid brother got drafted while I was over there, and reported the day I got home, so in some ways the autobiographical stuff gets passed on, without me having to say "My war stops here." The war went on for me (and my parents) all the time he was there. When I went, my father was proud. By the time his second son went, my father questioned his government's decisions. I don't think a non-fiction treatment can get to the gut of that. But, in the revised edition, Gabriel has become a father, and suffers from what my father had to suffer through. My dad didn't do what "old" Gabe did, but I might.

**Tyler:** Did writing "F.N.G." provide you a release of any sort in your feelings about the Vietnam War?

**Don:** Absolutely not. If anything, it intensified my feelings; everything about Vietnam was wrong.

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Donald. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about “F.N.G.”?

**Don:** You can visit [www.donbodey.com](http://www.donbodey.com). There you will find good comments from different book reviewers, a complete glossary of terms used in the book, and another glossary about Vietnam and the historical context of the novel. Finally, the website contains instructions on how to purchase, “F.N.G.”

**Tyler:** Thank you, Don. I wish you much luck with your novel. I found it to be very powerful, and I’m sure anyone who enjoys novels about war will enjoy this book.

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