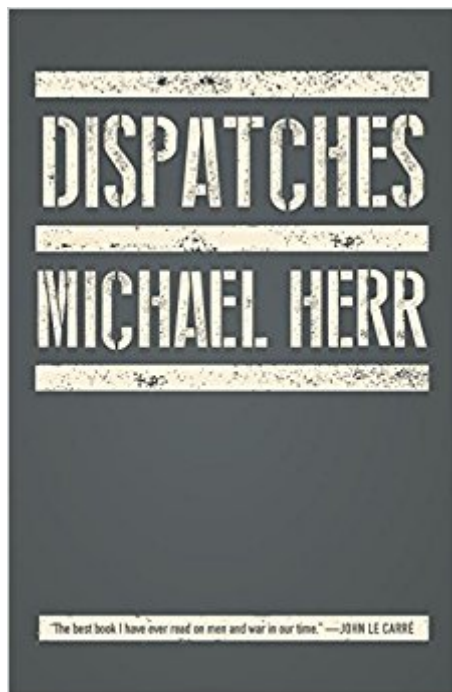


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# Dispatches



## Synopsis

"The best book to have been written about the Vietnam War" (The New York Times Book Review); an instant classic straight from the front lines. From its terrifying opening pages to its final eloquent words, *Dispatches* makes us see, in unforgettable and unflinching detail, the chaos and fervor of the war and the surreal insanity of life in that singular combat zone. Michael Herr's unsparing, unorthodox retellings of the day-to-day events in Vietnam take on the force of poetry, rendering clarity from one of the most incomprehensible and nightmarish events of our time. *Dispatches* is among the most blistering and compassionate accounts of war in our literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Michael Herr, who wrote about the Vietnam War for *Esquire* magazine, gathered his years of notes from his front-line reporting and turned them into what many people consider the best account of the war to date, when published in 1977. He captured the feel of the war and how it differed from any theater of combat ever fought, as well as the flavor of the time and the essence of the people who were there. Since *Dispatches* was published, other excellent books have appeared on the war--may we suggest *The Things They Carried*, *The Sorrow of War*, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*--but Herr's book was the first to hit the target head-on and remains a classic.

American correspondent Herr's documentary recalls the heavy combat he witnessed in Vietnam as well as the obscene speech, private fears and nightmares of the soldiers. "Herr captures the almost hallucinatory madness of the war," said PW. "This is a compelling, truth-telling book with a visceral

impact, its images stuck in the mind like shards from a pineapple bomb." Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A friend posted today that Michael Herr just died. The link said that he went through years of depression after returning from Vietnam, and after reading the book the only surprise would be if he hadn't. He reported for *Esquire* during the most intense year of the war, from late 1967 through the Tet Offensive. His level of sensitivity and perception must have heightened an experience that would have been brutal for anyone, but we the readers reap the rewards. This isn't history, it's a 262 page stream of consciousness prose poem from an artist who uses words as his medium. If you have any sense of the era it will snap you back in time; you'll feel the feral heat and humidity in the middle of winter, and hear rotor blades on a silent afternoon. Like his contemporaries the Beatles, Michael Herr lived to 76 knowing his legacy was set in stone by his early 30s; I hope he could accept that, because it's an extraordinary legacy, indeed. He assisted Coppola with *Apocalypse Now* and Kubrick with *Full Metal Jacket*; fans of those movies should read *Dispatches* to get the unvarnished source material, more in feel than in actual events. I first read *Dispatches* in the late 70s and I've gone through several copies and 8 or 10 readings in the intervening years. I finally got a clue and bought the book on Kindle today so I don't have to go looking for it or buy yet another copy when I feel the urge to read this prose that can still give me chills almost four decades after I first found it. Rest in Peace, Michael, and thank you.

I can see why Mary Karr cites this book as the way to do the thing right in her late book on the art of memoir writing. Transcendent, revelatory, reminiscent of the movie it helped inspire, *Apocalypse Now*, *Dispatches* makes you remember that fraught time period, the Sixties, and the war at its center that produced such a division in the American soul. Replete with scenes of correspondent drug use that parallel those of the soldiers and seem a sane response to the unchecked insanity of the conflict, Herr's stream-of-consciousness narration is as great a work of long-form journalism as Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail 1972*. By the time I got done reading *Dispatches*, I could hear that smoky voice, which, upon first viewings, and hearings, of the Coppola movie I had thought was Martin Sheen. Herr's reliance on the grunts themselves for a texture and a tone, not to mention content, of this vast undertaking proves successful. We get a sense of the true madness and absurdity of the war, and the way in which the bestial is released in the men tasked to prosecute it.

It's difficult to find a wasted sentence in this entire book. Herr spent nearly a decade distilling his experiences as a war correspondent in Vietnam, while revising, reworking and folding in the material that was originally published in *Esquire*. Boy, can he write. He can be flourishing and poetic, but he never goes on a tangent. If what he's trying to put across only requires one short paragraph, that's what he allows. In one of the final chapters, dedicated to his opinions on his colleagues and the coverage of the war in general, Herr is unsparing of the hacks and sycophants who never came close to a combat zone and just hung out at press conferences and inhaled the spin by top brass. Meanwhile, Herr and his daredevil buddies were rubbing shoulders with the Marines in Khe Sanh and Hue and other godforsaken locales. The wide chasm between what the "grunts" were experiencing and what Westmoreland was telling the media (which was dutifully passed on to the American people) is one of the most heartbreaking themes of the book. Several details and passages are forever haunting: one time Herr really wanted to leave a particularly hairy area, so he got on the first chopper available. Before he realized his mistake he was hundreds of feet up in the air with a dozen filled bodybags as his riding companions. And then the cover flew off one of the bags... Or after the Tet Offensive, where he fetches a beer for a doctor who has been working 12 hours and operating on the wounded. He has to tilt the beer up and into the doctor's mouth because he's operating on a Vietnamese girl who's lost her leg and his gloves are drenched and slick with blood... Or the image of dead Marines recovered from the battle of Hue with unopened letters from home still on them... Herr doesn't brag about his adventures. He could easily paint himself as some sort of badass for having the guts to willfully put himself at Khe Sanh mid-siege, but in the end he's very candid about his less-than-virtuous reasons for being such a daredevil. Ultimately, he said, he liked it too much and became addicted. Some soldiers understood this and were less than hospitable to Herr and other journalists: why would they stay here another day if they could be anywhere else, unlike me, who still has 6 months left to my tour? The one year Herr spent in Vietnam was the seed bed for a masterpiece of nonfiction writing. The price he paid for that one year was a massive emotional blackhole that took decades of Buddhist meditation to finally "scrape out." (he wasn't alone. There were lots of suicides by veterans after that war. It's still a problem to this day.) Like war itself, *Dispatches* is visceral and at times repulsive, but also addicting in its high octane, feverish details. They say books like this and *All Quiet on the Western Front* can forever warn people away from the horrors of war, but I'm not so sure. As Herr put it, it was often beautiful and even sexy. No recovered heroin addict will tell out that smack is unremittingly awful; they all have fond memories of how it made them feel. Such is humanity's dilemma with war, in every century, until world's end.

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