

A staggering account of soldiers occupying one of the most dangerous outposts in Afghanistan

WAR
By Sebastian Junger
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Review by **AMY DE KANTER**

WHEN you open this book, it is not long before your jaw drops. From now on, there are two things you can do.

First you can get an extreme mandibular workout by opening and closing your mouth throughout the rest of the book. Or, you can give up, keep it in permanent agape position and only when you are done reading dislodge whatever spider webs or beehives that have formed in there.

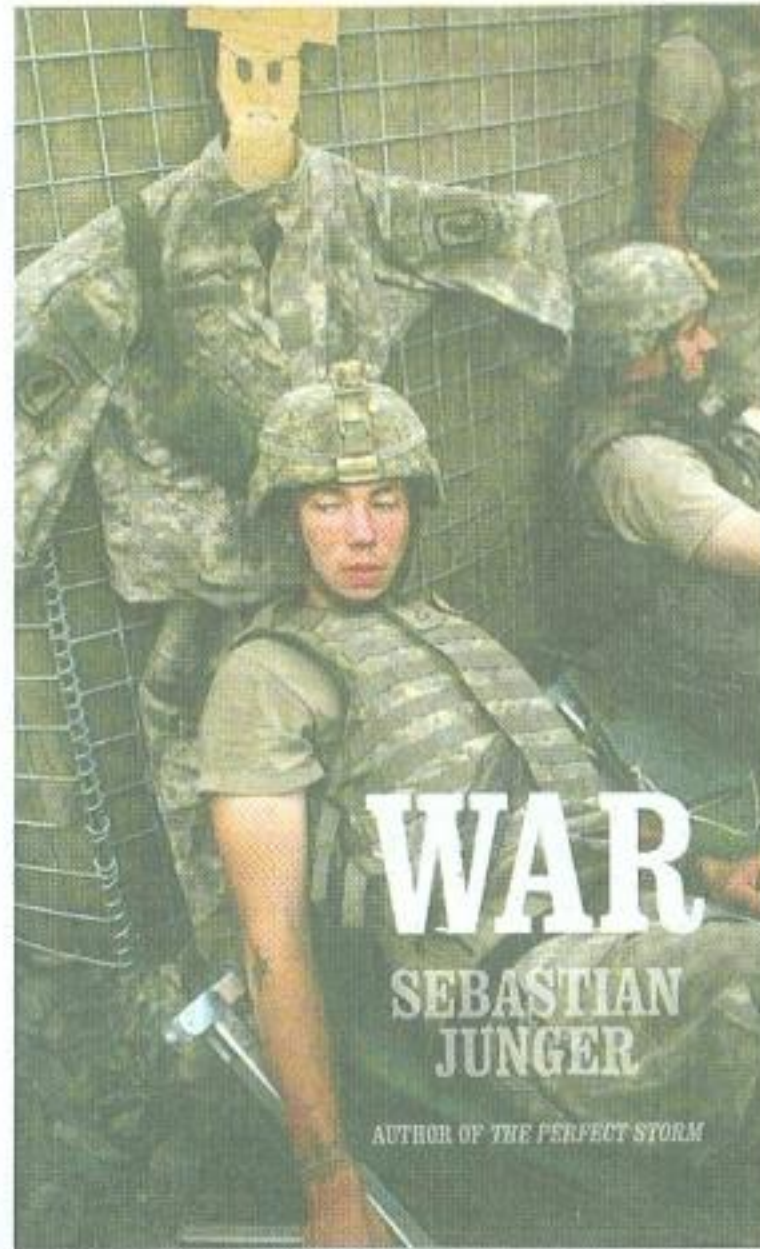
War is the latest book by Sebastian Junger, who also wrote *A Perfect Storm*. A fellow reader asked why on earth I would want to read anything more about the war in Afghanistan.

My friend suffers from bad news fatigue, not uncommon even among people whose closest contact to the war has been over their television sets and through newspapers. Around the world, people have grown weary after years of hearing about a war that has redefined stupidity.

Unlike other times, I did not have to go into a tirade with my friend about how we need to keep informed, keep sad, keep angry, keep speaking out. Junger needs no help from me. His book is different.

War is an observation of American soldiers in isolated outposts. He introduces us to the men who are sent there and shows how the experience changes them, both as individuals and as a group. Junger spends time with these soldiers at ground level, young men, little more than boys, of different backgrounds taking orders from "senior" officers who are

Men of war



barely college-aged themselves.

It would blow anyone's mind to try and imagine what happens when you stick a dozen or so men in a cramped, always either unbearably hot (which attracts flies) or

unbearably cold (which attracts scorpions) place. Healthy young men who are brimming with strength, energy and hormones, who are sexually frustrated and constantly alert to the fact that grenades can come raining down on them or a sniper's bullet can kill them in their sleep.

They are encouraged to smoke and take an obscene number of prescription drugs. From sleeping pills to help them make it though the night without screaming, to anti-psychotics, to a weekly malaria medication which lists "severe depression, paranoia, aggression, nightmares, and insomnia", among its common side effects.

It's a bad, mad situation that Junger, incredibly, makes sense of for his readers, so we almost understand this regression down the evolutionary ladder where men bond by beating each other up, leaving bruises and drawing blood. The more they love each other, the more they beat each other up.

In one startling event, a new commanding officer arrives and all the men leap at him, pinning him down and taking turns slapping him hard on the stomach. It is almost possible to understand why even men who hate each other would also die for each other.

And we have not even started on actual combat yet.

Junger's description of the technical aspects of weaponry are mind-boggling; fact is truly stranger than fiction.

A bullet travels faster than the speed of

sound, which means you hear the shot after it hits you. Soldiers will be sitting around, then hear snapping sounds above their heads – bullets breaking the sound barrier. Only after someone has been shot, or a wall has splintered above your head, do you hear the sound of the guns that were shot.

The soldiers are armed to the teeth, and even the mid-sized weapons cost more than what an American soldier makes in a year. The weapons are fired at people who could never afford them, with what they make in a lifetime.

The Americans may seem to have a clear advantage when it comes to technology, yet all their superior weapons, body armour and technology have not been able to defeat an enemy that has mobility, familiarity with the surroundings and numbers on its side.

No matter how good the weapons get, there is always a way to outsmart them. (Body heat detectors can be foiled by laying down on hot rocks and covering up, for instance.)

War is published by Twelve, the Jerry McGuire of publishing houses which only puts out one book per month. This is because it is determined that every month's publication will be spectacular.

If I were to vote for the 12 best non-fiction books of the year, I would have picked *War*, too.

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