

Review: *Blood Chit* by Grady Smith

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Reviewed by [Tom Glenn](#)

Here's a book that begins with a description of eating rattlesnake. Then it turns grisly.

If the role of fiction is to tell the truth, Smith's debut novel, *Blood Chit*, accomplishes its mission. No holds barred, it lays out the horror of warfare, death on the battlefield, and even military mortuaries without flinching. It goes on to recount a soldier's steady degradation from psychic laceration inflicted by combat. The text is devoid of sentimentality and judgment; the neutrality of the narrative makes it all the harder to bear.

Staff Sergeant Chuck Paxton, an infantry squad leader, is operating southeast of Saigon immediately after the Tet Offensive of 1968. His team is assigned to carry out a third patrol in 10 days. After casualties, he's down to seven men, counting himself. The squad is ambushed, and three more of his men are killed. Forced to go to the mortuary to identify the mutilated bodies, Paxton comes across a rat drinking the soldiers' blood. He kills it, but he believes that the rat, now immortalized, has lodged itself inside his body. It must never escape from his belly to drink soldiers' blood again. Thus begins the downward spiral.

The rest of the book traces Paxton's feckless therapy, his return to civilian life, and his failed struggle to obliterate the images burned into his memory. He can't keep a job, his sleep is bloodied by nightmares, and even though he knows he's hallucinating, he can't escape the scenes in his head. As he tells one of his doctors, "I wanted to come back, but I couldn't. I couldn't shut it off." Driven by memories more real than daily life, he drifts into homelessness, constantly reacting to the commonplace as if it were combat.

Blood Chit is a page-turner, compelling and shocking, and baldly honest. The military lingo is authentic, the terrain details accurate, the characters so real I think I remember them from Nam. Most galvanizing is Smith's understanding of the soul damage wrought by war. He comes to the task well prepared. He commanded an infantry company in Vietnam after Basic and Advanced Individual training, Infantry Officer Candidate School, and Ranger and Airborne training. He's at home with his characters and the violence of war.

The blood chit of the title is factual. It is an 8×15-inch cloth carried by soldiers, especially aviators, for use if stranded in foreign territory. It asks for help in multiple languages. Paxton comes across a blood chit at the beginning of the book, and a blood chit ends the book.

Never mentioned in the text is Post-Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI), the sickness that afflicts Paxton. At the time the story is set, the term didn't exist. In fact, few of us back then understood that war can create "casualties of the spirit ... forced beyond the limit of

human endurance,” as John Huston described it. Implicit in Smith’s narrative is condemnation of inadequate treatment of PTSD and the tendency to regard the trauma as weakness or cowardice rather than a genuine wound, as serious as any lesion on the body. And Smith hits hard on the most painful aspect of the disease — the patient’s inability to stop the episodes even though he knows they are imaginary.

Caveat lector, let the reader be warned: nothing about this book is easy reading. Smith uses the jargon of the Vietnam battlefield and emotional scarring with few definitions or explanations. Since Paxton often can’t distinguish his inner world from the outer world he is encountering, the reader slides from dream to reality and back again along with him. It’s this kind of writing, insulated from the deceleration of explanatory appositions, which makes the text so gripping.

Reading this book won’t be easy in another sense. Smith hides nothing. All the ugliness of war is in your face, just as it is for the combatant. You’re there, in the midst of it. The only escape is to stop reading, something I had to do several times.

Blood Chit is not a perfect novel. Minor distractions in the editing and word usage and a dependence on actionless structures (e.g., there was, there were) sometimes dilute the power of the prose. Occasional vague antecedents for pronouns caused me to reread. And Paxton’s relationship with Ellen, a woman he ends up living with, felt too facile. Most bothersome to me were awkward shifts in point of view, the perspective from which the story is being told. Too often for comfort, especially in the first half of the book, the reader is asked to jump briefly from the consciousness of one character into the consciousness of another and back again. More than once, I had to go back to be sure I understood whose head I was in.

But these deficiencies don’t divert the drive of the novel to its surprising ending. *Blood Chit* is a riveting portrayal of a soldier’s agony. It delineates a kind of suffering all of us should take into account before we rush into war.

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