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Vietnam War Conscientious Objector Author Republishes First Novel

Jan 22, 2005 – StopTheDraft Staff Writer



Robert W. Norris, a native Californian and Vietnam War conscientious objector (CO) now living in Japan, understands what many of the Iraq War generation are going through. Thirty-four years after being court-martialed as a CO, Norris has republished his first novel in order to give them an alternative viewpoint.

"Looking for the Summer," published January 15, 2005 by Lulu Press, tells the story of a Vietnam War CO's adventures and search for identity on the road from Paris to Calcutta in 1977.

"Back in 1970 I was a CO within the military, refused my orders to fight in the war, got court-martialed, and spent time in a military prison," Norris said. "The Kent State killings were the final straw in what was, at the time, a difficult and personal decision to make a stand against the war. With the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, all the questions about the Iraq War, and the strong possibility that the draft will return, the situation today is not so different."

Norris knows the decision to resist the war is difficult. "I can certainly empathize with those young soldiers and potential draftees who are questioning the legitimacy of this war," he said. "The enormity of making the decision to resist is tremendous. In your late teens and early twenties, you are seldom able to articulate the full depth of your feelings, morals, and values. You are scared and full of self-doubt. You know the decision will change the course of the rest of your life and you will probably suffer abuse, indignity, harassment, and perhaps even ostracism and imprisonment."

Norris hopes his story will serve as a positive example. "My own life was irreparably changed," he said. "After serving my sentence, I was kicked out of the military with an 'undesirable' discharge. For the next ten years I wandered the globe in search of an identity. I hitchhiked across the States twice, bummed around Europe, and took one journey around the world. Afghanistan and India, in particular, made a deep impression on me. I worked a lot of labor jobs during that time. Wherever I went, I was continually taking notes and writing journals. I became very interested in communication and foreign language study. Eventually, I ended up in Japan, where I now have a challenging job and a satisfying life.

"Although I couldn't have fathomed the thought at the age of eighteen, I now know that I'm a small but important part of a long history. I'd like young people to study about the thousands of conscientious objectors in history -- people like Henry David Thoreau, Eugene Debs, Mahatma Gandhi, William Stafford,

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Martin Luther King, Mohammed Ali, and that lone Chinese student at Tiananmen Square. As long as there have been wars, there have also been voices raised in opposition to wars. It's a tradition of which I'm proud to be a part."

Norris is the author of "Toraware" (Dead End Street Publications), a novel about the obsessive relationship of three misfits from different cultural backgrounds in 1980s Japan, "The Many Roads to Japan" (Lulu Press), a novella used as a textbook-reader in Japanese universities, and several articles on teaching English in Japan. He and his wife live near Fukuoka, Kyushu, where he is a professor and the dean of students at Fukuoka International University.

Authors and reviewers alike have praised "Looking for the Summer."

"A graceful autobiographical novel that breathes life into a perennial genre: the spiritual 'bildungsroman.' The theme of a questing expatriate who renounces Western materialism in favor of an exotic pilgrimage to the East will be familiar to anyone who has fallen under the spell of W. Somerset Maugham's 'The Razor's Edge' or Jack Kerouac's 'The Dharma Bums'....

"Although published prior to the events of 9/11, it is impossible to pick up Norris's novel without a heightened interest in its vividly depicted locales in a part of the world where our attentions are now so intensely focused. Several fascinating chapters are devoted to [the protagonist's] stay in Afghanistan. Written with a novelist's eye for characterization and a reporter's skill for observation, "Looking for the Summer" is the kind of small press gem that is often overlooked but is well worth seeking out." -- CultureVulture.net

"'Looking for the Summer' brings to light the turmoil going through the mind of a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War ... a powerfully written novel.... Highly important in its message about standing up for what one believes and about the personal growth one experiences while on a soul-searching journey as a result of taking such action ... certain to have a profound impact on the reader. It is a must-read, unforgettable novel." -- Knowbetter.com

"'Looking for the Summer' is a stunning novel of a metaphorical and physical journey across the Middle East. Though set during the 1970s, this story of war, pacifism, and redemption is as pertinent to today's global struggles as tomorrow's news. Fashioned in exquisite language and bolstered with some of the most beautiful descriptive passages I've ever read, 'Looking for the Summer' takes us on a voyage over deserts and mountains and through cities as the protagonist pursues spiritual, intellectual, political, and psychological enlightenment. This is a remarkable book and a must read for anyone seeking insight into the historical precedents for our post September 11 world." -- Marnie Mueller, author of "Green Fires," "The Climate of the Country," and "My Mother's Island"

"[Looking for the Summer] is beautifully written and tells us a great deal about the search for meaning in our lives. To learn who we are and what our lives are meant to be is a lifetime project, and Robert Norris has given us a fascinating glimpse of how this process unfolds."

-- Richard C. Anderson, WWII conscientious objector and author of "Peace Was in Their Hearts"

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