

An Interview with Ray Gleason

In his writing, Ray Gleason refuses to espouse any specific social or political ideology. "Once you do that," he observed, "You stop thinking about yourself and how meaning is derived from your experience." So life, for this soldier, writer, parent, teacher and scholar is a constant dialogue... a continuous interaction between the intellect and the phenomena with which it interacts. His social introspection, academic training, and military experience invite attention through his writing.

Born in 1948, Ray Gleason is as New York City as can be. He was born in New York City, New York County, New York State, in Gotham Hospital on the upper East Side of Manhattan ... seriously... Gotham Hospital! He was raised in Woodside, a working-class neighborhood in Queens along the #7 subway line, where Gaelic, Polish, Italian, Yiddish, Sicilian dialect - and even little English now and then - were spoken in the shops and along the sidewalks, while and the clergy from the local parish, St. Sebastian's, did a better job than the police, patrolling the streets on the lookout for young miscreants and delinquents.

"It was a Good Friday," he reminisces. "I was in the eighth grade and the nuns let us out of St. Sebastian's at noon so we could go to church. Since we were teenaged boys and it was spring, we certainly didn't rush over to the parish church to do

the Stations. Instead we chose up a baseball game in a vacant lot about two blocks from the school. We didn't even finish the second inning before the nuns rounded us up, frog-marched us back to the school, and called our parents to take us home.

The one of the two most formative experiences on Ray Gleason's early development was attending a Roman Catholic seminary, Maryknoll Junior Seminary, "The Venard," in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania coal country just north of Scranton. The other was serving as an infantryman in the Viet Nam conflict.

The former made him a socially conscious, spiritually oriented scholar. "At the Venard, I joined any movement that fought for social justice, like helping to build houses for the poor, collecting for food banks, and marching for equal housing with the NAACP," he explains. "I simply could not accept poverty and prejudice as a part of my America. And still, there's a part of me-I call it my 'inner nerd'-that rhapsodizes over Virgil's description of Aeneas' encounter with the shade of Dido in the Underworld or over Catullus' despair over his lost Lesbia, but only in the original Latin!"

Vietnam showed him the ultimate limits of humanity... how far a human being can be stretched and still maintain some tenuous grasp on human compassion. "Many of us went to fight in Vietnam because we thought it was the 'right thing,' protecting the

human rights of the South Vietnamese people," he explains one of the themes of his new book, *The Violent Season*. "While there, I had never experienced so great an attachment between people, as I did with the young infantrymen with whom I served. It was a love really... in an environment of violence, horror, death and hopelessness."

He retired from the Army in the early nineties and, having received an undergraduate degree from Hunter College in New York and a Master of Arts in English from Northwestern, he attended the Doctoral program in English literature at Northwestern University. "I had an opportunity to go to New York University," he quips, "But I felt that I had to do my graduate work in the Midwest. I wanted to teach literature in college, but how could I have any credibility with my students if I referred to authors as 'CHAW-sah' or 'Shakes-Bee-yah' while I sipped some CAW fee?"

Instead of immediately entering academia, he took advantage of the leadership and technical skills he had acquired in the Army and entered the business world. "I was getting ready to take my comps," he remembers, "When a buddy of mine called. He said he was in New Jersey and had run into an executive from AT&T, who complained that she couldn't find anyone in the Chicago area to build and run a data center. My buddy said he hoped I didn't mind but he gave her my name. As much as I wanted to go off to

some ivory tower and worship the muses, I had four kids to feed and to put through college. That had priority. The muses had to wait."

He finished his Doctorate and began teaching Medieval Lit part-time at Northwestern, but stayed in the business world for about ten years. "I finally wrote my last tuition check, did a happy dance, and realized that now I could 'work for myself' and do what I wanted to do," he explains. A private high school, The Culver Academies in Indiana, gave him the opportunity to teach ethics in their leadership program, so he sold the condo in Evanston, packed his books and cats and moved down behind the Corn-Silk Curtain.

While teaching in Indiana, he met his wife, Jan Peyser, who was then an English teacher, but has since retired from teaching to become an award-winning silversmith, jeweler, and the founder, owner, designer and creator of Jan Peyser Jewelry, LLC.

Also, he began writing. "At first, I wrote academic articles on Old French literature and on leadership. Then, I wrote *A Grunt Speaks* based on my experiences the Vietnam war. I wrote it as a way of dealing with some of my own *bêtes noires* ... you know ... the dark fears that you have to drag out into the light and render absurd, so they have no power over you ... but I was surprised at readers' interest and acceptance. I'm especially gratified when

someone tells me, 'I gave a copy of your book to my dad. He was in Nam and he never talks about it, but he really enjoyed your book.'"

If *Grunt* was written for his fellow vets of the Vietnam war and for those who are curious about the Vietnam infantry-culture, his next book, *The Violent Season*, reaches out to a more general audience to explain the role that this war played in the development of his generation.

"Vietnam vets not only have to deal with the trauma of combat, but also the trauma of America's seeming rejection of their sacrifice, the pop-culture's consistent portrayal of the Vietnam vet as a criminal and addict," he states with some passion. "I tell a story in the forward of *A Grunt Speaks*,

"One time, in graduate school, I was in the student center having a beer with the professor and some students after class. I went to grad school while still in the Army, so I was a bit older than the other students (and at least half the faculty) and my hair was a bit too short to be stylish. I know it was October, 1986, because we were watching the Mets and the Astros play in the National League Championship Series. The prof and I were both New York ex-pats and Met fans despite the university being a hotbed of Cub-ism and other futilities. One of the students, a young woman who looked to me to be about twelve, but

was obviously old enough to buy a beer, asked me if I had been in Vietnam. I guess the haircut and the twitching gave me away. I froze! Which in itself was amazing! I was a combat-experienced infantry officer and Ranger. Shoot at me, I don't freeze! Drop artillery on me, I don't freeze! A twenty-something on a college campus asks me if I had been in 'Nam—I freeze up like a can of beer left in the freezer too long (apologies for the metaphor ... too much Raymond Chandler at an impressionable age). What the hell, I thought, Vietnam was ancient history to these kids. So I told her I had been there. When I said this, she reached across the table and laid her hand on my arm and said, 'I don't think anyone really appreciates what you guys did over there. Thanks!' I plotzed! I had been out of 'Nam over fifteen years and this was the first time anyone had shown any gratitude or even tried to make me feel okay about what I and my buddies had gone through over there."

One of his purposes for writing *Season* is to reach out to his fellow countrymen and inspire them to become more like that young woman at Northwestern who welcomed him home after almost twenty years of wandering in the shadows of trauma, doubt and rejection.

Although writing *The Violent Season* is a climatic event in Ray Gleason's writing career, he has no intention of stopping there.

"Now that I have *Season* behind me, I'd like to write some 'fun stuff'," he promises. "I'm an avid reader of Phillip Kerr's Bernie Gunther novels. He writes a noir moderne that I'd like to explore. Then there's the Sister Fidelma mysteries of Peter Tremayne that one of my characters in *Season*, Lori McShea, admires. Writing in that genre would give me an opportunity to put my knowledge of medieval culture to use other than teaching an occasional course on Chaucer."

Ray Gleason has been awarded various commendations and decorations including the Combat Infantry Badge (CIB), Bronze Star for Valor, State of New York Humanitarian Service Medal, State of Ohio Commendation Medal and Viet Nam Cross of Gallantry with Gold Palm.

He and Jan live in Indiana. Together, they have two sons, four daughters, two grandsons, three granddaughters, five cats, and a varied assortment of furry critters living under the porch because it's a grunts' paradise, the chow is good and there's always a safe, warm, dry place to sleep.