



GABE HUDSON The Insistent Letter Writer

In his first collection of short stories, *Dear Mr. President*, Gabe Hudson tackles the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. Hudson does for it what Tim O'Brien has done for Vietnam—he's upped the ante. Big-time. And with Gulf War II looming, what better time to get Gabe's take on our country's future? A&F sent Alec Michod to file this report.

So you were in the Army, huh? I was in the Marine reserves for a good part of my undergrad days. As a privileged college kid, I decided, out of the blue, to enlist. I'd never seen a gun in my life, and then suddenly I was a rifleman in the Marine reserves. I'd been brought up as an art kid. I played the violin pretty seriously. I wasn't allowed to leave the house each day until I'd practiced for a couple hours. So, during my junior year in college, to freak my parents out, I enlisted. The Marines wanted me to take a desk job, because I had education. But I insisted that I wanted to do infantry. One thing's for sure, you definitely get a change of scenery. For anyone who is looking to make a career change, I think the Marines are still hiring. Just don't tell them I sent you.

How did your parents respond when you brought the enlistment papers home? It was even better than I expected. When I came home with the enlistment papers they were speechless. For a couple of years, my parents simply lost their ability to talk. Every kid should strive for this.

Going back a little, what's a brief autobiography of Gabe Hudson? My parents conducted an experiment on me, I think. I grew up in a house where there was no TV, and books and music were a big deal. My parents read to me each night before I went to bed, hours and hours, sometimes pretty heady stuff that I didn't understand. I remember how proud I was when I would go to check out all those books. It was like an athletic accomplishment or something. I wasn't allowed to play sports and barely ever got to play with other kids. When I finally did get out of the house, I acted like an over-enthusiastic idiot around the other kids. I just wasn't socialized properly. Then there was an extended break-dancing phase.

What led you to *Dear Mr. President*—why this book now? I felt like the younger generation needed a book that spoke about their relationship to war. We'd all grown up with these myths about Vietnam and WWII, like *Platoon* or *Catch 22*. And here was my generation, and their war was the Persian Gulf War, a censored 100-hour "virtual" war. The government, through pure propaganda and media manipulation, has tried to trick the American public into thinking it was a clean war. So I wanted to show, through humor, the psychological and physical toll of modern warfare.

What kind of research did you do for *Dear Mr. President*? I researched hard, but there's no direct or preordained trajectory to where I ended up. I read a bunch of Chomsky, media theory and war history. I also read a bunch of obscure texts that approached war from a kind of philosophical and sociological perspective. I read analyses on the differences between the WWII soldier and Vietnam soldier and the Gulf War soldier. I read other analyses on the effects of each war on America's collective conscious. I read about how the government practices strategic disinformation in order to secure public support. The funny thing is that the one constant in

all of my research is that the American government, each and every time, has camouflaged for the American public its true motivation for engaging in war. Time and again the American government lied. And given today's warmongering climate, they are clearly doing it again.

Why write about the Gulf War? Well, I'd seen how the Persian Gulf War had been glossed over by the government as this trouble-free victory, and I knew that was false. This was the first censored war. They wouldn't even allow journalists into the war theater, except at predetermined times. So when the journalists did arrive, they walked into the equivalent of a stage set. I knew that modern war was not this "clean" experience that the government tried to paint it to be. I wanted to show, with humor, the horrible effects that modern war has on modern soldiers. I think it's fair for me to point out that Timothy McVeigh, the D.C. sniper and this guy who shot the students at the University of Arizona are all Gulf War vets. My point is that there is a heavy toll on the vets from the Gulf War. And yet, for the most part, the American public has either forgotten about the war, or when they do think about it, that thought comes wrapped up in a nice victorious yellow ribbon. But that's an illusion, a hallucination brought on by patriotism, which is just a drug that the American people are addicted to.

What does satire mean to you? Overt satire usually bores me. I prefer nuanced satire that has a strong emotional element. **Satire, as I understand it, reveals the idiocy of mankind (including my own), of which there is a lot, so it seems like a noble endeavor.** I should also say that I believe in equal opportunity satire, so even though I'm a raging liberal, I consider it my duty to expose the idiocy of the liberal sentiment as well. No one should be safe from satire.

Finally, did you or did you not receive a letter from President Bush lambasting you? I didn't receive a letter from him, but that's only because he's too busy, I'm sure. I'd like to think he very much wants to write me a letter. I did go around claiming that I sent a copy of my book to him, and that he wrote me back a letter, calling my book "unpatriotic and ridiculous," and "just plain bad writing." It was meant as a joke. I also claimed that FBI agents had been lurking around some of my readings, and that the government was sabotaging my website. To me, it seemed so absurd. But then several national newspapers ran with the story, including the *Washington Post*. The White House started frantically calling my publisher because they were confused. I think deep down they had to admit that even though they didn't have any record of this letter being sent, they suspected Bush would be dumb enough to do such a thing.

Gabe Hudson photographed by Sarah Silver.