ABSTRACT

MATTHEW TUDOR SARDA. Inverted American Heroes: Challenging the American Trauma Hero Myth (Under the direction of Professor Elaine Orr)

With contemporary American conflicts waged by an all-volunteer force, the onus falls on volunteer American veterans to disrupt the nationalized war canon. But that source is increasingly smaller, with the literature trickling out of these conflicts a dwindling resource, despite their perpetually eternal status. How does the art evolve amidst these constraints? Writer and critic Roy Scranton postulates that the majority of works concerning Iraq and Afghanistan perpetuate what he calls the trauma hero myth. The trauma hero myth, according to Scranton, “works to convince us that war is a special kind of experience that offers a special kind of truth, a truth that gives those that have been there a special kind of authority.” Categorizing the soldier as the story’s ultimate narrator did not originate with the recent American forays into Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of the extremely limited participation in today’s conflicts, however, the trauma hero myth is now the dominant literary and commercial force. This is dangerous, Scranton argues, because it clouds the collective public’s ability to see these volunteer conflicts beyond the perspective of the American military veteran. Perspectives offered through the eyes of characters that are not American enrich the literary landscape and provide a broader understanding of the conflicts still affecting the United States.

The capstone examines and analyzes two recent American novels written by American veterans: Elliot Ackerman’s 2015 novel, Green on Blue, and Brian Van Reet’s 2017 novel Spoils. Each analysis reveals how underrepresented, non-American characters portray Americans, often challenging and disrupting key aspects of the trauma hero myth. Despite
critical and cultural aversions to writing from a non-American perspective, audiences will ultimately benefit from these emerging literary perspectives.