



Towson author Madeleine Mysko will be reading from her new book "Bringing Vincent Home" at Minas Gallery in Hampden. - Courtesy photo

RAFAEL ALVAREZ

Storyteller

Mysko at Minas Gallery, Ivy Book Shop

Madeleine Mysko will read from her novel "Bringing Vincent Home" at 5 p.m. tomorrow at the Minas Gallery, 815 West 36th St. in Hampden. Also on the bill are Savannah Schroll Guz and Joseph Young. The event is free. For information, call 410-732-4258. On Saturday, Jan. 26 — from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. — Mysko will sign copies of "Bringing Vincent Home" at the Ivy Book Shop, 6080 Falls Road in the Lake Falls Village Shopping Center. For information, call 410-377-2966.

For Towson author, 'this is the book I had to write'



Madeleine Mysko stares into the distance of 40 years from the window of her writing room in Towson and sees young men burned so bad their limbs have to be amputated.

She sees herself as a 23-year-old Army nurse fresh out of training at Mercy Hospital, the former Madeleine Seipp, no more than a girl.

A poet trained in the hard science of medicine, Mysko looks out toward the old Indian trail called Joppa Road and knows that fiction is the lie that tells the greater truth.

"That was a great surprise to me," she said of her journey as a writer.

More than three decades after the fall of Saigon — after years of "bottling up" what happened in Vietnam, of not finding the courage to go to pay respects to the Wall — Mysko has written about her experiences at the Fort Sam Houston Army hospital in San Antonio.

The result is her debut novel "Bringing Vincent Home," released this past October by Plain View Press of Austin, Texas.

"At 23 I was tending to the deaths and mutilated bodies of kids who were the age my boys are now," said Mysko, a mother of four who has taken to the streets in quiet protest of the war in Iraq. "I wanted to tell the story of the people I took care of. This is the book I had to write."

So why not a memoir, just the facts ma'am?

"By releasing myself from the worries about remembering exactly how it really was, I tended the story in a way that was somehow more pure," said Mysko, who wrestled the facts of the experience 15 years ago and failed.

"It's not really my story anyway," she said. "It's larger than that."

The tale begins with the mother of a soldier in Vietnam, frying chicken when the phone rings. It's the Army calling. Her son Vincent was being shipped from Southeast Asia to the burn ward at Fort Sam Houston. The only thing worse than a call is when officers come to the door.

"And I remember staring at the flame under the old black skillet, thinking about the pain of just one little spit of grease on the forearm. I had no idea where Vincent had been burned — his arms, his hands, his face? I only knew I had to get to wherever he was, and see for myself."

And thus, Kitty Duvall finds an old suitcase and heads for San An-

tonio to bring her beloved home to their Gardenville neighborhood in Northeast Baltimore.

If there is a soundtrack for this novel, it would be the song "John Brown" by Bob Dylan. Look around for the version by the Staple Singers with the stately Pop Staples on lead vocals. Then sit down and cry.

"When I asked a Vietnam vet in Baltimore to read the manuscript I asked if I got the details right," said Mysko, whose father served on an aircraft carrier during World War II.

"As a boy, I practiced magic but discovered it was trickery," he said.

"Why not someday use my wand to wake up the dead? So I took up a new hobby — writing stories."

- Tim O'Brien

"He said, 'You don't think I remember, do you?' I was traumatized, you were traumatized."

A contemporary of Mysko in the business of spinning truth from the lies of Vietnam is Tim O'Brien — they are both 61 — one of the finest novelists alive.

The author of "The Things They Carried," and "In the Lake of the Woods," among other novels, O'Brien almost never promotes other people's books. But the National Book Award winner took the time to give a quote for the back of "Bringing Vincent Home."

"Rarely does a book of any sort touch me as this one did," wrote O'Brien, who pulled duty as a foot soldier in Quang Ngai in 1969.

In the autumn of 2000, I interviewed O'Brien at Texas State University in San Marcos where he teaches. At the time, Bill Clinton became the first president to visit Vietnam since the war.

Vietnam, said O'Brien, "is the backyard where my generation spent its bad childhood."

The childhood of everyone connected, however indirectly, to the 58,152 Americans who died there. Like Mysko, O'Brien took up storytelling — the lie that tells the truth — to deal with the horror.

"As a boy, I practiced magic but discovered it was trickery," he said. "Why not someday use my wand to wake up the dead? So I took up a new hobby — writing stories."



Rafael Alvarez is an author and screenwriter based in Baltimore and Los Angeles. His books — fiction, journalism and essays — include "The Fountain of Highlandtown" and "Storyteller." He can be reached at ralvarez@baltimoreexaminer.com.



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