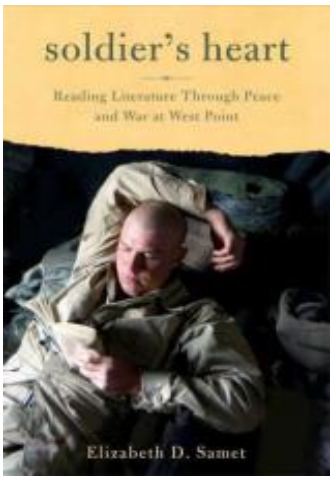
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Soldier's Heart

by Elizabeth D. Samet



About the Book

Elizabeth D. Samet and her students learned to romanticize the army ?from the stories of their fathers and from the movies.? For Samet, it was the old World War II movies she used to watch on TV, while her students grew up on *Braveheart* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Unlike their teacher, however, these students, cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point, have decided to turn make-believe into real life.

West Point is a world away from Yale, where Samet attended graduate school and where nothing sufficiently prepared her for teaching literature to young men and women who were training to fight a war. Intimate and poignant, **Soldier?s Heart** chronicles the various tensions inherent in that life as well as the ways in which war has transformed Samet?s relationship to literature. Fighting in Iraq, Samet?s former students share what books and movies mean to them --- the poetry of Wallace Stevens, the fiction of Virginia Woolf and J. M. Coetzee, the epics of Homer, or the films of James Cagney. Their letters in turn prompt Samet to wonder exactly what she owes to cadets in the classroom.

Samet arrived at West Point before September 11, 2001, and has seen the academy change dramatically. In **Soldier?s Heart**, she reads this transformation through her own experiences and those of her students. Forcefully examining what it means to be a civilian teaching literature at a military academy, Samet also considers the role of women in the army, the dangerous tides of religious and political zeal roiling the country, the uses of the call to patriotism, and the cult of sacrifice she believes is currently paralyzing national debate. Ultimately, Samet offers an honest and original reflection on the relationship between art and life.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the book?s title. What are the different meanings of ?soldier?s heart?? In what ways does literature address the ailments of what Wilfred Owen calls, in his poem ?Insensibility? (epigraph), a heart ?small drawn??

2. Although much has been written about West Point and military life in America, an English professor?s point of view on the subject is rare. What specific insights on this world does Samet offer as a civilian and a humanities professor at a military academy? How is her portrait of military life different from others you have read?

3. How does Samet?s description of her students and former students compare to your stereotypes of soldiers? What are those stereotypes? How does **Soldier?s Heart** confirm or challenge them?

4. Chapter 1, ?Not Your Father?s Army,? touches on the myths and traditions that define West Point, and military life more generally, by alluding to the literature that shaped the experiences of past cadets. Which aspects of the past remain vibrant on campus? Which aspects are radically different in the twenty-first century?

5. Samet writes that she hears the term *relevance* more and more in informal conversations about the education and training of cadets. How are humanities courses different from military training at West Point? What do such courses contribute to the preparation of cadets? What is the difference between education and training? How do you view the purpose of higher education in general, and the role of literature and the arts within it?

6. How has teaching at West Point changed Samet?s experience of literature? How might her relationship to literature and teaching have been different if she had taken a position at a liberal-arts college instead of at West Point? How does her teaching style compare to that of English teachers from your past?

7. Samet?s deployed colleagues and former students write to her with rich observations about their favorite literary works. In what ways does literature help them understand their experience of war? What do their reading choices reveal about that experience?

8. The author?s previous book explores the tension between liberty and obedience in nineteenth-century America, a dynamic she also explores in **Soldier?s Heart**. How do soldiers reconcile the military?s demand for conformity with the need for innovative minds --- in an all-volunteer military, no less? How do literature and creative writing serve or undermine the need for obedience and innovative thinking? What role does literature play in forging what West Point alumnus Ulysses S. Grant called *moral courage*?

9. Why is writing about war one of the oldest forms of literature? What was the significance of epic poems such as Homer?s *Iliad* or *Beowulf* to the warriors of earlier ages? What will characterize the artistic legacy of war in the twentieth and twentyfirst centuries? What is the relationship between writing and film when it comes to describing the contemporary war experience? Is your own understanding of war shaped more by literature or by film?

10. Some of Samet?s students gravitate toward war literature, while others prefer to read about nonmilitary topics. Does their reading seem more specialized than that of their counterparts at civilian colleges? What works would you include on a syllabus of assignments for cadets? Which classics would you like to see distributed today in an Armed Services Edition?

11. How is the experience of a West Point cadet different from that of a college student at a typical liberal-arts college?

12. What surprised you the most about the culture of West Point? How does military hierarchy influence educational practice? Do other American college campuses have comparable hierarchies? Should civilian colleges do more to

emphasize the self-discipline of students?

13. Chapter 3, ?Becoming Penelope, the Only Woman in the Room,? describes the ways in which gender is sometimes a factor in Samet?s teaching experience. What advantages and disadvantages come with being a woman at a male-dominated institution? What specific challenges do women at West Point face? To what degree does West Point?s recent history as a coed institution reflect the changing nature of the American military and American society? What are the effects of the stereotype associated with Penelope, a woman waiting for a warrior?s return? What role does literature play in helping the cadets think about these issues?

14. How was the author?s worldview shaped by her upbringing --- by a father who enlisted in the Army Air Corps during World War II, as well as by her years at the Winsor School? How did these experiences influence her teaching?

15. Chapter 5, ?Bibles, Lots of Bibles,? explores the blend of religion and politics that permeates some segments of military life. How would you describe religion?s role in the personal experiences of soldiers --- at West Point and elsewhere --- and its influence on national political decisions about war and peace?

16. How did 9/11 change the role of Samet and other professors at West Point? What were your reactions to the scenes in the closing pages, which capture the difficult debates about the United States? current and future military responsibilities?

17. How would you describe the impact of the Iraq war on life at West Point and on the ways in which the cadets and faculty understand their missions? Has the impact of war evolved over time?

18. How would you define heroism? How does the Army define heroism? What is the role of literature in the process of turning soldiers into heroes? In your view, does the national emphasis on heroism honor or diminish the humanity of soldiers?

Author Bio

Elizabeth D. Samet earned her BA from Harvard and her PhD in English literature from Yale. She is the author of **Willing Obedience: Citizens, Soldiers, and the Progress of Consent in America, 1776?1898**. Samet has been an English professor at West Point for ten years.

Critical Praise

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