



Bobbie Ann Mason

In Country
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***In Country* has been described as a "coming-of-age" novel? Do you agree with this assessment?**

Yes, it follows that classic structure, I think. When I was writing the novel, it was a long time before I realized that Sam's father had died in Vietnam. But at some point, when it occurred to me that she was of an age to start making inquiries about the father she never knew, I realized that the first generation of children of American soldiers who died in Vietnam was coming of age. So with that realization, I knew I had that universal coming-of-age story.

The three-part structure of *In Country*, with the beginning and ending sections framing the central portion of the novel, is integral to the story. Can you discuss how you arrived at this shape for your narrative?

The narrative was linear until I went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and realized that the characters would be going there too. I could hear their voices, and I could imagine their reactions to finding Dwayne's name on the wall. So I had a new development, a new ending. Then it made sense to take part of their journey and put it at the front—to begin in *medias res*. It's also a classic technique often used with the journey theme, and this is a story of a journey, on more than one level.

In many respects, *In Country* seems like it's Sam Hughes's story. But the end of the novel speaks more directly to the experiences of Emmett Smith. Why did you choose to end the novel with the striking image of Emmett's smile?

It sounded right. It was evocative. It was complex and resonant. It doesn't tie up loose ends the way a movie would. It captures a moment, which seems right to me.

You examine some unconventional bonds of family in this novel. What explains the special closeness between Sam and her uncle Emmett?

Sam is rebelling against her mother, who is moving on with her life and who seems to Sam to betray her old values. Emmett is the only father figure Sam has known, so she defends him when her mother has thrown up her hands in exasperation. As she graduates from high school and enters a new phase of her life, it becomes urgent for her to understand what Emmett went through in the war. She is trying to find her father through him.

When *In Country* was first published, what kind of reception did the book receive from Vietnam veterans?

I received quite a bit of overwhelming responses, many grateful to see some aspect of their story given credence and voice. The novel received an award from the Vietnam Veterans of America and I was invited to their convention. A chapter in New Jersey gave me a special plaque, "To the author of 'In Country' from those who served in country." There were some especially moving tributes. More of that came when a Kentucky chapter of the VVA was involved in the making of the movie of "In Country."

You've said that writing *In Country* made you feel a special connection to veterans. Can you talk a bit more about that?

My research was mostly reading oral histories. Their eloquent voices entered my imagination, and while I could not possibly know what they really went through, so many details burned themselves into my imagination, so that I felt a certain connection.

Many years have passed since the Vietnam War, but America has been involved in a series of international conflicts since then. Do you think *In Country* will speak to veterans of these conflicts in much the same way it has to veterans of Vietnam?

I hope so. In some ways, wars are all alike. There are universal themes, and there are many specific factors in all our recent wars that relate back to Vietnam. I think all these wars leave fatherless children, troubled veterans, broken families. And always questions are raised about who we are as a country.

Your knowledge of music and television of the 1980s, as displayed throughout *In Country*, is impressive. Are you an enormous fan of pop culture, or did you have to research some of these elements for your novel?

The music is in the novel because it is appropriate to the subject. The use of it is very deliberate and shouldn't depend on whether I am any kind of fan. I didn't have to research it because it was present all around me.

Have you ever considered a sequel to *In Country*?

No.

What's your next project?

My current novel is new — *An Atomic Romance*. Next summer I will have a book of stories called *Nancy Culpepper*.