

The Man Behind The Plot Of New Film 'Trumbo'

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Dalton Trumbo, left, and John Howard Lawson smile and wave from the U.S. Marshal's van as the Hollywood screenwriters were carted off in Washington, to begin one-year sentences for refusing to tell Congress whether they were ever communists, June 9, 1950.

AP photo

One of my son's significant literary choices for a book about war and the anguish it brings is Dalton Trumbo's 1938 novel, "Johnny Got His Gun."

It is a book that both of us know, and it takes on a different and deeper meaning as soon as you have been anywhere near a war zone, experienced war, fought in a war, or survived a war — whole, or in shattered parts.

"Johnny Got His Gun" was Trumbo's tale about a World War I soldier whose body was destroyed by a shell. The Doughboy — a World War I draftee — essentially had his entire body carved out by shrapnel. His arms and legs, gone. His face, that was gone too. No tongue. No ears. No nose. Fed by tubes. The book is written from the soldier's perspective; the inner life and his miseries.

My son discovered the book several years ago after surviving infantry combat in Fallujah with the Marine Corps. It is on his shelf with Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," and Karl Marlantes' memoir, "What It Is Like To Go To War."

I encountered Trumbo's novel 45 years ago, just a year before I left my teen years forever to join the Army. I never regretted reading "Johnny Got His Gun," and I never was given cause to have regrets about opting for military service. My end of the Cold War was cold enough. I drew "the lucky straw" unlike my draftee brothers just a couple of years older than me sent to Vietnam to do the best they could.

When I first read "Johnny Got His Gun" as a high school senior, national alienation about the war we prosecuted in South Vietnam was at high tide. Campuses roiled with anti-war fever and protest. I met Trumbo briefly, hearing him speak on campus at a local university where the anti-Vietnam War opinion wave was rolling through, as it did on so many other college campuses as the Sixties were ending, and we were ending our role in that long war.

The Trumbo novel remains a kind of literary gem. It takes the case about waging war to the most personal level by showing in an intimate way that war can destroy a single life.

I read "Johnny" again a few years ago, and the reading was informed by my own perspective as a veteran, a journalist embedded during the Iraq War, and also as the father of a Fallujah veteran. It is safe to say I read the novel a second time with a greater understanding of the material. Anyone with current military connection to

combat soldiers probably has a friend who left an arm, or leg, or more, somewhere in the hot and nasty bomb dust of Iraq or Afghanistan.

A new film about the writer, "Trumbo," stars Bryan Cranston, the actor who captivated a national audience for years as the high school teacher turned crime boss Walter White of "Breaking Bad." The movie, which was released on Nov. 6, also features the splendid Oscar winner Helen Mirren as the notorious Hollywood gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper.

The film will likely resurrect knowledge about Trumbo, who he was, and what he wrote.

Dalton Trumbo's mug shot, June 9, 1950.



As Hollywood's highest-paid screenwriter during the 1940s, Trumbo was a regular at Beverly Hills parties, and the kind of guy who lived in a great house with a big swimming pool, according to screenwriter John McNamara who spent three years researching the screenwriter's life. Trumbo also was a member of the Communist party in his early days in Hollywood, according to Victor Navasky's book, "Naming Names." Trumbo was a paradox, the communist as super-talented artisan and scribe who made a pile of money, [McNamara related to writer Louise Farr](#) in *Written By*, the magazine of the Writer's Guild of America. As Hollywood near-royalty, he wrote the words that became some of the most famous and loved films of World War II.

One such was "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo," about the Doolittle Raid, and another was "A Guy Named Joe," according to Trumbo's filmography. Both movies starred Spencer Tracy, in the first as the war's famous flight leader, Jimmy Doolittle, and the other as a lovable Army pilot who gets killed and returns in ghostly fashion to match-make his betrothed and the next Army pilot she will fall in love with.

It was Trumbo's suspected communist status that got him hauled in front of the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee that convened as the war fought by the Greatest Generation gave way to the Cold War against communism and the Soviet Union.

Trumbo refused to disclose his own politics, as was his right as an American. And he refused to supply the names of others, defying the committee and maintaining his personal standards of integrity. He went to prison for contempt of Congress, and as a member of the "Hollywood Ten," became the first major target of what was called the Blacklist.

The Blacklist itself was a stain upon American democracy, and it embodied aspects of the national security state apparatus of the Cold War. In a country rife with the paranoia of Cold War hysteria, it meant that the blacklisted writers would no longer be employed at their trade. To sell their work, the blacklisted writers had to deliver scripts to surrogates who "fronted" for them so the internally exiled authors could feed their families.

Trumbo and actor Kirk Douglas — a World War II Navy veteran — were instrumental in breaking the hold of the Blacklist in 1960. Douglas, one of Hollywood's heaviest hitters at the time, insisted that Trumbo receive screen credit for "Spartacus." The film is another war movie worth seeing. It is Stanley Kubrick's classic spectacle about a gladiator's doomed revolt against Rome. Next, Trumbo authored "Lonely Are The Brave," another Douglas film and another gem. From an Edward Abbey novel, it is about a cowboy who is a Silver Star veteran of Korea, who defies government authority by breaking out of a border jail and riding his white horse toward Mexico. It is a brilliant film and only would get made because Kirk Douglas enjoyed major clout flowing from the enormous success of "Spartacus."

As a screenwriter, and a political man, Trumbo survived the Blacklist by defying authority. He maintained his integrity by refusing to give names to knaves and scoundrels who happened to be elected to Congress. And he went to prison for it.

"Trumbo" opened in theaters on Nov. 6. Watch the trailer below.



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