



An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World

William T. Vollmann

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In 1982 William T. Vollmann, one of our most versatile talents, traveled to see the war in Afghanistan. In *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, his first book-length work of non-fiction, Vollmann paints a brutally honest and dryly comic portrait of a young American coming to terms with his political naivete. It is the story of a would-be giver who finds himself a perpetual Stranger, unable to comprehend the simplest things he hears and sees, and continually compelled to rely on others for help. In two narrative perspectives, Vollmann wryly confronts his own inadequacy in the face of limitless suffering and comes to the realization that one who went to aid and to understand could only hope, trust, and receive. In *An Afghanistan Picture Show* Vollmann describes a Cold War world of spies and lurking strangeness, a world in which his younger self asks unanswerable questions of orphans, refugees, guerrilla leaders, bureaucrats, corrupt officials, and prescient has-been politicians. He tells of Pakistan, a country as gracious in spirit as she is materially poor. And in his unnerving innocence Vollmann explores a land in which others continually invest him with almost supernatural powers simply because he is American. An ingenious narrative which inverts the very concept of the "white man's burden" and questions the idea of "truth" in non-fiction, *An Afghanistan Picture Show* stands as William T. Vollmann most entertaining--and autobiographical--work to date.

An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World Details

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From Reader Review An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World for online ebook

Richard says

For chronicling an utter disaster, there's so much value in this book! I would recommend it to anyone interested in traveling abroad to "help" others (or, really, traveling abroad in general.) In some ways you could say this book is a failure. Young Vollmann makes a trip to "help" the Afghans, and quickly realizes (and sometimes, painfully, doesn't realize until later) that he has no idea what he's doing or getting into (or how difficult he's been making things for other people).

What's so great about this book, though, is how he honestly explores his cluelessness and his failure. This story rings true in a way that most traveling journalism books don't. There's a whole genre of guys dropping into a troubled country for a few weeks or months to get the lay of the land and then making grand sweeping pronouncements about local culture & character and What the World Must Do Right Now. I always get the feeling that these books are nonsense - heroic journalists risking danger/hardship, making deep connections, coming to hard-won (or easily-won!) epiphanies, to uncover the true lay of the land and its people - with much of the horrible misunderstandings, insults, complicated ethics, and unknown personal agendas ignored or paved over; a hero's journey to understanding, fueled by ego and the need to sell a book.

Afghanistan Picture Show is sort of the opposite, lifting the veil from that type of book to look as something deeper, becoming more useful and powerful as a result. Vollmann homes in on all the embarrassments and errors he made and uses them to explore what motivated him to travel across the world to "help the Afghans" and how wrong his assumptions were about the kind of help he could provide and the kind of help they wanted. He also looks at the complicated moral calculus behind aid - why are we providing aid to some and not to others (on a personal and larger level) and what is the right way to provide it? This is Vollmann's first book, so you won't get the masterful writing of his Seven Dreams series (except maybe a short chapter on hiking in Alaska, which is beautiful)- but you do get the thoughtful self-questioning and curiosity inherent in all of his work.

Griffin Alexander says

Well this book has certainly become topical once again given recent redeployments. BUT:

Is this as good as the Vollmann you have come to love in his novels and more recent non-fiction? NO.

Is it worth reading for the comical fact that only about 70 pages of a book with Afghanistan in the title take place in Afghanistan? YES.

Should it be your first voyage into Vollmann's work? DEPENDS—A lot of the themes here are also elsewhere, though here they are in their infancy; it does illuminate his intent, that he is trying to do good and to understand, which hasn't changed since this book. This would be a weird place to start with Bill's enormous output, but I'd say judge it for yourself based on your reaction to this snippet from his new introduction to the 2013 Melville House edition (if you feel for this perspective, you will feel for this book; however, if you find yourself too filled with the desire for swift and sanguine vengeance still, even as Bin Laden's remains are by now surely sodden rotten and devoured by fishes— then you probably will NOT feel for this book and its desire for some kind of however unsatisfied sense of understanding):

Please let me tell you the obvious about Afghanistan: Every child and grandmother we kill makes us new enemies. We will never "win" over there.

I used to say that I hoped to see the September eleventh plotters all hunted down and killed. Now I am ashamed of having thought so. Osama bin Laden should have been put on trial instead of being gunned down. From what little I have read, he was wounded and helpless and they kept pumping lead into him. I would have liked to hear him explain why he did what he did.

Downward says

Vollmann went to Afghanistan to fight with the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union. This book is a transcript of what are mostly his failures, based on his assumptions of what he COULD do to help. It's really an examination of well meaning ignorance, as we have countless scenes of the Afghan soldiers slowing down significantly so they don't leave Vollmann behind, giving Vollmann his rations so he doesn't starve, carrying him because he's afflicted with intestinal parasites. Vollmann is honest about his flaws here and about his naivety about "saving the world" but he does do what journalists are supposed to do: he portrays a story from an in depth and rare point of view, that of the Mujahideen v the Soviets, while imbedded with Mujahideen soldiers, most of whom think he's CIA or a joke, or a joke of a CIA agent. Vollmann here refers to himself in third person, for the whole book, as "the young man" which I think speaks to his take on his own character.

Cody says

In which our hero drinks an awful lot of Sprite...

Quickly: the "Alaska" chapter and "The Toy Airplane" vignette rank alongside my favorite WTV of all-time.

I'm going to get out of my own way and let WTV's Wittgenstein-inspired self-analyses speak for themselves (see below). The applicability of this book to our modern global paradigm is stunning. For those who marvel at our hero's later adventuring, bear in mind that he was literally pissing blood and riddled with intestinal worms in Afghanistan and Pakistan on his own dime *long* before being published—all in his never ending pursuit of doing the 'right thing.' As the below adroitly observes, 'right' is subjective and our Western conceptualization of the same does not inherently make it so for others. I remain resolute in my opinion that WTV is an exceptionally well-intentioned man, unparalleled among his other writers.

"I believed, and still do, that every human being is my brother or sister, and therefore that we are all of us equally deserving of help."

-WTV, 2013

From *An Afghanistan Picture Show*:

(1) Being a citizen of the U.S.A., I really don't understand what anyone is doing in Afghanistan. This failure of imagination, while not directly relevant, nonetheless vitiates my activities.

(2) Even if the Afghans get their country back, in the long run it will be invaded again. Whether or not this is a ludicrous argument depends on how long the long run is. It does not make sense to give up brushing my teeth on the grounds that someday they will fall out anyway, but it may be intelligent not to rebuild a house of cards in a strong prevailing wind. I suppose that if Afghanistan were left to itself during the rest of my

lifetime I would be satisfied. But that would hardly encourage me to live a long time.

(3) Since I have decided to be “of service,” people might well ask me whom I will be of service to, and under what circumstances. —“If I saw a woman being starved by her relatives I would help her.” This absurdity can be demolished fairly easily. Afghan women and girls tend to be malnourished. They eat last. Sometimes, a doctor in the camps told me, their families just let them die. If the only evil that had been brought to my attention vis-à-vis Afghanistan were the suffering of women within the family, I’d never have lifted a finger, because I am neither Afghan nor a woman, and so right away I would KNOW that there was nothing that I could do. It might well be that in changing the position of a woman in an Afghan family I would destroy the Afghan family. (Maybe, for that matter, it is better to be an Afghan woman than an American woman. I might prefer to eat last and to be protected from men’s eyes by my thick black veil while I sat in my hot tent than, wearing my fashionable skirt, to eat all I want in some restaurant while enduring comments about my tits. Who am I to say? —How simple, by comparison, is the wrongness of a napalm wound!) —Most likely, if I were an Afghan woman I would have no idea of what it would be like not to be an Afghan woman. As it is, I have no idea how to help any or all Afghan women be Afghan women. Should I marry four refugees, as the Holy Qur’an allows, and try to make them all happy?

(4) “If I wanted to help a woman I would not rape her.” —This, too, shows a fundamental misunderstanding. I must take photographs of Afghan women. Otherwise, American women might think that Afghans are sexist (wouldn’t *that* be wrong?) and not want to help them. American men would be disappointed at not having the above-mentioned exotic faces and tits to comment on. —Fair enough. —I explain my requirement to the administrator of the camp, a very obliging Pakistani gentleman. —“I understand, sir,” he tells me. “I get some women for you.” —He turns to the refugees and explains. Voices rise, but he does what he has to do; he yells at them; the voices become more excited and angry than ever; he lifts his arms firmly, shouts the Afghans down, reaches out, pushes away a boy, and points to a woman, whose baby on her shoulder turns its head, sees me, and starts to cry. The woman crouches miserably in the sand like a dark bird. Her husband comes forward, balling his fists at me, and the administrator puts a hand on his chest and pushes him back. He stands there looking at me. We are surrounded by people—the woman, the administrator and I—all of them standing and looking at me. The administrator speaks to the woman rapidly and fiercely. Everyone is murmuring and watching my face. The woman removes her veil. She will not look at me. I see her cheeks, her mouth. Her unbound hair. I move to one side and raise my camera. I believe I am taking good pictures. —Afterward, the administrator goes to speak with her husband, who finally comes forward. —“Dera miraboni,” he says to me. Thank you very much. —We shake hands.

(5) In proposing to help the Afghans, I must accept the postulate that it is better for people to be exploited by their neighbors than by strangers. I cannot prove this.

(6) Nor is it fair to claim that the atrocities currently committed by the Soviets represent what would be an ongoing situation once the resistance movement was wiped out. Surviving Afghans would probably be forced into a more equitable system of distribution than currently exists. The women would receive as much food (or as little) as the men, we might hope.

(7) “But this would mean destroying the indigenous culture.” —After x years of Soviet rule, it would *be* the indigenous culture. Surely the current culture of Afghanistan displaced an earlier one. There is thus no need for action. Anyway, what does being indigenous have to do with whether a culture is “good” or “bad”?

(8) “But isn’t inaction in situations of human suffering even worse than making the wrong decision?” —Oh, I don’t know about that.

(9) If the Soviets took over the world, humanity would become more homogeneous. It seems that heterogeneity is one of the principal causes of strife: the conclusion must be that every new school of fish that Leviathan swallows extends by so much the dominions of peace. Of course, the process of mastication

and digestion is a little painful, but ah! after that, each glob of excrement will be like every other; and wide, toothy smile at us) we ourselves will all be one mass of tranquility and quietude.

(10) Besides, nobody else is interested in Afghanistan.

Hadrian says

[A]nd the Mujahideen fired in this long moment that was the reason I came; I don't want or need to say much more about it; they were fighting and I was not; they were accomplishing the purpose of their lives in those endless night moments of happiness near death, no fear in them as I honestly believe; they had crossed their river so long ago that I could not really comprehend them as anything except heroes shining like Erica on the far side of the water; they were over the red hill and nothing mattered.

Vollmann, in his first book written and seventh published, calls himself only The Young Man here, perhaps to distance himself from that other foreign country known as the past. Here he is a wee twenty-two years old, with his head full of Wittgenstein and blind idealism, frail of body, speaking no Pashtun and not knowing how to fire a gun. With this set of assets and liabilities, he soldiers off into Afghanistan to try and Save the World. No doubt many timid intellectual types have had feverish misguided dreams of becoming Che or some heroic martyr-general, but here's one foolish devil who tried to make these dreams come true. Vollmann's ironic historical self-awareness starts to bud here. He notes György Lukács and his futile efforts in the Hungarian Revolution, watching politics and force sweep aside the tender debates of the fine points of ideology.

What Vollmann does have here are a camera, a 'what-the-hell attitude', forty rolls of film, and a tendency to make friends. Enough material to write a book, but hardly enough to help people.

So off he goes. He sojourns from Karachi to Peshawar, and interviews some locals and reliable sources. The refugees - they are easy to find, as the city of Peshawar doubled in size after the war began - tell him their stories, and eagerly buy him Pepsi and Fanta with their little savings. At times, he might be guilty of a feelings of Orientalist exoticism towards the Afghans, making them into Others, but he tries to break down this self-built wall, talking to people first, suffering the heat, eating the food, genuinely listening to them, writing little Pynchonian ditties about the city. To be fair, the Afghans and Pakistanis have their own images of him and America too. They'd like guns. They'd also like to visit America, the promised land of guns, gold, and Cadillacs. They'd most like to be listened to, and ask the Americans for eager help and assistance, with increased bitterness as their pleas are selectively ignored. He talks to a few refugees who were lucky enough to get to America, and they are blandly pleased.

And here, Vollmann drifts between the literary to the political. There is a vast chronology in the back of the book, starting from the first Russian conquests against Khiva and the Kazakhs in 1734, and ending in 1989, with the election of Benazir Bhutto, the withdrawal of the Soviets, and the Final Victory over the Evil Empire two years to come. In his interviews with warlords, politicians, NGO workers, and the *Muj*, Vollmann was able to uncover that the US was giving aid to the Mujahideen via Pakistan by 1982. But of course, there was a real chance that if he had died in Afghanistan and the Soviets could have picked through his camera and his notes, then he could very easily have sabotaged the remaining American efforts there.

Another, post-modern fascination of Vollmann's is human perception and how nonobjective our gazes can be, especially decades of war and propaganda have made institutionalized lies about each other. The Soviets believed, or their institutional apparatus did, they they were bringing their own brand of communist liberation to the Afghan people, freeing the women from the veil, teaching children how to write, and molding them into international citizens who appreciated civic virtues of class-consciousness. But we know the difficulty of applying ideology through praxis without a biased viewpoint.

Perhaps the first problem with the book is that it was published too late. At this time, Vollmann was something like a respected novelist, and this awkward exploring memoir seemed out of touch in many ways. In 1992, we were already celebrating our Final Victory over the Soviet Union and had announced the End of History, whereas Afghanistan would soon be seized by the Taliban some four years later. In my brief research for this essay, I found one review in 1992 who smugly predicted "the resolution of the Afghan situation" was coming soon. History, of course, will not slow down or disappear because it is ignored by the powerful.

Vollmann's little efforts were a total failure, by his admission. The picture exhibitions he set up when he returned barely covered the cost of the rooms he rented. Vollmann, technologically proficient yet morally naïve, is a cipher for those who ape the motions of trying to aid others without understanding the complex circumstances they live in, is only too relevant today. He is an American Abroad, a well-intentioned Ugly American narrative character. His early childhood fantasies, of Alaska, mix with the red hills of Afghanistan and its landscape. His narrative is about failure, and perhaps he hopes his honesty and self-effacing modesty will atone for it. The secrets of Afghanistan and the World do not arise simply because he asked nicely.

So whither Afghanistan today? We want so much only to help, but there has been little unity, and there remains little today. Pakistan has its own issues, and justly resents our drone usage, and if their varied peoples are said to have any unified interest, it is survival and peace. The way forward is murkier. The eternal forges of hell burn the corpses of the good-intention, the ideal, the person who wants most desperately to change human nature.

Quinn Slobodian says

Vollmann went to the Afghan border in 1982 unbidden and unconnected, a twenty-two year old thick with Wittgenstein and the desire as he put it, "to learn if there was a way to help people get across rivers." He found that it was he who needed carrying over rivers on the backs of mujaheddin as he slowed their entry into the areas of fighting against the Soviet occupiers. Overwhelmed by both unceasing demands and unceasing acts of generosity, he clung to his tape recorder, his camera and his self-made version of an empirical method, determined to penetrate the conflict and bring back the data that would yield up his heroes after later analysis. Written between recollections and the time itself, the book is a portrait of intellectual self-consciousness, the knots of First World charity and encounter after encounter with men willing to fight "with their guns and everything" against any new wave of invaders, whatever language of legitimation they might be speaking this time.

Alexander Weber says

I have been a youth worker for the last two years. My efforts to make a difference in some of these youths

lives, if I am to be honest, seems to me pretty pathetic. The cycle of abuse and violence in our society is so strong I'm astonished at its powers. I feel like a failure against such an unbelievable force.

William Vollmann as a Young Man tried to go to Afghanistan to help them fight the Russians. He failed miserably and pathetically.

I find the honesty and complexity of this story seriously beautiful and real. So much more real than all the simple narratives that we love to digest (in book, tv, movie, or even in our interpretations of our lives).

I find his efforts to do something, and his shame at being so useless (and his honesty in facing this shame) extremely touching and personal.

Antonio Vena says

Forse il peggiore romanzo di Vollmann, forse quello davvero colmo di umanità e gentilezza.

Un romanzo di formazione ma unico, la storia di un giovane Vollmann e il suo viaggio e sguardo nel Pakistan e nell'Afghanistan coinvolti ancora una volta nel Grande Gioco. Uno sguardo davvero ancora valido e utilissimo.

In questo romanzo c'è già la traccia del grandissimo autore: gli statuti della Forza e la complessità composta del Bene.

Consigliatissimo

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

What ought to count as WTV's true First Book will finally receive a new edition from Melville House, July 9, 2013.

Considering how long the USofA has been killing people in Afghanistan it is high time that this little book of idealism and "do *something*"ism is returned to the public.

<http://www.amazon.com/Afghanistan-Pic...>

Krishaan Khubchand says

It shocks me that William Vollmann is still alive. I read most of this during the summer and I'm reviewing some of my notes now - I would like to return to the book and see how it pans out, but I'm not sure whether I'll get a chance.

So I'm going to squeeze out as many interesting lessons as I can from this:

1. It's far easier to harm than to do good. Vollmann entered Afghanistan with good intentions and ambitions, but, other than giving him an interesting story, it didn't really make the dent he sought. For some people, the takeaway here is: don't be naive, don't try, the world is what it is, that's it. I disagree. The takeaway here is that anything worthwhile is risky and difficult, and it requires competence, grit, and some luck. Continue to be well intentioned, but back it up with skills and hard work and understanding and actual empathy, rather than daydreaming about 'change'.

2. I live in Gibraltar. If Spain decided to send some troops or unofficial terrorists to kill any individuals here, it would cause more hatred towards Spain, more resentment, and stronger resolve. Yet some people here

think that places like Afghanistan and Iraq, along with their people deserve it (including the hundreds of thousands of kids who died from not getting vaccines thanks to silly sanctions, or the families that lost loved ones, not to glamorous bombs, but due a lack of access to antibiotics).

3. I have every intention of going to Afghanistan in the future. The tip on reading the Quran with hosts will hopefully come in handy.

4. I recall reading Vollmann's digression on being sick and the impact it has on memory and perception whilst I was down with flu. Made my being sick a bit better, so kudos.

5. I have some other thoughts on this but I'm gonna leave them for later.

Annouchka says

this book hit my own King Arthur complex with an ff-ing sledgehammer!

Eric says

Best part of the book

"This acceptance of reality – of the way things are, not pushing away the so-called bad, not pulling toward me or clinging to the so-called good – this is how I have changed, though if you had known me before I undertook this journey, I would appear no different now. Except for a couple of pounds and shorter hair, my “before” and “after” shots would be indistinguishable. I have the same voice, mannerisms, skewed sense of humor; the same vulnerable lower back; and many of the same personal issues. In fact, I am right back where I started from” living on the island I thought I has left for good two years ago, still in debt, still without a girl-friend, still falling on and off the meditation cushion.,

What has changed is my relationship to it all, but mostly my relationship with myself. Breathing in ...breathing out...gives me a split second of distance from my thoughts. I that moments I can separate body from mind, sensation from reaction to sensation. There – the that momentary refuge from “myself,” between the in breath and the out breath – I find salvation from ego, attachment, craving, clinging, desire and all the rest. "

The funny thing is I am not totally sure how he reached that based on what he wrote in the rest of the book! But overall the book was good, worth a read.

Patrizia Galli says

William Vollmann pubblica questo libro nel 1992, come resoconto di una splendida quanto fallimentare esperienza di vita che lo ha visto recarsi in Afghanistan negli anni dell'invasione russa. Spinto da altruismo, dalla voglia di raccontare all'America quello che stava succedendo in Afghanistan, dal desiderio di documentare le disumane condizioni di vita dei profughi e le violenze che erano costretti a subire, WV parte,

accompagnato solo da poche macchine fotografiche, pochi rullini e l'ingenuità tipica della giovane età (ha solo 22 anni quando parte...).

Raggiunge il Pakistan e da lì, assieme a un gruppo di mujahiddin, passa il confine attraverso le montagne. Durante il suo viaggio intervista i profughi, fa fotografie, fa nuove amicizie, si trascina nel caldo torrido seguendo i mujahiddin che, per quanto male equipaggiati, sono sempre un passo avanti a lui, prova paura e, soprattutto, un intenso senso di inadeguatezza davanti ai moltissimi profughi che gli chiedono aiuto, armi o visti per gli USA. Mentre cerca di capire come fare per aiutarli si imbatte anche nella realtà politica del paese, fatta di corruzione e ambiguità.

C'è molta purezza nell'ingenuità del suo desiderio: aiutare gli altri. Ma, mano a mano che si procede nella lettura, ci scontriamo anche con il suo scoraggiamento, con la presa di coscienza dell'impossibilità di realizzazione del suo desiderio. Il piano del "Giovanotto" è talmente ingenuo da mettere a disagio persino le organizzazioni umanitarie che lavorano nell'area. L'autore capisce, sa di essere inadeguato; ed è proprio questa inadeguatezza che WV sceglie come unico modo di essere per combattere la follia e il dolore del mondo.

Robert says

I can not rate this as highly as "You Bright and Risen Angels", my favorite book by William Vollmann, but this was my first introduction to the author and a really spectacular, complicated, and motivating book to read as an early-twenty something. He recounts his experience post college-graduation, when he packed up his camera and headed to Afghanistan to help the Mujhadeen fight the soviets, and along with this journalistic reportage, mixes in reflections on his own childhood and any number of other fantastic ruminations. He was motivated by a naive sense of idealism, helping the "freedom fighters". This self-criticism woven into this story is so sharp and sweet in light of current American involvement in Afghanistan.

Nate says

Review #26 of "Year of the Review All Read Books"

Guns. They want guns to kill the Russians. That is what the mujahideen wanted most from Vollmann and America. Not so much the aid to the refugees, food, medical supplies. But guns.

What this is most indicative of is the matter of autonomy. Afghanistan was invaded. To the Russian's they were bringing literacy, civic consciousness, infrastructure, elevation of women. This sounds similar to American arguments for their, shall we call them conflicts, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The problem is their autonomy was violated.

Certainly it's within reason for people worldwide to want the world to be healthier, more educated, more widely exposed to the advantages of technology and medicine. And while that line of thinking is often more rhetoric than reality, we still face the cumbersome task of violating a people's right to self-rule. We want them to choose a society in which they have something similar to 1st Amendment rights, but voting people may see that as dangerous. We have a tendency to say, "you're doing it wrong" but to intervene would just produce a faction that wants to strike back at us with a more concentrated fervor.

So a double bind presents itself in which we see their self-rule as perpetuating a humanitarian crisis of

oppression and our intervention as a bringing about unsolvable chaos and the ire of those we tried to help. This wasn't highly pronounced in the book, but I felt it was always stuck in the jaws of The Young Man. His rote questions come across as earnest, if a little calculated. The book is about failure; failure on his part to provide meaningful help, and failure on the Russian's part to accomplish their goals.

But the failure is essential in understanding what is perhaps an unsolvable complexity. The Young Man was propelled by Good Intentions. And of course, we all know proverbially where that gets you. The unfortunate consequence is a feeling of powerlessness; that to solve any one problem or even give a significant portion of aid, one has to start over with Universe and try to pick out the stray atoms that will lead to human immorality.

All the same though, Vollmann gives us, if nothing else, textual distillations of humans. In their full authenticity: their sins, their innocence, their desperation to be *free* (whatever that means), and their boundless generosity. We see men that view women as house pets and a foreign American idealist as a man who must have the very best of their country.

It's telling that Vollmann's last scene in Afghanistan is one that depicts the Afghans fighting the Russians, fulfilling a purpose, and he simply watching, sick with dysentery. He is the thinking, capitulating Hamlet, they are the Name of Action. They have purpose, they have identity, they have a freedom he could not: They did not doubt themselves.

Post Script:

Thought of doing a video review, but for various busy reasons and self-conscious reasons I took the easy way out. I may yet do one because this is the kind of book I like to promote on YouTube.

Speaking of YouTube, in the initial blurb about this book I posted this video link. Part 1 of a BBC documentary on Afghanistan. Part 2 can be found on other non-YouTube sites in full.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a7bP...>
