

# Book Review

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## The War at Home

By Kathryn Harrison

**I**N February of 1968, Daniel Trussoni, “a cocksure country boy from a family who thought war would make him a man,” arrived in Vietnam. Rather than remain an ordinary grunt in the 25th Infantry Division, he volunteered for a “suicide mission” that

**FALLING THROUGH THE EARTH**  
A Memoir.  
By Danielle Trussoni.  
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would afford him a measure of glory as well as higher pay. What it cost him, and his family, is the subject of a memoir,

“Falling Through the Earth,” the first book by his daughter and namesake, Danielle Trussoni. Lewis Carroll’s “Alice’s Adventures Under Ground” provides the author with an apt title; not only had her father been a “tunnel rat,” hunting the Vietcong in their notorious subterranean city, but like the eternally young and bemused Alice, Trussoni anticipates revelation from a plunge that will

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COURTESY OF DANIELLE TRUSSONI

Naomi Wolf: Sex and materialism in fiction for teenagers  
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## The War at Home

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COURTESY OF DANIELLE TRUSSONI

Vietnam, 1968: Daniel Trussoni, the author’s father, is at far right, second row; his buddy Thomas Goodman is at center, back row.

deliver her to the other side of the world. There she intends to make sense of the father whose demons removed her childhood from the family hearth and set it, precariously, on a barstool in a neighborhood dive called Roscoe’s.

Trussoni already understood herself as a daddy’s girl when, 11 years old, she happened upon a page in her mother’s diary. Drawn in colored pencil was a bar graph that “quantified how much” her mother believed the various members of the family loved her. While Danielle’s younger sister rated a 9 out of a possible 10 and her brother scored just a bit higher, Danielle and her father each got a 4. “Mom had balanced the books,” Trussoni concluded, “and the two of us didn’t measure up.” In retrospect the graph would appear to be an ingenious effort by her mother to predict the damage of the divorce her husband and children didn’t know she was plotting; in the moment it confirmed Trussoni’s perception that she and her father were bound together, in opposition to the rest of the family.

Despite the fact that custody of all three children went to his wife, when Dan Trussoni moved out, Danielle followed him: to the other side of the tracks; to a motherless kitchen; to smoke-filled evenings spent in the company of barflies; to lonely nights made lonelier still by the sounds of “married women, divorced women, women with kids, women with tattoos, women with twin sisters; more and more women... screeching and moaning from his bedroom”; and, eventually, to what she believed to be the source of all these dislocations — her father’s experience in Vietnam.

Kathryn Harrison’s memoirs include “The Kiss.” Her most recent book is “Envy,” a novel.

More than 30 years after his tour of duty, Danielle Trussoni set out to discover what happened to the man her father had been before he went to war. She’d heard his stories; she’d studied the pictures he took in Vietnam, including a “trophy photo of his kill,” a young man “on a bed of elephant grass. Bullet holes peppered his chest.” She’d seen the enemy skull he kept as a kind of fetish. And she knew about Thomas Goodman, the comrade whose death haunted her father. Maybe if she were to descend into the underworld of her father’s war, she could begin to understand how it had assumed the power to reach beyond him and ravage his family.

“Two parts stubborn, one part insane,” Daniel Trussoni had believed he “could handle the worst the war had to offer and come out unscathed.” Whether naive, self-destructive or afflicted with hubris, he chose to do battle beneath the jungle floor, in a maze of sweltering, claustrophobic passages that connected arsenals, hospitals and propaganda presses, as well as kitchens and bedrooms — sinister warrens whose entries were hidden and whose byways were mined and tripwired. If it sounds like hell, it was.

“Falling Through the Earth” cuts back and forth between Trussoni’s father’s career as a soldier and the subsequent dissolution of his marriage and family. Using her own visit to Vietnam as a means of accessing and revivifying war stories her father, who died last month, told her, Trussoni strings scenes he described into a coherent sequence. When she recounts going down with a guide into the Ben Duc tunnels (about 45 miles from Ho Chi Minh City, they are the only extant tunnels, preserved as a memorial and as a draw for tourists), the read-

er understands that penetrating the dank and ill-lit labyrinth is a kind of spell she casts on herself, willing her physical penetration of the actual landscape of her father’s past to vouchsafe her entrance into his psychic landscape, territory she must explore in order to understand her father’s rage, his alcoholism and his inability to maintain emotional connection to the people he loves. Then, perhaps, she can forgive him and transcend the tough-girl persona she cultivated for a father who rewarded strength and turned his back on frailty.

Narratives composed of two or more strands present the risk that one will emerge as more gracefully and completely realized, and thus more compelling to the reader. In this case, despite life-and-death stakes, war takes a back seat to family drama, at least in part because the author can report viscerally and intimately only on what she has experienced herself. Too, the central conceit of “Falling Through the Earth” — that a trip to a remote place can transport one to a remote time — is marred by the inclusion of a subplot that introduces a feeling of forced suspense. Upon her arrival in Ho Chi Minh City, Trussoni is unnerved by her wordless transaction with a native in “mirrored aviator sunglasses,” a menacing character who, she somehow

“wanted to hurt me.” The man, never identified, comes to represent the author’s vulnerability and panic in Vietnam; he stalks her during her visit and makes himself equally unwelcome on the page, appearing to have been summoned into the text by Trussoni’s insistence on taking possession of what isn’t, in the end, available to her: her father’s experience of war. “Was this how Dad felt in Vietnam — scared and alone, in unfamiliar territory?” she asks herself of her fear of the stranger. “The sense that with a single misguided step he would fall into enemy hands?” That the stalker turns out to be a red herring makes his inclusion the single significant flaw in what is otherwise a finely tuned account of the relationship between Trussoni and her father, a man who betrays the people he loves, visiting on them torments he can’t, despite his best effort, contain.

**T**HAT must have been some scary “Heart of Darkness” business, a fellow tourist remarks when Danielle explains the mission of a tunnel rat. “Mega-scary,” she concurs, but the story she has to tell is less that of a civilized man’s encounter with madness and savagery than it is a father-daughter romance scripted after “Bluebeard.” Like the bride in the fairy tale, Trussoni can’t allow her father his private bloody chamber filled with evidence of carnage. She must open it, confront it and live with what she sees: dismemberment not of the enemy but of the soul who has held her in his thrall for all of her life — her father. The affection, respect and humor she brings to the task of revealing this complicated individual is testimony both to her creative abilities and to the generosity of her spirit. □

Trussoni tries to make sense of the father whose demons removed her childhood from the family hearth and set it, precariously, on a barstool.



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