



The Volunteer

Salvatore Scibona

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A long-awaited new novel from Salvatore Scibona, National Book Award Finalist, the epic story of a restless young man who is captured during the Vietnam War and pressed into service for a clandestine branch of the United States government

A small boy speaking an unknown language is abandoned by his father at an international airport, with only the clothes on his back and a handful of money jammed in the pocket of his coat. So begins *The Volunteer*. But in order to understand this heartbreaking and indefensible decision, the story must return to the moment, decades earlier, when a young man named Vollie Frade, almost on a whim, enlists in the United States Marine Corps to fight in Vietnam. Breaking definitively from his rural Iowan parents, Vollie puts in motion an unimaginable chain of events, which sees him go to work for insidious people with intentions he cannot yet grasp. From the Cambodian jungle, to a flophouse in Queens, to a commune in New Mexico, Vollie's path traces a secret history of life on the margins of America, culminating with an inevitable and terrible reckoning.

With intense feeling, uncommon erudition, and bracing style, Scibona offers at once a pensive exploration of how we are capable of both inventing and discovering our true families and a lacerating interrogation of institutional power at its most commanding and terrifying. An odyssey of loss and salvation ranging across four generations of fathers and sons, *The Volunteer* is a triumph in the grandest traditions of American storytelling.

The Volunteer Details

Date : Expected publication: March 5th 2019 by Penguin Press

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Author : Salvatore Scibona

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From Reader Review The Volunteer for online ebook

Teresa Cervera says

If you're interested in the plot line of the little boy left at the airport like I was, this is disappointing. That only lasts for 20 pages and the next 100 have been a Vietnam war story which I have lost interest in completely. I think the synopsis is misleading, a bait and switch to the (sort of) grandfathers life story. DNF

Mike A. says

The Volunteer by Salvatore Scibona is a solid work of contemporary literature and also a good read. I stayed up most of the night to finish it -- on a work night no less, so yea, it grabs! Mr. Scibona writes with a matter-of-fact judiciousness that feels sensitive even as it denies sentiment. There is no overt flourish, but the author's voice endows the reader's mind with insight's of deep intuitiveness only granted to some and only through experience. It is not without effort, but the discerning reader becomes this book's characters and knows discomfort, fear, shame, and love... and has been challenged to go places they would not go. The distribution of the reviews for this book may ultimately not reflect it's worth. To challenge the reader, to allow characters to have deep expertise and to allow them to discourse on it, to allow both moral excellence and moral frailty in the same character, to inspire, to disappoint, to disgust, to make readers rut in their own humanity such as they may find it, is probably not the best business model. This is not a fairy tale. This is not flippant entertainment. It is knowledge. It is food. It is lovely. It does engross. It is a "page turner." But the reader is expected to learn things here.

This is the story of a family of men. Three generations of them, although the first generation, the patriarch, so to speak, is technically not so due to biology but rather to proximity. This family's story, as it is told here, resolves to a missed opportunity that probably wasn't even there, and that is the patriarch's story and the theme of the book, and yea, I'm not telling you much about the story except what to expect in the telling of it. It is told honestly and mostly linearly. The book begins and ends with a slice of the grandson's story and between these narrative book-ends the reader comes to know the entire life of Volly, who, like many people, just wants the freedom to exist without any familial or emotional ties or responsibilities. To that end, and unlike most people, he does not presume to demand much from this life or from anyone else living in it -- or tries not to, but neither does he offer much, or so he expects.

This is a work that seems at first to have ambiguous motivations, not from the characters, but as to what it will be about and how it will present itself, as though this was the author's intent: to be ambiguous. There are bad guys (characters), but they are difficult to look at. They are our family. The human family. The complicated ones; the pathetic ones who hurt us. And there are good guys (characters), but unless they are not critical to the story, they are deeply flawed, or are they? This book talks war; it talks killing, it talks decency. It talks of surviving and of living well, and of selfishness. The good the bad and the ugly of all of it. Upon some reflection however, the statement of what this book is crystallizes to a critical commentary on murder and to a lesser extent the limits of love, while all the while trying to romanticize honestly what honestly cannot be romanticized.

Fyi, I have absolutely no connection with this author, publisher, etc. In fact, I may have stolen a galley copy, but enough about me! It's a good book, and worthy.

This is the redemptive literature of other people's missed opportunities, and of reaffirmingly positive human role models. This is the sober literature of social criticism, but it is not boring. Read it!

James Beggarly says

An amazing book. A young boy is left in an international airport by his father and then the author takes you through this amazing journey to show he we've reached this point. It's a journey that includes the Vietnam War, an abandoned commune, shadow government ops and all the way to a dangerous soldier of our current wars. I doubt I will read a more intelligently written book anytime soon.

Nikki says

I got my hands on an ARC through the variety box delivered to my work back in October.

I read about a hundred pages and had to put it down. DNF.

The premise was....enough to pick the book up, I guess. But my investment existed exclusively with the "protagonist's" (if we can call him that) son. I didn't have much investment in him or his motives. To me, he was one-dimensional - he was a better representative of love and praise for the male ideal and the garbage excuses men use for why they idolize blinding stupidity than a character. I don't know how or why I was supposed to take a personal investment in someone so self-centered, especially when his kid had the tragic backstory.

Anyway, if there was supposed to be more of a story beyond that, I didn't get there. If there was something with pacing that wasn't "man whines about why he's such an asshole," it should've started there instead of introducing us to an insufferable, generic character with the intent for us to feel sympathy for him.

Chaya Nebel says

I tried to get through this tortuously written novel and just could not make it. I had no interest in Vollie, not the way he is portrayed here, in sometimes confusing and contradictory ways. Any time a bit of writing makes me scratch my head and wonder what the motivations were for the character's actions, I know I'm dealing with an author who trades more in atmosphere, psychological ambiguity and obfuscation, all to the detriment of clarity and character. The writing style was a bit dense and confusing (I will give the author the benefit of the doubt and say deliberately so) and, as I said, I am more a fan of clarity over style.

Csimplot Simplot says

Excellent book!!!

Threasa says

I won this book on Goodreads. I really didn't even finish it because I was so confused. I would have liked more character development and not have characters thrown in in the middle of the story with no explanation who they were. I always try to read the books I've won, but I am sorry that I didn't want to waste any more time on the book.

Katherine says

Don't usually give up on a book but just could not get into the style of writing. No sense of immediacy or relationship to the character.

Rachel Parrott says

Review to come.

My copy was a gift through Goodreads First Reads.

Deb says

I won this book on a goodreads giveaway. I tried, and tried to get through this book, but ultimately did not finish it. It is confusing, lacking consistency, and true character development. too many great books out there to waste any more time, sorry.

Tory says

Huge. Sweeping. Epic. Finely-wrought language. Elroy is one of the most detestable, puling, pathetic creatures to ever be written. This book is a beast of a creation to tackle, but I'm glad I toughed it out.

An says

The Volunteer begins with an enigma--a young boy is left abandoned at an airport, speaking an unintelligible language, with his father nowhere to be found. Who is this boy? How did he get here? Why? The answers to all these questions begin many years earlier with the story of Vollie Frade, who joined the Marine Corps during the height of the Vietnam War. We follow Frade through the jungles of SEA as he witnesses and partakes in the horrors of war, and their lasting aftermath. Salvatore Scibona has created a great work of modern literature, with his lyrical use of language to captivate the reader and his insights into the effects of war and the fringes of society.

Disclaimer: I received a free advance reading copy of The Volunteer through Goodread's Giveaways, and my rating is based on an uncorrected proof. The Volunteer will be available in bookstores on March 15, 2019.

Brie says

I won this book in a Goodreads First Reads contest.

I really wanted to like this book. It had a promising storyline and I started to read it.

I have decided in 2019 to only read a few chapters of books that do not grab my attention. I do not want to waste my time struggling through a book that just does not suit me. This book falls into that category.

I had a hard time following the plotline. I usually can easily read even the most non-conventional plots in books but the writing in this one seemed so choppy that I had confusion figuring out what was going on. I seriously thought the child was a human bomb at first because the way his abandonment at the airport was portrayed was so confusing in writing. I had no idea what was being written and why.

This "WTF?" Feeling continued as the story unfolded and I just had little interest in where the story was going so allowed the weird way the story was unfolding to pull me out of the story.

This was a resounding DNF. So disappointing. I will pass it on to someone who may like this book better than me.

lisa says

When I received an ARC of this book I read most of it over lunch breaks, and annoyed my co-workers by constantly changing my mind about this book. Did I like it, or did I hate it? Was a piece of misogynist war-porn, or a complicated reflection on men and their influences? I had to spend a few days processing this book, which is what led me to giving it a reluctant three stars. Something that made me think so much earns an extra star, even if I didn't like what the book ultimately had to say.

The story jumps around a lot, and as soon as you find your groove with one character, the narrative changes time, place, and circumstance, and you have to catch your breath with the next character. The story in a nutshell boils down to several generations of men whose decisions (and ultimately their fates) are the consequences of each other. Vollie is an Iowa farm boy who joins the Vietnam war, then ends up in remote southern New Mexico. Elroy is the child of free love hippies who struggles to control his violent impulses by joining the army. Janis is a frightened young boy who is abandoned at a German airport with very little knowledge about himself. These men's stories sound like they are completely isolated from each other, and they are, but they are interconnected in ways that only become obvious on reading the whole book.

And this book is a bitch to get through. It has paragraph long sentences, a writing technique that never fails to annoy me. It has long, intense descriptions of Southeast Asia circa 1970. It waxes on about the cold bleakness of a New York City winter, and the starkness of a New Mexico landscape. It talks a lot about what is ultimately nothing, but it took me almost two hundred pages to realize that. Once I found out a lot of the writing is pointless filler, I was able to skim through the pontificating and get through the book much faster. The bones of the men's story is riveting, and I was truly interested to see what would befall the male characters. I stayed up way too late to finish this because I was so invested in what would happen to this motley crew. The story is incredible, and the male characters are flawed and stunning in ways that is so unique from each other. And of course I'm a sucker for any book where the state of New Mexico is such an obvious character. I loved that the author wrote a lot about southern New Mexico, particularly Dona Ana and McKinley counties. So many authors dismiss Southern New Mexico, but it is a unique in its landscape and commerce and general population, and I thought the author did a great job of showcasing that without being offensive.

What I didn't love about the book was its complete disregard for women. The only female character with any substance is Louisa, and she was clearly a character written by an author who didn't care to get into the muck

of her character. Her reasoning for the choices she makes don't make any sense at all, and her ultimate regrets are so contrived and pitiful. There are parts of her that make sense if you look at her through the view of the male characters who do nothing but stomp cluelessly around different countries, and states, in the name of the US armed forces. These characters don't see her story as being worthy, and it seems like the author (focused as he is on his icky men) doesn't take the time to give her any nuance, I guess also concluding that she is not worthy.

I personally see this book as a novel about how stupid and useless men are to each other, and how they can only process the world through war, isolation, and pain, which ultimately leads to their isolation from each other. There is a beauty to this novel, despite some of the obnoxious things about it. The journey of the three men, Vollie, Elroy, and Janis are the saving grace of this book. Everything else about this book, from the long, ridiculous descriptions; to the flat, whiny women; to the absolutely appalling acts of the men are all cringingly terrible, and make this book very hard to read. However, the little bits of beauty under all that rubble will be nice to read, and this book will likely provoke something in you, even if it's an eye roll for its treatment of women characters, or an impatience for pointless descriptions of a POW camp.
