

Adrenaline Rush: Pain Games

Bevin Goldsmith

Amazon KDP

(186pp)

979-899021002-8

Adrenaline Rush: Pain Games is a complex soldier's story set during the Iraq War.

Bevin Goldsmith's intense military novel *Adrenaline Rush: Pain Games* follows a guarded military officer through the accomplishments, failures, and sufferings of boot camp and a tour in Iraq.

Katie is part of the elite Black Devils, a special forces team that moves between Iraqi villages in search of intel to capture high-priority targets—terrorists, bomb makers, and other war criminals. Beginning with her military origin story in basic training, where she was broken down and built back up into a woman capable of standing toe to toe with her crude and raucous male counterparts, *Adrenaline Rush* recreates the complex world of the Iraq War, with missions to track down terrorists ending at houses full of women and children, constant fears of roadside bombs, and a pervasive tension that explodes into violence, crass military humor, and occasional romance.

A soldier's story, *Adrenaline Rush* is as much a character study as it is about the overall culture and experience of serving in a war zone. Its cast includes Katie; her on-again, off-again romantic partner, Alex; Jaxson, a gruff master sergeant with a criminal background; and Charlie, a dreamy California surfer with a penchant for explosives. The violent shouts of a sergeant, the ominous sound of far-off small-arms fire, and the smell of nervous, sweating bodies pervade the story, whose environment is crafted and elevated in each paragraph of the book, with even the flat, dusty landscape and the busy military base vivified.

Molded by the tension of the war, the characters jump past formalities and reach emotional depths and intense moments of sincerity with remarkable speed. Whether Katie is fighting over a moniker that the special forces team forces on her or is shouldering unvarnished advice to stop avoiding the man she loves, the prose is direct and evocative. It also often deals with heavy subjects, like matters of life and death.

However, aspects of the war and politics are handled without dimension. There's continual emphasis on good versus evil to the extent that the brutal methods employed by Katie and her team are underinterrogated; for example, they bribe children with candy to divulge the whereabouts of their parents, who may be killed as a result. Elsewhere, in particular during the novel's second half, important turning points are introduced in a manner that is at odds with what came before, resulting in drama but impeding continuity, as when military airplanes and equipment fail.

Adrenaline Rush is a serious novel about a woman's experiences of life, love, death, and duty while deployed in the Iraq War.

WILLEM MARX (February 28, 2025)

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