

Chasing the Daylight: One Woman's Journey to Becoming a US Army Intelligence Officer

Joanna Rakowski

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Joanna Rakowski's memoir *Chasing the Light* is about immigration, ballet, and working in military intelligence.

Rakowski, a Polish immigrant whose patriotic attachment to the US motivated her to join the military, joined the National Guard when she was thirty-one. Although qualified to enlist as an officer, she decided to start at the bottom and work her way up. As one of the oldest people in her cohort, she faced low expectations from her peers and superiors. But the childhood years that she spent on ballet drills turned out to be useful during basic training, and her fluency in several languages qualified her for a dream job in a military intelligence battalion.

Two related themes dominate the book: that physical prowess builds self-confidence, and that the mastery of languages (including colloquialisms) leads to a sense of identity and belonging. Scenes from Rakowski's army life, including of basic training hardships and of following orders later on, are compelling because of their authoritative details. Rakowski recalls being pushed to her physical limits during strength and endurance challenges. She communicates her emotions and experiences in evocative figurative language: a final basic training exercise is "a factory of courage and determination" that pumped out toughened recruits.

The book gets off to a fitful start, however. Information that's critical to the narrative is shared without sufficient context. For example, the opening chapter makes mention of two people, Alec and Chris, without initially disclosing Rakowski's relationship to either. Alec is later identified as her husband; Chris, later still, is identified as her university professor in Poland. Once the identifications have been made, Rakowski's relationships with Alec and Chris are juxtaposed to the main story of her army life with more success. Thereafter, there are more straightforward transitions between scenes, accomplished through letters home to Alec and flashbacks to Rakowski's university days, which help to keep the names, locations, and time periods clear.

Still, while the book's three narrative threads (related to Rakowski's military career, her marriage to Alec, and her work with her professor) come close to each other at numerous points in the book, their particular elements are nonetheless compartmentalized. At times, the book reads like three separate memoirs. Its missed connections are too disorienting in the end.

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MICHELE SHARPE (May 7, 2023)

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