

# Bruce Patterson's Memoir

Review by Jonah Raskin

Drugs play a part in *Turned Round in My Boots*, a new memoir by AVA writer and longtime Mendocino County Jack-of-All-Trades, Bruce Patterson, AKA Pat. If there weren't any drugs in this running account of his turbulent life and raucous times something would be very wrong indeed. After all, Pat grew up in Southern California in the 1960s, went to war in Vietnam, became a hippie, and ended up on a real Northern California commune. He's not a good-goody two-shoes. So, in *Turned Round in My Boots*, Pat smokes pot and cigarettes, drinks alcohol, and even tries heroin. But drugs never hook him and he doesn't have to go into a program for recovering alcoholics or junkies who need to kick a nasty habit.

Still, he's a kind of addict: hooked on war and work, his own adrenalin, and on an innate instinct to "fuck up," as he puts it on the next-to-the-last page in the last chapter that's entitled "Baja Mendocino."

Pat does mess up again and again. He also turns his life around again and again — as the title of the book suggests. But no sooner has he broken out of one self-destructive cycle than he becomes caught up in another, and, when the book ends, it's not clear if he has broken loose for good and forever or about to go around one more time. On the last page, he describes himself tramping through the rain, on a "force-march" and feeling "like a GI." He isn't having a psychotic flashback, but it's definitely a case of *déjà vu*.

It's hard for Pat not to feel like a GI. Vietnam is his cradle and his grave; it's where he's born a man and where he dies a man — not literally, of course, but figuratively. In a vivid passage about his experiences in Vietnam, he says of himself and his fellow soldiers, "to defeat our fear we tried to pretend we were already dead." So Pat belongs not only to the army of the walking wounded, but to the army of soldiers who have already written their own last testaments. No matter how much walking he does, no matter how many miles he travels across America, he never seems to be able to put Vietnam behind him — even when he's walking alone years later in the winter rain of Mendocino. Vietnam haunts him and stalks him in much the same way that Vietnam still haunts America and Americans today, and as the ghost of Vietnam hovers above US soldiers, no matter where they are.

Of course, not everyone has had the same experiences as Pat's; not everyone has done exactly what he has done. But he's a kind of American Everyman. His experience is the common experience of the common man: the red-white-and-blue patriot, the gung-ho soldier, the anti-war activist, the outlaw, the criminal, the itinerant worker, the dreamer and the lover. He's bigger than life and a living legend.

Pat calls his book "A Memoir." And I'm sure that it's based on his own actual adventures, deeds, and misdeeds. But I don't, for a moment, believe that every single thing that he describes in the book actually happened to him in the precise way he writes about it. Poetic

license is at work here. The imagination has come into play; things are left out and time is compressed. Or so it seems to me.

And so *Turned Round in My Boots* is a work of art. I hope that phrase doesn't frighten any potential readers because it's also a real yarn with enough sex and violence and beauty and truth to hold a reader's interest. Page after page, Pat's book is down and dirty, as well as downright muddy, funky, smelly and besotted with the blood and guts of humanity itself. Pat's good-hearted father is here, along with Pat's fellow soldiers, fellow prisoners, workmates and the book's two endearing women characters: Samantha, the first woman he loves; and Trisha who steals his heart much as he steals hers.

There's enough love in *Turned Round in My Boots* to turn it into a real Hollywood love story, but a movie would not be able to do justice to Pat's way with words: his ability to use the language of the street and the jailhouse as well as the language of the clan of American writers about war and manhood, from Ernest Hemingway to Norman Mailer. There are also memorable passages of nature writing as in this description of "blue-berried juniper and white-flowering chamise, singing ponderosas, quaking aspen and mountain mahogany."

There's something here for just about everyone, and, if there's fictionalization in *Turned Round in My Boots*, Pat's memoir also has the ring of truth about it that ought to echo not only in Anderson Valley but in all the valleys of America. "If I wished to stay out of prison and maybe live to a ripe old age, then I'd do well to stick to nature," he says near the end of his story. "My body would do all right. It was my bruised and battered soul that needed tending to."

It isn't for the descriptions of nature, however, that make this book a classic. It is rather for Pat's creation of the fucked-up hero — as true an emblem for our fucked-up culture and our fucked-up society as any other in our literature and our pop culture. American can't win a war or outright lose one, can't clean up the environment whether in the Gulf of Mexico or the Mendocino National Forests. It can't clean up its own act or actions. These are fucked-up times, and a fucked-up hero is just what we need and deserve: a mirror of our fucked-up nation. ¥¥

(*Turned Around in My Boots: A Memoir* By Bruce Patterson. New from Heyday, 2010; \$18.95.)