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The art of darkness

by [Stefan Beck](#)

On *Tree of Smoke* by Denis Johnson.

Denis Johnson

Tree of Smoke.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 624 pages, \$27

Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* ought to be an awful book. It's about the Vietnam War, so the reader can't help but expect present-day Iraq dressed up in jungle camouflage. One character, the CIA veteran Francis Xavier Sands ("The Colonel"), sounds a little too Kurtzy for comfort, and his nephew Skip—a trainee spook whose very name evokes "Dennis the Menace" naiveté—must be a cardboard stand-in for the blundering idealism so often imputed to American foreign policy. Then there's the question of length. Does Johnson need a more exacting editor, or is this one of those "ambitious" books we hear so much about?

Dead wrong on all counts. Against the odds, *Tree of Smoke* is tremendous, *sui generis*, and utterly engrossing. Notwithstanding a parallel or two dutifully sussed out by Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*, it's no more about Iraq than it is about the Battle of Hastings. For that matter, it's about Vietnam in only a very superficial sense: Johnson's achievement isn't to chronicle a conflict but to render the dark night of a dozen-odd souls in prose as brilliant and rousing as tracer fire. Along with F. X. Sands, who isn't actually much like Kurtz at all, and Skip, there's a widowed nurse named Kathy Jones, a pair of dumb and doomed brothers from Arizona, a German assassin, the Colonel's manic acolytes, and a couple of Vietnamese men being groomed for a double-cross. Not one of these many figures is a throwaway.

Skip Sands is front and center, nevertheless. In 1965 he's still in one piece:

In the Stars and Stripes all the passions of his life coalesced to produce the ache with which he loved the United States of America ... the summers of his childhood, the many Kansas summers, running the bases, falling harmlessly onto the grass, his head beating with heat, the stunned streets of breezeless afternoons, the thick, palpable shade of colossal elms, the muttering of the radios beyond the windowsills, the whirring of redwing blackbirds, the sadness of the grown-ups at their incomprehensible pursuits.

Incomprehensible pursuits are to become Skip's bread and butter—or should we say his pineapple, as he's posing rather ineptly as an employee of the Del Monte Corporation when things first go awry. Skip is privy to the pointless murder of a missionary thought to be aiding the Communists. It is, as they say, all downhill from there.

But for a novel set in one of the most unpopular wars in American history, *Tree of Smoke* is

remarkably short on cynicism or bitterness. Its Kurtz isn't a brutal madman but an American original who elicits grudging admiration, "both barrel-chested and potbellied, also bowlegged, also sunburned. He wore a silver crew cut on a head like an anvil. He was at the moment drunk and held upright by the power of his own history: football for Knute Rockne at Notre Dame, missions for the Flying Tigers in Burma... . In Burma in '41 he'd spent months as a POW, and escaped." The Colonel doesn't want to mutter nonsense and rule over ignorant natives; he wants victory. His *hamartia* is precisely that he believes in what he's doing.

Tree of Smoke, like the Colonel, is held upright by the power of its own history. Its plot is labyrinthine, but it's a quicker and more entertaining read than many books half as long, and it's full of the fruits of diligent research: Southeast Asian folklore, military hardware, and the theory and practice of intelligence-gathering all receive ample air-time. Johnson is the consummate detail man. When Skip Sands passes time at a carnival, we get an unforgettably ghastly passage: "The Five Dwarfs of Bohol... . In five large bassinets the dwarfs lay in dirty diapers, blind, spastic, comatose, with their names, ages, and weights displayed on cards... . Not beards, but long filaments of peach fuzz never trimmed. Their limbs jerked, their milky eyes shivered in their heads" This is, like many scenes in *Tree of Smoke*, a step beyond the hell we think we've seen before.

Johnson's dialogue is as rough and authentic as the baroque banter of *Full Metal Jacket* or *Platoon*. (For instance, the Colonel's single-sentence assessment of Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*: "Something to shrivel your balls on every page.") It's funny, which is to say completely disorienting: If the frisson of watching a horror movie lies in being well out of harm's way, the strangest effect of reading *Tree of Smoke* is its way of making the reader almost—almost—wish he could experience the dread and delirium of this alien landscape for himself. Denis Johnson has nothing pat to say about Vietnam, no hard and fast "lessons" thereof, but it's impossible to read this book without marveling at his preternatural ability to see how war can pitilessly rearrange a human psyche. That's a thing worth carrying whether we believe in the fight or not.

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