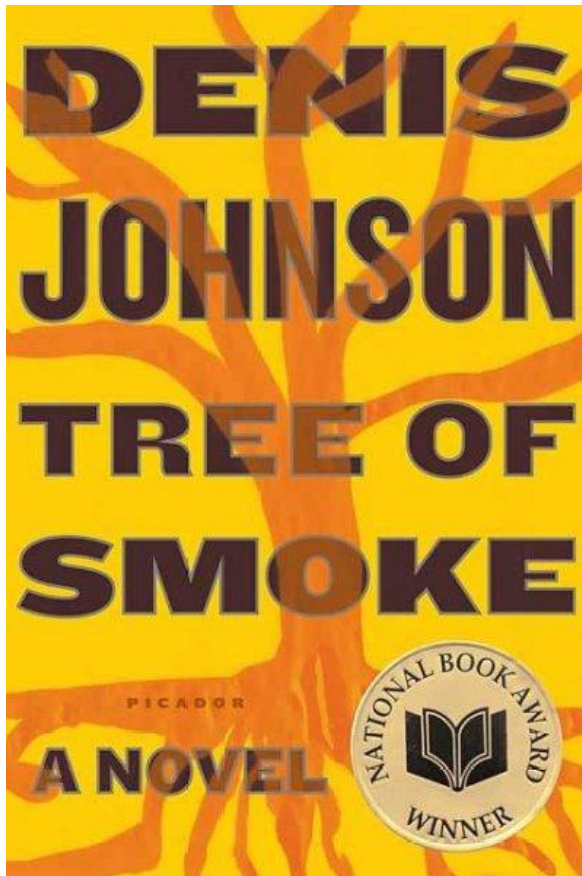


## About the book...



The lives of Skip Sands, a spy-in-training engaged in psychological operations against the Vietcong, and brothers Bill and James Houston, young men who drift out of the Arizona desert into a war, intertwine in a compelling novel of America during the Vietnam War.

## About the author...



Poet, playwright and author Denis Johnson was born in Munich, West Germany in 1949 and was raised in Tokyo, Manila and Washington. He holds a masters' degree from the University of Iowa and has received many awards including a Lannan Fellowship in Fiction in (1993), a Whiting Writer's Award (1986) and the Aga Khan Prize for Fiction from the Paris Review for *Train Dreams*. He is best known for his collection of short stories, *Jesus' Son*. Denis Johnson is the author of five novels, a collection of poetry and one book of reportage. He lives in northern Idaho. ~[bookbrowse.com](http://bookbrowse.com)

## **Awards**

National Book Award 2007

## **Reviews**

### *Booklist*

Colonel Francis F. X. Sands' wartime exploits made him something of a legend. He flew as a mercenary for the Republic of China Air Force unit known as the Flying Tigers, shooting down Japanese planes. Shot down himself by the Japanese, he suffered sickness, beatings, torture, and starvation before escaping from a prison camp in Burma. He rose to the rank of colonel during World War II and joined the CIA in the 1950s, his background in Southeast Asia an asset as the U.S. replaced France in the Vietnamese war against communism. Enter Skip Sands, the colonel's nephew, a young intelligence officer currently a clerk in charge of cataloging his uncle's three footlockers full of thousands of index cards, "almost none of them comprehensible." The colonel enlists Skip in a secret operation involving a double, an agent ready to betray the Vietcong. Skip, an earnest patriot, nevertheless finds himself deep in the unauthorized world of renegade psychological ops, off the grid and outside the chain of command, an ethical quagmire where almost anything goes, where he encounters conflicts of loyalty between his family, his country, and his religion. Johnson (Jesus' Son, 1992) is a gifted writer with a knack for erudite and colorful dialogue, and his sense of time and place is visceral and evocative. With this worthy addition to Vietnam literature, he confidently joins the ranks of Tim O'Brien, Larry Heinemann, and Michael Herr.

### *Bookmarks*

"Massive," "epic," and "wildly ambitious" are the most common adjectives applied to Idaho poet and novelist Denis Johnson's latest work. While the cranky *Los Angeles Times* asks, "Why write about Vietnam at this point in history? Is there anything else that needs to be said?" the majority of critics love how *Tree of Smoke* brings fresh life to the tired setting by uniting it with unconventional plot and character choices. As the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* summed up, "Sound like you've read it before? Trust me, you haven't." Johnson brings his well-known penchant for eccentric characters and his spot-on ear for dialogue (both best displayed in 1992's *Jesus' Son*) to his riskiest-and, many say, his most rewarding-work to date. –

## **Literary Criticism**

Title: Denis Johnson. *Tree of Smoke*

Author(s): Lee Mhatre

Source: **Confrontation**. .100 (Fall 2007): p321. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review

Full Text:

Denis Johnson. *Tree of Smoke*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

War is so much a part of our lives that we risk taking it for granted. Watching Ken Burns' epic television drama on World War II, we are reminded of the grisly nature of war and its aftermath. The visual display of thousands of armed forces struggling to get a foothold in the invasion of Normandy, suffering extensive losses of 3,000 men in one day, the sacrifices of thousands who crawled inch by inch, island by island in the Pacific, attest to the horrors of violence. The folks at home shared their losses and their grief as much as they could imagine it. This was a "good" war, it was said, one with a moral purpose.

The Viet Nam war was different. In *Tree of Smoke* Johnson captures the feeling of those days, starting with the assassination of John Kennedy. It was a time of marked dissension. People felt confused, alienated, uncertain about world events, and angry about our presence in Viet Nam. Men were being sent to fight a war in places that the majority of people had never heard of, whose names they could not pronounce. It was an ugly war, full of shadows, lack of understanding, and C.I.A. operatives who blundered miserably in their contacts with the Vietnamese people. Johnson's novel is a clear statement of anti-war sentiment as presented through the eyes of a select group of participants in the Viet Nam war.

Johnson's prose is powerfully evocative. He doesn't do as well with the development of his characters. His plot lines are at times loose and bewildering. He is less interested in battle scenes than in the portraits of lack of understanding of events. It is not only the killings he explores, but the ennui and stifling boredom of waiting for orders. The dialogue, though, is riveting if occasionally obscure. Think of Heller's *Catch-22* for a comparable achievement of rendering the incomprehensibility of war.

The main characters include William and James Hanson, two brothers who enlist to escape from their mother's excessive religious piety. James finds the service to be a bit of heaven. He is cared for, told what to do, and given the opportunity to drink and screw available prostitutes. Much of the novel details numerous bar exploits, drunken conversations, and sexual conquests. The recruits, including the Hansen brothers, demonstrate a kind of living without ambition or dreams or plans for the future. They show little insight into their service lives, or its meaning. The reader may sympathize with their deprivations of childhood, their lack of education, but this is a long book, 614 pages long. After a few chapters, humanism and compassion wear thin. We hardly care whether they will make it back to their base or their ship without being cut up or without going AWOL. Johnson does not fare much better with his young C.I.A. operative, who,

enamored of his famous uncle, Colonel Sands, wishes to follow in his footsteps. Sands sends his nephew to language school to learn Vietnamese for the prospect of becoming a spy. Skip is shipped off to the Philippines as an undercover agent for Del Monte. It is not clear what his role he is to play. There are secret files to collate. In his off-time, Skip has an affair with a recently widowed missionary, a dedicated woman trying to sort out her life in accordance with the teachings of her Calvinist God. Mistrust, lies, and philosophical conversations do not prove conducive to a good relationship. Damaged as a child by his father's death, Skip has mother-son conflicts as well. Later he is sent undercover as a Canadian collector of ethnic folk-material to a secluded villa isolated from the mainland of Saigon. Unfortunately, the enforced solitude does not clarify his feelings. He remains loyal to the Colonel, who is trying to recruit a VietCong as a double agent. There are some touching scenes involving a Vietnamese family with their concerns of loyalty and security. What will happen to all of these people? Who should they ally themselves with--the Americans or the VietCong?.

Johnson's novel can be read as a series of separate events. The colonel comes in for scrutiny on his rogue operation. Skip is implicated. Idealism is tested. The Hanson brothers return stateside, rootless, unable and/or unwilling to hold down a job. James becomes involved in petty crime and is sent to prison. Skip spends his life in a series of false identities and fickle relationships. He becomes a zealot to the idea that making money, even in shady, criminal ways, is a purer act of devotion than his previous shadowy life. Convicted of gun-running in Malaysia, he faces a death penalty.

Though not wholly satisfying, this is an important book. It is grim. Idealism is in short supply. In spite of its flaws, it left me with a concern I could not disassemble about what we, in our American clothing of rhetoric and deed, have done to ourselves and others. I am glad it has won the National Book Award this year, for more attention will be paid to the dilemmas it presents.

--Lee Mhatre

Mhatre, Lee

### **Source Citation**

Mhatre, Lee. "Denis Johnson. Tree of Smoke." *Confrontation* 100 (2007): 321+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What symbolism, if any, underlies the fact that we see Seaman Bill Houston shoot a monkey in the jungle mere hours after the assassination of JFK? Why juxtapose these two events?

2. Position Johnson's dialogue against that of other military narratives, literary or visual: does the conversational tone seem authentic to the situations of his characters? Why or why not?
3. Johnson takes liberties with his use of language frequently, often toeing the line between innovation and strangeness. Consider some of the following phrases from his book: "my invisible foot hurts," a complaint from one of the soldiers; a soldier weeping "like a barking dog," a jungle that "screamed like a mosque," and Kathy, who is described as so thrilled by John Calvin's "terrifying affirmations" of her "foreordained damnation" that she continues to return to his "spiritual pornography like a dog to its vomit." What stands out most in his use of language?
4. Much of both the criticism and praise leveled at the book has to do with its non-linear structure. How did this affect your reading of the book or perception of events?
5. One of the characters in *Tree of Smoke* refuses to be addressed by anything but "Black Man" and keeps his name patch covered with tape. What purpose does this serve in the context of the novel? Consider this insistence in the context of the civil rights movement coinciding with Vietnam. What are some of Johnson's possible intentions here?
6. In the novel's beginning, Skip believes wholeheartedly in the goodness of America, convinced that United States is going to defeat the Communists in Vietnam and that he will be there to witness it. After Skip witnesses the priest's assassination and begins fighting in Vietnam, how does his character change?
7. Col. Sands eventually begins to believe that the CIA's functions are being used to "provide rationalizations for policy." Might Johnson be drawing parallels to Operation: Iraqi Freedom, given the timing of this novel? What elements do they share?
8. The novel spans 1963 to 1970, with a coda in 1983. These years obviously contribute to the book's length, but what other purpose might it serve to write across such a span? What does the coda add to the novel?

## Multimedia

"Johnson Covers Vietnam, CIA in 'Tree of Smoke'" Available through National Public Radio: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14162036>

## Read-alikes:

*A Man You Could Love* by John Callahan

Callahan's first novel outlines the ebb and flow of Democratic politics in America, from the Vietnam era through today, by following the career of Oregon congressman (and eventually senator) Michael "Mick" Whelan, as seen through the eyes of his adviser, aide, and best friend, Gabe Bontempo. The novel is rich in detail about the maneuvering that occurs, often in barrooms and private offices, before bills reach the floor of the House or Senate. [...] It picks up speed and emotional resonance in the last half, when Gabe's devotion to Mick and his work has a devastating impact on his family life. ~ *Library Journal*

*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

The silence of the jungle is broken only by the ominous sound of drumming. Life on the river is brutal and unknown threats lurk in the darkness. Marlow's decision to hunt down the mysterious Mr Kurtz, an ivory trader who is the subject of sinister rumors, leads him into more than just physical peril. ~ *NoveList*

*The Fearless Man: A Novel of Vietnam* by Donald Pfarrer

Veteran soldier Captain MacHugh Clare undertakes a mission into the mountains of Vietnam to destroy a hidden cache of enemy weaponry, accompanied by Paul Adrano, a Catholic chaplain struggling with his growing feelings for a Navy nurse. ~ *NoveList*

*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

Heroic young men carry the emotional weight of their lives to war in Vietnam, in a patchwork account of a modern journey into the heart of darkness. ~ *NoveList*

### **Watch-alikes:**

*Apocalypse Now* – dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1979

Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic, loosely based on *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, tells the story of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), a special agent sent into Cambodia to assassinate an errant American colonel (Marlon Brando). Willard is assigned a navy patrol boat operated by Chief (Albert Hall) and three hapless soldiers (Frederic Forrest, Sam Bottoms, and Larry Fishburne). They are escorted on part of their journey by an air cavalry unit led by Lt. Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), a gung-ho commander with a love of Wagner, surfing, and napalm. After witnessing a surreal USO show featuring Playboy playmates and an anarchic battle with the Viet Cong at a bridge, Willard reaches Colonel Kurtz's compound. A crazed photo journalist and Kurtz groupie (Dennis Hopper) welcomes the crew, and Willard begins to question his orders to "terminate the colonel's command."

*Platoon* – dir. Oliver Stone, 1986

Oliver Stone draws on his experience as an infantryman in Vietnam to convey the brutality of guerrilla warfare. Charlie Sheen stars as Chris, a raw recruit, or "new meat," who serves as the film's narrator. At first he wilts under the rigorous conditions of jungle life, freezes up in a fire fight, and wonders whether he'll be

able to survive. But he gradually adapts and, as time goes by, begins to see that the platoon is divided into two groups. One consists of lifers, juicers, and subintelligent whites, the other of blacks and heads. Sgt. Barnes, a combat-loving burnout (Tom Berenger), is the informal leader of the lifers, and Sgt. Elias, a free spirit (Willem Dafoe), leads the latter group. When the platoon takes some gruesome losses, an enraged Barnes kills some Vietnamese and orders the burning of their village, outraging the temporarily absent Elias. As the conflict between these two reaches its tragic climax, Chris must decide what he really values.



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