

Book Review

AUGUST 4, 2019 \$4

COURT INTRIGUE How the fight to shape the Supreme Court became so divisive

READING LIST The professor who turned Mary Beth Keane into a writer

PLUS Tony Horwitz on Confederate sisters and J. Courtney Sullivan on a school satire



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No Country for Old Men

By Bruce Barcott

MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA encompasses more than 16,000 square miles of northern hardwood forest, broken here and there by hardscrabble towns whose year-round population is slowly bleeding away. In "Hunter's Moon," Philip Caputo's powerful new collection of linked stories, the U.P. serves as a repository of damaged men. Elderly fathers are disappointed by their sons. Sons have goddamn well had it with the old man's constant ragging. Lost jobs, bruised egos and failed expectations fill every

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By Alida Becker

HUNTER'S MOON

A Novel in Stories
By Philip Caputo

272 pp. Henry Holt & Company.
\$28.

TO AMERICANS OF A CERTAIN AGE, it's a lot more than a "Jeopardy!" question: What happened on the night of Dec. 1, 1969? If you know the answer, you're in the target audience for Richard Russo's new novel about the reminiscences and regrets of three aging male baby boomers, former college roommates who watched the nation's first draft lottery in the kitchen of the sorority house where they toiled as lowly "hashers." Got a high number? You're golden: Carry on with your life. Low number? Start pre-

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CHANCES ARE . . .

By Richard Russo

302 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.





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'Hunter's Moon'

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middle-aged dude's shopping cart. PTSD is as common as seasonal allergies. Like plastic swept into an ocean gyre, the wreckage of American masculinity seems to drift up to the U.P. and never leave.

The seven stories in "Hunter's Moon" act as an unflinching reality check on the state of middle-age manhood at the close of the second decade of the 21st century. The Cialis tubs and wealth management ads that pepper every golf tournament telecast portray the American man's empty nest phase as a silver-tipped victory lap. On the ground, though, the truth is ugly. The suicide rate among American men aged 45 to 64 rose 45 percent between 1999 and 2017. The states with the toughest solitary-cowboy reputations — Montana, Alaska and Wyoming — charted highest on the self-erasure scale.

Sharing, supporting and healing? No, ma'am, we're just out here hunting.

That is Caputo country. The writer who established himself more than 40 years ago with "A Rumor of War," the classic memoir of his years as a Marine in Vietnam, now writes from the vantage point of an elder. Phil C., the author's fictionalized self in the story "Lines of Departure," notes that he and a fellow Vietnam veteran feel "obliged to dispense our hard-won wisdom to younger members of the soldier's tribe. That I didn't have much wisdom to dispense seemed beside the point."

Don't take that display of humility as fact. Caputo's wisdom runs deep. Few writers have better captured the emotional lives of men, their desperate yearning to improve them and their utter lack of tools or capacity to accomplish the task.

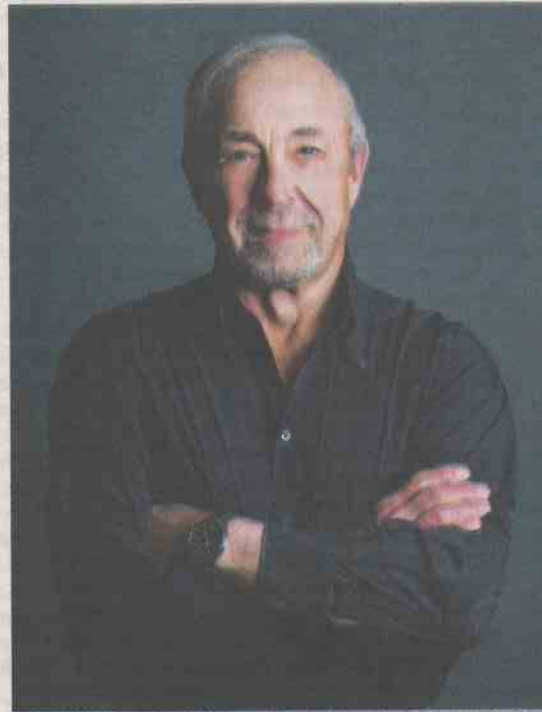
A common cast of characters runs through most of the stories in "Hunter's Moon," and one of the strongest is Will Treadwell, a Vietnam veteran who owns a brew pub in the fictional U.P. town of Vieux Desert. Will is also a hunting guide. It's his side hustle. Or, as he tells two clients — a couple of Chicago cops up for a week of bear hunting in the story "Dreamers" — it's more like "a hobby that pays a few bucks. Gets me out in the woods. The woods are good for my head. The bar business drives me crazy sometimes."

That cleansing notion — the woods are good for a man's head — drives a lot of the action in "Hunter's Moon." Michigan's

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northern forests (and, in one story, northern Alaska) offer men the chance to rekindle friendships, heal old wounds and forge new memories together. Hunting trips like these are often the only place middle-aged guys feel safe to share their emotional lives — just so long as the heartfelt talks are the byproduct and not the point of the outing. Sharing, supporting and healing? No, ma'am, we're just out here hunting.

The publisher bills this collection as "a novel in stories," but the stories don't combine, interweave and run together to form any sort of collective denouement. It's not a novel. And that's O.K. Just let them be stories and let us enjoy Caputo's masterly telling.



Philip Caputo

"Blockers," the collection's opening story (and its best), features three mature and mildly accomplished men whose friendship dates back to the high school football field. Years ago, Tom and Paul protected Bill Erickson, the golden boy quarterback, from getting flattened by blitzing linebackers. The good-looking son of the local newspaper publisher and state senator, Bill glided through life protected by the unseen forces of wealth and privilege.

Now in his 50s, Bill finds the verities of that life breaking down. He can't stop drinking and his newspaper can't stop losing money. And he hides it all so well. "Dudes!" he shouts when he sees his old friends, hooking his arms around their necks. "How's Cheryl? How's Julie? How're the kids? Goddamn, love ya, great to see you guys again."

Paul, who's now a professor of Russian literature at Michigan State, narrates the story and captures the loving, awkward dynamic between the men:

"You've probably heard a story about ex-high school sweethearts who meet decades later, discover that the emotions of first love haven't faded, divorce their spouses and pick up where they left off. In the same way, Tom and I found that our relationship with Bill hadn't changed. We fell right back into our guardian roles. For a week of nights for six autumns in a row, we made sure he didn't do grievous harm to himself, dragged him out of bars, waltzed him into bed. It got on our nerves but was nothing we couldn't put up with."

It falls to Lisa, Bill's wife, to fill the boys in on the truth. She's been spiking Bill's orange juice with Zolof. He's too stupidly proud to take the antidepressant on his own. To do so would be admitting he needed help.

A similar affliction troubles Will Treadwell, the brew pub owner and hunting guide. In the story "Lost," Will sells the brew pub and finds himself unhappily retired at age 64. After a dimwitted argument with a colorful local character named Skryd (about whom this reader hopes to read more, perhaps in a future novel), Will tailspins from a deep brood into a prickly depression. His wife, Maddie, makes him confront the demons that are chasing him. "To his own surprise, he does," Caputo writes. "To his surprise because he's a former Marine, because he doesn't come from people who readily confide their troubles to others — no, not even to their spouses or closest friends. To do so is a sign of weakness."

For solace Will runs to the woods — to a spot near the Two Hearted River, the Upper Peninsula waterway made famous by Ernest Hemingway's 1925 short story. Readers of "Hunter's Moon" will not be shocked to find that the woods don't solve his problems. It may be Caputo's way of telling us that now, almost a century after Hemingway wrote that piece, we know this much: A stoic, manly week in the woods isn't enough to cure the deep wounds of war.

A bill has come due. Decades of American male bravado, of Hemingway woodsmen and Clint Eastwood cowboys, of rugged individualists driving manly trucks alone, have given us the suicidal wreckage of American masculinity. Philip Caputo is 78 years old and he's seen enough. Punt the pretense and tear down the tough-guy facade. In "Hunter's Moon," he all but begs his countrymen to ask for help and open up: Take care of one another, you bighearted lunks, you stubborn fools, you American men. □

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL PRIEST