

*Generation Kill: A Trice Told Tale*  
The representation of reality in a non-fiction adaptation



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Abstract:

In this age of mass media, it is important to be able to find the truth in between the sensationalising and embellishments, especially when it concerns controversial topics. This thesis analyses *Generation Kill*, the narrative of Evan Wright who is an embedded reporter that joined a platoon of First Recon Marines during the first weeks of the invasion of Iraq, on the representation of reality. Not only Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2004) - a work of literary journalism that wraps the facts in a literary jacket - will be discussed, but also the HBO adaptation *Generation Kill* (2008) - a fictional adaptation of a non-fiction work. The thesis will answer how *Generation Kill* by Evan Wright and the HBO series of the same name blur the boundary between fact and fiction and how an adaptation of a non-fiction work can provide a different perspective to the fidelity debate.

Keywords:

Literary journalism; adaptation studies; fidelity; non-fiction adaptation; *Generation Kill*.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

"True stories are never quite true, and adaptations of true stories are even less so" (Dwyer, 49).

In an increasingly technological world, many people have access to the news twenty-four hours a day. Newspapers have websites and apps that are accessible and updated throughout the day and there are television channels such as CNN that exclusively broadcast the news. The news items discussed, however, differ greatly between the different newspapers or news shows. They can focus on national or international news, can be aimed at a certain group of people, or have a clear political orientation. Watching a certain show, or reading a certain newspaper then determines what developments in the world a viewer or reader is aware of, but it is not clear which show or paper gives the right perspective. In addition, this problem occurs in the many programmes that aim to be informative as well as entertaining. Both these issues appear in the book and series *Generation Kill*. They blur the line between fiction and reality which forces the audience to search for the facts in between the interpretations of authors, scriptwriters, and producers.

### 1.1 Literary Journalism and War Reporting

Literary journalism is a type of writing which is not easily defined. It is classified as non-fiction since it is a type of journalism and described and read like true stories. But in reality works of literary journalism are often read as fiction because of the use of literary techniques in the books. They are too truthful to be fiction and too artistic to be non-fiction. The literary techniques and other aspects that make up the discipline of literary journalism are discussed in chapter 2. An example of another television series that, like literary journalism, blurs the line between information and entertainment is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999). *The Daily Show* is a satirical late-night television programme hosted by comedian Jon Stewart. Most of the show's news items (47%) are about American politics and 43% of its American audience has said they watch the programme mostly for its entertainment value (Pew Research, "Americans"). And still, while it is known Jon Stewart is a comedian, he came in at number 4 in a questionnaire that asked which journalist people most admired (Pew Research, "Journalism"). This shows that while the audience is aware of the selectiveness of a programme's news items and the function of the host, they still trust it to provide information on news items and views on controversial matters. This same problem arises for readers of literary journalism. Literary journalism gives an author the opportunity to not only provide the facts of a situation to his or her readership, but to immerse the audience in a world the author

experienced as well. In this case a major issue arises that is also present in shows like *The Daily Show*: objectivity. Journalism is founded in telling the truth and George W. Ochs describes it as presenting the news "truthfully, accurately, unbiased and uncolored" (51). It is not based on stories or on interpretations, but it is based on facts and figures. This is where literary journalism "flies in the face of accepted notions of 'objectivity'" (Whitt 23). But these interpretations might be just what people are looking for nowadays when they are confronted with choosing a reliable and an entertaining way to stay on top of current affairs. Works of literary journalism or news shows and papers with distinctive ideologies are not always sources of reliable information, because truth and fiction can become intermingled to make the story more interesting. The audience will be tasked with distilling what they want to learn from their chosen news provider which leads them to question what can be read as truth and what can be read as interpretation, especially in the case of literary journalism which blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction. This poses a problem, especially when the work discusses a controversial issue.

Reporting on controversial issues is something that journalist John Sack has done his entire career. In their article "Literary War Journalism: Framing and the Creation of Meaning," Keith Saliba and Ted Geltner discuss the well-known journalist who is famous for his stories as an embedded journalist in conflict areas. They describe his role in war reporting:

While most of the world got its news from 24-hour cable networks and Pentagon-staged briefings featuring its new can't-miss wonder weapons and the video-game sterility of late 20th-century warfare, Sack was doing what he had always done—putting himself on the line to tell the story of men who fought, killed, and died. (2)

This shows the importance of literary journalism as a discipline, especially in war reporting. Literary journalism gives the story of the people fighting that war, not the cold hard facts. And with the close connections to literature it is less likely to have been censored (Bak & Reynolds 6). Literary journalism demonstrates the dedication of the journalists as well. They immerse themselves in situations they know nothing about and give readers the story of their subjects. They are not there with a political agenda, instead they want to show readers the situation as they experience it. To do that, it is almost impossible to stay objective at the same time. However, objectivity is not a prerequisite to telling a true story. John Sack did not believe that objectivity was the key to finding and describing the truth. Instead he believed that in order to get to the closest version of the truth, the narrative he wrote had to be infused with subjectivity, but without the reader being aware of his perspective (Saliba and Geltner 3).

John Sack expressed it as wanting "the reader to feel that he or she is being handed raw information, raw facts, that objective facts have just been plunked in front of the reader and haven't passed through anybody else's consciousness" (qtd. in Saliba and Geltner 3). Works by journalists like John Sack are not objective, but that does not mean that those stories are not trustworthy. The facts just need to be dug out from between the metaphors and symbolism.

## 1.2 Evan Wright and *Generation Kill*

Evan Wright takes the same perspective as John Sack in his works of literary journalism. Evan Wright is an American journalist who has often chosen to write his articles in the discipline of literary journalism. He is known for his works *Hella Nation* (2009), about different subcultures in America and *American Desperado* (2011), about the cocaine cowboys in America ("Evan Wright"). Moreover, Wright has written a collection of articles for magazines such as *TIME*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Rolling Stone* (Waxman). However, Evan Wright is best known for his work *Generation Kill* (2004), a series of articles published in *Rolling Stone* and afterwards published in one volume. *Generation Kill* describes the first few weeks of the Iraq War in 2003, a major conflict in the War on Terror. To write this book Evan Wright joined the First Recon Battalion, a team of reconnaissance Marines who are the first troops to go into enemy territory. He goes with them as an embedded reporter to be able to describe the situation not safely from his computer at home, but from the frontline with the soldiers who are fighting that war. Or, as it is described on one of the first pages of the book, "living dangerously on the road to Baghdad with the ultraviolent Marines of Bravo Company" (Frontispiece *Generation Kill*). All the events in the book have passed through Wright's consciousness and the scenes have been arranged in such a way to create meaning, but the reader is unaware of Wright's perspective.

*Generation Kill* is a perfect example of how a genre like literary journalism can influence the perception of events, especially when it describes a controversial issue such as the Iraq War. *Generation Kill* shows the reality of war, instead of the "conventional coverage of war: casualty reports, damage assessments, ground gained or lost, [and] strategic implications" (Saliba and Geltner 15). What makes the conflict between fact and fiction even more clear is that *Generation Kill*, being a non-fiction work, has been adapted into a television series by American network HBO. The adaptation made Evan Wright's book more available to the general public and has been received very well. It has been nominated for eleven Emmy Awards with three wins ("Generation Kill"). The fictionalising of Wright's work has caused a further blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

### 1.3 Adaptation Studies and the Fidelity Debate

The conflict between an original work and its adaptation fits within the field of adaptation studies. While it is a quite recent academic field, it has already sparked many interesting debates. One of these debates is the fidelity debate, or in other words, the question if an adaptation of a prior work should be faithful to its source. Fidelity has been an important point of discussion in the evaluation of an adaptation and one that "while most major works on adaptations have dismissed fidelity as a measure of evaluation . . . [continues] to direct the reading and interpretation of adaptations" (Newell 78). This is echoed by critics Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins: the rejection of fidelity as "a marker of an adaptation's success" becomes impossible because of a continuing "dedication to the literary values," no matter how much scholars might want to get rid of it (qtd. in Newell 78). HBO's adaptation of *Generation Kill* (2008) fits into this debate since it is referred to in newspapers as a docudrama or a true story. It is rooted in the truth, but the audience is aware that the series is fiction. While Kevin Dwyer asked if "not all non-fiction, through the process of adaptation, [is] destined to become fiction," it seems audiences are still looking for the reality and the authenticity within the fictional show (43). Nathaniel Fick, one of the marines that is featured in both Wright's work and the HBO series, said in an interview that while the show is rooted in the truth, it is "an interpretation of a book, which is itself an interpretation of events" (qtd. in Finer). As a result, it might be even more difficult to get the true events on screen. For an audience of either *Generation Kill* (2004) or *Generation Kill* (2008) it is difficult to distil the truth from the fiction. Both genres, literary journalism and non-fiction adaptation, have different ways of incorporating truth in fiction.

The goal of this thesis is to examine Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* as an example of literary journalism and its HBO series as a non-fiction adaptation in their way of blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. Both works will be compared to analyse the result of a fictional adaptation of a non-fiction work and to see how non-fiction adaptations fit within the fidelity debate. Therefore, the research question of this thesis will be: How do *Generation Kill* by Evan Wright and the HBO series of the same name blur the boundary between fact and fiction and how can adaptation of a non-fiction work can provide a different perspective to the fidelity debate?

### 1.4 Delineation of Thesis

The body of this thesis is divided into four chapters which are followed by a conclusion. The second chapter discusses literary journalism as a discipline and defines the

characteristics that make a work belong to literary journalism. The third chapter discusses the history of adaptation studies and examines the academic field. The emphasis in this chapter is on the fidelity debate. In the fourth chapter the characteristics of literary journalism discussed in chapter 2 are applied to Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2004). This is done to determine if all characteristics are applicable to *Generation Kill* (2004) as well as to show how these characteristics blur the boundary between fact and fiction. In the fifth chapter the HBO series *Generation Kill* (2008) is analysed as an adaptation of Evan Wright's work by focusing on many of the same characteristics discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Again, fidelity to the source is given emphasis in this chapter.



## Chapter 2: Literary Journalism

"Creative non-fiction, narrative journalism, and the New Journalism of the 1960s," all these terms mean the same thing: the discipline of literary journalism (Saliba and Geltner 5). But these different terms all describe the discipline in a certain way. Creative non-fiction puts the focus on the creative approach to journalism while narrative journalism puts more emphasis on the creation of a narrative to tell a story. New Journalism on the other hand not only highlights the fact that the discipline is part of Journalism rather than fiction writing, but it connects strongly with the 1960s. But it is hard to come up with a good name for the discipline, as well as a clear definition. There has been pressure to classify the genre since its conception. Literary journalism is a genre that came of age in the 1890s as a combination of the developments in journalism and the developments in the realistic novel, but even after all this time it seems that it is still difficult to separate the fiction and the non-fiction properties of literary journalism (Hartsock 21). John Hartsock also describes the classification of literary journalism as problematic, though a description that was often used is "those true-life stories that read like a novel or a short story" (22). This gives quite a good characterisation of the discipline. The following describes the characteristics of literary journalism that make the discipline read like fiction.

### 2.1 The Subject

A first characteristic is that instead of clinically describing the facts like in mainstream journalism, in literary journalism the focus is on the subject (Hartsock 41). By doing this literary journalism acts as an antithesis to mainstream journalism which is 'objective' and 'factual'. Alex Kotlowitz is a journalist in Chicago who wrote *There Are No Children Here*, a work of literary journalism. It focuses on two boys living in the Henry Horner Homes, a neighbourhood which could be likened to a war zone, and is a good case study of the contrast between the focus on the event and the focus on the subject. Newspapers published cold facts in articles with titles such as "Man, 24, Stabbed To Death At Henry Horner Homes" and "Woman Killed At Horner Homes." These articles focus on the violence and the gangs in the neighbourhood. Alex Kotlowitz took another point of view. He focuses on his subject, the experience of the boys growing up, instead of only giving factual information. *The New York Times* wrote that, "Alex Kotlowitz's story informs the heart," which captures the 'subject' characteristic perfectly ("After the Ghetto"). The story is moving because the reader relates to the subjects of the book, they become more like characters than people, but it stresses that the

goal of the book is to inform as well. Books like *There Are No Children Here* mean to teach their audience that the situation described is interesting, strange, or wrong. The situation needs to be given more attention.

## 2.2 The Mundane and No Glorification

Staying true to the 'subject' of the work of literary journalism means that it describes the mundane. The mundane are events that are often left out in regular journalistic accounts because they are deemed not appropriate or not interesting enough. Journalistic accounts are often broadcasted or selected because they are sensational, if only to get more readers or more viewers. In literary journalism entertaining the audience is less important than a faithful representation of the subject. Sharon Waxman describes this in her article on Wright's work in comparison with mainstream journalism for the *New York Times*: "Mr. Wright's portrait is nuanced and grounded in details often overlooked in daily journalistic accounts" and is "far from the news media's lionization of the captured Pfc. Jessica Lynch or its vilification of enlisted grunts in the Abu Ghraib torture debacle." The importance of the ordinary over the glamorous is echoed by John Bak and Bill Reynolds who wrote that literary journalism "has remained loyal to its commitment to inform the world accurately and honestly about the magical in the mundane, the great in the small, and above all, the *us* in the *them*" (2). The focus on the mundane only stresses that a work of literary journalism is faithful to the truth. It has not been glamorised or cleaned up, it can be brash, cruel and funny - just like reality.

## 2.3 Framing

Reconstructed dialogue and scene-by-scene construction are literary characteristics found in literary journalism (Wolfe & Johnson). These, like the use of perspective and the use of symbolic language, are part of framing. Framing consists of "object attributes, quote selection, source selection and emphasis, anecdote selection, symbolic language, included/excluded information, metaphors, and editorial commentary" (Saliba and Geltner 4). Framing is one of the most important aspects of literary journalism. The frame that is selected influences the way a story is reported and who its subject will be. It also influences the way the subject will be perceived by the audience. Framing is dangerous for a discipline as literary journalism because it threatens the reporting of the truth. When editing a story as severely as done with literary journalism, anecdotes can be omitted to put someone in another light or important facts or events can disappear. Then again it might be argued that events that might have been

important in the greater scheme of things, might not have been important at that time to the subject and are therefore negligible in the account of the writer.

Another literary technique that is used in literary journalism is the use of the first and third person perspective (Whitt 4; Pauly 220). In literature this often allows the reader to connect with the story's main characters. While this is true for literary journalism, it has another function too. In addition to being in the mind of the character and reading his or her thoughts, the first person perspective gives the readers an inside perspective in the situation. It is used to "construct a point of view that helps foster a particular interpretation of a given situation," and shows people what happened while placing it in context as well (Saliba and Geltner 4). The first person perspective fits well with literary journalism's often used method of immersion reporting. The author has immersed him or herself within the world of the subject as well as drawing the reader in by making their perspective extremely personal while keeping themselves at the background. The switches to third person perspective bring the reader closer to the characters while it decreases the interference of the writer. These passages often include more direct dialogue and therefore can feel less edited to the reader.

One of the best-known characteristics ascribed to literary journalism is "the widespread 'adoption' of the techniques commonly associated with realistic fiction" (Hartsock 23). In other words, describing factual events in a literary fashion. Not all literary techniques of realistic fiction are used, but some of the techniques that are used a great deal are symbolism and metaphor (Whitt 34-5). The way these are used in literary journalism, especially in the case of war reporting, is that the comparisons made are often situations of everyday life so they can be understood by a general audience. But its main goal is still to act as a way to solve the "difficulty of doing descriptive justice to reality's horror" (Kerrane and Yagoda 46).

## 2.4 Conclusion

While literary journalism uses a lot of literary techniques, it is not fiction, nor is it literature. While there is a lot of overlap in the two disciplines, the two have many areas that do not overlap. The way a scene is described or the types of metaphors or symbolism that are used can differ greatly between literary journalism and literature. As John McPhee said, "[t]hings that are cheap and tawdry in fiction work beautifully in non-fiction because they are *true*. That's why you should be careful not to abridge it, because it's the fundamental power you're dealing with. You arrange it and present it. There's lots of artistry. But you don't make it up" (qtd. in Whitt 23). The elements from fiction are there, but the truth is not supposed to be

made prettier than it is. Works of literary journalism are supposed to reflect reality. The use of literary techniques combined with describing the mundane and the focus on the subject makes literary journalism a discipline that, while with much overlap, is still distinctly different from mainstream journalism and fiction writing. These characteristics will be discussed in chapter 4 to see how they apply to *Generation Kill*.

## Chapter 3: Adaptation Studies and the Fidelity Debate

The adaptation of non-fiction works can be seen as "'trice told tales': firstly recounted by the various participants, the story is then arranged in a book by the author," and then filmed as a television series or a film (Dwyer 45). The questions this quotation raises are how much of the actual events is still represented in the film or television series and if the adaptation is then still faithful to the work it was based on. These are questions that are important in the field of adaptation studies and within the fidelity debate.

### 3.1 The Emergence of Adaptation Studies

Adaptation studies is a discipline that emerged in the 1960s and 70s in the United States and the United Kingdom out of English literature departments (Aragay 11). The discipline mostly studies films and television series that have been based on or inspired by previous works. The presence of the source text in the study's work depends on the type of adaptation. The source text can be easily recognisable. It can be a creative interpretation of the source text, but still with overlap. And it can be transposed to so many different times and places the source text is barely recognisable any more. In all these cases though, the adaptation is usually put into a category based on its faithfulness. The background of literature studies in the field of adaptation studies has created an emphasis on the likeness to the source text and by viewing film as a "low brow, popular form of entertainment," the topic of fidelity to a source emerged as a "central category of adaptation studies" (Aragay 12). Film as a discipline was still not recognised as a serious art form because, "[i]t has always been the case that new technologies are greeted with suspicion" (Cartmell 1). Since the beginning of cinema, the film industry has been making adaptations of for instance *Romeo and Juliet* and *Aladdin*, which had to faithfully represent the "well-known art masterpieces" (Cantrell 2). This way the source text becomes a model, an original which at best can only be copied on screen, not changed or improved. But even though by these standards a film adaptation could never be as good as the book, faithfulness kept being the factor an adaptation was evaluated on.

### 3.2 The Fidelity Debate

Because of the emphasis on the source text, fidelity has always been a major topic in adaptation studies. However, "much of what is understood as fidelity discourse has developed out of attempts to rationalize or diminish fidelity's influence on adaptation studies" (Newall 78). Scholars are bored with the fidelity discourse and prefer to look at other aspects of a film

when evaluating an adaptation (Hutcheon, 2012; Orr, 1984). George Bluestone, writer of the founding book *Novels into Film* from 1957, already mentioned that "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium," that an adaptation can never be an exact replica of its source text (5). And while this is still an accepted opinion, the use of fidelity to judge the worth of an adaptation is no longer accepted by all scholars of adaptation studies (Hutcheon, 2012; Newell, 2012; Orr, 1984). Linda Hutcheon (2012) wrote that the biggest flaw of using fidelity as a way of evaluating the worth of an adaptation is "the applied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text" (7). The flaw of those critics is thinking that the only aim of making an adaptation is to tell the story to those who do not wish to read the book. Christopher Orr remarks that the focus on fidelity will "impoverish the film's intertextuality" (qtd. in Connor par. 10). He believes that the unique qualities of film will suffer in an adaptation because of the need to be faithful to the book and the inability to include other references. To be creative, film makers will have to simplify, amplify, and extrapolate the primary source for the adaptation (Hutcheon 109-10). This could mean leaving characters or events out, taking minor characters and giving them a bigger role, or taking events or themes from the source and expanding it beyond the original. Examples applied to *Generation Kill* will be discussed in chapter 5.

But while academics aim to move away from fidelity discourse, it just is not happening. The focus on fidelity is as big today as it was at the emergence of adaptation studies (MacCabe, Murray, and Warner 215). Not only do case studies keep appearing in which an adaptation is compared with its source text, the audience of adaptations keep holding on to fidelity, the kind of audience does not matter in this case. Concerning fidelity "the readers of cult classics are likely to be just as demanding of film adaptations as are the fans of the more traditional classics" (Hutcheon 2004, 110).

But when analysing adaptations based on non-fiction works, it might not be smart to disregard fidelity which scholars of adaptation studies seem to want. These adaptations are often defined as docudramas or based-upon-a-true-story films and bring with them the "promise of fact" (Paget 3). With this assurance the attention of the audience is bought as channels believe that it will cause audiences to suspend their disbelief more easily (Paget 3). This promise of fact also easily abuses its power. The audience is aware that, while a story is marketed as based-on-a-true-story film, the programme they watch is fiction, but the audience expects it to be largely based on the truth. Sara Brinch notes that "a based-on-a-true-story film always will be a representation referring to an actual past" (240). Large inconsistencies with the past will, therefore, be noticed by the audience and will not be accepted. And while film

makers and scholars of film and adaptation studies might say that non-fiction adaptations constrain "filmmakers' creative movements" and have the "danger of draining the concept of adaptation of any substantial meaning and leaving it without much explanatory power," a faithful adaptation might be just what the audience expects of docudramas (Vidal 1; Brinch 226).

### 3.3 The Docudrama

A docudrama is a "television form combining dramatised storytelling with the 'objective' informational techniques of documentary" (Bignell 306). It is the ideal genre to provide the audience with information about a situation or person, while entertaining at the same time to make sure an audience tunes in next time. A docudrama creates a simulation of reality instead of showing actual footage and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard posited that this so called hyper reality has a bigger impact than the raw images of news photography (Chown 20). The non-fiction source forces the filmmakers to stay true to the people the story is about and to represent their situation as faithful as possible. This might limit the filmmaker in ways because an adaptation of a non-fiction work does not offer as much creative freedom as an adaptation of a fiction work. What is possible for a filmmaker while adapting a non-fiction work is to give it the same layer or perspective that is given in news programmes and newspapers. There is still the possibility of highlighting certain events while ignoring others, of framing the story in such a way as to give the story another spin.

American network HBO, known from acclaimed dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, has used the docudrama to shed light on the Iraq War (Chown 1). *Generation Kill* is the first docudrama about the Iraq War that has been released by HBO. The HBO programming about the Iraq War have been documentaries until *Generation Kill*, but documentaries "will always be bedevilled by arguments about objectivity versus subjectivity, or the truth claims it makes in often controversial, political terrain" (Chown 15). The objectivity versus subjectivity argument is still present in a docudrama, especially in the case of *Generation Kill* which is told from the perspective of an embedded reporter and the Iraq War is controversial, political terrain. However, the advantage of a docudrama over a documentary is that it is fiction. HBO has the ability to put a spin on the original work to make it more attractive to its audience without changing the content of the source text.

### 3.4 Conclusion

So while fidelity to a source text has been a point of discussion in adaptation studies, there might be a difference between fiction adaptations and non-fiction adaptations. Non-fiction

adaptations call for a greater faithfulness to its source, and while that does mean there is less creative freedom for the filmmaker, it does not mean that the adapter is unable to create a frame for the audience. The based-upon-a-true-story tales raise a certain expectation with the audience and while scholars want to move away from using fidelity to evaluate an adaptation, the audience does not. In the case of analysing a non-fiction adaptation it might then be more interesting to examine what has been changed and with what effect, than to look at how faithfully other scenes have been brought to the screen. This will be the focus of chapter 5.



## Chapter 4: Analysing *Generation Kill* (2004)

"'Truth,' it has been said, 'is the first casualty of war'" and while literary journalism often has the ability to disguise the truth by the literary style of writing, this was not Wright's intention when writing *Generation Kill* (Snowden vii). In *Generation Kill* reporter Evan Wright joins the Marines of First Recon while they cross the Iraqi border and make their way into Iraq to invade Baghdad. Wright describes his experience, but mainly gives the stories and experiences of the Marines in Alfa and Bravo Company, primarily Sergeant Brad 'Iceman' Colbert, Corporal Josh Ray Person and Corporal Harold James Trombley with whom he shares a Humvee. While it is true that not all of Wright's stories and notes made it into the finalised version of *Generation Kill*, its goal is still to portray the events as experienced by Wright himself and the Marines he worked with as truthfully as possible. It is important to Wright that the stories he notes down are the truth and not a rumour. Especially when Wright has not been present himself, "I'm not convinced that Gunny Swarr is the most reliable source. I set out to find people who were there" (358). Still, it seems like the truth of Wright's time in Iraq has been wrapped in a literary jacket that can already be noticed without reading the book. The form of the book, for instance, is distinctly literary, shown by the fact that it opens with a prologue. The prologue gives a taste of the extreme situations that lie ahead. The work also ends with an epilogue in which he gives the reader closure on the lives of the Marines in Iraq although Wright himself is already back in the United States. To show why Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* fits within the discipline of literary journalism it will be analysed based on the characteristics described in chapter 1. The results give an insight into how *Generation Kill* gives a truthful representation of the events in the first weeks of the Iraq War while reading like a work of fiction and how this can blur the lines between fiction and reality.

### 4.1 The Subject

While often described as such, *Generation Kill* is not quite a book on the Iraq War. It is a book that tells the story of its soldiers. Whether they play a major or a minor role in Wright's narrative, the reader is introduced to all the soldiers Wright talks to. The reader gets information on their appearance as well as on the person behind the soldier; their family, where they live, where they went to school, previous jobs or what they wish to do once the war is over. For example, in the second chapter of the book Lieutenant Sergeant Nathaniel Fick is introduced: "He is six foot two with light-brown hair and the pleasant, clear-eyed looks of a former altar boy, which he is. The son of a successful Baltimore attorney father and

a social-worker mother. . . He entered Dartmouth intending to study pre-med" (33). The introduction to the Marines does not only give the reader an extra insight in their character, it makes them more memorable, which is needed when so many different people are discussed. The reader is drawn in not because of stories of weapons, bombs or politics, but because of the character of the soldiers and their way of dealing with combat situations. The focus on the soldiers instead of on the Iraq War as a whole is stressed in the author's afterword. Rather than describing important conflicts in the war because they played a major role, the conflicts described are only discussed because they feature one or more of the soldiers Wright spent time with. This is not to say that the events described are not put into a larger context within the Iraq War, because they often are, but it is always written from the soldiers' standpoints. The soldiers' knowledge and experiences are what matters for Wright's narrative. While Wright does incorporate his own views and experiences sometimes he never makes himself the centre of attention. This becomes especially clear when he describes the people whom he shares a Humvee with. He describes his company as a family, but excludes himself in this comparison: "the undertaking sometimes feels like a family road trip. Colbert is the stern father figure. Person is like the mom . . . Garza and Trombley are the children, happily munching candy, eager to please their dad" (88).

As with Alex Kotlowitz' *There Are No Children Here*, discussed in section 2.1, the focus on the soldiers as the subject of Wright's work causes the readers to connect with them, making the events in the book that much funnier, or more serious, or horrific. It causes readers to feel empathy. The afterword discusses what the soldiers are doing at the moment the book went to press. This shows that the writer kept in touch with the soldiers. Knowing this, it adds truth and value to the scenes in the book as it shows that the connection between the soldiers and the connection between them and Evan Wright are real and not part of a ploy to make the writing seem more attractive. The empathy for the soldiers ties to a message meant for the audience that Wright explicitly states at the end of his book:

It's the American public for whom the Iraq War is often no more than a video game. Five years into this war, I am not always confident most Americans fully appreciate the calibre of the people fighting for them, the sacrifices they have made, and the sacrifices they continue to make. After the Vietnam War ended, the onus of shame largely fell on the veterans. This time around, if shame is to be had when the Iraq conflict ends - and all indications are there will be plenty of it - the veterans are the last people in America to deserve it. (462)

With this Wright enforces the idea that the shaming of veterans because of decisions made in a war by people in command is not alright. This is a message that is more likely to be taken to heart when the readers relate to the Marines.

#### 4.2 Framing

In creating his narrative, Wright has chosen specific devices to frame his story as discussed in section 2.3. Perspective is very important in creating a certain frame from which readers experience the situations described in the book. The prologue starts in the first person perspective, it draws the reader in and makes it more personal. While this perspective shows that the writer is there, his presence is never dominant. Instead he always puts himself in the background letting other people or the general situation thread on the foreground. Then Wright switches back and forth between first and third person perspective, placing himself out of view. The focus is completely on the subjects of his narrative and he only intrudes when it adds to the experience and understanding of the reader. For instance when explaining military commands or gears or while explaining military hierarchy. What Wright emphasizes while doing this is that it is not his story, it is the story of the Marines of First Recon.

Besides perspective, other literary techniques present in *Generation Kill* (2004) are constructed scenes and reconstructed dialogue. Scene construction is done to enhance the effect of the scenes that follow each other. For example in one instance scenes are described in which the Marine Burriss has turned a situation into "his own personal, comic mishap" (394). This scene is followed by one in which this same Marine uses a shoulder fired AT-4 missile to blow up a T-7 Iraqi tank. An AT-4 missile is not built to destroy a tank, but Burriss succeeds and produces "one of the biggest explosions many Marines have seen in the entire war" (395). This not only shows the smart construction of scenes to enhance the effect of the explosion and sketch the situation the Marines operate in, but it gives some much needed comic relief as well, which adds to the reality of the situation. Constructed scenes are also used to keep the narrative chronological. Wright may have heard about an experience of another unit at a different time, but it might chronologically fit next to another event he was present for.

Reconstructed dialogue is used often to make the book flow better. It leaves out the static interview-like writing, but that shows that conversations have been severely edited. Wright uses many different ways of writing down his conversations with the Marines. He uses direct as well as indirect speech for both himself and the Marines. In multiple instances he uses both within the same sentence. For instance in a conversation with Lt. Col. Ferrando, "When I ask him about his cancer - if he ever smoked, chewed tobacco or had other bad

habits - he tells me he was a runner and a fitness nut, then adds, smiling, 'I guess I'm just lucky'" (69). This demonstrates that Wright has carefully selected the direct quotes he wants to use while paraphrasing others to fit better in his narrative. The reconstructed dialogue does show that through editing, quotes and stories could be changed to either fit the narrative or an image that has been given to a person.

The few instances Wright does come to the foreground of his narrative is when he offers the reader insights in the future that neither Wright nor the Marines have at that moment in the invasion. The use of foreshadowing is subtle and does not get in the way of the story, but it does - like in literary narratives - create suspense and push the reader to keep on reading. Like with the reconstructed dialogue, this literary technique shows that the work has been extremely edited. This way of editing his story does give Wright the opportunity to call attention to some major issues within the military structure and the situation of the Marines behind enemy lines. The supply of batteries and essential equipment meant for night vision or communication is a huge problem, one that Wright is able to call attention to as well as driving his readers to keep on reading to reach the event Wright is referring to: "Within a few days, when they are at the height of their operations in ambush country, the men will sometimes go whole nights without any batteries at all for their PAS-13, and in at least one instance, this deficiency will nearly kill them" (104).

The use of symbolic and literary language can be found in *Generation Kill*, but as said before, it is only used to do "descriptive justice to reality's horror" (Kerrane and Yagoda 46). The technique used most often is simile, which seems to be the best way to convey the situation as experienced by Wright and the Marines to the readers. Images are compared to situations in ordinary life - or at least situations that readers can imagine - so they can be understood and related to by the general public. The difficulty of using certain military equipment in the situation the Marines find themselves in - bad weather, while moving, in the dark, and under enemy fire - is translated to a more relatable situation that could raise the same level of frustration in readers:

Mark-19 grenade rounds have an elliptical flight path, so after you point it in the proper direction, you then have to tilt the barrel up or down, depending on how far away the target is. This is done with a tiny wheel you have to spin, and doing it from the back of a bouncing Humvee, in a fifty-mile--per-hour dust storm, while people are shooting at you, is about as easy as changing a flat tire on a car parked on a hill during a blizzard. (Wright 186)

The idea of changing a tire under difficult circumstances might express the situation so readers unfamiliar with military equipment can better understand the conditions the Marines operate under. There is also the occasional metaphor, but these are much more scarce. While not as common as similes, the metaphors cause the text to read more like literature as well as making it easier for the reader to vividly imagine a situation. A scene in the book describes how the stress of war is getting to the Marines and that they are not always able to think or perceive situations clearly due to a lack of sleep, food and the constant threat of enemy troops. This is quite aptly described in the metaphor with which Wright rounds off that particular chapter: "it's not that the technology is bad or its operators incompetent, but the fog of war persists on even the clearest of nights" (236). The idea of fog clearly creates an image which might enable the reader to better imagine the mental state of the Marines.

#### 4.3 The Mundane

Another important aspect of literary journalism that can be read in *Generation Kill* is that of describing the mundane. *Generation Kill* makes a point of focusing on aspects of military life in combat that would never make the news and would otherwise not even have been noted down. One of these aspects is the issue of the grooming standard. According to military protocol Marines in combat are not allowed to have moustaches that come past the corner of their mouths. While this is a quite insignificant in the larger scheme of things, it is a big deal to the commanders and the Marines, which is why it is a big deal in *Generation Kill*. While the Marines are still at Camp Mathilda in Kuwait the grooming standard is a constant issue for commanders. Lt. Col. Ferrando is particularly focused on it, "I don't know when we are going to get to the Euphrates," he says, "but we will, and when we cross the Euphrates all mustaches will come off. That is the rule. Make sure your men shave their mustaches" (67). Wright gives the reaction of the Marines on their commanders' focus on moustaches rather than battle tactics or motivating the men under their command: "We're getting ready to invade a country, and this is what our commander talks to us about? Mustaches?" (69). An issue that seems insignificant compared to the invasion of a country is a big deal to the Marines and therefore a subject worth discussing. The same goes for the time in between the attacks that the Marines fill with random chit-chat, singing Avril Lavigne songs and the seemingly simple matter of going to the bathroom. Relieving yourself in combat is cannot be private or quick but is important nonetheless. Team leaders keep track of their team's bowel movements so they can keep on top of their health. Taking 'a dump' is quite a process though:

Everyone defecates and pisses out in the open besides the highway. Taking a shit is always a big production in a war zone. There's the MOPP suit to contend with, and no one wants to walk too far from the road for fear of stepping on a land mine, since these are known to be scattered haphazardly besides Iraqi highways. (112)

Since this is a major part of the lives of the Marines, the fact that Wright has taken such care to incorporate this in his narrative shows that the mundane is regarded equally as important as the action. In addition, the focus on the mundane illustrates that *Generation Kill* gives a realistic impression of life during the invasion. Issues or situations the Marines find themselves in are not made more prettier than they are in real life.

#### 4.4 No Glorification

The representation of war is an issue for both Wright and the Marines. Corporal Ryan Jeschke comments about war reporting that "[w]ar is either glamorized - like we kick their ass - or the opposite - look how horrible, we kill all these civilians. None of these people know what it's like to be there holding that weapon," which is exactly what often happens (283). Wright makes sure not to portray the Marines as either heroes or villains. He does not glamorise the Marines or the situation they are in. What Wright tries to do is write the story of the people holding the weapons and show his audience that war and life as a soldier is not that black and white. Instead of looking for sensation or outrage, Wright discusses the incompetence of some people in command, deaths of civilians but also of team members, and the issue of food. At first there are many descriptions of Marines 'ratfucking' their rations - getting the good meals out now and leaving the foul MREs, Meals Ready to Eat, for a later time. But as the invasion continues and rations are cut after the loss of a supply truck the readers are forced to face the reality of the bad quality food: "there is a silver lining to having your rations cut. When you eat MREs in abundance, they taste foul. Now, with everyone having a constant edge of hunger, meals that once tasted like dried kitchen sponges in chemical sauce are pretty tasty" (213). At one time during the invasion the Marines are down to one MRE a day, compared to three a day when they started, while they are up all night and have to be alert. Another way in which Wright refuses to glamorise the situation in Iraq is by showing the incompetence of the officers in command. They often pose an even bigger problem to the platoon than their lack of food. Especially Captain America and Encino Man, while regarded as good officers by their higher ups, make rash decisions that are often made impulsively and based on wrong observations. Their actions put their people in danger. Wright writes about Encino Man that

"although the corps rates him as a fit commander and he has an admirable service record, fellow officers have expressed their alarm to me over Encino Man's seeming inability to understand the basics, like reading a map" (81). While First Recon is described as the best of the best, the reality shows that not every Marine is able to handle the stress of close combat situations. The Marines under the command of Captain America and Encino Man have no opportunity of speaking up without risking a court marshal for disobeying direct orders.

Shooting civilians during a war is always frowned upon, but the ROE - Rules of Engagement - keeps changing and is always struggling to make sure the Marines able to defend themselves, while trying not to make civilians targets. Even with a subject as delicate as civilian casualties, Wright lets the Marines speak without passing judgement himself. He shows that there are varying opinions even within the group of people in First Recon: "'We fucking shot their kids,' Doc Bryan says. 'Dude, mistakes like this are unavoidable in war,' Meesh responds. 'Bullshit,' Doc Bryan says. 'We're Recon Marines. Our whole job is to observe. We don't shoot unarmed children'" (225). Besides showing the differences between the Marines and their opinions, *Generation Kill* gives the horrors the Marines face and the inability to cope with them. During a roadblock a little girl is killed while she is in the backseat of a car that would not stop after the firing of warning shots:

Graves sees a little girl curled up in the backseat. She looks to be about three, the same age as his daughter at home in California. There's a small amount of blood on the upholstery, but the girl's eyes are open. She seems to be cowering. Graves reaches in to pick her up - thinking about what medical supplies he might need to treat her, he later says - when the top off her head slides off and her brains fall out. When Graves steps back, he nearly falls over when his boot slips in the girl's brains. It takes a full minute before Graves can actually talk.

(282)

*Generation Kill* does not put the Marines down as villains, but not necessarily as heroes either. They are presented the way they appear; people who are in Iraq to do their jobs, their personal interests do not include blowing the country to bits, nor do they care about oil. But they do care about what they are doing there. They do not mind shooting Fedayeen, but shooting civilians can break them up, especially when it hits close to home. They want to help the people whose lives they uproot by being there, but sometimes they are unable to do so. By showing this in his narrative, Wright gives a realistic view of the Marines and the way they deal with death and post traumatic stress.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* realistically describes how he and the members of First Recon have experienced the first few weeks of the invasion of Iraq; the invasion that came down to "a bunch of extremely tense young men in their late teens and twenties, with their fingers on the triggers of rifles and machine guns" (195). The book is about the experience of the Marines. That includes mentioning their daily lives and events that are not sensationalised or downplayed. By using literary devices Wright has severely edited the book. He has not necessarily made it less truthful, but he has changed the way the readers perceive the situation. Which in effect blurs the line between fiction and reality. By strategically arranging scenes and quotes and shifting perspectives events and people can be put in a different light, but Wright often makes sure that all people have a chance to comment, even people like Captain America or Encino Man. Arranging it as such does add to Wright's purpose: to show his readers the true life and experience of the Marines fighting a war and showing them as people with their own personalities and opinions, rather than stereotypical heroes or villains.



## Chapter 5: Analysing *Generation Kill* (2008)

Like the book by Evan Wright promises to be "a work of non-fiction" and that "the contents of the book are true," the HBO series promotes itself by saying it is based on the true and faithful work by Evan Wright (Titlepage, *Generation Kill*). It is clear from interviews with the executive producers and directors that staying true to the Marines and their time in Iraq is their most important goal. That even though, "sometimes [they] screw up, the intent is to make every little detail picture-perfect" ("The Making of"). This level of dedication is not only there on the part of the producers, but on the part of the actors as well. James Ransone, the actor who plays Corporal Josh Person, said that he wants to "serve the real Ray Person more than anyone else" ("The Making of"). As executive producer Ed Burns has noted, "it's very good to know that you're doing honour to the guys who've actually lived this" ("The Making of"). Faithfulness to Evan Wright's book and the experiences of the Marines in Iraq is what they are trying to achieve. This chapter analyses the HBO series *Generation Kill* (2008) on the use of dialogue as well as the visual representation of Wright's narrative, focusing on many of the same topics discussed in chapter 4. The emphasis of this chapter is on the differences between Wright's narrative and the HBO series, as suggested in chapter 3, and the effect of these differences on a truthful representation of the first weeks in Iraq.

### 5.1 The Switch Between Media

The producers of *Generation Kill* (2008) have made a tremendous effort in trying to make the television series as faithful to the book as possible. Original members of First Recon have acted as military advisors, and some even play in the series either as themselves or as another character ("The Making of"). Moreover, the actors had a boot camp taught by sergeant Rudy Reyes and sergeant Eric Kocher to make sure they knew how to handle their weapons and that they were familiar with military tactics. Marines of First Recon were asked to help with the purchase and fixing up of the Humvees used in the series to make them as accurate as possible. Though being faithful to the work of Evan Wright and the Marines has been crucial to the series, the producers have made some change to Wright's narrative while translating it to the screen. An important difference to start with is that while the book is non-fiction, the series is fiction. In addition, the switch from a written work to a television series has had some major influences on the way the story is told. One is that while in the book the reader is introduced to military lingo, places and situations, the viewer of the series is thrown right in the middle. There is no narrator to explain that MRE means Meals Ready to Eat or that when

Marines say that they are Oscar Mike they are On the Move. This means that the viewer is a lot less comfortable than the reader of the book, but the confusion actually does fit the chaos of combat the viewer is thrown in with. This chaos is reflected in the way the series opens. Instead of the more usual opening and establishing shots, the audience is not introduced to the situation in Iraq or the Marines. The fast images show the mundane: flashes of a military hat, guns and even packets of Skittles® and through these images the audience is immediately thrown into the life of the Marines. Another consequence of the switch between media is that the people in the book no longer get a background story to make the audience familiar with that character. Instead images move quickly from one person to another and the audience is lucky to pick up a nickname or a real name which are used inconsistently - like in real life. The information viewers do get about the characters is given by the characters themselves either in conversation with other Marines or when they are asked about it by reporter Evan Wright. The appearance of each new character is accompanied by a close up so it is clear which person is represented by which actor. The lack of focus on Wright, however, actually fits quite well with his part in the book.

## 5.2 Role of the Reporter and the Subject

The role of reporter Evan Wright, or 'Rolling Stone', has been adapted to fit the role of Evan Wright in the book. He is clearly secondary to the Marines who are the focus of the series. The role of the reporter is made secondary to those of the Marines by showing from the start that this story is about them. The first episode of the series opens with a training exercise in which the Marines practice in their Humvees. This training does not appear in the book - as Wright was not present during the training of the Marines. But this scene is very effective scene because it immediately place the Marines at the centre of the narrative. Wright is not even seen on screen until the nineteenth minute of the first episode making him seem like secondary character because most other characters have been introduced before Wright makes an appearance. The role of Wright as an embedded reporter is minimised, as is done in the book, to keep from having an effect on the story of the Marines. This role of embedded reporter is picked up by the camera. The scenes are often filmed from within the cramped space of the Humvees and while the unsteady position of the camera can cause the images to be unclear, it draws the audience in. This way of filming has a distinct documentary feel about it, which fits with Generation Kill's label as a docudrama. The embedded position of the camera returns when images are seen as through the eyes of one of the Marines instead of staying in the position of the omniscient observer. This is done by images through night

vision goggles and by showing only the barrel of a gun or sometimes even the scope of a weapon. It pulls the audience in and draws them into the action. Though these examples can make the audience think of a first-person shooter, and have unwanted associations with the comparison of war with videogames, they do put the audience in the shoes of the Marines. The way this focus on the characters and their circumstances is represented is reflected in the many conversations between Wright and the Marines. The questions asked by Wright that lead to the stories of the Marines are cut each time. The audience is only given the story of the Marines, but it is still clear that it were Wright's questions that led to the stories. Wright's subtle presence is noted in all episodes of the series. The audience sees him observing the Marines, scribbling in his notebook, and reacting to the combat situations or conversations between the Marines. His role becomes slightly larger as the series progresses and Wright starts to fit in with the Marines rather than just being an outsider. He laughs, eats, and sings with the Marines, but he never intentionally pulls the attention toward himself. The few times Wright is made the centre of attention is when comments are made to him about reporting the truth. In the episode "Get Some," for instance, the Marines have to 'unsurrender' a group of Iraqis and send them on their way instead of helping them get to safety. In reaction to this and the less than enthusiastic responses from the Marines Lieutenant Fick comments to Wright, "write this as you see it. I'm not here to stop you" ("Get Some"). It is important to the Marines that Wright describes the truth of what happens during the invasion. The representation of Wright in the series is therefore more effective than in the book. In the series Wright no longer has the role of narrator and does not have to introduce the reader to the military world, he is simply an observer. Someone who is tasked with faithfully representing the truth to the people back home.

### 5.3 Extended Characters

While many characters outside Bravo Company - the Marines under the command of Lt. Nathaniel Fick - have somewhat equal parts in the book, in the series the role of some characters has become much bigger. One of these characters is Sergeant Major John Sixta. In the book he is rarely mentioned and when he is mentioned he is referred to as "one of [Ferrando's] senior enlisted Marines, tasked with enforcing the grooming standard" (68) or as "the Coward of Kajifi" (131). The character of Sgt. Maj. Sixta does not only appear more than he does in the book, he has more dialogue too and is discussed by other characters. The character Sixta is an example of amplification, one of the ways to add creativity to an adaptation discussed in section 3.2. Moreover, his character is interesting and says something

about the American military as a whole. Sgt. Maj. Sixta is the man that enforces the grooming standard, he is the one that confronts the Marines time and time again, at camp and in between combat, that their appearance does not conform to regulations. In the first episode "Get Some" Sgt Maj. Sixta comments on the state of dress of Cpl. Person after he has stretched himself over his Humvee to fix it:

Sgt. Maj. Sixta:           Why the fuck is your shirt out of regulation?

Sgt. Colbert:               Sergeant Major, is there a problem? My Marines have been working on that Humvee all morning.

Sgt. Maj. Sixta:           I don't care if your Marine has a sucking chest wound! He will not traipse around on the deck with his shirt-tails hanging out!

He says things like this more often which causes many Marines, and the audience, to dislike him. The grooming standard is given much attention in the book, as was discussed in section 4.3, but as the focus is on a select group of Marines, Sixta is not discussed that much. In the series there is more need for a clear antagonist that not only can be identified by name, but also has more interaction with the marines. Through this interaction, some Marines already know that Sixta has an ulterior motive for acting the way he does. Sergeant 'Pappy' Patrick is one of the Marines that knows what Sixta is doing which he shows by saying, "we all got jobs to do. Sergeant Major Sixta's job is to be an asshole, and he excels at the position" ("Get Some"). In addition, in episode six "Stay Frosty" Sixta position as an 'asshole' prevents a group of Marines from sexually harassing a female soldier by complaining about the grooming standard. While this comment does not change the opinion of the Marines the audience is made aware of Sixta's fuction. His purpose becomes especially clear when he comes right out and says it in episode seven "The Bomb in the Garden": "If morale gets really bad, Mike, let me know. I'll stir 'em up good with the grooming standard." Sgt. Maj. Sixta is supposed to keep the Marines focused. He makes sure that if the Marines are angry at something they can focus that anger on him or on the grooming standard instead of losing control and messing up in critical situations. This gives the audience a reason for the focus on the grooming standard. The Marines in Iraq accept issues such as the grooming standard as part of military life, they do not need ulterior motives. For an audience of a fictional series, however, this causes loose ends that need to be tied up by an antagonist with clear motives. Sixta's character demonstrates that while officers can appear despicable, there might be a hidden meaning. This hidden meaning is often hidden to the Marines in reality, but it is made visible to the audience.

Like Sgt. Maj. Sixta, Lieutenant Colonel 'Godfather' Ferrando is a character that appears more often in the series than he does in the book. His physical presence emphasises how negatively the officers are portrayed in the series. Lt. Col. Ferrando is shown as an officer desperate to get promoted. He wants the men he commands to pull through almost impossible missions so he can brag and receive a promotion. This is common knowledge for the Marines in his command, "of course Godfather's happy. He's trying to get his full bird on our backs" ("Screwby"). This flaw of Ferrando is made much more obvious in the series than it is in the book. It is more obvious because in the series the audience actually sees Ferrando talking to his circle of officers and trying to please General Mattis, his commanding officer. Ferrando does not have much contact with Wright which is why there is not much personal interaction with him in the book, but by seeing Ferrando make decisions on screen and praising officers like Encino Man, who have shown to be incapable of being in command, the emphasis is put on the flaws of the officers. The audience gets a much lower opinion of the military officers in general and military hierarchy is not glorified at all. In contrast with the expanded role of Sixta, Ferrando is not given a positive twist and his motive is pride rather than the well-being of the man under his command.

#### 5.4 Extrapolation

Captains Dave 'Captain America' McGraw and Craig 'Encino Man' Schwetje do not come across as capable officers in the book, but their actions were somewhat softened by the fact that the reader gets information about them as well because Wright has had conversations with everyone. In the series, however, their actions and moments of incompetence have been given much more focus. In adapting the book, the theme of officer incompetence has been extrapolated. In combination with the scenes of Ferrando, 'Captain America' and 'Encino Man' give a bad image of military officers and by stressing this, military life is not glorified. The weak chain of command is given emphasis by giving it extra screen time, while many of them were probably narrated second hand to Wright in the book. In the episode "The Cradle of Civilisation" 'Captain America' is seen waving around his Iraqi AK and shooting at nothing while Wright is seen scribbling in his notebook. This does not only show the focus on the officer's incompetence, but also that Wright has observed it all. It adds a level of truth to the representation of the officers as because Wright did not get those stories from someone else. He was present for each of them. Even though reality might not be glamorous or heroic, it is written down. The truth is then not changed or hidden to make it more attractive to an audience. Another way to stress the officers is by showing the reactions and elaborate

discussions about the officers amongst the Marines. In the book the officers are referred to by terms used by other Marines, Encino Man is referred to as "the retard commander" in the prologue for instance (16). In the series though, viewers do not get the calmer edited versions. Instead the audience gets the uncensored versions: "maybe because a certain severely retarded company commander by the name of Encino Man who, in his infinite retardation, duct-taped his Humvee windows. Thought he was being all tactical until Bravo missed the turn at the checkpoint 'cause retard couldn't see out of his fucking truck" ("Get Some"). The failings of the officers and the Marines' frustration with them is a clear theme in the series and while this makes for good television, it might be a bit of an exaggeration. The real life Gunnery Sergeant Mike Wynn has seen the series and has commented on the representation of the officers:

One of the things that I want to talk about is I think it may have gone a little bit overboard with the officer bashing. Officers are an easy target just by virtue of the positions they hold. Ultimately, they are responsible for everything that does or does not happen. They are in charge and everyone that's not in charge always has their own way that they want to do things, but the bottom line is, our officer corps, and I hope the general public can separate the television from reality, but in my opinion I think the officer corps, our military officers today, are some of the best and brightest the country has on offer, and they are doing a superb job. ("*Generation Kill*")

This statement demonstrates that the people who have been the inspiration for this series have been involved and have given their opinion on the finalised product. For a standard audience a truthful representation might not be the most important thing, but it is for these people. Representing the officers in such bad light can negatively influence the opinion about the officers in real life.

### 5.5 The Mundane

While the series focuses less of its time on the background of the characters and more time on showing battle sequences, one thing it does very well is representing the mundane in the lulls between battles. This contrast between peace in between battles and the chaotic state during the conflict is mirrored in the way it is visually represented. The style of filming matches the mood of the scenes very closely. The lulls in between action are shown in long shots and overviews of the camp and the surroundings. The image is steady and composed. In contrast, the scenes that show combat are blurred and vague. Besides in the style of filming, this contrast is also noticeable in the way colour is used. The quiet moments are full of colour

while the moments of combat are greyer and darker, even when there is daylight. This way the audience is drawn into the way the Marines experience the combat as well as into the moments of peace in which the mundane becomes highlighted. As discussed in section 3.2, academics have stated that faithful adaptations limit creativity. This way of incorporating different shots into one scene, however, shows it is certainly possible to be creative while staying faithful to the story. The series gives shots of gear, weapons, and packets of Skittles® as well as plenty of conversations between Marines about combat jacks and keeping track of the consistency of their faeces. The lack of food is referred to as well, though some things have been added that were not in the book. For example, when the company rested Cpl. 'Q-tip' Stafford went hunting because he was so hungry. When he is asked what it is he has caught he replies, "don't know. It's got fur, four legs, little bit o' meat," showing that the only thing he is interested in that moment is a meal ("A Burning Dog"). Stafford cooking his own meat is not seen as a good idea by all other Marines, but the comments do show the camaraderie between them, "the fuck is wrong with you, dog? What is it with you white boys? Leave you alone for 10 minutes, you go all *Lord of the Flies* and shit" ("A Burning Dog"). The lack of sleep is shown in the series, but for obvious reasons this only becomes more apparent in the later episodes. The Marines constantly have to wake each other up and get by on 45 minutes of sleep before they are disturbed again. While some are able to deal with the lack of sleep quite well, others such as Cpl. Person live on Ripped Fuel or other energy pills. The quiet in between combat is present in the book, but it is comes across better on screen. There are no noises that would not be there in Iraq and often it is simply silent. The only music present in the series are the ones the men provide themselves by constantly singing songs from for instance Avril Lavigne.

## 5.6 No Glorification

Like the book, the series is set on not glorifying the war. The series is filled with shots of dead bodies that are found along the road and bloodied corpses in the cities and car wrecks. The conditions the Marines have to operate under are not the only example that add to the disillusion of war with viewers. It can be found in the reactions of the Marines to the horrors they see around them as well and in the comparisons with previous wars. Sgt. Espera compares the way the invasion of Iraq is going with his experiences in Afghanistan, "it sure isn't Afghanistan. Any of us had been running our teams in that AO, we sure as shit wouldn't have dropped a bomb on that village like they did this morning" ("A Burning Dog"). There are many instances in which Marines shoot civilians, either accidentally or because everyone

is declared hostile according to their Rules of Engagement. The reactions that are shown do not dive into their psyche, there are no thoughts that are narrated on screen or shots of them working through it with a psychologist or fellow team members. What is shown are the lost expressions on their faces and long shots of the Marines while dead children are carried away. It is clear that war and combat effect the Marines negatively, especially towards the end in "A Burning Dog" when Cpl. Walt Hasser fires a shot at an approaching vehicle and kills a civilian:

Sgt. Colbert: Fuck, Walt! You didn't even fire a warning shot. That was a wounding shot, motherfucker!

Cpl. Hasser: The car kept coming.

It is clear to see that Hasser suffers from PTSD and while it is not discussed, it is not hidden either. The series shows that Hasser is struggling with his actions and his emotions. Following episodes show him being more silent than usual, leaving his weapons on the ground, being distracted, and having trouble writing up the shooting. Another good example of this is the video diary. While at first it shows the happy and excited faces of the Marines, it later shows images of the horrors they faced during the invasion. The Marines are not able to look at the images for a very long time and one by one they leave the room. This demonstrates that the Marines are definitely aware of the horrors they have seen and have not quite processed everything, nor do they take pleasure in it. This scene is not in the book as Wright has already left for the United States, but is a very effective and powerful scene in the series. The series, though it is fiction, stays close to reality and wants to truthfully represent the experience of the Marines. By not glorifying the war the series has accomplished that.

## 5.7 Conclusion

The HBO series of *Generation Kill* shows that the producers and the actors have done their utmost best to make the series as faithful as possible to the book. Actors have been instructed in such a way that they will react like Marines and the equipment and vehicles have been made in the likeness of the real ones. Though the experience as viewer is quite different than the experience as reader in terms of introduction to the situation and the characters, many other elements such as the mundane and images and effects of war have been aptly translated to the screen. Some have been exaggerated like the officer bashing, which was a lot more intense in the series and gives the audience a different image of the conduct and competence of military officers in command. Elements such as the surroundings and the singing from the Marines come across better on screen than they do in the book due to the visual aspects. Also,



the way Wright is represented in the series, as an observer rather than an active character or as the series' narrator might be even more effective than the book. The style of filming matched the invasion of Iraq with moments of tranquillity and moments of intense chaos, but it nevertheless was able to draw in its audience in the world of the Marines in First Recon.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

By straying from the regular forms of news reporting, both Evan Wright's and HBO's *Generation Kill* have blurred the boundary between fact and fiction about the first weeks of the invasion of Iraq. Evan Wright has done so by choosing the discipline of literary journalism to share the story of the Marines of First Recon Battalion. HBO has done so by wanting to stay as close to the facts as possible, while making a fictional television series. Either way, completely factual or not, both have succeeded in doing what they set out to do. Evan Wright has been able to tell the stories of the Marines, instead of the cold facts that dominate war reporting. *Generation Kill* (2008) has been able to mostly stay true to the experience of the Marines as well as being an incredibly successful miniseries. The following shows just how *Generation Kill* by Evan Wright and the HBO series of the same name blur the boundary between fact and fiction and how an adaptation of a non-fiction work can provide a different perspective to the fidelity debate.

### 6.1 *Generation Kill* (2004)

Because Wright chose to write in the discipline of literary journalism, he has had to severely edit all his notes and shape them into a coherent book. All the editing makes the book read like fiction as it has literary language, foreshadowing, reconstructed scenes and dialogues, and switches between different points of perspective. All these literary techniques, however, are not what sets the book apart from others, nor is it because of these techniques that the truth is shown. Instead the truth lies within the mundane, the day to day activities, and the focus on the Marines. Like Sgt. Eric Kocher said, "every other book you read about the war it's telling about how some platoon commander led his guys to victory, it's all bullshit" ("The Making Of"). This is exactly what Wright tries to avoid. While the officers and commanders are mentioned, they are in no way placed above the other Marines, instead they are secondary figures compared to Wright's main subject: the Marines of First Recon Battalion's Bravo Company. John Hartsock has said that literary journalism's most important characteristic is that the focus is completely on the subject and in this Evan Wright has succeeded (41). As said by David Simon, executive producer of *Generation Kill*, "it doesn't reflect a glossy heroism when he writes about them. It is more honest about their mistakes, it's honest about their foibles, it's honest about war. But it's very committed to capturing them" ("The Making Of"). Like *There Are No Children Here* informed the heart *Generation Kill* does the same ("After the Ghetto"). It teaches about the invasion of Iraq, and it introduces the reader to many

people that shock, move, and inspire. While Wright's book is a work of non-fiction, it is a work of omission and strategic editing. It does not involve everyone and not all people are given equal time and covering. That part of objectivity cannot be found in this work. The book describes two stories: the experiences of Bravo Two and their closest team mates and Wright's experience of combat. These stories are accurate and honest and let the ordinary triumph over the glamorous (Bak and Reynolds 2). Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2004) has been edited, it is full of events and people that would have been left out in mainstream journalism, it is entertaining and contains literary techniques but is not fiction, and most importantly it shows reality.

## 6.2 *Generation Kill* (2008)

At first sight, the HBO adaptations seems to be closer to reality than the book due to its documentary style of filming and the position of the reporter. The reporter is not present for the first half of the first episode which puts the complete focus on the Marines. This also implies that the writer has not edited these conversations and events. After the introduction of the reporter, his role remains a perfect representation of the Wright in the book: at first as quiet observer and later as collector of stories, but always in the background. The truth is harder to distinguish from fiction in the series as the series is fiction. The series has done a remarkable job in giving the mundane as large a role in the series as it has in the book, which is risky because a fictional series is judged mainly on its entertainment value. The producers have made a tremendous effort to stay as true to Evan Wright's account as possible, but there are alterations. Some alterations have been on the receiving end of criticism, such as the officer bashing. Then again, the surroundings and the function of the reporter have come across more effectively on screen. In the series the audience is given less explanations at the beginning, characters or terms are not explained like they are to the reader. In contrast, the series cannot allow the grooming standard to be a big issue without deeper reasons and the character Sixta that enforces them. Therefore, this is given more attention in the series while it is simply accepted in the book. The incompetence of the officers is exaggerated in the series. This is the biggest issue for the Marines that saw the series afterwards. Not many events made up for entertainment value only, but the intensity or way of portraying a situation has been varied. This means that it is hard to tell where the truth ends and the exaggeration or the understatement begin. The blurring of fact and fiction is what happens in the adaptation of non-fiction works, though. While Sara Brinch wrote that the adaptation of non-fiction works extremely limit the way a story can be brought to the screen, it is certainly possible to stay

creative in this process (226). Like Linda Hutcheon suggests, film makers will have to "simplify but. . . also amplify and extrapolate" instead of creating new situations (109-10). Because of the simplification, exaggeration, and extrapolation, it is only in the responses of the Marines that were present in Iraq themselves that an audience is able to find a boundary between the fiction and reality. This is why extras such as making of's or interviews with these Marines are so important in determining what is fact and what is fiction.

### 6.3 Non-Fiction Adaptations in the Fidelity Debate

Concerning the fidelity debate, the adaptation of *Generation Kill* clearly show the importance of staying true to not only the original non-fiction work, but especially to the people who form the subject of that work. These are not merely characters, but representations of actual human beings. Large inconsistencies with the original work are bound to be picked up by the audience and by the people who are represented by the characters. The idea put forward in adaptation studies is that staying faithful to a source would limit creative freedom is not applicable in the case of *Generation Kill* (Vidal 1; Brinch 226). The fact that the series operates without a narrator and that it has interesting camera angles and motions gives the makers of the series plenty of room to express their creativity within the chaos of combat and the calm interludes. Director Susanna White is very satisfied with the layers and complexity that can be found in the HBO adaptation: "You think you're getting a war movie, but you get something that is quite confusing at times because it makes you laugh. It makes you feel tremendous sadness for what's going on. Above all, it makes you understand the complexity of what went on" ("The Making Of"). It seems that in the case of non-fiction adaptations, it might not be such a good idea to dismiss fidelity as an important guideline. Film makers can be creative in their way to tell a story, while staying faithful to a source. In non-fiction adaptations the characters are based on real people and they can be negatively influenced by large changes in the storyline. Especially when the subject matter is as controversial as the Iraq War. It does mean that the film or series should stay as close to reality as possible and that it does honour to the people whose lives are on display.

### 6.4 Further Research

In the adaptation of *Generation Kill* it is important to stay true to reality and to the people the work is inspired by. Still, the series has put its own spin on the characters and the surroundings. This own spin is created by exaggeration, simplification and changes in perspective and camera work. For further research other adaptations of works of literary

journalism could be analysed, such as the work *There Are No Children Here* and its 1993 film adaptation, to see if they use the same techniques to stay creative within the boundary of reality. What could also be examined is if entertainment value is seen as more important than staying true to the real life story and the people that are its inspiration. Other avenues that could be explored are comparisons between *Generation Kill* (2008) and the miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2011) in their representations of life in combat as well as the glorification of war.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Kevin Dwyer wrote that "true stories are never quite true, and adaptations of true stories are even less so," but even though a work of literary journalism can not cover the whole truth, it is able to tell a part of the truth (49). A part that might not incorporate everything that happened in a situation, but that is true nonetheless. Reality just has to be found in between the literary devices that make the book read like fiction. The same goes for its adaptations, but the difference is that while those are often still rooted in the truth, they are classified and meant as fiction. This does not mean that events in the adaptation are imagined or altered. It means that the truth often has to be found within simplifications or exaggerations. The fact that this is sometimes hard can be seen in *Generation Kill*, but it does make a case for not dismissing fidelity as a factor on which a non-fiction adaptation should be evaluated. Reality is not always explained, and does not operate in the same logical steps that are expected of fiction. Representing truth can therefore be difficult, especially when it is wrapped in literary techniques or fiction. Or as Mark Twain said, "truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities, truth isn't" (qtd. in Kiskis xliii).

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