

**BOOK REVIEW**

# Strong Ending: A Journey from Combat to Comedy

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Book Review of Audible Audiobook, Strong Ending: A Journey from Combat to Comedy.

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*Strong Ending*, the Audible audiobook is not a book in a literal sense. It is a production, which weaves together interviews, live stage performance, and commentary from scholars to tell the story of how stand-up comedy offers a modality for healing and growth for veterans. The production is narrated by Mary Louise Parker, an actress whose tone and cadence allow for a natural flow between comedic moments and a frank discussion of veterans' struggles with injury, depression, and PTSD. The production is centered upon the experiences of Comedy Bootcamp participants.

Comedy Bootcamp is a stand-up comedy class offered by the Armed Services Arts Partnership in the Washington, D.C. area. The story focuses on the lives of veterans who have graduated from Comedy Bootcamp and follows those completing the class with a culminating stage performance. This production aptly illustrates how veterans use the process of writing and performing comedy as a way to overcome the emotional toll of the mental and physical injuries of war.

This audiobook, with a running length of one hour and 16 minutes, appeals to a broad audience. The production is aimed at the layperson, but can appeal to any listener with its fresh perspective on the healing nature of humor and comedy performance. The production first draws the listener in with the story of Michael Garvey, a veteran who was a sergeant in the Marine Corps. He is a student-turned-teacher at the Comedy Bookcamp. His story begins with a clip of him on stage introducing his service dog, Liberty: "I have him because I got shot twice in Afghanistan and it turns out, if that happens, occasionally they will just give you a sweet dog instead of proper medical care." This recording of his stage performance is then couched within his story of joining the Marines, becoming injured, and his recovery at Walter Reed Medical Center. Garvey shares his story of adapting to the civilian world in an honest, unvarnished manner. His story is real and relatable for those who have returned from combat. His frank account of his recovery and diagnosis with PTSD helps listeners understand what PTSD looks like, in real life and not just text in the pages of the *Diagnostic*

and *Statistical Manual*. The producers tie in excerpts from Dr. Sarah Kleiman from the Boston VA Research Institute, discussing the symptoms of PTSD with Garvey's descriptions of episodes in his life where he struggled with those symptoms. This humanistic approach to the veteran experience depicts the internal struggle endemic to PTSD and transitioning to civilian life. Garvey illuminates this as he describes his internal thoughts while driving his car: "I didn't die in Afghanistan, I'm not going to die because you are fucking texting."

The audiobook also features input from Hollywood heavy hitter and Marine Corps veteran, Rob Riggle. Riggle, who has worked as a writer on Saturday Night Live and as a correspondent for the Daily Show, served 23 years as a Marine before entering the world of comedy. Uniquely positioned to understand the worlds of military service and stand-up comedy, Riggle sheds light on the veteran perspective. He describes how a 22-year-old sergeant is given a great deal of responsibility for the lives and operation of his squad, but when he returns state side, he has trouble getting a job as a valet. This is emblematic of the transition of many service members who find that civilian life is incongruous with military life in that it lacks the same degree of social support and challenging job opportunities (Blackburn, 2016).

Veterans are drawn to the Comedy Workshop for different reasons. Some join for the social activity and others to experience the challenge of writing and performing comedy. Humor, remarks Rob Riggle, comes naturally to veterans, who, during their time in the military, communicated with one another comedically. Humor is peppered throughout military life, beginning with drill instructors using humor to establish their power, during marching songs which mock death, and making stressful situations less threatening (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). The producers of this audio book pull in U.C. Berkeley psychologist, Dacher Keltner to explain the healing power of humor. Keltner describes the positive effect of humor and laughter from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. Humor is described as a way to

communicate a fundamental truth to an audience whose critical faculties are disengaged. This was best described by Michael Garvey's mother when she explained how Michael takes something that really bothers him and turns it into a joke, allowing people to accept the information more readily. This audiobook demonstrates how humor is as valuable a tool in civilian life as it is in the military.

Throughout the production, the terror and fear of performing stand-up on stage is revisited. Riggles describes this fear as a feeling of lack of control: "I've been shot at and I felt I had a lot more control than I did when I was up on stage doing my first five-minute set." Going up on stage is described as terrifying but leading to a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. The stand-up comedy process at Comedy Bootcamp involves group training on comedy skills followed by practice and refining of these skills resulting in a fear-inducing stage performance. Not noted in this production is how this process could be seen as a metaphor to the warrior experience. The process of training for an activity that forces individuals to push themselves beyond fear could be seen as a mission-driven, purposeful exercise that is familiar to military veterans. The production also failed to note the possible relationship between sensation-seeking and stage performance. The latter could satisfy the thrill-seeking need found in many military veterans (James, Strom, & Leskela, 2014).

An important dimension offered in this production is the perspective on the female veteran. Isaura Ramirez was a lieutenant in the Army who describes how stand-up comedy has changed her life. Following her deployment to Iraq, Ramirez suffered from depression and fibromyalgia, two conditions that make getting out of bed each day challenging. She describes how having a stage performance gives her a reason to overcome her pain to be with others. She highlights the sense of connectedness that stand-up can provide, "People are with you right now, they are laughing." The connection and sense of accomplishment seems even more important when Rajeev Ramchand, senior behavioral scientist at the Rand Corporation, highlights that women

have unique experiences in the military and are at risk for suicide and PTSD.

This audiobook packs in a lot in under an hour and a half. I would recommend this listen to veteran scholars, practitioners working with veterans, and most importantly, veterans themselves. The main message of this audiobook is that humor can be used to share information in a palatable, accessible way, creating a community between the speaker and the listener. This audiobook invites the listener "in" on the joke, drawing her into the veteran community. By laughing along with the veterans quoted in this production, a bridge is built between the veteran and the listener. Imagining the harrowing moments of war wrapped in the protective blanket of comedy, the audience can empathize but doesn't feel the need to sympathize. On stage, these veterans display mastery over their experiences, laughing in the face of their greatest fears. One veteran at the graduation performance illustrates this with perfect comedic timing: "I was shot five times, in fact I wouldn't be here today without a little help from above, two Apache gunships just came in."

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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