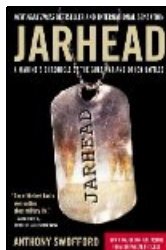


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**Book Review**  
**Jarhead**  
*A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*  
by [Anthony Swofford](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: October 31, 2005

*Jarhead* will soon be released as a Major Motion Picture. Previews for the film, which looked pretty good, prompted me to pick up the memoir that it's based on.

After serving in the Marine Corps as a scout and sniper, Anthony Swofford attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and his book shows some of the marks of the writing-school graduate: present tense, terse sentences, startling word choices (the night sky in the Mojave Desert is "wracked with stars"), and epiphanies that are sometimes too laboriously worked up. At times Swofford wants you know he's a tough Marine, and at others that he's a sensitive literary guy. Digging foxholes in the sand reminds him of Kobo Abe's [The Woman in the Dunes](#).

Still, inconsistency and self-consciousness are understandable in the memoir of a young man: especially when that young man was sent, like so many, to do battle in alien lands when he was barely out of high school. Swofford's insecurities make his story absorbing, and he doesn't spare himself when describing a bar brawl after a friend's funeral, or having his mother iron a Marine Corps decal onto his T-shirt when he was a boy, or what it feels like to piss on yourself when you experience your first rocket attack. He is trained to kill the enemy the old-fashioned way — one at a time, with the enemy in his rifle sights and his goal the "pink mist" of a head shot. Still, when a captain steals the "honor" of calling in an airstrike on a position he located, Swofford's anger is followed by gratitude that he doesn't have the deaths of two soldiers entirely on his conscience.



Jarhead  
Action/Adventure, Drama  
(2005)

By the end of the war, he has seen more than enough death, from the dead man behind the wheel of a bombed jeep, "looking serious, seeming almost to squint at the devastation," to the circle of dead men gathered around a fireplace, their boots "cooked to their feet" and arms hanging at their sides "like the burnt flags of defeated countries." War is terrible, he believes, but there is nothing that can be done about it. "Sorry, we must say to the mothers whose sons will die horribly. This will never end. Sorry."

**About the Reviewer**

*Geoff Wisner* is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).



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—Mahatma Gandhi

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