

# Iraq and back again

## *A Fobbit's tale*

By Frank Soos



David Abrams (right, in sunglasses) and fellow soldiers ready themselves to leave Baghdad and return to the U.S., in December 2005.

**IN 1992, UAF'S GRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM WAS FULL OF AMBITIOUS AND GIFTED WRITERS. AMONG THEM WAS A GUY WHO RUSHED INTO CLASS EVERY WEEK STILL IN HIS WORK CLOTHES — FATIGUES. THAT WOULD BE SERGEANT ABRAMS, A JOURNALIST ATTACHED TO THE 6TH INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT) AT FORT WAINWRIGHT.**

Sgt. Abrams — David — was not a soldier who suddenly took a notion to become a writer. Instead he was a writer who'd chosen the Army as his day job while he pursued a career in literary fiction. He'd already finished an undergraduate degree in English at the University of Oregon, and had written a large chunk of a first novel, a novel he says will remain forever locked in a desk drawer. A person digging around on the Internet can find a picture of a young, newly married David, no GI haircut, a full mop of hair, presenting a check, a payment for an early publication, to the camera. That photograph captures a beginning moment in a life of accomplishments and setbacks.

David began college life in Wyoming, thinking he would be a theater major, an actor. He found parts in locally produced, broadly comic shows where he was often cast in the role of an oafish character. But while he and a friend were making plans to strike out for Denver or even New York to pursue their ambitions on a larger stage, he met a young woman named Jean. He invited her to a play he was in, but she was not especially impressed, so David instead showed her some short stories he'd been working on. "I think you're a better writer than an actor," she told him. He made an abrupt change in direction.



By 1987, David had earned his BA, was married to Jean and was the father of two young boys. And he was working as a cook. The young couple took a chance, pulled up stakes in Oregon and moved to Montana, with no prospects waiting for them there. David got on as a beat reporter for a small paper, *The Madisonian*. He was paid 50 cents per column inch for his words — typical journalists' pay for the time — so David learned how to write a lot of words. From there he moved to *The Livingston Enterprise*, where he climbed up the ladder a few rungs and had the chance to do some feature stories. Sent to cover a photo exhibit, he lucked into an interview with actor Jeff Bridges.

David was writing, but his work didn't pay the bills. Soda pop was a luxury he and Jean couldn't afford.

So he enlisted. Oct. 11, 1988, was his first day of a 20-year career writing press releases and articles for the Army. His third child, a daughter, was born in December of that year. He and his family set out on the typical Army life, moving around the country, including to Fairbanks.

During that time, David caught moments when he could write, at nights or on weekends. That time might have been family time. "I don't really regret writing," David says, "but I regret not having a better balance.

"You're always going to have to take something away from something. We all make choices. It's tough."

On the day the twin towers fell, David, like most of his fellow soldiers, saw a deployment of some sort as inevitable. So 17 years after his enlistment, three years after 9/11, David found himself on a military transport bound for Germany, the first stop on the way to a deployment in Iraq. As a writer going into a war zone, he set in to reading Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, but as far as his own work was concerned,

he planned to use what free time he had to work on a revision of *Dubble*, his graduate thesis novel, and get it in shape for publication.

When he made the last leg of his trip wearing full body armor and clutching his M16, when he at last touched down in Iraq and the rear cargo ramp opened onto a hot desert landscape, David Abrams adjusted his thinking: This strange new world would be the subject that held his

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attention and would be the focus of his writing and his work for the next six years.

The Forward Operating Base (the FOB) was not what David had expected. If he imagined eating MREs, sleeping in a tent, suffering sand and heat, what he found was a large metal building filled with a cubical jungle. The Fobbits worked in air-conditioned comfort while they created PowerPoint demonstrations, ground fresh coffee beans at their desks, joked around like any group of office workers.

This environment occasioned David's attitude of "surprised irony." He was not in the war he had expected, and as a result the novel he wrote is not the war novel people might expect.

*Fobbit* was published to general acclaim in 2012. Writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Christian Bauman found *Fobbit* to be "a very funny book, as funny, disturbing, heartbreaking and ridiculous as war itself."

Yes, funny. A number of books, fiction and nonfiction, have come out of the Iraq war, most all of them brutal and harrowing. Few have as much as a moment of accidental humor. With the war and its attendant atrocities and political failures still fresh in people's minds, nothing could be riskier than treating the war humorously — or more specifically,

satirically. Satire, David says, is "poking holes in what we expect something to be ... letting the air out of the tires."

The satire begins with the title. A Fobbit is a member of the Army, but one stationed safely within the perimeter of a Forward Operating Base. In his year of duty in Iraq, David ventured outside the wire only once, for a ceremony. Fobbits,



**David spoke at a writer's craft talk and gave a public reading at UAF in November 2013.**

like all soldiers, carry guns, but their M16s are rather like the umbrellas civilians might carry when there is a slight chance of rain. They are not fully immune from danger — the occasional mortar round does fall inside the FOB. (One such round proves to be a pivotal event in the course of the novel.) Fobbits live in a world of shillyshallying political maneuvering. Fobbits have a health club, hot showers, fast food and movies. Like hobbits, perhaps their distant kin, the Fobbits are "reluctant to go beyond their shire." [See excerpt on page 12.]

Lieutenant Colonel Eustace Harkleroad is the very model of Fobbitry. His bulging excess weight tests the fabric of his uniform. He's given to nosebleeds at times of stress, and he writes long, self-aggrandizing emails home to his mother. Once

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**Excerpt from *Fobbit*:**

They were Fobbits because, at the core, they were nothing but marshmallow. Crack open their chests and in the space where their hearts should be beating with a warrior's courage and selfless regard, you'd find a pale, gooey center. They cowered like rabbits in their cubicles, busied themselves with PowerPoint briefings to avoid the hazard of Baghdad's bombs, and steadfastly clung white-knuckled to their desks at Forward Operating Base Triumph. If the FOB was a mother's skirt, then these soldiers were pressed hard against the pleats, too scared to venture beyond her grasp.

Like the shy, hairy-footed hobbits of Tolkien's world, they were reluctant to go beyond their shire, bristling with rolls of concertina wire at the borders of the FOB. After all, there were goblins in turbans out there! Or so they convinced themselves.

Supply clerks, motor pool mechanics, cooks, mail sorters, lawyers, trombone players, logisticians: Fobbits, one and all. They didn't give a shit about appearances. They were all about making it out of Iraq in one piece.

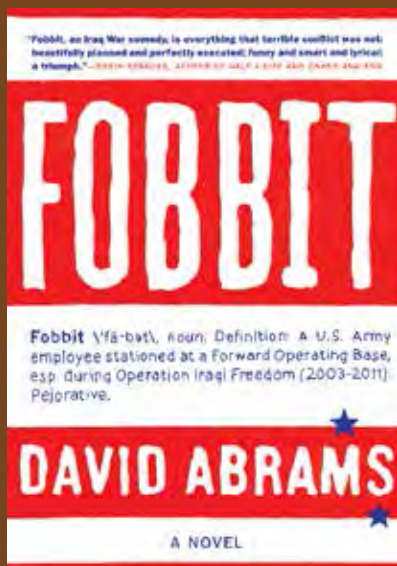
Of all the Fobbits in the U.S. military task force headquarters at the western edge of Baghdad, Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr. was the Fobbitiest. With his neat-pressed uniform, his lavender-vanilla body wash, and the dust collected around the barrel of his M16 rifle, he was the poster child for the stay-back-stay-safe soldier. The smell of something sweet radiated off his skin—as if he bathed in gingerbread.

Gooding worked in the public affairs office of the Seventh Armored Division, headquartered in one of Saddam Hussein's marbled palaces. His PAO days were filled with sifting through reports of Significant Activities and then writing

press releases about what he had found. His job was to turn the bomb attacks, the sniper kills, the sucking chest wounds, and the dismemberments into something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs. No one wanted to read: "A soldier was vaporized when his patrol hit an Improvised Explosive Device, his flesh thrown into a nearby tree where it draped like Spanish moss." But the generals and colonels of the Seventh Armored Division all agreed that

the folks back home would appreciate hearing: "A soldier paid the ultimate sacrifice while carrying out his duties in Operation Iraqi Freedom." Gooding's weapons were words, his sentences were missiles.

As a Fobbit, Chance Gooding Jr. saw the war through a telescope, the bloody snarl of combat remained at a safe, sanitized distance from his air-conditioned cubicle. And yet, here he was on a FOB at the edge of Baghdad, geographically central to gunfire. To paraphrase the New Testament, he was *in* the war but he was not *of* the war.



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the character of Harkleroad came into David's head, the novel began to take shape. David says Harkleroad's many emails almost wrote themselves. The novel was off and running.

Sgt. Chance Gooding Jr. is among the subordinates who must try to do their jobs under Harkleroad's feckless command. Gooding, though, is a different sort of Fobbit. While others play video games, stream ballgames from the States on their computers or watch pornography, Gooding reads Cervantes and Dickens. He is not so different from his creator. David has admitted, with a bow to Flaubert, "Chance Gooding, c'est moi." Gooding keeps a journal, and David has acknowledged that many of Chance Gooding's musings are close variations on his own.

Gooding maintains a cool, ironic distance on all around him. That distance probably began for David himself when he enlisted. "I joined the Army as this guy who was writing short stories. I joined as this guy who was separate from what he was becoming a part of, and that just intensified when I got over to the war zone."

It is through Gooding's eyes that readers see some of the most absurd elements of the press releases he must write for the public affairs office, press releases bland and evasive that still must be vetted by the chain of command before they can be offered to the public.

While Gooding reflects that dead soldiers "are objects to be loaded onto the back of C-130s somewhere and delivered like pizzas to the United States," he cranks out the same boilerplate release: "A soldier paid the ultimate sacrifice while carrying out his duties in Operation Iraqi Freedom."





Photo courtesy of David Abrams.

**As public affairs officer at Task Force Baghdad headquarters, Abrams was responsible for, among other things, writing press releases, managing a photo library, answering media questions, editing a biweekly internal newspaper and “fixing paper jams in the office printer.”**

When he arrived in Iraq with a stack of empty notebooks to fill, David planned to simply capture the details of what he expected to be a life-changing experience. It was that, to be sure. But at some point, David began to see how the material in his journals could be made into a novel.

His next posting — as it turned out, his last — was at the Pentagon, where he was a “geographic bachelor,” his wife and kids staying in Georgia. Living alone, when he should have had plenty of time to work developing his novel, he found he had let the project lapse. David determined to get up early one morning, 5 o’clock, and spend an hour on the manuscript before doing his physical training and heading for work. He tried it, and he had a productive morning with his manuscript. Energized and reconnected to his project, he got up early the next morning and the next. *Fobbit* was beginning to take shape.

Once he was out of the Army but still working a full-time job, David found he needed to get up earlier still to find working time for the novel. Three-thirty became — and still is — his wake-up time for writing. As he worked along, he began to feel a sense of urgency to get the novel out in the world. His timing was excellent. *Fobbit* entered the literary world alongside other well-regarded Iraq war novels:

Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, followed by Lea Carpenter’s *Eleven Days* and Roxana Robinson’s *Sparta*.

When seen in the context of these books offering varying takes on our recent wars, David is one writer in a community of writers. His most immediate

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community might be that of his fellow writers of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another significant audience is the many people in the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force who served there. David’s satire bites harder on commissioned officers than on enlisted people, but both groups seem to have found *Fobbit* to their liking. Allowing for the hyperbole necessary in satire, even some public affairs staffers told David that he pretty much got it right. His favorite critique, though, came from a soldier in Afghanistan who wrote in an email that he and his buddies were passing *Fobbit* around — while on guard duty — and enjoying it thoroughly.

*Fobbit* will be among those books that, as decades go by, people will turn to in order to place the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in a historical context. After a reading from the novel in Fairbanks last November, David was asked how he wanted it to be read. He replied that his initial intent was to write a book that would be as apolitical as possible. But he had to face facts. “Who am I kidding? I didn’t write an apolitical novel.” His judgment, at least in the short run, is that the war was a mess of politics, bureaucracy and red tape, with those who served doing the best they could.

Beyond the community of fellow soldiers (and perhaps the narrower community of fellow Fobbits), David is an active and activist member of a much larger, continent-size community of writers maintained through his weekly blog, *The Quivering Pen*. Living in Butte, Mont., away from New York — still thought to be the center of the literary universe — David’s solution has been to bring the community to him.

*The Quivering Pen* gives David a chance to explore and celebrate his various reading interests, and has proven to be a vehicle for David to build a network of literary friendships. David is the son of a preacher, and when his father moved the family from the East Coast to Wyoming and a new congregation, he found that the friendships among his classmates were already formed. Besides, he was the preacher’s kid, stuck under a halo whether he wanted it or not. So he accepted his isolation and took to reading. Looking back on those days, David recognizes that he was also learning something important from his father: Each Sunday sermon was

a carefully crafted 20-minute essay.

Through all the hurrah surrounding the publication of *Fobbit* and the accompanying disruptions in his work schedule, David has continued to produce new work. Lately that work has been in the form of short stories. His stories can be found in the Iraq and Afghanistan war anthologies *Home of the Brave: Somewhere in the Sand* and *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, as well as a more broadly conceived volume, *Visiting Hours*. These stories will lead to his own collection — with luck — soon.

Meanwhile, *Dubble*, that novel project put on hold when David was deployed to Iraq, is back on his desk for another round of revisions. *Dubble* is the story about a star-struck dwarf who sets out to make his mark in Hollywood. He finds work as a stunt double for an obnoxious child actor. Informed by work of the classic Hollywood director Preston Sturgis — a fine satirist himself — *Dubble* is, like *Fobbit*, a serious story wrapped in wildly humorous episodes.

In his graduate student days, David wrote a wonderfully imagined short story, “Providence,” about a freakishly deep fissure in the earth on a Georgia farm, converted to a state park. That story was accepted by *Esquire*, among the most prestigious venues for serious short fiction. That acceptance was a significant mark of distinction for any writer, especially for a guy who had not yet completed his degree.

When he got the call from his agent relaying the happy news, he was at work in his public affairs office. David, not wanting to do personal business on Uncle Sam’s time, hung up and quickly stepped into the hall to call her back on the pay phone. Fifteen years before the publication of *Fobbit*, he thought the appearance in *Esquire* meant his literary star had

risen; he’d leave the Army when the current term of his enlistment expired and live the life of a writer. It didn’t quite

**“It’s been a 30-year train chugging down the tracks, and it finally pulled into the station.”**

happen then. (Neither did his graduate career: a combination of Army moves and procrastination meant he didn’t get his master’s degree from UAF until 2004.)

That first agent did not see the marketing potential in *Dubble*, and at the time, short story collections were not strong sellers. In David’s words, a story collection looked like “moldy bread to agents; they didn’t want to touch it.”

Now, despite the success of *Fobbit*, David is still working a full-time, 40-hours-a-week job in public affairs for the Bureau of Land Management. It’s a better situation than his Army job, less red tape and without the burden of a chain of command second-guessing his every sentence. He is his own one-man shop. His BLM boss has been flexible and generous in granting David time off to promote his book, and

**Homecoming, with Jean and their daughter, Kylie: “One of the ... happiest days of my life.”**

colleagues who know about his literary pursuits have been supportive.

Through steady hard work, David has made himself a fully enfranchised member of the literary world, in love with the wonder of well-told stories, whether his own or others’. He realizes his short story collection and the novel *Dubble* may or may not get into print or find the same level of acclaim. Undaunted, philosophical

about the good luck and bad luck that has informed his writing career so far, David says, “It’s been a 30-year train chugging down the tracks, and it finally pulled into the station.”

Still, being a writer means being something of a professional fatalist. What you did in your last novel or story or poem is no use in writing the next thing. You’re always starting from scratch, always accepting that rejection is part of the deal. Like every writer, David would like to see the day when his day job would be doing his own work — writing more stories and novels. But he worries the abundance of freedom would not necessarily translate into the discipline needed to spend seven hours at his desk. Given all he has accomplished in the bits of time he managed to grab for himself over the years, that seems an unlikely outcome.

So until his dream job becomes his day job, David Abrams still wakes up at 3:30 every morning in the cold dark, sitting at his desk, crafting another story to tell. ■

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Professor Emeritus Frank Soos taught English and creative writing at UAF for 18 years. He takes considerable pleasure in witnessing the success of his students in the literary world.



Photo courtesy of David Abrams