

DON'T TREAD ON ME

A Suggested Reading Companion Novel

by Dave Connis

ABOUT THE BOOK

Sixteen-year-old Levi lives in the ever-shrinking neutral zone of the second civil war, on a farm harvesting cash crops for military rations. When his town is swallowed into the borders of the Western Forces, he's shipped off to the front lines, leaving everything behind.

Seventeen-year-old Joss has never known anything but the Eastlands. Born in a house on the Mason-Dixon line, he's been raised to fight for the restoration of a long-forgotten nation. His grandpa, a retired general, and his dad, an active general, and now him, a newly promoted platoon Captain.

In a meeting orchestrated by the bloody injustices of war, the boys are thrown together when they're forced to kill an innocent civilian. With nothing but the idea that there has to be a better way, the boys desert the war. Traveling the closely monitored northern path of the neutral zone, known as Deserter's Corridor, they stumble on an old limestone mining tunnel, and build the first library without war-side bias since the beginning of the conflict, bringing together literature and cultural items from underground artifact dealers.

As they attempt to fuse the splintered world back into one, Levi and Joss suddenly find themselves leading a new movement. With an army at their command, they become enemies of *both* sides of the war. When the neutral zone is declared forfeit, the war threatens to unravel everything they've worked for... and they must decide what ideals are worth their lives.

THE COMPANION & COMPARATIVE TITLES

DON'T TREAD ON ME is a proposed companion novel to Dave Connis' *Suggested Reading*.

The interplay between *Suggested Reading* and *Don't Tread on Me* can be compared to books like Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* and *Carry On*; the former inspiring the latter. A similar relationship would be if John Green ever wrote the fictional book, *An Imperial Affliction* from *The Fault in Our Stars*.

DETAILED SYNOPSIS

After years of a growing political divide, the United States of America found itself on the brink of a second civil war. To keep the nation from falling into violence, the Civil Separation Bill was passed, slicing the USA in half. The bill allowed the states to form into new nations, the Eastlands, the Grace States, and the Westlands, the Free States. To keep the two separated, the Civil Separation Bill set aside the state of Armistice, a strip of land stretching from the edge of southern Texas all the way up to the northern edges of North Dakota, to serve as a buffer between the new nations.

Sixteen-year-old Levi Granting and his younger sister, Kat wake up at three AM every morning to help their parents tend the family farm in Abilene, Texas, a city that was originally inside the borders of the state of Armistice. Since the founding of Armistice, Levi and the other residents of Abilene have watched the state shrink from its original size of 631,000 square miles to 223,000 square miles, less than half its size, as the opposing nations have slowly occupied cities within the buffer state as a show of force and power.

Military clashes became more frequent as cities within Armistice became contested areas, constantly switching from one nation's control to another. This leads the Armistice to be split into North and South, bisected by a channel called Hell's Graveyard. On the northern edge of South Armistice, Abilene's neutrality is one itchy trigger finger away from being swallowed into the war zone.

When Levi wakes up to the rumble of tanks and footfall of troops in his backyard, and he knows that the borders of Armistice have finally shifted out of Abilene's favor.

He knows what comes next, it's come for most of his friends, and he's made a plan for this

night. He won't be taken. But it all happens faster than he could imagine, and suddenly Westland soldiers are in the house. Him and his sister are thrown into a truck and sent to a training facility to be made into Westland soldiers.

Seventeen-year-old Joss Lees has never known anything but the Eastlands. Born in a house right below the Mason-Dixon line, he comes from a long line of famous Eastland infantry, his grandpa, a retired general. His dad, an active general, and now him, a newly promoted platoon captain. As his first command, he's sent to lead a platoon in Hell's Graveyard. When he arrives, he's thrown right into the war with no preparation, and horrible orders from his commanding officer. When and his entire platoon dies, and he barely escapes, he's used as a scape goat to protect the commanding officer and imprisoned for lack of competence.

After basic training in Colorado, Levi and Kat are sent to a battered platoon on the frontlines of Dallas. After their communications system is destroyed in a battle to regain control of Wichita, Levi is ordered to run back to command and request backup. On his way back, he's shot in the shoulder, then taken as a POW.

When Levi is thrown into Joss's prison cell, Joss is far from happy about having a Westlander boy in there with him. He makes a fuss, yelling at the guards to treat him with some "damn dignity," when Levi breaks down and starts crying. Joss snaps at him to shut up, but decides to give the boy some space to grieve and feel horrible, something Joss was never given.

In the middle of the night, the two boys are dragged from their prison cell into a room. Inside, a woman is tied to a chair. She's not wearing any colors, showing no affinity towards either side. Joss barks questions at the officers standing over their shoulders, and they simply tell them, "One person can go free."

Before they can finish the instructions, Joss grabs a rifle, aiming it at the woman, ready to prove himself to his superiors, but Levi yanks it from his hands, throwing it on the floor, screaming at Joss, “What is there to prove? That you’re just as evil as the rest of them?” A commanding officer places a second gun in the middle of the room, and tells them, “If any of you want a second chance, then be the last alive.” The officer unties the woman, then leave the three prisoners—Levi, Joss, and the woman—alone.

Levi and Joss rush for the gun, Levi to keep Joss from killing anyone, Joss still wanting to prove himself. After a scuffle where no one comes out on top, the boys realize that the woman is still sitting in the chair even though she’s untied.

“If you play their games, you lose” she says. “It’s all panem et circenses, boys. That’s it.”

The two stared at her. “Bread and circuses. Food and games, dears. That’s all it is. Illusions. We strip away all the things that define humanity and call it the right thing to do. Literature. Art. Disagreement. It’s all gone.”

“What are you talking about?” Joss asks.

The woman recites a poem, and the door behind them opens. The woman grabs both boys by the collar and pulls them close, “Great Bend. Train Depot. Do not disappoint me.”

The officer rushes into the room. The mysterious woman is shot, and the boys fight back. Chaos breaks out in the room as soldiers and officers swarm in to contain them. Joss and Levi take cover behind a metal table. Just when Levi decides to stand up, to go out fighting, the building rattles and shakes, explosions shuddering through the walls. Suddenly, everything is on fire and debris is pouring down from the ceiling. The boys bolt towards the exit, empty of officers and soldiers. Together, they escape their prison and find themselves in the middle of a

battle in the streets of Wichita Falls. They run north. Out of Hell's Graveyard, towards the neutral zone. Towards North Armistice.

They leave the battle behind by climbing through backyards, war-torn industrial complexes, and crumbling rural roads, eventually making camp for the night in an abandoned ranger station at Black Kettle National Grasslands. Once they have a second to catch their breath, neither boy knows what to say to the other, despite the fact that they each saved each other's lives. So they simply go to bed.

Levi wakes up later the next morning to the sound of bombs exploding in the distance. Joss is gone. Levi is almost relieved that the boy left. He lays on the dusty floor of the ranger station, thinking about Kat with every bomb. He wants to save her, but he has no idea how, but feels like there may be an answer in the woman he'd met the night before. All she'd said about the war, the poem she'd recited, her charge, "Great Bend. Train Depot. Don't disappoint me," it all ran through his mind, and had been since he'd laid down to sleep. Who was she? Why was she a prisoner if she wore no colors? The questions flooded him as he listened to the distant cough of bombs. Finally, he stands and looks for a map, he traces his finger along highway and finds Great Bend, Kansas, and he decides that's his new destination.

He finds a small backpack in a closet, and then loots the ranger's station for anything useful: a map, a first aid kit, scissors, and etc. Just as he's about to leave, Joss returns, carrying guns, ammo, and what looks like a giant duffle bag full of food and supplies.

"What are you doing?" Levi asks.

"What are *you* doing?" Joss asks.

Levi tells him that he was planning on heading towards Great Bend to find some answers

about the woman. Joss nods and then begins to sort the supplies he brought.

And the two set off on what should be a week-long trip toward Great Bend.

After sneaking through the borders of Armistice, they stay off main roads and cut through field after field. The boys walk silently, still unsure if they can really trust each other. For two nights, they camp in the forests surrounding small creeks and streams. On the third day, they run into the Cimarron River, and need to cross using a bridge. Against Levi's gut, they decide to stop for supplies in the town across the river, Freedom, Oklahoma. In a small general store, they pick up some matches, some granola bars, and a few other odds and ends when the store is suddenly filled with smoke. Bullets start to fly everywhere.

Levi and Joss try to shoot back, but there's so much smoke everywhere that they can't see where the bullets are coming from. Suddenly, a man has Joss in his arms, a gun to his head, telling Levi that the bounty is for the boys dead or alive and that he'd prefer to bring them in alive. Levi puts down his gun and raises his hands, when suddenly the owner of the store appears behind the bounty hunter with a shotgun and tells him to get out of Freedom before he calls the cops.

He leaves, giving the boys a warning that they'll see him again.

The store owner tells him he recognizes them from the Westlands TV programs. The Westlands is saying they're responsible for killing a high-ranking Westlands officer, and the leader of the ROA, the Rebels of Armistice. The owner looks at them for explanation, and Levi, against Joss's wishes, tells him. The man nods, lowers his shotgun.

"Come with me." He says.

The boys hesitantly agree and hop into the man's old truck. He brings them to his old

farmhouse at the end of a long dirt road. He tells them they're gonna stay for the night, and, in the morning, he'll drive them to Great Bend. But, they've gotta make up for destroying his store, and the old man puts them to work on his farm. Throughout the day, they learn things they never knew about the war, but, most importantly, how the woman from the prison, the leader of the ROA, was his daughter.

At dinner, Levi asks the man about the poem she recited, and the man smiles, "Walt Whitman." He goes and grabs a book from his shelf, a tattered and torn copy of *Leaves of Grass* and tosses it to Levi. "Banned in the West and East. Too many ideas. Too many things that might make people think something that's different." Joss and Levi both prickle at the statement.

"What do you mean, 'banned?'" Levi asks.

And the man tells them that the states have completely banned anything that doesn't agree with their morals, ideologies, or in some cases, if the author just has a storied past.

"Why do you think we've been fighting so long?" He asks. "No one knows how to disagree without a gun."

That night, Levi can't sleep. Again. Too busy thinking about Kat, about what they'll find in Great Bend tomorrow. About books, and everything else the old man said. About Joss who hadn't anything outside of "thanks for dinner." About his world and if he wanted it to be the way it was.

To calm his mind he reads *Leaves of Grass*.

The old man wakes the boys up when it's still dark out. He points toward the kitchen and tells them, "Get you some coffee and meet me in the truck." In the truck, they're silent, so the old man turns up his radio, which, isn't playing state-approved music, but something else.

“Patsy Cline,” the man says, seeing the boys faces. “Banned, I’m guessing.”

The old man doesn’t notice, but Joss begins to cry.

Levi reads Leaves of Grass.

An hour and a half later, they cross into Great Bend. The old man pulls into an old train station and throws the truck in park.

“If you think you can get out, go in and see what’s going on and then walk away from this, you can’t,” the old man says. “You boys can just stay in this truck, and I’ll drive you back. You live with me for a while. Let the world and the bounty hunters forget about you. Make new lives.”

But neither can walk away from this. The old man bids them farewell, but not before gifting his book to Levi.

Once inside the train station, they find something they didn’t expect... a bookshelf filled with books neither of them had ever seen. They both grab a book and read for the rest of the day, not saying a word to each other. That night, they make camp in the train station. Joss starts talking to Levi about books, all the ones that had shaped his life. Levi has barely heard of any of them. Levi tells Joss about books that shaped his life, and the same is true about Joss, he’s heard of none of them. Joss begins to wonder what his entire family had fought for? Themselves? An idea? The boys talk, they talk into the night about ideologies, philosophy, and family, but they end in an argument in which they tell each other “you’re the reason there’s a war.” Levi storms off to take first watch for the night.

Levi climbs into the rafters above the only door not boarded up. He seethes, wondering if he should’ve been a Westlander all along. Eventually, he drifts off to sleep but wakes up to

shouting not long after. He runs along the tops of the train station rafters, hidden in the dark, until he finds that Joss has been surrounded by strange looking soldiers. No colors. Just armed. For a moment, Levi wonders if he should just let whatever happens happen, but decides to intervene.

“Put your guns down and I won’t shoot you,” he shouts. “We’re not here to make trouble. No one else has to die.”

A soldier shouts back, “I disagree with that.”

“Well, then I guess I have to kill you,” Levi says.

The soldier laughs. “Well, aren’t you just a pretty little part of the system?”

“Who are you?” Levi asks. “Why don’t you wear colors?”

After a few more tense moments, Levi and Joss discover that the soldiers are ROA.

Thinking it’s safe, Levi makes his way to the floor, and it’s then that the ROA soldiers recognize the two boys as the two that killed the last ROA leader. The mood shifts, and a few gunshots are traded before the soldiers knock Levi and Joss out with knockout gas, and take them prisoner.

Joss wakes up in a crude cell with nothing but the clothes on his back. Explosions rumble somewhere nearby. The ceiling shakes, a part of his cell even. Eastern forces are attacking.

Joss works out that he’s been brought to Lincoln, that he must be in the ROA base. Or what’s left of it. The soldier ignores Joss’s explanations of what happened with their leaders, how it wasn’t his fault, and walks out of the room. A few minutes later, a bomb hits directly above him, and the cell collapses even more. The cell bars fall against him and trap Joss in a tiny cave-like hole. The lights flicker out, and suddenly there’s a group of flashlights waving around the darkness. The bars are lifted off him, and he’s taken out of the room, and pulled down a hallway and shoved in a torn-up, sparking, half-collapsed command center. One man stands watching a

big screen filled with multiple video streams, and a flickering map filled with heat spots.

A few moments later, Levi is pushed into the room.

“The city of Lincoln has repelled every single attack from every side who thought they could take it.” The General says. “We’ve stood as the last bastion against men and women who tell everyone what to think and why to think it, and today is the last day.” The man turned around. “Lincoln will fall tonight. We will fall, tonight. The ROA is done.” The man pauses, barks a few commands into a microphone. A loud explosion goes off, and a few of the dots on the heat map disappear, leaving no more than ten.

“You spoke to her. Kassi, before she died, didn’t you?”

Levi nodded, a trickle of blood dripping down his brow. “If that was the rebel leader everyone is saying we killed, then yes. We did.”

“What happened?”

Levi recounts everything, bombs putting periods and pauses in the story where they weren’t meant to be. Levi realizes that Kassi knew that the fall of Lincoln was coming, and so was the end of the ROA. He realizes that she was pleading with them, asking them to take up the cause. To fix it.

“And?” The general says, more dots on the heat map disappearing.

“And what?” Joss says.

The general nods, then waves toward a set of stairs. “Leave then. I won’t have the disgrace of dying next to two people who believe in nothing.”

Joss and Levi look at each other, wondering what to do. Another bomb explodes and some of the command center behind them collapses.

“Go!” The general yells, picking up a pistol from a table and pointing it at them. “Get out. You don’t deserve to be here in the last moments. Get. Out.”

Joss and Levi run out of the ROA base and into the night. The city of Lincoln is on fire, planes still dropping bombs. Everything is torn apart. They attempt to slip through the city, dodging skirmishes between Eastlands and Westlands, shooting back when needed. They make it to the edge of the city as dawn breaks, sneaking past an Eastland’s military border. Just when they think they are in the clear, they run into a patrol of Westland soldiers, moving in to flank the Eastland forces. They hide in a river, and in the agonizing moments of waiting, Levi hears the voice of Kat barking orders. She comes to the bank of the river to see if there’s another path around, standing no less than ten feet from Levi. Levi risks everything to see her.

She almost shoots him, but they hug, and both immediately start crying. The moment doesn’t last long.

“I have to go,” she says. “Any longer and they’ll come looking for me.”

“I’ll find you,” Levi says. “I promise. Just stay alive.”

“Fix this,” Kat says. “Fix this, Levi.”

And she disappears into the night.

Joss walks next to Levi, who, silently, cries for hours. They finally stop and rest in a town called Weeping Water. It’s here Levi discovers an abandoned mining tunnel. With all that had happened to the two boys up until that point, Levi has the idea to start an underground library, a place where all ideas are welcome, where discussions, theories, and concepts could be discussed. A place of learning, with no war side bias. Joss agrees. But they are unsure where to start.

Remembering that there was a bookshelf of books back at Great Bend, they make plans to return

and retrieve them.

The next morning, the boys are listening to a stolen radio before going back to Great Bend and they learn that the ROA has fallen, and that both the Westlands and the Eastlands have retreated from the city of Lincoln, letting it burn as symbol to the rest of the nation of what happens when you try and rebel.

The boys hot wire a truck and make their way back to Great Bend with only a few close calls. There, they gather the books when a bounty hunter, the same one that they'd met before, catches them off guard. Joss is shot in the arm, and Levi tosses his gun to the side in surrender. The bounty hunter, binding their hands, says they're worthless now that the ROA was gone, but he needs the cash, and brings him to an old FedEx truck. He tosses them inside, and brings the bag full of books to the front of the cab. Once their eyes adjust to the dark, they see that they're not alone. Four other people, two women and two men, also sat, hands bound. They know who the boys are immediately.

"Ah," one says, "the boys who destroyed the ROA have been caught like the rodents they are."

"We didn't destroy the ROA," Joss says, "Your leader got caught. We didn't even shoot her."

"Then why are they saying you did?" Another says, which is when Joss and Levi realize they're in a truck with three ROA POWs.

"Because that's what they do," Joss says, "They lie. They lie to keep you fighting."

The truck is silent for the next hour until the same soldier starts to verbally push the boys again. Joss and him go at it, and the soldier, despite his hands being bound, starts to physically

push them around. The other soldiers stand, and right before a brawl begins, Levi tells them what Kassi told them before she died. He tells them about the impact of literature, of books, and that he's come to believe the war is only made worse by cutting off ideas. He tells them what he and Joss plan to do. That they're starting a library, a place where you can read everything. Talk about everything. Disagree. Trade ideas. Books. For a moment, the ROA soldiers are silent, but then the back door opens. An Eastland soldier stands next to the bounty hunter, as the bounty hunter declares what he's hauling. The soldier begins counting the cargo when suddenly the truck is flying sideways.

Everything is ringing as Levi sits up in the grass, thrown from the back of the van. Bullets tear through the air. Bombs explode and the buzz of aircraft fills the sky. The truck is on fire, and no one else has come out. Levi runs over to the truck, pulls everyone out, and then sees the backpack of books on the front seat. He grabs them and jumps off the road as an airplane flies over head, dropping more bombs. Levi rushes back to Joss, as the ROA soldiers run off into their own directions.

Levi helps Joss, who now has a bullet in his arm and a major burn on his leg, stand and they start walking. Across fields, into the night. When Levi can't walk anymore, they collapse in the middle of a field, Levi exhausted, Joss in pain. The two pass out in the field, and are woken by the sound of twig snapping. Levi sits up and scrambles for his gun when he sees that it's one of the soldiers that he'd had pulled from the truck earlier that day.

“Did you mean it?” She asks. “Did you mean it about the library?”

Levi nods.

The woman comes over and reaches out her hand. “The others are waiting in a truck. You two can’t stay out here. Come on, help me with him.”

They pick up Joss and carry him across the field, then put him in the bed of a truck. Levi hops in the back, as well.

The ride back to Weeping Water is long, but eventually they stop and the tarp is pulled off. The woman comes out and asks Levi to get in the cab of the truck and tell them where to go. He does. They hide truck in a nearby forest and then Levi leads them to the mine. Using only a headlamp and a bag of medical equipment, one of the soldiers digs the bullet out of Joss’s shoulders, and treats his leg burn.

The others introduce themselves to Levi and tell him that they’ve got nowhere to go, but they don’t want to stop fighting, and if it was true what Joss and Levi wanted to do, then they wanted to help. Levi agrees, knowing that they’ll need it.

Levi sets the first book of the library, Kassi’s copy of *Leaves of Grass*, on the floor against the wall of the mine. Then he sets out the others from the Great Bend station and then sits there and stares at them.

The next morning Joss has recovered a bit, but there’s no walking around for him. Levi tells him that the three ROA soldiers want to help, and Joss says they can. Joss also asks what the plan is to get more books and to check out books, Levi doesn’t know. Joss starts listing all the things they’ll need for the library. Lights. Tables. Shelves. Do they want people to be able to take them out of the library or not? Do they even want people coming down to the library, potentially jeopardizing the location? Where will they store books until they can catalogue them? Do they need a cataloguing system? They work a few details out, and Joss and Levi delegate tasks among

the ROA soldiers, and they get started building the Library of Armistice.

With the ROA neutralized, Lincoln is quiet. Neither side of the war has made a move to take it as a city, though it is only a matter of time. Using the connection of one of the soldiers, Levi visits a well-to-do arms dealer with a massive network. The meeting starts precarious and tense, but the dealer agrees to help if she's paid. Knowing the library needs the dealer's connections and backing, Levi says they'll figure payment out and the dealer agrees. Levi learns from the dealer that, in order to make the Library happen, he needs to start attending the parties and galas of the rich who have control over a massive blackmarket that runs across the states. The dealer allows him to stay in her mansion, and Levi agrees, realizing that he'll be spending a lot of time traveling back and forth between the mansion and the Library.

Joss, unable to move much because of his leg injuries, directs the building of the library and keeps tabs on all that needs to be done. He also starts writing, writing down all the thoughts he's had about the war, about himself for fighting in it, his story as a son of war. When he's not writing, he reads all the books they've retrieved from the Great Bend train station and then writes about them. One of the soldiers discovers his writings and tells him that the world needs to read it. Joss says, "absolutely not," but the soldier doesn't stop hounding him about it. Finally, as Joss regains mobility, he gives in and says, "Fine. I'll write something and you can do whatever you want with it if you leave me alone."

Levi attends what the Dealer calls a Masquerat party, parties where the rich from all sides of the war gather, wine, and dine in masks, so they can be completely anonymous. He grows his network, but he struggles with finding people who don't write him off once he pitches the idea of

a library. However, a small amount of book donations start coming in, but he has to sell most of them in the blackmarket to pay for the dealer's help.

He struggles to understand why the story isn't connecting with the rich until, one night, realizes that the Masquerats act as somewhat of an intellectual free-for-all who attend. No one adheres to the war side forced ideological lines drawn in the sand. The discourse and ideas flow freely, and he finds himself gravitating towards where those discussions are happening. Levi realizes that this sort of intellectual freedom hasn't gone away, it's stayed alive in the rich circles because they can afford books from the blackmarket, and because they have enough power to clear their name if they are caught. They actively read their collections and, because they are so expensive, view them, and the knowledge that comes with them, as a status symbol.

He returns to the library for a visit, with the idea that a books and knowledge can't be relegated to the rich, but accessible by all, and he and Joss argue about how to get the books to people who want them. They come to an impasse, Joss refusing to allow people to come into the library, Levi wanting to let anyone in if they apply and pass various checks. Instead, the soldiers volunteer to be book runners who take requests and then deliver them around the area.

A few days later, after Joss turns on the radio, the broadcaster recounts the Westland news, and tells a story about a mysterious pamphlet that has caused an uprising in a small town near Wichita. He tells her listeners that, if they see it, to burn it on sight, and, if they have any information about who wrote it to let the proper authorities know. The soldier tells Joss that that was his writing. His words that inspired the people to act. Joss, at first, is mad, but then begins to wonder what it means that he could write people into action.

Levi realizes the way to win people onto his side is to join the ideology debates at the

Masquerats. So he dives himself into studying old books, new books, learning all he can about censorship and the history of the civil war. He begins to appeal to the rich that old democracy was made so that everyone could have access to ideas and that libraries used to stand as beacons to their communities, giving everyone the chance to be learned, and that the hoarding of knowledge is detrimental to society. He also talks about the war-side censorship and what it has done to the nation and the book donations begin to pour in.

At the Masquerats, he becomes known as The Guerrilla Librarian. At one masquerat, a high-ranking Westland officer approaches him and calls him by his name, and Levi recognizes her voice immediately, Kat. They move to a quiet space and talk. She tells him that there's rumors floating around that the war states want to get rid of the neutral zone.

Joss begins writing targeted pamphlets, speaking out against censorship and the ideologies of war. He writes them, the soldiers take them to a ROA-sympathizing printer to get them digitized, and then spread them across the neutral zone. In time, the neutral zone, which had always been at the whims of the West and east, begins to push back. The library begins to explode, there aren't enough book runners to keep up with demand, and with the soldiers busy with book running, Levi and Joss take up some of the donation retrieval work. In the time that has passed, Levi has become good friends with the Dealer, and when she orchestrates a donation that gets her killed, it shocks the Masquerat crowd, and, being her closest friend, they begin to turn to Levi and he spurs them all to action.

One morning, Joss and Levi wake up and hear on the radio that the East and West have declared the neutral zone has been forfeit. Kat had been right, and, suddenly, everything seems lost. He, Joss, and the other soldiers are unsure what to do now that the neutral zone's protection

is completely gone. They decide what they're fighting for the library, and all it stands for, is worth the fight. So they return to their duties.

Because of the threat of the front lines moving into the heart of the neutral zone. The Masquerats stop, so Levi doesn't return to the Dealer's house, which was left to Levi in her will. Because of all that they've learned in their studies, he and Joss decide to start the Armistice Journal, an anonymously written newspaper of revolutionary sentiment and heavy criticism of the East and West polices, all inspired by the books they read. Working with ROA-supporting printers across the Divided States, and using new branches of the Armistice library as distribution points. They include massive chunks of books banned in Eastlands and distribute them there, same with the Westlands. Again, on the war-side radios, the paper and the books start to show up in broadcasts, and Joss and Levi know, if they're not careful, they'll be wanted by both sides again, but they know it is worth it. Levi continues to meet with Kat, and she presses him that, if a rebellion were to ever succeed, it would be now while the sides are distracted with occupying new cities and fighting each other on new fronts.

With houses threatened with bombing, all of the old Masquerat acquaintances begin to donate their books to Levi and Joss, and they receive more books than they know what to do with. Some even give them money to fund their gorilla book-fare efforts. They can start to afford armor for their runners, guns, vehicles. Their network expands across states, and they open new branches of the Armistice library, which also increases distribution of the Armistice Journal.

Before they know it, they're running an operation that spans across the Divided States, supplying books and information to all who need it.

An old friend of the Masquerats finds Levi when he's collecting some donated books in the

city of Lincoln. He tells Levi that a group of them think Levi and Joss should use their influence and operation to restart the ROA and that, if they did, because of their work with the libraries and Armistice Journal, they would have the groundswell of support that the last attempt didn't have.

“The last ROA was a group of ruffians who didn't want to lose their town, what you and Joss have made is a nation who doesn't want to lose their history, their rights, and their nation.”

Levi considers this, especially considering that Kat has been pushing him to take the opportunity, and goes back the Library and brings it up to Joss, they argue about it, of course, and can't decide whether or not they should. Feeling as if the choice isn't their own to make, they put it to a vote, spreading it across the armistice network, letting every donor, book runner, library manager decide.

“We're book people, Joss,” Levi says while they wait for the results. “We've always been book people. Can book people be fighters?”

Joss smiles. “We've always fought for books, haven't we? We've always been fighting for something.”

The results of the vote come back, and the answer is overwhelmingly yes, become a military. Fight back with books, freedom to read, and might. Joss, being the more experienced commander, starts to train and equip commanders with both books and tactical skills. The radio is now offering handsome rewards on information about the new rebel splinter cell. At the threat of death, Levi begins hosting invite-only Masquerats at the Dealers house to bring in money to support the militia. The Masquerats also help bring in information for crippling the West and East forces. Joss starts ordering strategic non-violent attacks on supply lines and military depots, only ever in the night. The support for the ROA continues to grow, but so do the losses. A task

force lead by a man named General Williamson has started to hunt the ROA and is doing a very good job.

With the Armistice Journal and libraries making more educated population, the recognition that choice is an essential part of freedom, and what the stakes are if it is removed, is clearer than ever, and the people themselves begin to demand it. They demand discourse instead of war. The leaders of both sides refuse, stating that the only way to solve the long-standing differences is to win.

With help from Kat and other officers on both sides who are ROA supporters, and the general support of the American people, they draft a plan to attack both capitals at once and demand that the leaders sign a Redecclaration of Independence, which ratifies the separation of the states, and reinstates the freedom of choice.

On the morning of the attack, Levi and Joss are alone in the Library when they get a tip that General Williamson and his troop are on their way to them. They attempt to remove some of the rarest and most important books and intelligence from the library, before the General shows up, but he arrives quickly. The boys are held at gun point, but the radio in the room is playing out the successful ROA attack and General Williamson knows he's lost.

Out of anger, General Williamson shoots both of them. But, as they die, Levi and Joss know that they've done it. And it all started there, with the idea that the power of books and the choice of those books was worth protecting. Though the world is far from stitched together, at least discussion can happen. Lessons have been learned, and going forward, the states must work through their differences, and come to a solution. That democracy isn't democracy without choice. Without the marketplace of ideas. Without arguing. Discussion. Without bad ideas.

Without wonderful ideas. Without books.

And that is worth fighting and sacrificing for.

DON'T TREAD ON ME

Sample Chapters

by Dave Connis

LEVI

Unfortunately, I was a farmhand before I was a son.

JOSS

There's this saying in my family that goes, "We were family before we were soldiers".

LEVI

I let Kat out right under the steeple, then swing around to find a parking spot, driving around craters, and park next to two blackened crispy-fried shells of bombed out trucks.

JOSS

My mom is on my right, my Grandfather on my left, a retired Eastlands general, and my father, a current Eastlands General, is singing *Come Thy Peace of Jesus* in uniform, with the choir. Most of the church is in uniform, and sometimes it feels like the uniform brings us together more than God.

LEVI

The church building barely survived the bombing from the Eastlands, but in Sweetwater, Texas, the spirit don't need a building anyway. That's one of the things I like about God, he doesn't need buildings, he doesn't need tanks, he doesn't need EMPs, cyber-attacks, brown outs, surface-to-air missiles, wartime ideologies, and he *certainly* doesn't take me from my home and force me to fight a war. With him, I was a son before I was a farm hand, and I loved that. I also loved that my parents never came to church. They were too afraid of God. Luckily, they felt that church was a boon to Kat and I's moral development. I guessed that they let us take most of an entire day off from the farm for marketing purposes. With their kids in church, our farm could be billed as a "God fearin'" one.

I comb my hair in the rearview mirror, snip a loose thread popping out from one of my shirt buttons, and then I pull the door handle and shove my weight into the door. It pops open, and I walk across the lot to the door. I shake the Jacob Wottan's hand, the door greeter. Then I tell Annalise Thurman, late-sixties, that she looks beautiful today. I see Kat talking to Andy Aguilar, and his wife, Judith, and join their conversation before sitting down.

The pianist starts playing, and, this Sunday turns into one of those Sundays where all I can do is stare at all the seats that used to belong to my friends, that are now empty.

JOSS

I spot a few of my friends, in uniform. Rhett points to my lapel, then gives me a small round of applause. I nod. She turns back and then keeps singing. I try to ignore the rest of the sanctuary, but I feel like I keep seeing eyes flit in my direction. And it is so distracting and uncomfortable that I want to hide the Captain insignia on my lapel. I want to hide.

Everyone must know about my promotion. That I was given a platoon to command. That we're deploying to Hell's Graveyard tomorrow. I see it in everyone's eyes. The pride. They expect great things of me, and I never thought their expectations would be so crushing, but they are. I feel like I can't breathe. Like the air conditioning has turned off.

I remember my mom didn't cry when she found out her only son was being deployed to the bloodiest place in the war, and I realized that, we may have been a family before we were soldiers, but now, we're a family of soldiers, and, just like the church, the uniform brings us together more than our blood.

I want to take it off.

I want to take it off.

I will die with it on.

LEVI

We are singing *On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand*, when the bombs start going off. The congregation shifts, uneasy, worried, but the pianist just starts playing louder, to drown out the noise. And, then, everyone starts singing louder. Like they mean it. Like they have something to say.

We drown out the war.

For a moment, in these walls that are barely standing, we end the war with words, with beauty, not guns, and I think, maybe, the Spirit really is here.

JOSS

After the service, I say a quick goodbye to everyone that matters, Rhett and a few other members of my Gunnison Military Academy class, and then I go hide in the bathroom.

I can't take another "congratulations".

I don't want to speak "Hell's Graveyard" again.

Everyone here sings about peace, love, but then, we leave, and we go back to war.

LEVI

When the Second Civil War started, and the Neutral Zone was established, the first the war sides agreed on was decommissioning every single public library. That was the first time the residents of the Neutral Zone realized that we hadn't been spared, we'd simply been annexed by two countries and that, eventually, we'd be the rope in a game of tug-of-war.

No one really knows what happened to the books in the libraries. One day, they were there, the next, they weren't. Our church had been bombed once, already. We used to meet in a building that had been standing since the early 1900's, but war is insatiable. Not only does it take life, it takes books, history, everything.

When we lost that building, we rebuilt our steeple from the debris, and moved into the decommissioned library building. It's one big room. We sing. We learn.

Then we eat.

And Kat and I stay for every single minute of it.

JOSS

On the ride home, my dad asks me where I was after the service. Tells me that a bunch of his friends wanted to congratulate me. I can tell he's disappointed. He wanted those moments. The moments of introducing his son as a Captain, only the third Gunnison student to ever graduate as a Captain. We are a family of soldiers.

"I didn't feel good, during the whole service. Had to go to the bathroom as soon as the service was over," I say.

"Diarrhea?" He asks.

"No. Migraine."

My dad nods, but my Grandfather clears his throat.

"Gotta get over that," my grandfather says. "Every Lees man gets migraines. No excuse."

"Yes, sir," I say, sitting up in my seat.

"You'll be fine," my mom adds. "You'll be fine."

LEVI

Church is empty, but Kat and I still fellowship with the smell of Mrs. Aguilar's Carne Guisada. We stay every Sunday, avoiding going home. Avoiding the list of things that will never end. Avoiding my dad. Sometimes I wonder if it'd be easier fighting in the war then running a farm.

I'm sweeping in a corner when I hit a baseboard with the side of the broom. It falls on its face. I hear a, "Good going" from Kat who's on the opposite side of the church. I kneel down and plan to stick it back on there when I notice that the wall doesn't run all the way down to the floor. I stare into the dark void and see a glint of green reflecting in the light. I reach into the space and wrap my fingers around something hard. I pull it out. A book.

"Hey, Kat," I say, "Come here."

She walks over and looks at the thing in my hand. "Leaves of Grass" she says. "Think that's one they tried to get rid of?"

I turn it over in my hands and rub the dust off the cover. "I'm sure it's banned on one of the sides. Who knows which one."

"Yeah, I guess they each are scared of something different."

I flip it open. "Maybe they're scared of the same things and are just taking it out on each other."

"Maybe." She walks back over to her corner and keeps sweeping. "What should we do with it?"

I close it, consider bringing it with me, but then I remember I'm a farm boy, not a son. I

don't have time to read. I barely have time to sleep. I shove it back into the space, then place the baseboard back over the hole in the wall.

"That," I say. "Gonna leave it there. Some librarian must've hid it when they decommissioned the libraries, and I'm not going to undo their work."

"Maybe they meant for you to undo it. Maybe the point of shoving those books in the wall was so that there was a chance for it to be undone?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not a librarian. I'm a farmhand. I don't undo things. I just do things in perpetuity."

Kat laughed. I laughed.

And, when I took my shirt off to go to bed so I could start working in four hours, I realized my shirt smelled like Mrs. Aguliar's Carne Guisada.

Sundays were the best part of my life.

JOSS

I throw up in my bathroom as I think about the fact that I might die tomorrow. I want to say something. I want to cry. To be with my family, but if they knew they'd call me out. "You're a Lees man," someone would say. "We survive. We win."

But what if I don't?

I sit on my bathroom floor.

Thinking this will be the last thing I do before I die.

Throw up alone.

LEVI

I awoke to a thunder in the earth. It vibrated my bedposts, a manmade earthquake, what shook wasn't as much as the physical world but my future. The noise I heard, the tension inside it, moved into my chest, and, suddenly, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move.

My door opened. "Levi, we need to hide."

Kat's voice, my younger sister, brings me away from the vibrations, back into my bed, in my house, on our farm in Abilene, Texas. Where we were always away from the war, where we were the exception to the rest of the county.

"Yeah," I said, swinging my legs from my bed and grabbing the go-bag I'd had stuffed under my bed for a few months now. Putting on my shirt that still smelled like Carne Guisada. "Yeah, grab your gun. Meet me in the hallway, I'll get mom and dad." I rushed down the hall, thinking of all my friends that went this way. Annalisa, Gavin, Joaquin. All taken when the thunder came. When the tanks of war caught up with all our farming towns. When we turned in plows for guns.

I opened my parent's door, "Mom, dad, someone's here. Someone—"

My sister's scream tore through the house, and I was running toward her before I even thought what I was doing. They were already in our house. Who? East or West? I couldn't tell, the lights were off, and, in the dark, the blurry dark, flags are the same. Color, fabric, stitched together with blood. I reached for the soldier holding my sister's arm and swung my fist towards their face. My knuckles landed hard on jaw and pain rippled through my hand. The soldier stumbled back, then with a yell of anger, rushed forward, shoving the butt of their rifle into my

stomach. My breath left me. Like my future. Like the world where I believed I could run. Where, when they came for me, I could reverse the fortune of all of my friends. But they were right. By the time you hear the thunder, the tanks, you're already picking out a uniform.

I don't know what happened. I felt hands. I heard Kat. My parents. I heard some voice say, "By decree of the Free States government, order two forty-four, you are conscripted on sight to fight for the true country."

The Westlands, then. Where others had been taken by the Eastland forces, me and my sister would fight for the Westlands. Kat was crying. My parents were crying. I was crying too. And none of us lifted a finger. None of us protested, because there was no use. Me and Kat, we were children of war and violence now.

JOSS

My father was a general by the time he was twenty-three. At seventeen, he became the acting captain of his company in the Battle of Tulsa. His platoon was given an impossible mission, float undetected down the Arkansas River, climb out under Highway 244, and, in the dark of night, infiltrate the Westland held city capitol building and deactivate the security cameras lining 244 Eastbound so a battalion of tanks could move into position to support an massive infantry attack. If he and his company failed, the attack would be a catastrophic loss.

In the Arkansas River, before they even climbed out, his company was hit by a drone strike, killing all of his platoon. He survived by diving underwater, and swimming to cover, holding his breath for over a minute. He climbed out over a mile short of 244, his rifle lost to the river. He snuck through the city, undetected, unarmed, and somehow deactivated the security cameras alone. After this, his ascent through the ranks of the Eastland Forces was inevitable. Each new battle brought a new promotion, until finally he was General. And he still is, except now, he has four stars on his chest to prove it.

This is all I can think about as the sounds of explosions rock the infantry van that contains my platoon. My platoon. The orders we've been given my responsibility to fulfill. Mine. I wipe a hand across my forehead as we roll towards Hell's Graveyard, a 315-mile channel cut into the Neutral Zone. Dallas, Fort Worth, Highway 35, and Oklahoma City, were all part of the bloodiest place in the whole war. We were deployed to Plano with simple orders. Secure a landing zone for a set of Blackhawk helicopters. It was my first operation.

All I could think about was my dad.

My earpiece crackles, and the voice of my company dispatch trickles into my ear. “Captain Lees, a new Eastland company has moved into position around the target. We’re mapping a new target, for you. Over.”

“Roger that,” I said, standing and knocking on the window of the truck cab. It slid open, and it felt like all I saw through the windshield was fire. I stared into the explosion-littered horizon, the bombed out, chewed up, burning, crumbling husk of Plano coming closer and closer. I feel the intense need to throw up again.

“Captain?” The driver said, and I realized that I’d forgotten everything at the sight of Hell’s Graveyard.

“Uh,” I said, feeling like every part of me that I’d been when I climbed into this truck, confident, ready, calm, had already turned to shrapnel and was scattering to the four winds. “The target. The target is being remapped. Will have new coordinates soon. Hold course, but plan to change routes.”

“Yes, sir.”

I sat back down, my stomach roiling. Minutes passed and we were still moving towards the same landing zone that was now swarming with Easties. I radioed into my commander. “Captain Lees to dispatch, still awaiting new coordinates, over.”

“Roger that, Captain Lees,” the voice said. “Still awaiting orders on our end.”

I could feel the explosions through my boots. My chest started to hurt, and my breath seemed to float away into the air.

“We’re about a minute from entering the hot zone, do we have delay orders?”

There was no answer.

“Dispatch, I repeat, we’re entering the hot zone, do we have delay orders?”

“No, Captain, no delay orders.”

I swore. Then looked at all the soldiers with me, suddenly feeling an added ten pounds for every single one of their stares. I stood and walked to the far end of the infantry truck. “Dispatch, we’re about walk into a target where we’re outnumbered four to one, do you have coordinates?”

No answer. I swore again. Unsure what to do. We had ten, maybe fifteen, seconds, before we hit the hot zone, where rain was bullets and dust was shrapnel. To break now would be disobeying orders, and that was not what I would do for my first mission. My first command. But the odds...four to one.

I walked back to my seat.

“We’ve got our orders,” I say, looking into the eyes of my soldiers. No one responds, but I know what they’re thinking, because I’m thinking it too.

We’re about to die.