The Art of War

A first novel by a survivor of two genocides

June 1, 1998 By Michael Denneny

Rabih Alameddine, 38, left his native Lebanon as a teenager, alone, hoping to escape the civil war, with its constant reminders of death and loss. But he gained only a brief respite, for in the brave new world of gay liberation he found in San Francisco, the war of AIDS was just beginning. When he himself tested positive in 1987, he “gave up on everything”—then turned to writing to make sense of it all and produced a dazzling first novel, KoolAIDS: The Art of War, which I had the honor of editing. It tells the interlocked stories of characters who are caught in two historical disasters and can no longer love or even think except in fragments. But out of this kaleidoscope of fragments, Alameddine has constructed a mesmerizing novel. Reading the book is like channel-surfing through some of the most interesting minds you’ve ever met, as all these elements shine their combined lights to reveal the way we live now.

[Excerpts]

I wish I could write better. I have never been able to write anything because I don’t trust my writing.

I have had many ideas which could not translate well into painting. I wanted to write them down. I never really did. I just did not have a good command of the written word.

When I first started to see my friends die, I wanted to write a book where all the characters died in the beginning, say in the first 25 pages or so. I never went beyond the incipit, which I thought was a damn good one. *Death comes in many shapes and sizes, but it always comes*. I thought it was great. I wanted to make sure death and sex were associated. Look at the words shapes, sizes and it always comes. Sexual allusions galore.

I showed it to Scott. He said I should stick to painting. I guess he thought my incipit was insipid. He did not like the idea of my book. He said one could rarely write a book about death without being sentimental. He thought only Danielle Steel could write a book about the ravages of the AIDS epidemic and get away with it.
He did like my idea of a book about Jesus meeting Mohammed—that is, the real Mohammed, the last prophet, not me. I never wrote that either.

I miss Scott.

The first massacre of the war occurred in Karantina, in January 1976. It did not affect me that much. In retaliation, the Palestinians and other leftist militias destroyed Damour, a Christian town. That one devastated me.

I did not know anybody killed in that bloodbath. It was not the gory pictures in the newspapers that baffled me. It was simply the concept. As a Druze, one would assume I would be more affected by the massacre

at Karantina. I really had no idea where Karantina was, though. Damour, on the other hand, I passed through every day on my way to school. I loved that town. In one fell swoop, Damour no longer existed. They killed the people. Bloodied corpses, with open eyes, were left everywhere. Those who managed to escape on boats, left quickly, never to return. They hid in monasteries and convents in the mountains. The guerrillas stole everything. They ransacked the town, picked the houses clean. They took the clothes, silverware, tiles, doors, faucets, furniture, and even toilets. Then they burned the town and the surrounding citrus groves. Damour was no more.

Expunged. Obliterated.

I never thought humans could do that.

Nawal: (putting the coffee cup down) So how’s your love life these days?

Kurt: Don’t ask!

Marwa: She just did.

Nawal: This is good coffee.

Kurt: I don’t mind talking about it. There is not much to talk about. I don’t have one and it’s not because of lack of trying. It’s just difficult to find someone to have any kind of relationship with.

Nawal: There are a lot of men in the city who are in the similar health situation. Isn’t there some social group or gathering where you can meet other guys?

Kurt: There are lots of them. It’s just not conducive to salacious trysts.

Nawal: What do you mean?

Kurt: When two men in my health situation get together, it isn’t very erotic. It just isn’t, no matter how much we may want it to be.

Marwa: Why not?

Kurt: Oh, I don't know. It just isn't. Just yesterday I met this guy. We were supposed to get together for the sole purpose of having sex, and it didn't happen.

Marwa: What happened?

Kurt: We had talked on the phone. He had left a message on a phone sex line saying he was looking for a nice guy to have sex with. He said he was HIV positive. Well, I left him a message and he called me back. We got along great. We could not get together right away. He kept leaving these messages and I began hesitating, thinking he was a little too desperate. That's funny, right? Me thinking someone else is desperate. Anyway, he finally called me the day before yesterday. He left a long message on my machine telling me what he was going to do to my hard dick when we got together. Well, we got together yesterday. We decided to meet right here in this coffee shop. When he first showed up, I realized he was not my type, but I thought he was a nice guy anyway and I would go to bed with him. (Pause. Drinks coffee.) Anyway, he sat down and I asked how he was feeling. He said he was feeling kind of queasy. I asked him what he was taking. He started reciting the litany of drugs. He was on 3TC, d4T and saquinavir. He was also taking acyclovir as a prophylactic against herpes. Septra for pneumocystis, Sporanox for fungus. The list was endless. About as long as mine, actually. We started comparing drugs. Is saquinavir better than Crixivan? Isn't it hell to have to eat three meals a day, making sure you drink a glass of grapefruit juice with each meal to be able to take saquinavir. Let me tell you, if we had a single lascivious thought in our mind, it was gone in the first 10 seconds. Hell, I started feeling queasy. Twenty minutes later, he just stood up and said, "It was nice meeting you. See you later." That was it.

Nawal: God, that must be tough.

Kurt: It is. It really is tough.

Marwa: It might get better.

Kurt: (smiles gently at Marwa) No, dear, it only gets worse.

Marwa: I'm sorry.

In one of his short stories, Coover takes the reader into an old village. Slowly, he brings the various characters into view, except they are all the same character. We see a funeral procession. The dead man in the casket looks exactly like the six pallbearers, exactly like the priest and his assistants, and exactly like the mourning women. They take the casket to the cemetery, interring it into its plot. We hear scratching and clawing. The dead man comes out of the ground. We see the people flee. The dead man runs after them. We notice him entering one of the houses in the village. He sees the dress and scarf of one of the mourners. He puts it on. He becomes one of the mourners. Another man puts on the priest outfit, and others the pallbearers' outfits. We have the

funeral procession starting again with a new, but the same, dead man. We see the cycle begin all over again.

What if there is no afterlife?

It does not exist, you know. You die. That's it. You cease to exist. No heaven. No hell. No reincarnation. No presents. No waiting for Judgment Day. You die. They bury you. They cremate you if you're lucky. That's it.

Kurt keeps trying to convince me an afterlife exists. His main argument is a simple one. If all religions, throughout the millennia, believed in an afterlife, there must be something there.

That argument is flawed, as any rational person would tell you. It does not even pass a simple Aristotelian test. Yet I hear it often, even from people I consider reasonably intelligent. The need for a belief in the nonfinality of death is so great it affects even usually logical people. I hope I do not have to to elucidate all the rationales as to why all religions require an afterlife. "If there is no life after death," a Muslim theologian once told me, "the very belief in God becomes irrelevant, or even if one believes in God, that would be an unjust and indifferent God: having once created man and not concerned with his fate."

One of Kurt's favorite proofs for an existence of an afterlife is the Tunnel of Light. All those who have had a near-death experience have had practically the same vision. They see a tunnel with a bright light at the end, and deceased loved ones calling them or welcoming them into the light. That, for many, it seems, is conclusive proof an afterlife exists.

I always wondered why they all see loved ones. Where are all the hated ones? In hell, I assume. Everyone you loved in your life will be there to meet you, all those you did not like very much are somewhere else. You, like Jesus, have that power. I would hope Rembrandt van Rijn is there to meet me. That would be more exciting. Gauguin would be in hell, since I loathe his paintings. Mondrian, yes, but not Malevich. Shakespeare, yes, but Chaucer should burn somewhere else. The Marxes, Karl, Groucho, Harpo and Chico would be there, but not Zeppo. No dull people in my tunnel, thank you. This is fun, isn't it?

But what about the tunnel? What about the tunnel, you ask.

What about it? It isn't Nabokov's fountain, after all. If you think about it, the one experience as stressful as death itself is birth. What does one see as one is being born? Possibly a tunnel, but I doubt welcoming loved ones. A slap on the butt is more like it.

I know, you say. You have proof. Many people remember past lives clearly. How is that possible, you ask.

Drugs is one possibility. Schizophrenia is another…

What if I told you matter creates consciousness? Would you believe me, or would you run away and hide behind your safe beliefs? You can call me a heresiarch, if it makes you feel better. I like that word.

Are you so afraid of this life? Are you still practicing, hoping to get it right in the next one? Are you being a good girl, hoping Father will reward you with everything you weren't able to get? Are you?

One day, you will write that book. One day, you will be fulfilled. Some day, you will take that risk. Some day soon, you will be doing what you really, really love. One day, you will begin to live your life.

What have you done with the garden entrusted you?

From the book KoolAIDS. Copyright © 1998 by Rabih Alameddine. Reprinted by arrangement with Picador USA, a division of St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York, NY.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/The-Art-of-War-7142-1764