ANGELS OF WAR

a review by Jonathan Vincent

Daniel Kraus. ***Angel Down***.
Atria Books, 2025.

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DANIEL KRAUS's *Angel Down* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2026. It was also a *New York Times* Top 10 Book of 2025 and a national bestseller. His novel *Whalefall* (MTV Books, 2023) was reviewed on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, won the Alex Award, was a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist, and was a Best Book of the Year for *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and NPR, among others. He has written over a dozen novels and for television and film. His books have also been named Library Guild selections, YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults picks, Bram Stoker finalists, and more. His work has been translated into over twenty languages. A Chicago resident now, he lived in Wilmington, NC, in the 1990s and early 2000s.

World War I, in countless historical accounts, gestated the modern world. It's magnitude and brutality *constituted* (in the sense of re-founding) the "disenchanted" new order that followed, an abject profaning and desacralization of an older, metaphysical cosmology – if not for all, at least for many. Unfurled in a whimsy of theocratized nationalism, endowed with all the fervor of a soul-making vision quest, the Great War inducted its participants, rather, into a devastating technological apocalypse that – amid the gore of nine million eviscerated human carcasses, nameless numbers of which were dumped into mass graves – laid to rest forever mythologies of the heroic tradition as well as the cultural reassurances of both "providential" human meaning and "progressive" historiography. For the generation that survived it, there was no "mythic structure" to make it cognizable. No pattern of narrative framing could be found to assimilate it, as synthesis, into a cohesive story of "tradition" and "reality." It would be this desecration of grounding assurances that would propel the modernist search for new aesthetic forms: for formal innovation, for a new materialist poetics, in an attempt – to borrow from Ezra Pound's often-rehearsed mantra – to "make it new." Or at least this is the story that, for twenty years now, has sustained my courses on World War I and modernism.

Daniel Kraus's most recent novel, *Angel Down*, is a blistering World War I *tour de force* in which, central to its cast of characters is an angel felled from the sky into the Bois du Fays battlefield of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The recipient of 2026's Pulitzer Prize for fiction, *Angel Down* tells the story of five American GIs sent by their commander, Major General Lyon Reis, to investigate a harrowing "shriek" emanating out of No Man's Land in the wake of a furious artillery barrage and engagement with the enemy. Having themselves just survived its pandemonium of fire and violence, they are charged with fulfilling the honor code protocol of "leaving no man behind" – even if that means simply delivering a merciful *coup de grâce* to end a comrade's torturous struggle. It is in many respects also a suicide mission. The men – especially Private Cyril Bagger, through whose eyes events are narrated – are the company's lowest of degenerates sent deliberately, as disposables, since their loss would mean no real subtraction from the unit's more talented core.

What the men encounter instead, however, is a beautiful and beatified angel, a radiant and celestial beacon of light, *downed* into as unholy a scene of destitution as I've ever encountered in writing. This is, without a doubt, the most demented and revolting human world I have ever seen depicted. In relentless, bludgeoning, hyperventilating, propulsive, whiplashing prose, Kraus carries readers through a go-for-broke hellscape in which not a single portrait of human putrescence has been omitted. Disfiguring every page are sustained descriptions of ditches dripping with mortared human viscera, living cadavers with face-rotting trench mouth, sexual organs festering with gonorrhea,

vermin-infested local villagers living off dead rats. It is a grotesque and morbid world of modern gargoyles.

Elliptical on both ends, the novel is, moreover, highly experimental in form. Obviously indebted to magical realism, it is nonetheless aesthetically innovative: beginning with a comma and unrolling, for the duration, without a period, it is even taken in its three-hundred-page entirety – a single, redounding sentence fragment. The effect is to produce in writing what the single-take, rolling "long shot" hopes to capture in film (one has to assume that Kraus was at least partially inspired by Sam Mendes's 2019 film *1917*). From the start, the reader is hurled into a ramifying mayhem – the world of which is an aesthetic-temporal mash-up of medieval gothic, industrial-era steam punk, and twenty-first-century anime. But to describe the novel as a revolting modern dystopia is precisely to catch onto something: Kraus's is an entirely experimental literary canvas, but he's working in a well-established and venerated tradition – one likely grounded in the Old Testament before moving into Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, Edward Munch's *The Scream*, and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. It is World War I's own Otto Dix updated for our time: "a psychedelic pageant of a world in total rupture" (276).

Why, then, re-enchant *The Waste Land* with images from a religious provenance? Why repopulate *Paradise Lost* with spiritualized relics – angels! – from anachronistic mythic symbology? Because *Angel Down* is not a novel for the early twentieth century; it is a novel, allegorically, for our own moment – for a time of Putins, and Netanyahus, and Trumps; a time of intoxicated nationalism, paranoid conspiracy theory, and End Times prognostication. (At the time of this writing, the White House lawn has been transformed into a UFC cage fighting arena, the manosphere is redounding with fantasies of Spartan and Roman remasculinization, and the Department of Defense has been rechristened the Department of War.) If World War I squelched older assumptions of progressive historical promise and change, and if we can imagine the generations since as cogs in an ongoing machine of perpetual, industrial war, then we might see Kraus as taking us back to the scene of primal rupture in order to raise some vivifying questions about where we go from here.

Especially over the last half century, amid a social imaginary paralyzed by postmodern malaise and non-possibility, remembering the inaugural event in what Kraus describes as an ongoing "chain of traumatic violence," and "at a scale necessary to satisfy global demand," a demand for "the next war, the next, the next" (263), might constitute a much-needed reckoning with the shape and futurity of modern history itself. Suffocating, unbearable, escapeless – *Angel Down* is hard to read, and that's the point. It's a novel coextensive with our own contemporary news cycle. And perhaps it's precisely this inaugural scene of twentieth-century war – the scene of a world in a threshold of intense historical change, a disorienting transition from then to now – that conveys the social optic so missing in our own time: mutability, transformation, possibility. One hopes – and hope is the operative word here to answer the "why celestial sourcing?" question – that, as none other than Lincoln himself once mused in addressing his own moment of social collapse and war, it is precisely in these reckonings with crisis that we might discover, instead, its alternative possibility: "the better angels of our nature." ■

ABOVE **113 Field Artillery arriving from France, circa 1919**;
courtesy of Military Collections, State Archives of North Carolina