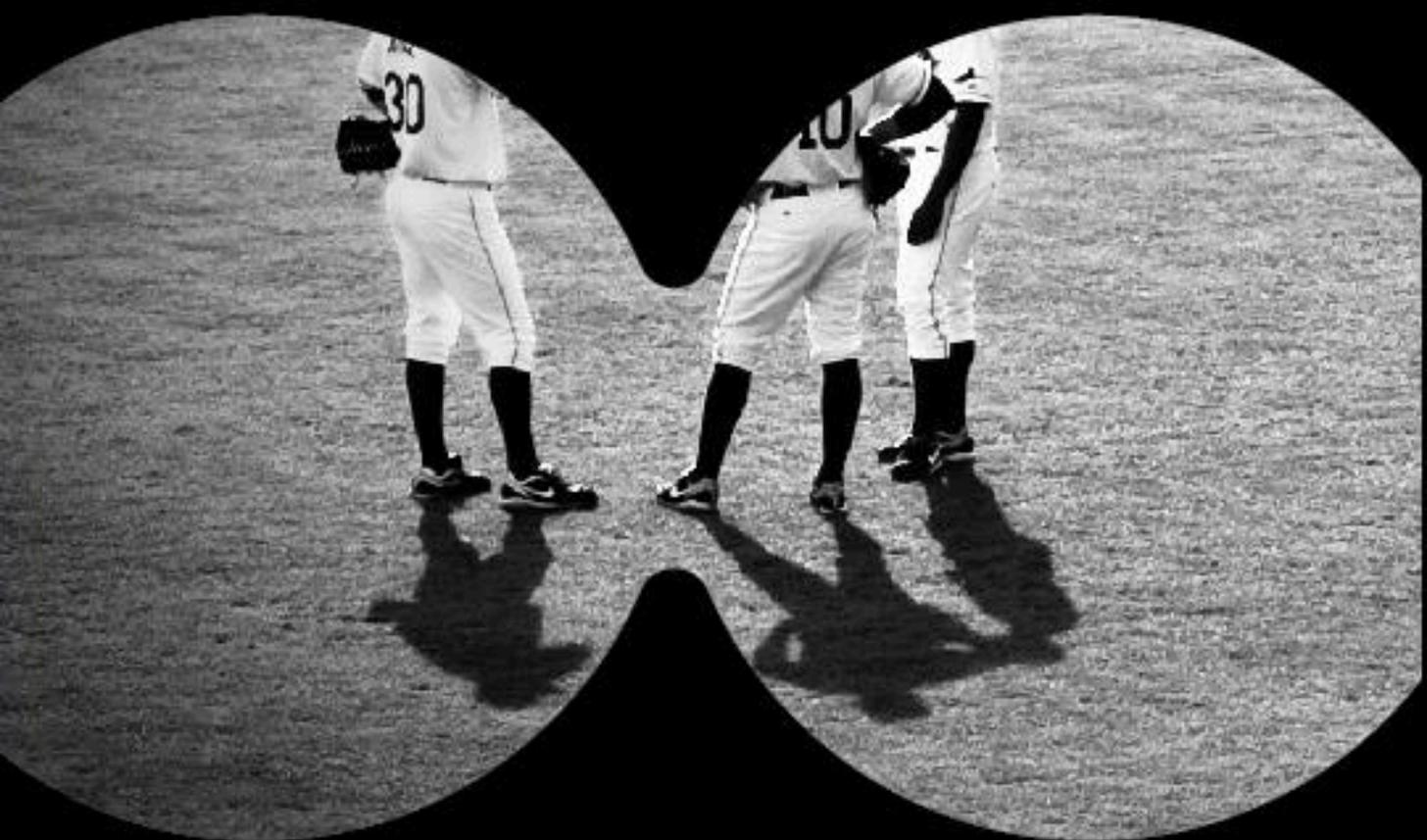


The Clubhouse Thief



A Novel

James Janko

Winner of the AWP Award for the Novel

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The Clubhouse Thief by James Janko

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“Narrated by a sardonic aging bench coach, still grasping for a last chance and revitalization and beset by contemporary changes of race and gender to his iconic (white) American game, this romantic comedy is crafted with careful tension, all the gripping pacing and rhythms in play. Rummaging through and lifting the love letters, poetry, and opinion articles of his team, the bench coach/clubhouse thief gets an education and an epiphany. I followed every pitch, hit, and steal with the same intensity of the telling, and I realize that I, too, really wanted the Cubs to win. Hilarious and heartbreaking.”

—Karen Tei Yamashita

“Jimmy Janko’s *The Clubhouse Thief* is a baseball book the way Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* is a baseball book. Set in that great American city, Chicago, here is an American story that’s at once morality play and entertainment. More

than a genre book, yet *The Clubhouse Thief* mines our fascination with the inner workings of a profession and discipline. How does a baseball player think? Here is a deep exploration of America, and how we create ourselves and our conscience and our country.” —Maxine Hong Kingston

“The historic problem with sports fiction is that the fictional, internal dramas on display can’t compare with what we read in the best of sports biography. But with James Janko’s *The Clubhouse Thief*, we have sports fiction that rises to the level of art. Its intersection with sport is mere setting for the issues it explores. An absolute triumph.”

—Dave Zirin

James Janko refused to carry a weapon while serving as a medic in Viet Nam. His medals include the Bronze Star for Valor, which he returned to the U.S. government in 1986 to protest their military involvement in Central America. In 2008, Janko gave away other medals to Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange: Mrs. Dang Hong Nhut, who suffers from thyroid cancer and has had numerous miscarriages, and Ms. Tran Thi Hoan, who was born without legs due to her mother’s exposure to the chemical.

Janko’s short stories have appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Sun*, and many other magazines. He won a 2002 Illinois Arts Council Award for Fiction, and his earlier novel, *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo*, received wide critical acclaim and won the Association of Asian American Studies 2006 Prose Award and the 2007 Northern California Book Award for Fiction.



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THE FRIENDLY CONFINES

“I hear a rumor,” says Stompiano. “I hear the Bosox got bragging rights over in the American, earned themselves an appointment at Wrigley.” He shrugs. “Well, then, mark your calendars, circle the date—October 27th, Wrigley Field.” He tilts his head to imitate a thinking man. “I can’t say for sure I’ll steal home again, race lightnin’ and win.” Maybe a hundred cameras catch his wink. “Lightnin’ might not show up,” he says. “Lightnin’ wants nothing to do with me.”

Hail to Chicago’s Royal Highness, our crowned King. Twenty-eight years old if I remember right, but with the mien of a teenage boy. He calls to mind the spit and sass and vinegar of memorable misfits: Braggo Roth, Rube Waddell, Noodles Hahn, Boys of Summer of the early twentieth century. He abides by no rules, except those he conjures for himself.

So bathe him in light, surround him with news hawks in this post-game clubhouse of high drama. “Hey,” he says, and it’s as if a great bell rang away some of the sadness of the world.

Jesús Mijango uncorks a bottle of champagne, aims a geyser at Johnny, then sprinkles some on Dantel Hood’s kinky hair. Azzy

rubs a paw over Hood's right shoulder. "Meet the man on the mound," he says, "the man who pitched us to the World Series."

Old Hood smiles a mile, big yellow teeth.

"Great grandson to Satchel Paige," says Azzy. "Winding up and throwing Bat Dodgers, Trouble Balls, one after the other."

Jesús says, "Nobody hits a Trouble Ball."

Johnny wings his arms through the air. "Whoosh! Strike three! Siddown. Shaddup. As Hawk Harrelson used to say, 'Sorry, Sam. Grab some bench.'"

Clubhouse TVs provide a bird's eye view of Wrigleyville: streets crammed with people, abandoned cars, apartment windows lit like Christmas, scores of pilgrims gathered on rooftops. Red lights mark the entrances and exits of Wrigley Field. Cops and firemen rush to douse a bonfire at Clark and Addison. Three guys in Cub caps get turned around, cuffed, shoved in a paddy wagon. The police have trouble driving off because rowdies stand in front of their vehicle with signs—THANK YOU JOHNNY! LOVE YOU DANTEL! I see an old man crying, his face in his hands. I see a black boy spread his arms and spin, spin, his face lifted to the sky.

Jimmy Lieski blurts, "Cu-Cu-Cubs win!"

Matt Creighton shakes his head and slumps in a chair near his locker. "No thanks to me," he says. "I did everything wrong."

*

11:20. I'm sitting on a stool between Jimmy Lieski and Matt Creighton when representatives of ballpark security and the Chicago Police tell us it's still too dangerous to leave the clubhouse. By now the press has vanished, we've taken our showers, changed into street clothes, and have begun to feel a tad edgy. In 2016, when the Cubs became world champions, Chicagoans surprised themselves and behaved, so what's with all the precautions? Security won't tell us anything, except that it's best to stay put.

Old Jimmy asks who first described Wrigley Field as The Friendly Confines. The question is rhetorical, so I let Matt Creighton answer: “Ernie Banks, Mr. Cub.” I tremble at the phrase—Friendly Confines—for what it suggests. A smile and a straightjacket. A wink and a scream. I give Matt a glance, then Jimmy. “Maybe you can spare me the Cub lore,” I say. “Let’s call Wrigley Field the home of the Cubs.”

A moment later we discover Johnny Stompiano is gone. No one saw him leave, but he must have stole his way out of Wrigley Field soon after security officials issued their warning. I suppose the Kid donned a hat, sunglasses, and chameleoned his way into the crowd beyond the players’ gate. I say, “Well, the Thief stole home again. Is anyone surprised?”

No one is.

“Goddamn,” says Nick. “They should band him the way they band a wild bird.”

Johnny’s glove is behind him on a stool. An old Wilson, oiled and dark brown, a leathery map of wrinkles. Wouldn’t surprise me if the Kid’s been using this rag since Little League. I sidle in, grab the old mitt, and sniff the leather. No flower smells better than this.

*

Midnight. The skipper stands and is weaving a bit. “No hurry getting home, right? Fans could be raising hell, setting cars on fire, causing a ruckus. Security has given me the low-down. Play it safe, play it smart. Don’t get mixed up with a bunch of goons.”

So we hit the booze and watch the tubes. I let out a cheer as they give us the last play of the ballgame. Old Paddy Delaney rearing back, throwing with all he’s got and then some; O’Leary spanking the daylights out of the ball, drilling it on the line to deep right center. My head jerks when I see for the second time Johnny’s sheer, stark speed. A blur as bright as a bullet, a perfect projectile.

A muzzle flash lighting across the field.

After commercials, ten minutes or more, a Homeland Security official asks that “we remain vigilant and report suspicious activity to the proper authorities.” Daily, and in dreams, we hear these words any number of times, but tonight they arrive with a footnote. The official, who is older than I am, adds that the Chicago Cubs won the National League crown. I wait for him to say something gracious, congratulatory, but instead he urges “all Chicagoans, in **all** neighborhoods—north, south, east, and west—to avoid crowds and celebrate indoors.”

Why the hell all the worry? Nobody’s raging, setting buildings on fire, blowing things up. I suppose the whole world’s on alert, but little is happening. We know from TV that no bombs have gone off in Chicago or elsewhere. In asking us to hole up in the clubhouse till the streets are clear, park security and other authorities are erring on the side of safety. I’m outwardly calm, inwardly churning. Is this a celebration? Is this a party? We took the pennant from the Cards, literally stole it, only to be cooped like chickens in a clubhouse cave.

TV sucks at our eyes the way magnets suck metal. We’re all watching now, even Jesús and Azzy. The Chief of Police, Dick Kowalsik, is giving his spiel. How we need to cooperate, how security is everyone’s issue. Is this a public service announcement? If so, someone would do a service by stuffing a rag down the Chief’s gullet. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry already knows Chicago and every other city is under surveillance. The authorities—let me tell you—have every gizmo the imagination can conjure. They aim an eye at every nook and cranny in the world.

A few nights ago I couldn’t sleep. I watched a special on UAVs, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, these contraptions that hover over our cities to protect us from harm around the clock. We can’t see what sees us, these hawks in the wild blue, watching and

recording. They can, if those monitoring them wish, count the freckles on a girl's face as she walks east on Waveland Avenue. They can see the walkway beneath her shoes as she lifts her feet. In the same instant, they can zoom in on a madman palavering with his pecker. The cameras have catchy names like Global Eye. The UAVs on which they are mounted can, and usually are, programmed to rise above bad weather. The recording of data never ceases. The cameras house sensitive apparatus—radar waves, antenna—to shoot through blizzards, torrents of rain, sleet, dense fog, even foliage. They can map the ground beneath groves of dark trees. They can send an alert should anyone, animal or human, lurk or cower, or glance over his shoulder. Innovation is endless. Our legacy may be in the cameras that film every shadow and light beyond the time when human beings exist.

Chief Kowalsik congratulates “Nick Glouser and his champions, the Chicago Cubs.”

“Sing it sweet,” says Azzy.

“I'm pleased to report post-game festivities have remained civil, but let us pray they remain so.” He squares his shoulders as the camera glides in for a close-up. “In two days, we'll open the gates at Wrigley Field when the Cubs face the Red Sox.”

A cheer goes up in the clubhouse.

“As your Chief of Police, it is my duty to remind you that every fan is a patriot, a lover of God and country. Let this be the greatest, most unforgettable year in the history of our Game.”

Who knows why we keep listening. Talking about our Game is not our Game. Spit and sass, dirt and grass, this is baseball. If you catch a ball, what happens? You feel the truth of it in your palm. If you throw, you feel the blood rush to your arm, your hand. If the ball moves fast, you hear the path it cuts through bright air. Baseball, baseball. What else is true anymore? Daily, I watch the tube, let it take every free moment, a watcher hooked

on watching. Game shows, talk shows, sports, news, sit-coms, whatever. Only when I'm at Wrigley, near the field, the world takes a shape I believe. When Johnny steals a base, dives, muddies his jersey, I want to touch him. When Jesús lifts one toward the ivy and beyond, when he circles the bases, his body and the arc of the ball drive every last cell from Limbo. If I could live in the open air near the field, would I be happy? No, in close games neurosis sets in, fear of humiliation. My mind—what is left of it—teeters at the edge of a cliff.

Time passes. After the Chief paves the way to a Marine Corps commercial, Jimmy Lieski opens his Bible and reads in whispers. Matt Creighton is on his cell phone, probably talking with his mother. Azzy looks around and says, "Well, you guys can hang here till the sun comes up. I'm goin' home."

Jesús Mijango says, "Me too."

Dantel Hood gets up from a chair. "Long night," he says. "I'm more weary than Satch ever was."

Nick says, "Stay put. You can sack out in the trainer's room."

"No, thanks."

"Well, who's for another round of drinks? Security might not flash the green light till the last of the wee hours."

"They can flash it for themselves," says Azzy. "I'll be home by then."

"Home?" says Nick. "And what if you get trampled along the way? What if Stompiano got himself trampled?"

Jesús shakes his head. "Olvidalo."

"It could happen," says Nick. "You know it."

"Not to him."

"Oh? And what's Wild Child made of? Steel?" He tries to stare down Jesús, then Azzy, then me, and succeeds with the latter. "Damn it," he says. "Let's hope Stompiano's not a piece of

hamburger lying on the street.”

My job, first and foremost, is to support the skipper. I say there’s no hurry going home. We got booze. We got TV. We got everything we need.

Jesús, standing, raises his voice a notch. “I live nine blocks away,” he says. “I got sofa space, floor-space. **Bienvenidos a todos.**”

“Nine blocks?” says Nick. “You ready to jump over how many thousand Cub fans? How many buildings?”

“**Millones.**”

“Well, I thought you were smarter than this, I was **sure** of it.” In private, Nick says Jesús is dumb and dark as a Gullah nigger. “The trouble is, I can’t keep you here, and maybe Security can’t either.” He shrugs. “The best I can do is air my concerns and hope no one gets hurt.”

Commercials give way to Wrigleyville live, thousands of pilgrims still surrounding their beloved ballpark. The cameras zero in on a guy about foaming at the mouth. You don’t have to be a skilled lip-reader to know what the lunatic is hollering: “Cubs! Cubs! Cubs!”

The skipper points to the large TV at the south end of the clubhouse. “Take a long look,” he says. “Is this what you’re ready to deal with? A world gone mad?”

Azzy’s already at the door.

“I can’t stop you,” says Nick, “but I can warn you. Why not wait for Security to flash the green light?”

Creighton, his eyes on TV, an ear to his cell phone, says, “It’s bad out there, believe me. It’s way worse than it looks. I’m talking with a lady who lives a half mile from the ballpark. She says the chaos is ten times worse than what we see on TV.”

Most players ignore him. Within minutes everyone has flown the coop except Creighton, Lieski, Delaney, the coaching

staff, the trainers, the security personnel, the clubhouse manager, the chumps who stay. We chat and drink, watch the tubes, but I feel a major depression coming on. Why can't I leave? Why can't I push myself up from a stool and place one foot in front of the other? It pains me to look at us, to hear us. Matt Creighton whispering his woes to a cell phone. Jimmy Lieski reading from the Bible, rubbing our noses in failure: "Babylon the great is fallen, fallen, and has become a dwelling place for demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!"

He describes well those of us who remain.

*

A long hour later Matt says, "It's a mob out there, a mob. Perfect for a suicide bomber."

Jimmy says, "And I saw the dead..."

*

Depression is often described as a veil or cloud, but it's more like a wall or an avalanche, a weight that restricts movement. On a given day, I manage to breathe a little, move a little, and call it a life. A few hours ago we stole the pennant from the Cardinals, but the heroics of Game 7 seem long over. If Security advises us to camp out in the clubhouse till tomorrow noon, we will oblige. We are remnants of old-time Cubs, legends of loss. Stuck in The Friendly Confines with no way to go home.

I wonder where Johnny is, what he's doing. I try to imagine a body as fleet as a thrown knife. Or as bright as a bullet blazing across a field.

Praise for *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo*

“Nothing in the publisher’s biography of [James] Janko suggests he is a poet, but his book is what used to be called, admiringly, “a poet’s novel.” Readers who seek a complex plot won’t find it here, but the lives of the two antiheroes, U.S. Army medic Antonio Lucio “Geronimo” Conchola and 14-year-old Viet Cong villager Nguyen Luu Hai, are rendered in such rich textures that one sometimes feels Virginia Woolf is writing them.”

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“A beautifully written first novel about the ugliness of war—in Vietnam and anywhere else. An anti-war novel certainly, but very much its own kind...Folkloric in approach, it’s sustained by prose that is often lyrical, though never self-conscious.”

—*Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review*

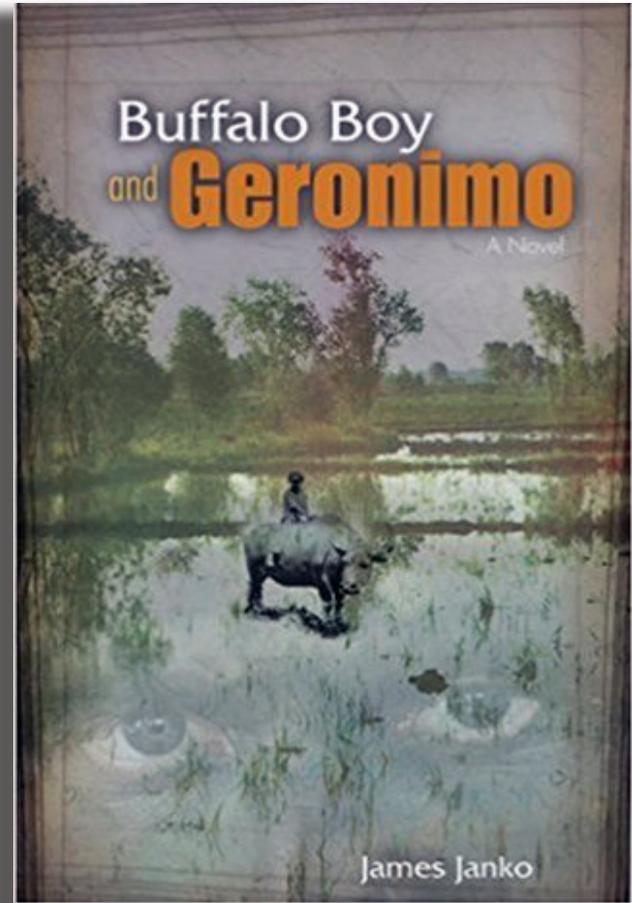
“Set in Vietnam during the war, this simple tale achieves depth through its language and naturalistic detail...This book deserves to enter the canon of masterly, penetrating works about this still controversial era. Recommended for most collections.”

—*Library Journal*

“This compelling novel has the ability to communicate village life in Viet Nam during the war and the way the whole of it—animals, people, the aged, as well as packed rice shoots—are moved through the forests, across rivers, as the Americans follow them in their business of destroying villages and imposing immense ecological damage. It’s extraordinary.”

—Grace Paley

“Janko keeps his two plots simple—men overcome obstacles in pursuit of love—both so as not to overburden his gorgeous, incantatory prose and to accomplish his more ambitious objective of bearing witness to the mute suffering of the earth and animals.” —*Kyoto Journal* #66



“One can revisit the Vietnam War in *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo*...It is not just its horrors that are recounted, but the thirst for beauty and nature, and the ecological damage that war inflicts on humans, animals, and the environment they share.”

— *Bookviews*

Winner of the Association for Asian American Studies 2006 Prose Award:

“Janko’s book takes a familiar theme, the Viet Nam War, and makes it refreshing by telling a war story through compassion for animals. But not only is Janko’s subject matter presented in a refreshing way, but also the narrative moves in unexpected ways. Janko’s narrative has two strands—one of a young boy and another of a medic—that move back and forth, closer and closer towards each other as the violence increases. What the committee members appreciate most is how Janko doesn’t present easy answers or obvious endings.”

—Committee Chair, Victoria Chang, poet, writer, and editor

Interview Excerpts with James Janko

Jaclyn Allard, *Curbstone Press* (Spring 2007)

JA: *Do you consider your experience in writing this novel a period of reflection, as well as a therapeutic outlet after your time in Viet Nam?*

JJ: To sit alone and try to write one true thing is reflective, radical, an act of rebellion in today's world. The goal is to be an honest witness, and in the effort itself—whether or not “a good story” emerges—there is healing.

JA: *It could be assumed that you recognize a part of yourself in Geronimo, due to his role as a GI medic in Vietnam. However, what other aspects of Geronimo do you relate to? And in what ways do you also identify with Hai?*

JJ: Like Hai, I can't survive without beauty. Geronimo is this way, too. They are relentless in their search for beauty. They do not compromise; they do not give up. Beauty is where we meet. Hai remains rooted in his culture, but Conchola—because of the destruction he has witnessed—no longer sees himself as an American. He wants to be Geronimo, a force of nature that cannot be killed by a bullet or bomb or anything mechanical. In the end, he is the opposite of the war machine. I identify with him when he stumbles through the jungle shouting, “Geronimo, Geronimo!” to scare birds and other creatures from an area about to be bombed.

JA: *Which scene and/or character do you find most true to the Buddhist teachings that run throughout your novel?*

JJ: A chapter called Hero describes the nightly prayer routine of Ma Xuan, the buffalo boy's mother, by far the most devout Buddhist in the book. Buddhism has many cultural variations; for the Vietnamese, ancestors are at the heart of the religion. Ma Xuan has an altar with pictures of those who have passed on—her husband, her parents, her husband's parents. Que huong (ancestral homeland) is home in the deepest sense. The placenta and the umbilical cords of Ma Xuan's two children are buried in the land of the ancestors. Her husband is buried near the field where he worked, as are her parents. The ancestors and the fields they farmed, and the living who continue to work in these fields, are one circle, one web of union. When one lives in this way, and honors the dead in this way, how can one harm the land? It would be like stabbing one's own flesh. Maxine Hong Kingston, in *China Men*, says it this way: “Men build bridges and streets when there is already an amazing gold electric ring connecting every living being as surely as if we held hands, flippers and paws, feelers and wings.”

Beth Jacobs, *Journal of Poetry Therapy* (2016)

BJ: *Did you consider the book's creation to be a therapeutic act for you? If so, at what point did that become conscious and did your sense of its therapeutic potential change over time?*

JJ: I never thought of the writing process as therapeutic, though clearly it was. Each day I just wanted to sit alone in a room and write one true thing. For a given scene, the effort was to get the voice right, or to find the best words for the smells of the trees, the animals, the land, the inhabited world. To this day I take this attitude to my writing: sit alone and write one true thing.

BJ: *Another power of your writing is the ability to articulate animal reality. Again, your reader is able to experience feelings across difference dimensions and see the interrelationships. What was the meaning for you and impact on you of portraying animal consciousness in this story?*

JJ: Even during the war, when I knew nothing about Viet Nam, I could see that a buffalo boy and his buffalo and the rice paddies and the wallows were inseparable. The beauty and lushness of Viet Nam was not lost on me. After Viet Nam, I became a hobo for a while, a flower vendor in New Orleans, a strawberry picker in Oregon, but I slipped in and out of college and eventually graduated. I received a B.S. in Conservation of Natural Resources from UC Berkeley, and one class in particular—Ecosystemology—had a direct impact on Buffalo Boy and Geronimo. For our final exam, Arnold Shultz, a wonderful teacher, herded us outside onto the campus and told us to choose one square inch to write about as an ecosystem, that is, to write about inputs and outputs, to write about what was present, what sustained this square inch and allowed it to breathe. I remembered, as I was writing, that a Cobra gunship could put a bullet in every square inch of a football field in less than a minute, or at least this was the boast; having seen them in action, I suppose it's true. On a sunny spring morning in Berkeley, I wrote about my square inch beneath a eucalyptus tree with great care, and I was quietly amazed by the complexity of life in minuscule, and death, too, or at least hints of death, even here. I believe what Walt Whitman believed: “...a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars.” In writing Buffalo Boy and Geronimo, I had to open myself to so much that was destroyed, but I also felt great love for what was lost and voiceless, and for what survived, even thrived. Moreover, I felt loved by the world. It felt natural to write from both animal and human perspectives.