



Press: The Military Spouse Book Review Blog

The Gumshoe Wore Combat Boots: M. L. Doyle's Sergeant Harper Mysteries

By Andria Williams, April 6, 2017

Once I started in on author M.L. Doyle's "Master Sergeant Harper" mystery series, featuring career soldier Lauren Harper, they were so much fun that I devoured one after another, thanks to my insidious enabler, Amazon Prime. Set in far-flung locales like Bosnia, Honduras, England, and Germany, each novel or companion short presents Master Sgt. Lauren Harper with a mystery she must solve, with risk to both her own life and to the lives of other people caught up in the greed and violence of those in positions

Writing mysteries set among the day-to-day operations of mostly non-combat, deployed soldiers is a rather brilliant premise by Doyle; when you have a number of often-very-young people interacting with one another (and with a local population) away from home, someone is going to get in trouble. If they are lucky, the trouble is only absurd or inconvenient for everyone involved, but if they aren't so lucky, there could be a real mess.

That's where Master Sgt. Lauren Harper comes in. Her career in public affairs has given her a nose for situational nuance and interpretation, as well as a very good camera — all of which come in handy.

The first Master Sergeant Harper mystery, *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, opens in Bosnia in the mid-nineties, where Harper is part of a NATO peacekeeping mission. The "peace" ends within the first few pages, however, when Harper returns to her trailer after a day in the field and finds one of her soldiers, Specialist Virginia Delray, brutally murdered. Delray and Harper weren't exactly friends, but Harper carries some guilt about not having helped "her soldier" more. As Harper herself becomes a suspect and the murder investigation seems hopelessly misled, she takes a larger role, which hinges on some of the photos on Delray's camera — luckily, preserved by Delray's grieving but proactive boyfriend. The photos help uncover a much deeper ring of violence and exploitation, a circle of trouble that nearly costs Harper her life.

But it also brings her closer to an unlikely friend and eventual lover, the charmingly rough-around-the-edges Sergeant Major Harry Fogg, a British bachelor-with-a-heart-of-gold. He appreciates Lauren from the get-go; she is good at many things and one of them is preparing tea, and you can almost hear her smiling to herself beneath his admiring gaze: "I pulled out several selections of teas and watched Fogg's reaction as he realized I wasn't messing around."

This relationship with Harry helps spare Lauren the pain of her earlier, ill-fated crush on a superior, Colonel Neil McCallen. McCallen reveals himself to be a bit of a spineless ninny and a narcissist, but something about his flaming red hair and facial scar appeal to Lauren, who has used excuses over the past couple of years to avoid being alone with him — mainly out of a general sense of protocol, and not exactly guilt over poor "Michelle and the boys" who are waiting at home, with Michelle due in another three months.

As with many of the other backstage issues raised in Doyle's books, deployment infidelity—either real or imagined— and the somewhat prickly dichotomy between the military spouse waiting faithfully at home, and the single female soldier spending months or a year in the field with a man who may consider himself a temporary bachelor, is rendered with a light touch but serious reverberations, and it's just one of the many things Doyle does well.

Thank God, anyway, for Harry Fogg, who plays a major role in getting Lauren out of the scrape she's in near the end of the novel (though the bravest course of action is taken by Lauren herself). "Scrape" is putting it too mildly: Doyle gives Lauren a taste of the degradation and even slavery which most Americans will hopefully never experience. It's a serious and poignant move, a statement on the freedoms many people worldwide, especially women, do not have, and the lengths to which people will go to try to escape their circumstances, even if that requires serious gambling with their lives and their security.



Doyle's mystery novels have tension and underworld crime in spades, but they are also smart, politically-savvy and politically-invested. The author's empathy is with the underdog and her writing has a particular concern for the plight of women and girls, both in and out of uniform.

As I was saying: along comes Harry, the British badass (from along line of British badasses; his mum, Rosalind Fogg, received the Victoria Cross for working as a spy during WWII and escaping capture). (Harry, unlike our president, loves people who get captured! — Bad joke — Editor) Harry's gruff but tender good nature and easy humor also provide levity. He and Lauren have a welcome and diverting sexual tension which span the mini-book in between *The Peacekeeper's Photograph* ("Canceled Plans") and its follow-on, *The Sapper's Plot*. Doyle is an expert at keeping a plot moving while she, for lack of a better term, leads you on a little. Harry and Lauren are desperate to meet up again, but how is it possible, with her now stationed in Honduras and he back home in London, drinking brandy with his neighbor's cat? Oh, Harry will find a way. Just you wait and see. And his eventual, impossibly romantic reunion with Lauren is totally worth it.

As a character, Lauren Harper is refreshingly believable: practical, smart, and good at her job, but still human enough for the occasional relationship entanglement (some of which pop up again to rankle her later). Her responsible nature comes in part from having helped raise her younger sister, Loretta, with whom she's very close. Despite her patience and professionalism, she's not above sputtering the occasional "fuckin'-A" or "What the freaking..." when she's handed a particularly maddening situation. And, perhaps in a way that only a soldier with multiple remote deployments can, she appreciates a well-built latrine:

A wide wooden bench sat in the middle of the structure with four positions, two on each side of the bench, back to back. Each position was separated from the next by a couple of feet of space and upright plywood walls, giving each seat at least the illusion of privacy in the makeshift toilet. You wouldn't be able to look your neighbor in the eye, but you'd know they were there.

Porcelain seat covers and short wooden poles stacked with plenty of toilet paper made the latrine one of the nicest I'd ever seen in a jungle...First Sergeant Dodd had a latrine to be proud of and that was no small thing in my book.

Doyle, an Army veteran and Reservist, must have smiled to herself writing these lines, poking a bit of fun at the personality quirks that inevitably develop from decades-long military service.

Such description also puts the reader right into a scene. I had never read a book set on a military installation in Bosnia or Honduras before; Doyle has both lived some of this experience and done her research, and the result is engaging writing with a character you can root for, in a place you may never have imagined.



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