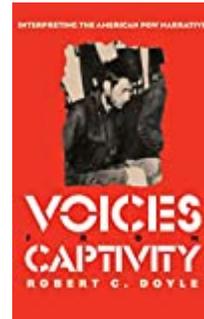




Robert C. Doyle. *Voices from Captivity: Interpreting the American POW Narrative.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. xiii + 370 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0663-4.



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POW Narratives as a Genre—Puritans to the Gulf

Being captured and held a prisoner of war (POW) is one of the most harrowing and dangerous experiences a soldier can face. Over the course of American history, the nation's war prisoners have been starved, beaten, tortured, held on disease-ridden ships, and sent on forced marches. Thousands never returned. Many of those Americans who survived captivity have told their stories through published memoirs, essays, interviews, and other media. In *Voices from Captivity*, Robert C. Doyle (presently at the University of Strasbourg in France) examines this literary genre and has produced a revealing look into the minds and memories of former prisoners of war.

The POW narrative is an "important literary form" (p. 1), according to Doyle, one that scholars have often misunderstood or overlooked altogether. Having been forcibly removed from their own culture, prisoner-narrators ask "basic questions about the power of a culture's...commonly held ideas" (pp. 281-282) and provide metaphoric insight to standard historical accounts of war. Doyle divides the work into three sections. The first establishes the context of the POW narrative, and

includes discussions of international law regarding prisoners and the experiences of colonial Americans in their wars with Native Americans. The middle section explores the thematic content of POW narratives. In the final section Doyle considers the "legacies of captivity" (p. xii) as manifested in American folk and popular culture, and includes discussion of the lingering questions surrounding those who remain missing in action upon the conclusion of hostilities.

The work's most engaging aspect is the discussion of narrative themes. Doyle identifies seven distinct "event-scenarios" commonly found in these works. "From colonial times through Vietnam," he writes, prisoner-authors "have styled their messages within a set of recognized, understandable, temporal, contextual, sequential, and categorical boundaries" (p. 81). Most begin with a precapture autobiographical sketch. The accounts then describe capture by the enemy and removal to the rear. Prisoner-narrators, who often endured years in camp with very little to do, typically describe the prison landscape in copious detail. The narrators also discuss their strategies for surviving imprisonment, whether it

be through passivity, active resistance, or escape. Ex-prisoners describe the joy of their release and homecoming, but often end their works with a lament for the years and opportunities lost while in prison.

Voices from Captivity is a remarkable work in many respects. Doyle has scoured a vast corpus of literature and found an amazing amount of continuity in works spanning centuries of American cultural evolution. Some scholars have dismissed POW narratives as vindictive diatribes or self-serving apologies, but Doyle takes these works seriously and writes sensitively about them. While he is properly skeptical of his evidence, the author reaches beyond the minutiae that sometimes trap military historians and uncovers larger truths about culture, human nature, and the experience of war—as well as about a literary form often neglected by *litterateurs* after

the Puritan era. Doyle takes his readers into the world of the POW camp as the prisoners themselves saw it and remember it. *Voices from Captivity* is an indispensable work for anyone interested in the prisoner of war experience and a fascinating application of the interdisciplinary approach to literature that so often receives more praise than practice. Thus Doyle's book is of value not only for its declared subject, but as a model for the study of literature in a historical/cultural context.

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