

Joe Lerner is shipped home to an unexpected welcome. He rejoins his buddy at college. Their veterans' dorm outrages the neighbors. Joe fails to fit into his world. Haunted by nightmares, Joe doses himself with booze and pot. Then, a false accusation of murder...What will become of Joe Lerner?

BACK IN THE WORLD: A Composite Novel

by Joe Lerner and Herman Kaufman

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BACK IN THE WORLD:

A COMPOSITE NOVEL

RETURNING TO THE WORLD CAN BE
SO MUCH HARDER THAN LEAVING

A person wearing a dark beanie, a black leather jacket, and dark pants stands in profile, looking down. They are positioned against a dark, textured wall with several prominent cracks. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the wall and the person's clothing.

JOE LERNER & HERMAN KAUFMAN

Back in the World

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The characters in this book are entirely fictional. The events may be real happenings that have been fantasized into fiction, but are not intended to portray historic happenings. Those readers knowledgeable about the Vietnam War's history may object to the authors' twisting of timing; they can only plead dramatic necessity. The public's ill treatment of Vietnam veterans is all too true.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Hail the Conquering Hero	11
Chapter 2. Welcome Home.....	13
Chapter 3. Back in the World	17
Chapter 4. Help from Above.....	23
Chapter 5A. In Search of a New Life	26
Chapter 5B. I Enter the Story.....	28
Chapter 5C. Landing Zone Calverton.....	30
Chapter 6. Off to Work They Go	35
Chapter 7A. Hardcore the Outlaw	39
Chapter 7B. Believe in Your Dream.....	44
Chapter 8. Battle Royal.....	46
Chapter 9. Honoring the Fallen.....	51
Chapter 10. Believe in Your Dream	55
Chapter 11A. Summer’s Women.....	58
Chapter 11B. The Long View.....	62
Chapter 12. Flying the Colors.....	63
Chapter 13A. Rules of Disengagement.....	66
Chapter 13B. Love Goddess	70
Chapter 14. Everyone Loves a Parade	74
Chapter 15A. Bored on the Fourth of July.....	82
Chapter 15B. Incoming.....	86
Chapter 16. Morning News.....	89
Chapter 17. Alley Cat Night and Doggy Day	93
Chapter 18. Hardcore the Outlaw	97

Back in the World

Chapter 19. The Fire This Time.....	101
Chapter 20. Believe in Your Dream	106
Chapter 21. The Neighbors Come Calling.....	108
Chapter 22. Back to School We Go	112
Chapter 23. Easy Work, Quick Money	115
Chapter 24. Post Vietnam Syndrome.....	121
Chapter 25. Post Post Vietnam Syndrome	125
Chapter 26. Post Post Post Vietnam Syndrome	129
Chapter 27. Covert Operation	131
Chapter 28. Charlie's on the Wire	135
Chapter 29. Dean's List	138
Chapter 30. A Dark and Stormy Night	141
Chapter 31. Tricky Treat.....	144
Chapter 32. So Proudly We Served	147
Chapter 33. Chain of Events	152
Chapter 34. Confrontation	156
Chapter 35. Happy Birthday, Marine Corps	160
Chapter 36A & B. Honoring the Fallen	165
Chapter 37. Crossfire	170
Chapter 38. Believe in Your Dream	174
Chapter 39. The Eagle Flies.....	176
Chapter 40. Easy Money.....	178
Chapter 41. Festive Feast.....	181
Chapter 42. Everybody's a Critic	185
Chapter 43. In a Manner of Speaking.....	191

Chapter 44. Believe in Your Dream	195
Chapter 45. It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas	197
Chapter 46. Boxing Day	199
Chapter 47. Hangover	205
Chapter 48. Covert Operations	207
Chapter 49. Rape of the Black Virgin.....	209
Chapter 50. What'd I Say?.....	211
Chapter 51. Believe in Your Dream	215
Chapter 52. On the Waterfront.....	217
Chapter 53. Fireside Chat	222
Chapter 54. Drive Through Service	224
Chapter 55. Easy Money	226
Chapter 56. Rules of Reengagement.....	228
Chapter 57. Believe in Your Dream	231
Chapter 58. The End of Easy Money.....	232
Chapter 59. Convoy of Tears	234
Chapter 60. Believe in Your Dream	239
Chapter 61. Rat Race	240
Chapter 62. Believe in Your Dream	242
Chapter 63. Rally Around the Flag, Boys.....	243
Chapter 64. Believe in Your Dream	245
Chapter 65. In the Black	249
Chapter 66. Under the Gun	251
Chapter 67. Believe in Your Dream	255
Chapter 68. 30 April 1975	257

Back in the World

Chapter 69. The Light Appears.....	258
Epilogue	262

Chapter 2. Welcome Home (From a manuscript by Joe Lerner)

I see a quartet of figures silhouetted at the end of the Jet way. They are apparently waiting to greet someone. With a start, I realize I am the last passenger, and must be the person they are awaiting. *Well, some good souls came down to greet us, bless their hearts,* occurs to me.

The four forms take on detail as I approach them. I squint, looking for flags or placards or bunting, but spot none.

However, there is a grandmotherly ancient biddy, all gingham, steel frame glasses, and cotton boll hair. She looks the type to stand on street corners and pass out smudgy semi-literate tracts on doom and salvation—sweet, maternal, daft.

Next to her is an ersatz Bolshevik, all fanatic glare, polyester Nehru jacket, shaggy beard, and soft hands clutching a scarlet copy of *The Sayings of Chairman Mao*.

There is also an acne-headed punk with a Beatle haircut and a magician's cape, breathing through his bucktoothed mouth.

And, hello, there's a juicy little pigtailed sweetie of a hippie milkmaid, all freshly nubile curves, flaxen hair, and poreless skin, a sight to gladden the groin of any returnee.

They catch sight of me as I step in the door.

Grandma looks like somebody pissed in her fresh-baked cobbler.

Nehru Jacket shoots me an off-to-the-firing-squad glare.

Pimpley attempts a glare.

Sweetie wrinkles her cute little snubby nose at me as though she's sniffed a beer and burrito fart.

And the attack is on.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Granny scolds.

"Capitalist warmonger," the parlor revolutionary shrieks.

"Sucker," Pimpley sneers.

"Baby killer," Grandma hisses at me.

Milkmaid puckers up and hawks right in my face. I am startled and shocked by the saliva; I raise my hand to wipe it away. Pimpley grabs my wrist. "Don't you dare hit her, piggy," he whines.

My mind is whirling as bad as my innards. I have served my country as I was taught. I have just finished three tours of combat duty. Disgusted by my experiences, I had sworn an oath of perpetual peace on the airplane home; now I am being harassed by pacifists. It is a crazy-making situation. *Just what the fuck is going on here?* I wonder. And then startlingly, I am looking at my world through a rosy film of unreasoning rage. I reflexively counterattack. I twist my arm out of his grasp and seize his pinkie in a pain compliance hold. I jerk upwards, and he waltzes up on tiptoe to ease the agony shooting up his arm.

I stick my nose up against his. “Don’t fuck with me, punk,” I snarl.

I jab my other hand out to the side. My stiffened fingertips knife into Bolshie’s diaphragm. He rocks back in his Birkenstocks and gags into his birds-nest beard.

I shove Pimplly away and stare bullets at both males. Their eyes decline my challenge. They became very absorbed in studying the patterns in the airport’s tile floor until I turn away.

“On the other hand,” I say to the sweetie who spat on me, peering down into her cornflower eyes, “you’re kind of cute.” I pinch her cheek between thumb and trigger finger as the anger again flares in me. “Why don’t you let me butt-fuck you some time?”

She pinkens and cringes.

Grandma gapes so wide she loses her dentures. I accidentally on purpose step on her upper plate as I lunge into the restroom.

My bowels are a whirlpool of acid. My guts want to wring it out of me like a housewife twisting a dishrag. I charge into a stall, whip down my drawers, and let rip. I lean my burning forehead on the cold steel of the toilet wall and ignore the stench.

I hear a slurred quacking outside, “...and then he ducked in there.” I prop my feet against the stall door and set my bag in my lap. The restroom door crashes open. Someone starts banging open stall doors. When mine doesn’t give, there’s a scuffle of shoe leather and cloth swiping on the floor. A hand reaches under my door and waves a nightstick back and forth parallel to the floor. There’s an effortful groan and creak of knee as the security guard gets back up.

He hurries back into the corridor. I overhear, “...must have left while you were fetching me.” The restroom door subsides.

I leave the stall and wash my face and hands in the sink. I am changing my trousers when an older man enters. He's mid-forties, has a little gut on him, but his posture is so GI straight you can tell he has served.

He takes a quick whiz, sniffs the air, spins around. He mutters, "Jesus, another stinking loser," and heads out the door.

I'm staring through that pink haze again. I lunge for him, but my dropped pants hobble me, so he escapes without even noticing my attempt.

Wearily, I change into civvies. As I do, I recall my family's legend; Great-Grandpa had come home in 1865 in his treasonous Confederate gray to a welcome by his hometown's brass band, his townsmen's cheers, and subsequent election as justice of the peace. And now, I conclude, I come home from being duped by patriotism to fight for my country instead of against it, only to become a target for ridicule.

Time to ditch the uniform, I decide; I don't need any more hassles.

The last thing I do is salvage my medals from my shirt before I discard the uniform in the trash. I wipe the snotty slobber from my awards and carefully wrap them in a handkerchief. I tuck the hankie into the bottom of my luggage.

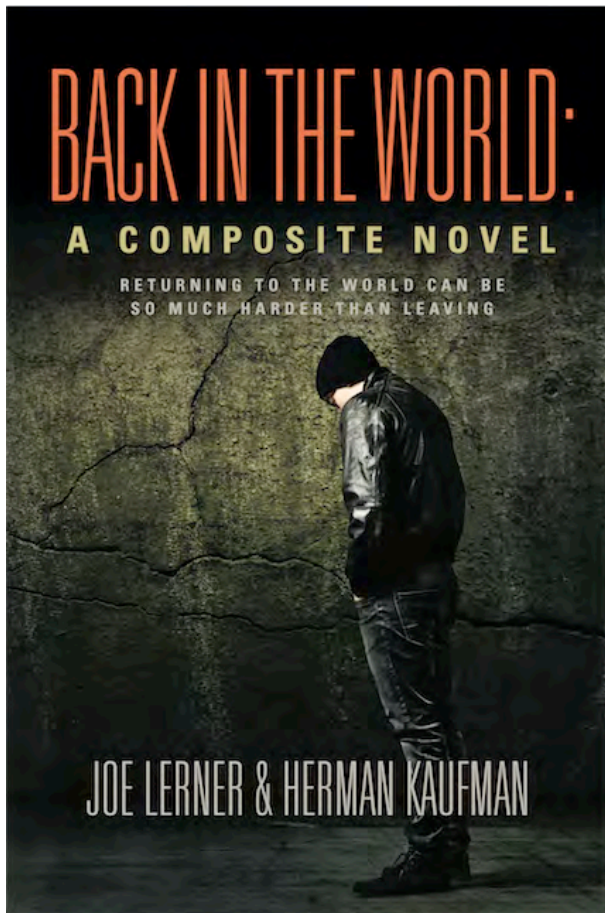
I catch sight of myself in the mirror over the sink. I am no longer a warrior. Once my hair grows out, I can be any mechanic or warehouseman. The thought is strange, unfamiliar, unsettling after the past years in uniform; I barely recall being a civilian.

Before I leave the restroom, I check the hallway for sight of the welcomers. They are down at the far end, glued up against an observation window, heads together, deep in a confab.

I head the opposite way for my connecting flight home. I look out the window to what's attracting such avid attention from the quartet. Down below me, a lone forklift driver is lifting a gray aluminum box from the hold of the airplane I had just left. There was no ceremony, no flags, and no honor guard; indeed, there is no audience except Joe and the four protesters. Two other coffins already sit in the back of an idling pickup truck.

Back in the World

Better that I be spit upon than them ran through my mind, but if those assholes get a chance, they would even spit on the dead. With that bleak thought, I head toward my boarding gate.



Joe Lerner is shipped home to an unexpected welcome. He rejoins his buddy at college. Their veterans' dorm outrages the neighbors. Joe fails to fit into his world. Haunted by nightmares, Joe doses himself with booze and pot. Then, a false accusation of murder...What will become of Joe Lerner?

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