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LILLIAN MOATS

HOWARD ZINN

the Humanist

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WITH

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*"If ever there was a
moment for such a
movement, it's now."*

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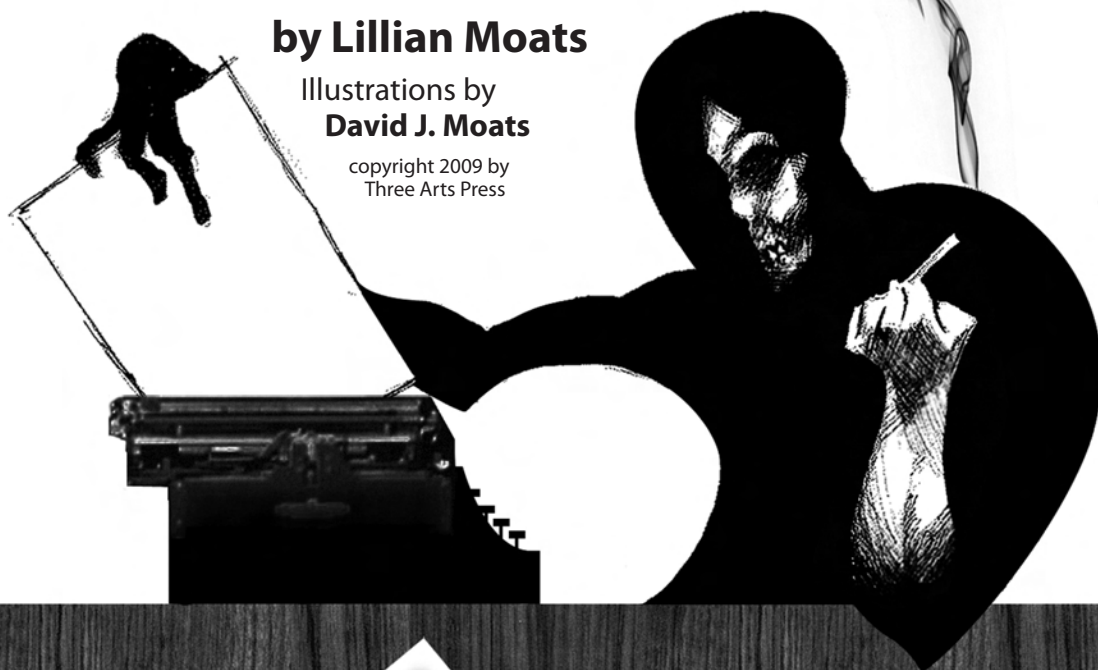
BOOK EXCERPT:

The Letter from Death

by Lillian Moats

Illustrations by
David J. Moats

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FOREWORD

by Howard Zinn

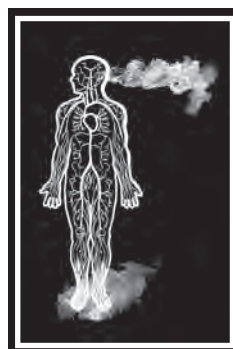
LILLIAN MOATS gives us, in *The Letter from Death*, a brilliant and strikingly original work of the imagination, drawing both on biblical scholarship and contemporary military doctrine, infused with wit and irony, grounded in a profound aversion to war and a celebration of human potential for peace.

She starts with a provocative premise, that our fear of death is an obstacle to our understanding of life, that this fear is used by those in power to seduce us into violence and hatred. Moats uses death not as a threat, but as a prism through which to examine the most profound questions that confront the human race today. Her ruminations on hell, and how it has been used through the ages, are both funny and troubling, a mini-education in how our culture distorts our perceptions.

She quietly skewers the blaming of war on "human nature," and draws on the research of respected military historians to tell us the untold story of the natural aversion of soldiers to killing. She also reminds us of what we easily forget: the universal longing of infants for warmth and affection, surely a more powerful resource to draw on than the superficial layers of a culture that denies our deepest needs.

What more authoritative voice can we listen to, in rejecting the violence of war, than that of Death itself? This brief meditation has beauty and eloquence on every page, and it is accompanied by a set of wonderful illustrations by David Moats, the author's son.

Howard Zinn, is a historian, activist, playwright, and author whose books include the best seller, *A People's History of the United States* and *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*.



[The following is excerpted from Section X with permission of the author and publisher.]

To state my frank opinion, neither religion nor science nor technology (nor any other -ism or -ology) will save you. Yet, why would I bother to address you if I did not think you had the potential to save yourselves? I would simply pity the whole lot of you if I believed humanity to be condemned by its genetic make-up—or some “fall from grace”—to endlessly repeat atrocities.

Doubtless, you have concluded from my railing against the widespread violence of your species that I think human beings are *naturally* prone to killing their own kind. How little you know me still. I don't think anything of the sort.

Throughout your long history, I have experienced every one of your societies. Their distinctive relations to warfare I have learned through the psyches of their peoples. I have assimilated cultures that engaged in no warring; some that, to obviate the need for killing, created ceremonial outlets for conflict. I have known ritualistic warfare, in which the killing of a single member of an enemy group constituted a victory respected by both sides. I have absorbed both ancient and current cultures that have institutionalized the neurosis of retaliation, cultures that slaughter and torture—need I say “pathologically?”

In reporting that some form of war has been built into myriad cultures, I do not endorse the claim that concerted violence is bound to find expression in you. It is the collective credulity with which you accept and pass along a culture's approval of war that astounds and alarms me.

You excuse human behavior by pointing to that of primates from which you evolved. You shrug, “Violence is just part of our animal nature.” But you are as closely related to the gentle, matriarchal bonobo ape as to the aggressive chimpanzee. Tell me, why have so few of you even heard of them? And why are you rarely taught about those human societies that have so valued peace that they have devised effective measures to foster it?

My role demands I come to all living things privately—requiring a concurrently distant and close-up point of view. Could there be anything more wrenching than the contrast I find between what you now call the “macro” and “micro?” Why do individuals behave so differently in groups? No one could speak with more intimate knowledge than I about the instinctive aversion you have *as individuals* to killing your own kind, and the toll such a primal act can exact from the killer.

I don't have in mind the sociopaths among you, or the endless parade of politicians who manipulate and conscript adolescents to kill and die for them. At this moment, I'm



thinking of countless soldiers whose private agonies have been so ignored in the war myths you call “history.”

The natural resistance to killing another of your species is reinforced in childhood by every moral teaching. Then, with each nation’s support, its military shames and trains its youth to kill. Do you think a conscience can be permanently suppressed?

Since your earliest warring—and more commonly than you might guess—I’ve taken in dying gasps of young boys who made easy targets of themselves, immobilized with horror after their first kill. In your most destructive century, I absorbed the final breaths of decorated World War veterans still haunted by the photographs of infants they found on the corpses of the “enemy.” Far outnumbering these are my memories of soldiers who desperately disguised an inability to kill, even as they died saving their comrades. I know that the war stories you are used to hearing are not like these. Such accounts of personal anguish are censored or drowned out by the more “heroic” kind.

Why are histories of warfare written? Justification by the victors is a covert motive I discern. “Never forget the triumphs and sacrifices of our side,” your leaders implore you. But by what maniacal reckoning must more and ever more youths die so none will have “died in vain”?

While you have been repeating by rote the presumption of war as necessary evil, powerful militaries across your world have applied themselves to the widespread “problem” of young men reluctant to kill. Not to worry! Desensitizing solutions have already been found: slick propaganda, relentless practice in virtual killing, overexposure to glorified brutality. Are you relieved to know that, for soldiers conditioned by such techniques, the firing rate has more than quadrupled since your Second World War?

My outrage at the growing militarism of your species does not blind me to the more subtle and varied traits I find in individuals. I admire that human quality—call it compassion, empathy?—that still makes it nearly impossible for most of you to kill. Do you find this ironic—Death admiring those who cannot kill? Then how little you know me, even yet. 🏠

Lillian Moats is a Chicago area writer, artist, and filmmaker. *The Letter from Death* is her fourth book.

David J. Moats lives and works in London as a film journalist for *The Quietus* and as a freelance illustrator and architectural researcher.

