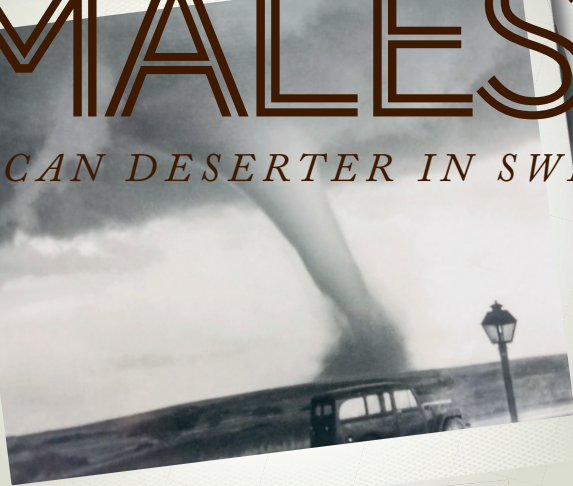


WILLIAM MALES



THE LIVES OF WILLI MALES

AMERICAN DESERTER IN SWEDEN



1961 Cheyenne Oklahoma

This is a coming-of-age novel about Oklahoma boy Willi Males who goes off to Yale to get educated and become a man. It takes place during the Vietnam War American Style which ate up the 60s and went on and on. Willi never experiences Vietnam but does experience Sweden, which is where he ends up after deserting his army post taking care of war dogs in the States.

Though the book is a generally lighthearted it is among other things a meditation on the ethics of war and killing and is therefore indelibly relevant.

Most autobiographies are stale and self-serving, this is quite the opposite: an engaging story about a boy who chose the road less traveled. And ended up a US deserter in Sweden.

Augustin Erba



William Males was born to school teacher Lorena and her banker husband "Red" Males in 1946 and grew up in Cheyenne, Oklahoma. He eventually ended up in Sweden, as deserter from the army during the Vietnam years.

William now lives in Gothenburg with his Eva and is the proud father of three from an earlier marriage, grandfather of two.

Portrait photo: Soraya Mirgalou.

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THE LIVES OF WILLI MALES

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AMERICAN DESERTER IN SWEDEN

William Males



The Lives of Willi Males: American Deserter in Sweden

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*This book is dedicated to my mother Lorena
and to her mother Mary.*

*They were both teachers and both were
born on the 4th of July.*

*It was Mary who reportedly remarked,
“If Bill says the war is wrong, it probably is.”*

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INTRODUCTION

William Males was easy to spot. As I detrained in Rättvik in Dalarna County, I looked out for my host for the weekend, an American who, by this time in 2006, had been living in Sweden for 37 years. Standing just outside the platform entrance was a tall man wearing a Stetson. Nothing about him suggested he was anything but an American. No Swedish reserve, but an enthusiastic anticipation on his smiling face. He recognized me immediately, a fellow American, and came bounding toward me, hands extended in greeting.

William and I are both writers. I write historical novels, and he writes poems and stories, and at that time was drafting the memoir about his desertion from the US Army during the Vietnam War, *The Lives of Willi Males: American Deserter in Sweden*, which is the book you have in hand. I was researching for a novel about the American deserters and a mutual acquaintance had connected us. It was writing as much as research that brought us together. William taught writing at The University of Gävle and had invited me to present to his

workshop. When the location of the workshop was moved from Gävle to Stockholm, I bemoaned that I wouldn't get to see Sweden outside of Stockholm. He didn't hesitate and invited me to his home in Rättvik for Easter

I learned a lot about William that weekend over lunches of fiddlehead soup, sandwiches with *Herrgårdsost*, and bike rides in the hills overlooking icy Lake Siljan. He was the son of a banker from Cheyenne, a community in western Oklahoma, not far from the Texas panhandle. When we watched the movie *The Last Picture Show*, he declared that the setting of the movie with scenes of 1950s small-town life in the southern Great Plains with its cottonwood and mesquite trees, prickly pear and dust storms was his home.

It is more than just setting that connects William to *The Last Picture Show*. The movie focuses on restless teenagers who are looking for more out of life than their stultifying town offers them. William, too, was looking beyond Cheyenne, where, even as a child, he felt he was an outsider.

Escape came when he enrolled at prestigious Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, half a continent away from dusty Oklahoma in the polished environs of America's east coast elite. He was in the same first-year class as George W. Bush, though he never met the future president because, as he told me, he avoided people from Oklahoma and Texas. His search for a comfortable identity intensified while at Yale, and perhaps the most certain outcome of his experiments with identities was that he thought he could be a writer. Failing to achieve at Yale, William was drafted into the US Army, and here began the struggle-of-conscience that came to define him as a deserter and an expatriate.

The Vietnam war was a very hot spot in the Cold War. Vietnam, having been divided into North and South following the retreat of the colonial French fell into a civil war. Fearing the expansion of communism into the South, the United States officially entered the war in 1965 and soon found itself in an intense jungle war with the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, the military branch of the South Vietnamese Communist movement, the National Liberation Front. As US involvement grew, the war became increasingly unpopular among Americans and spurred a vigorous anti-war movement. By May of 1971, an estimated 40,000 anti-war demonstrators threatened to shut down Washington, DC.

Swedes, too, reacted strongly against American involvement in Vietnam. As early as 1964, there were Swedish anti-war demonstrations, and in 1965, the Swedish Vietnam Committee, later to be restructured as the Swedish Committee for Vietnam (SKfV), advocated for peace and gave strong support to North Vietnam. Unlike American protests which grew primarily out of youth movements, the Swedish protests were associated with the government through connections with the Social Democrats, and involved high ranking officials, notably Olaf Palme. Even before he became Prime Minister, Palme participated in demonstrations organized by SKfV. Under his leadership, he invited American soldiers in danger of going into the Vietnam conflict to a safe haven in Sweden. Though numbers are not clear, it is likely that about one-thousand young American deserters, draft dodgers, and other war resisters came to live in Sweden in the late 1960s and early 1970s. William, long wrestling with himself over what role he

would play in the war, indeed, what role he would play in the USA, was among them.

My research shows that every deserter has a unique story—a desertion narrative, if you will. Even so, William’s experience was unique among the deserters to Sweden. With financial support from his father, he suffered less of the pecuniary hardships of many of his fellow deserters. Further, he was able to maintain a strong relationship with his Oklahoma family, primarily through regular letter writing.

As a desertion narrative, *The Lives of Willi Males* is extraordinary for its intense and thoughtful meditation. It’s fair to say that the deserters were running away from something—the war in most cases, but not all. William’s desertion is as much a search for self as it is an escape from war. There is a light-heartedness to the style of this narrative, but underlying it is a deeply philosophical disquisition about identity and human experience. This tone is William as both a young man coming-of-age in a time of war and the older writer putting together the pieces of his life and placing those pieces in the broader world. He is not alone in this quest, as some of the most thoughtful ponderings come in letters between himself and his father, L. L. Males.

Young William could not have seen his future, now, 55 years after the desertion. All he could have done is what he did do, something not all people are capable of doing. He stood by his convictions, risked losing family and country and boarded an airline that took him to an uncertain future.

The war resisters resided in Sweden from the late 1960s until the Carter Amnesty in 1977 when the majority of them returned to the USA. Likely only about 200 remained, raising

families and contributing to Swedish commerce and culture. The event is not well known to American audiences. Swedes, however, have explored the deserters in books and film, notably in the journalism of Johan Erlandsson and documentary films of Johan Romin, which feature one of the earliest of the deserters, Terry Whitmore. To my knowledge, outside of Terry Whitmore's *Memphis, Nam, Sweden, The Lives of Willi Males* is the only published memoir by a deserter to Sweden. For this reason alone, it is an important book to read. Even greater value, however, comes from William's thoughtful reflection and probing into matters of being human that deeply challenge us all.

Anthony Grooms

PROLOGUE

Stockholm, 2010: Walter Flowers

The last time Willi saw Walter, Walter couldn't see right. The light of spring was returning but Stockholm was still stone cold. Walter was a praying mantis behind the shrubbery of a miniature park—Berzelii Park—in the middle of Stockholm, across from the Royal Dramatic Theatre. Willi was just passing by on the sidewalk—the fat guy among the bag-bearers, could have been a jazz musician in his shades and colorful scarf. He was toting a battered briefcase with his Swedish college logo.

Willi and Walter had been best buddies and Willi could recognize Walter's way of haunting Berzelii Park. He drew closer to get a better look and could see that Walter was wearing cowboy boots, old and beat up—had they been Willi's?—and a worn out cowboy hat—was this also a hand-me-down from Willi?—and a ragged field jacket—definitely Willi's, once Willi's father's. Like Willi, Walter wore sunglasses, but Walter's were the mirroring kind that hide your eyes and make you look like a bug. Walter's face was still crooked. His teeth fell one

side and his harelip pulled toward the other. His body cast a thinner shadow than formerly, and moved in jerks. His hair was still abundant and still duck-tailed, though a patch on the very top was bare. He was still carefully clean shaven— how did he manage that? His face was wrinkled, weather-beaten. You could have taken him for a derelict Swede, but he was actually an honored war resister from Higgins, Texas.

Willi ran into Walter in Stockholm on an “even anniversary,” as they say in Sweden, of their coming to Sweden. It had been four decades since Walter and Willi washed up on these shores at the very end of the 60s, flotsam from America’s sinking war in Vietnam, part of a shadow army of tens of thousands who balked in different ways and for different reasons at taking any part in it.

Walter and Willi established beachheads here on their own private D-Days, where “D” stands for “deserter.” Willi’s exact date was the 12th of April 1969. Walter came months earlier. It was a time in history when the Swedish government was treating US Vietnam deserters almost as refugees, almost implying that they were some kind of heroes, while newspapers back home were calling them defectors—another D-word. Almost no one back home thought it remotely possible to be a refugee from America.

All that was moons past. Willi had spent his time trying to blend in and establish a second life in a second homeland and learn a second language and become something more than second class. His posture was straight by conscious will. His BMI was 35 which means he had grown into a grand fatso, but he tried to carry his weight with something like grace.

When Willi recognized Walter he called out Walter's name, which you generally don't do on the streets of Stockholm. It's like calling your dog. Willi could see that Dad's field jacket was falling into rags and had to resist an urge to ask for it back. Walter finally picked Willi up on his radar and rotated in Willi's direction in measured movements, disinterested as a weather station. He moved slowly toward him as if walking on stilts. He was trying to smile, but it looked like a grimace, made his asymmetrical face even more one-sided, pulling at his hare lip and exposing his crooked teeth.

Willi couldn't see Walter's right eye behind his sunglasses, but knew it was hazed over—Willi's doing. "Walter?" Willi called out, a little unsure if he had the right man.

It was Walter all right. He still used Brylcreem judging from the shine of his hair. His insect eyes stared at Willi.

"This is Willi," Willi said, using his deserter name. At his Swedish college everyone called him "William." Willi almost shouted, enunciating carefully in case Walter had gone deaf. "Where you been?" Willi asked so Walter wouldn't ask first.

Walter squinted and smiled. One of his crooked front teeth was missing. "Hey, man!"

Dad's field jacket kept moving toward Willi and Willi wondered if they were going to embrace. In the end they didn't. They just stood facing each other in the shrubbery of Berzelii park.

Berzelii Park is down toward the water from NK, an upgrade department store. It's down below where the prostitutes and pushers, the disoriented, disenchanted and dispossessed roam like holy cows until the color runs off them and they