

“Chasing the Light” by Oliver Stone

A Book Review

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

Like the wandering and rascally Odysseus upon whom he models his life, Oliver Stone is “double-minded” in the most profound and illuminating ways. The title of his fantastic new memoir is a case in point. “One of the first basic lessons in filming,” he writes, “is chasing the light. Without it, you have nothing – no exposure that can be seen; even what you see with your naked eye needs to be shaped and enhanced by the light.”

For as a true artist living out a marriage between his writing and his filmmaking, his father and his mother, the warrior and the peacemaker, the domesticated and wild man, he has chosen a title that has a double meaning that is subtly woven like a thread through this labyrinthine tale. It takes the reader from his childhood through his service in Vietnam and his struggles as a writer and filmmaker up to 1987 and his great success with his powerful autobiographical film, *Platoon*, for which he received Oscars for Best Film and Best Director, among others.

Driven by a youthful urge to escape his internal demons first brought on by his mismatched parents’ divorce when he was fifteen, Stone dropped out of Yale, his father’s alma mater, where he had enrolled to fulfill his stockbroker father’s dream. He accepted an offer from a Catholic Church group to teach English-speaking high school students in Chalon, a suburb of Saigon, which he did for six months before traveling around southeast Asia. Back in Saigon, he joined the merchant marine and worked his way back to the states cleaning boilers, the lowest and dirtiest job on the ship. After a storm-tossed 37 days journey, he was cured of his desire to go to sea, a romantic fascination he had acquired from literature. The lesson: Books are not life, nor are movies – they are ways to shape and illuminate it.

Back in the states he threw himself into writing, his first love and the place where his “anxieties could be relieved” and where he felt he could confirm his independent existence separate from his parents. Through writing he could control his story. He wrote a novel called, “A Child’s Night Dream.”

He reentered Yale but only lasted a few months since his heart was not in the placid life of academia, having already had a taste of the wandering life. He then quit Yale for good, to his father’s great disappointment. Lou Stone thought Oliver might turn into a “bum,” a painful refrain in this memoir. This twisted parental inculcation of shame and fear cast a deep shadow on Oliver’s soul and became one of the ghosts that he spent years trying to outrun by becoming a workaholic desperate for success. His novel was subsequently rejected and he fell into a deep depression and self-loathing.

Suicidal at nineteen, he volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army in Vietnam to expiate his guilt, shame, and self-loathing, thinking that perhaps God would take his life for him.

“Odysseus thought he would return home when he left Ithaca,” he writes, “I wasn’t sure of anything...”

It was in Vietnam on January 1-2, 1968, after a terrifying night battle along the Cambodia border where his unit was in a hot zone interdicting North Vietnamese Army troops coming through Laos and Cambodia toward Saigon, when he experienced a profound light experience very different from the type he would later chase while making films.

The battle raged throughout the dark jungle night where confusion and terror reigned. It was impossible to hear or see, and although 25 Americans and 400 North Vietnamese were killed, Stone “hadn’t seen a single one of them [Vietnamese],” although he performed bravely. Here is his brilliantly disturbing and revealing description of what ensued.

Full daylight revealed charred bodies, dusty napalm, and gray trees. Men who died grimacing, in frozen positions, some of them still standing or kneeling in rigor mortis, white chemical death on their faces. Dead, so dead. Some covered with white ash, some burned black. Their expressions, if they could still be seen, were overtaken with anguish or horror. How do you die like this? Charging forward in a hailstorm of death into these bombs and artillery. Why? Were you terrified, or were you jacked out of your fucking mind? What kind of death did you achieve? It was frightening to contemplate, and yet, I wasn’t scared. It was exciting. It was as if I passed from this world and was somewhere where the light was being specially displayed to me in a preview of another life. Soldiers might say it was hell, but I saw it as divine; the closest man would ever come to the Holy Spirit was to witness and survive this great, destructive energy. [emphasis added by author]

So after fifty years in another life, the survivor remembers in that odd mixture that memory is, a shaping force that relies on the light of experience to enhance the existential marriage of hope lost and found, fact and fiction joined to find the truth of an epiphany. He continues:

No person should ever have to witness so much death. I really was too young to understand, and thus I erased much of it, remembering it in this strange way as a stunningly beautiful night full of fireworks, in which I hadn’t seen a single enemy, been fired on, or fired at anyone. It’d been like a dream through which I ‘d walked unharmed, grateful of course, but numb and puzzled by it all. It reminded me of passages in Homer of gods and goddesses coming down from Mount Olympus to the bloody battlefields at Troy to help their favorites, wrapping a mist or cloak around them and winging them to safety.

These passages appear early in the book, and I quote them not just to point out the dual nature of the book’s title – only something a truly creative writer would conceive – but because the dual theme of chasing and being chased by the light is central to Oliver’s life story. It is a tale of a split-soul, the twice wounded warrior who receives a Bronze Star for heroism but who hates war and journeys to get back home where he can rest with his family by the hearth and feel at peace, and the wild, restless, tormented free pirate sailing for adventure and new discoveries. Of course getting back home is no simple matter, especially when you left because home had set the conflict in your heart in the first place, as it did for Stone.

Home is a country as much as a family, and this personal tale is also a guidebook through

modern American history, a country riven since the 1960s. A country that's been feeding on lies that had "infected everything, and I was still numb from it. Because I'd basically never woken up."

But there are epiphanies along the way that wake Stone up, intuitions, hunches, risks he takes, and there are luminescent passages throughout this book to crack open the reader's consciousness to a second reality. *Chasing the Light* is not a superficial trip down memory lane like so many memoirs by famous people; Stone is a wonderful writer, and as with his films, he takes you deep to places you may wish to avoid but are essential for true sanity. The great thing about this memoir is his passion for truth and life that courses through its pages. He seizes the reader by the throat and shouts: Consciousness! Wake up! Don't let sleep and forgetfulness make you into one of the living-dead! A lesson he learned fortuitously at NYU when he took a course in classical drama and his professor, Tim Leahy, raged about the fate of Odysseus and how he was the only one of his crew to get back home because he dared to keep his eyes and ears open to both the dark and light forces whirling all around him. He refused "LETHE" – sleep and forgetfulness.

But as the fates decreed, when the desperately poor warrior Stone came back from Vietnam to NYC and was still struggling to find his way back to a true home he couldn't envision, writing to make sense of his life, he encountered his Calypso, as did Odysseus along his wandering journey to get home to Ithaca. Her name was Najwa Sarkis, an older Lebanese woman who worked at the United Nations. They fell together and for five years Najwa gave Oliver shelter from the storm in her apartment in the East 50s. The sex was passionate and the living conditions in Calypso's cave comfortable, and although they married at her insistence, it was like his parents' marriage, built on a lie. "I can't say the marriage, from my side," he writes, "was built on love, but rather on comfort and caring for each other." Tempted to stay by the thought of comfort, as Odysseus was by the promise of immortality, Stone finally admits the truth to Najwa and himself, packs his bags and leaves "his goddess." He knew he wasn't home yet and had to risk much more to try to get there. "The flaw was that I hadn't grown into my own man. This I knew in my gut – that I hadn't yet been successful as a writer because I'd failed to complete the journey I started when I went to Vietnam." So Odysseus heads to the uptown subway with his two suitcases.

Vietnam haunts him. He starts to write what eventually will become the script for *Platoon*, using Odysseus as his template and example of conscious behavior to expose all the lies of the Vietnam war and the insidious hypocrisy of American life. As in Tennyson's poem about the older Odysseus, still wanting "to seek, to find, and not to yield," the memoirist, himself now not young, says, "In my seventy-plus years from 1946 to now, the chorus of fear-mongering bullshit has never ceased – only grown louder. The joke is on us. Ha Ha Ha."

Throughout this book, Stone is very hard on himself as well as the country:

I had my story, I realized. I was no hero. I slept on my consciousness. My whole country, our society had. But at the least – If I could tell the truth of what I'd seen – it was better than...what? Nothing – the void of a meaningless war and waste of life while our society was stuffing its ears with wax. Odysseus, lashing himself to his mast to preserve his sanity, had insisted on hearing the Sirens, and remembering it. Whereas I was honored for my service to my country, the truth was I soiled myself when I could've resisted, exiled myself, gone to jail for it like the Berrigans, the Spocks, and some 200,000 others. I was young, yes, and I can say that I didn't know better, that I was

part of the unconsciousness of my country.

He tells us he didn't wake up until he was nearly thirty-years-old – in 1976.

Ever since he has devoted his life to the art of waking up his fellow Americans through writing and filmmaking, which he had the great good fortune to learn at NYU film school from that other passionate New York filmmaker, Martin Scorsese, who was his professor. Scorsese shone a light on Oliver after he had made a short film without dialogue called *Last Year in Vietnam*. It was shown to the class, a tough group of critics, but before anyone had spoken, Scorsese said, "Well – this is a filmmaker." It was an epiphany that Stone says he will never forget. A pure gift that set him on his way to eventually make his great films.

But the journey was hard and took years to complete.

Stone's mother, Jacqueline Pauline Cézarine Goddet, and his father, Louis Stone (born Abraham Louis Silverstein), were married in Paris as World War II ended. He was an U.S. Army officer and she, a "peasant" French girl, were mismatched from the start. They "made possibly the greatest mistake of their lives – to which I owe my existence," he tells us. Oliver became very close to his French grandparents, especially his Mémé. As he was struggling to write successful screenplays and break into filmmaking, his beloved grandmother dies and he goes to France for her funeral. There is a scene in this memoir – I almost said movie – where he arrives alone in a suburb of Paris where she is laid out in her musty apartment in an old apartment building. He felt the dead were calling to him from the past – Vietnam, France. So much death, so many lies, betrayals. He writes:

I thought about how Odysseus went to the Underworld to find Tiresias for a prophecy about when and how he'd return home to Ithaca. And once in the Underworld, he recognized his mother, Anticlea, who, like the other shades, had come to him to slake herself at the pool of sheep's blood he had sacrificed to get there.

For Oliver, his Mémé was like a mother to him, and with her forty-year marriage to her beloved Pépé who had predeceased her, was a symbol of what family life should be all about, the family Oliver had lost and desperately wished for. Home as love and commitment. "Without a family, we one and all suffer," he says.

In less than four pages, his description of this encounter with his grandmother illuminates the heart of this memoir and is an exquisite example of a great artist at work. An artist who uses words to touch your soul, heart-breaking, tender, and hopeful in turns, far different from the often-popular image of Stone. I would buy this book for these four pages alone. Listen:

I drew up my chair closer to be with her, like we'd been when I was young, cuddled in her big bed as she told me the stories of the wolves in Paris who'd come down the chimneys to snatch the children who'd been bad...There was the silence of 'la mort,' and then the October light began to drop. No one else knocked or visited. Just me. And you, Mémé – and that something listening between us. Not long ago I'd been twenty-three. You were so happy when I'd returned in one piece from over there. I'd tried to pay my debt to society. We all have one, we don't only live for ourselves. But I still felt uneasy and Mémé did too. What did Vietnam have to do with saving our civilization when it only

made the world more callous? You never asked me for an explanation. Three wars in your life time...I'd done nothing. I'd achieved nothing. Therefore I was nothing...I was crying but didn't know I was until I felt the tears. I hadn't cried in so many years – I was a hard boy. I had to be, I felt, to survive. I was raised to believe men don't cry.

But this time it feels fresh, like a rain. But who am I crying to? Not you, Mémé – you're not the one judging me. You never have. Is it my self I'm crying to? My self, but who was that? I could not see myself. I was ugly, hiding. I could cry myself dry with self-pity. All this pain, so much pain. Yes, I feel it now- feel sorry for myself, it's okay- so raw, all my lies, my embarrassment naked for the dead to see, naked to the whole world! No one loves me, no one will ever love me. Because I can't love anyone – except you, Mémé, and you're gone now. Can I...can I learn to love? How can I start? By just being kind like you were? Can I be kind – to myself? In my mind, I heard Mémé reply: 'Try – you're a man now. You're no longer seventeen sitting on the sidelines of your life, judging. You've seen this world, tasted its tears. Now's the time to recognize this, Oliver, Oliver, Oliver' – my name, invoked three times to rouse myself, to wake myself from this long slumber. Do something with your life, I demanded, all this energy bottled up for years, hopeless dreaming and writing, no excuse, you can do better. Stop fucking around...Mémé continued speaking to me so gently. That soft voice: 'Mon chéri, mon p'tit Oliverre, te fais pas de soucis pour rien...Fais ta vie. Fais ce que tu veux faire. C'est tout ce qu'il y a. Je t'embrasse, je t'adore.' (My darling, my little Oliver, don't be miserable for nothing...Make your life.

Do what you have to do. That's all there is. I embrace you, I adore you.) ...The other shades were approaching now, smelling the blood, so many young men groaning...faces distorted in death. There was whispering, many voices. 'Stone, hey man, don't forget me! Where you goin'? Gimme some! Hey, tell my girl you saw me, will ya? Remember me, will ya? You got a joint?' Mémé wanted me to go – quickly, before it was too late. I couldn't hear, but it clear what the shades were saying: We, the dead, are telling you – your lifespan is short. Make of it everything you can. Before you're one of us. I rose and kissed Mémé's face one last time..." Au revoir, ma belle Mémé. And I walked out – as she looked away and began slaking her thirst with the others...I walked the silent streets to the Metro. Like in a dreamscape, there were no living people. Maybe that's the reason we die. It makes us want to live again.

Oliver does exactly that. Reborn, determined, he returns to the U.S. and makes his life by making the illuminating movies that have made his reputation. He does the opposite of what his father advised him. "People don't want to know the truth," his father told him. "Reality is too tough. They go to the movies to get away from all that." He knew his "very nature was unacceptable to the fantasy world of moviegoers," but he wasn't home yet and pushes on, getting in lots of trouble for telling truths people don't want to hear, except perhaps the dead.

But making those films was far from smooth sailing. It was another form of warfare, treacherous, filled with betrayals, drugs, Hollywood a place where you had to watch your back. Just when the battle seemed over and you had won, another rocket would explode at your feet, throwing you for a loop. It would take another toll on Stone. So often, when he would think his screenplay or deal to direct a film was secured – that the stone he had rolled to the top of the hill was set – back it would roll. He would find that often what seemed to be up was down and that when he thought he was at the top, he was soon on the bottom. The years that followed were a roller coaster ride.

He writes truthfully about his need to quell his anxiety with a host of drugs that fueled his days and nights and led to addiction, his guilt and confusion, his partying like his glamorous party-loving mother, who “was *there* for me, and yet she wasn’t; it was more like she was on display.” He tells us how he was always running from something, writing, hustling, trying to justify himself as he traveled toward a home called success, the bitch-goddess Success, the pipe dream nurtured in Hollywood.

In numerous chapters, a reader fascinated with the nuts and bolts of filmmaking, from the screenplay through directing, financing, casting, editing, distributing, etc., will delight in his detailed description of the movie game. *Midnight Express*, *Scarface*, *Salvador*, *Platoon* are explored in depth. If you want to know about Al Pacino, Charlie Sheen, Michael Cimino, James Woods, Dino De Laurentiis, the wild Richard Boyle, et al., it’s all here. The good, bad, and the ugly. Gossip or insights, call it what you will. It’s all interesting.

Stone writes about his second wife, Elizabeth, the joy that the birth of their son, his first child, Sean, brought him, the conflicts that developed as he’s torn between home life and the mad pursuit of filmmaking, “even if it’s leading you off a cliff.” He wrote in his diary:

What have I become? A Macbeth of workaholics. I’ve worked straight 17 years, two scripts a year, etc., and what has it brought me? Never been able to relax, but must. I’m always running like a mad rabbit down an Alice in Wonderland hole, always getting bigger or smaller and never knowing what will happen next.”

By the end of the book, Oliver, now forty-years-old in 1987, is on the top of the world when he wins Oscars for *Platoon*, and although he revels in this victory, something continues to eat at him, as if he hadn’t really reached Ithaca, but was still on the journey. “So I’d come to this moment in time,” he writes. “Success was a beautiful goddess, yes, but was I being seduced by this vindication, this proving myself to my father; was it the acceptance, the power? What did I really believe?”

The double-minded rascal was still alive and at sea, despite saying that, “And truthfully, I don’t think I’d ever been happier.” He had finally achieved great film success, had a lovely wife and child, a garden, his books, a pool to jump in. Tranquility.

No. He tells us:

Mine was a free man’s life, without a home, really, except for the wenches in the local ports, like Sabatini’s Captain Blood, who ‘was born with a gift for laughter and the sense that the world was mad.’ Thus it remains a split in my soul – the home, the hearth, and then out into the wind with your crew – Odysseus’s ‘I am become a name.’ Could this be? Could I live two different lives? Like those hard men I’d worked with in the merchant marine twenty years before – six months on land, six at sea; unsettled, eccentric men who remained free in their souls yet tormented. In the next years, I’d live out this split in my nature to the fullest.

The reader will have to await a sequel to *Chasing the Light* to see if Odysseus ever finds his way to his true home.

In the meantime, Charlie Sheen’s words at the end of *Platoon* will have to suffice:

Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life.

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Distinguished author and sociologist Edward Curtin is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. He is the author of the new book:

<https://www.claritypress.com/product/seeking-truth-in-a-country-of-lies/>

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