ONLINE RESOURCES

VIDEO

News Hour Interview with Kevin Powers
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2012/10/conversation-kevin-powers-author-of-the-yellow-birds.html
Two video clips with the author -- one six-minute clip discussing his inspiration and craft behind the book, and a ninety-second clip of him reading the first page aloud.

Frontline: "The Soldier's Heart"
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/
An 80 minute documentary about Iraq war veterans with PTSD from 2005. Can be shown in part. Site includes a thorough "readings and links" section for research.

LITERATURE

"The Literature of War"
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/readings/lit.html
A compilation of excerpts from literature on the topic of war, from the Civil War through Vietnam. Great for comparing both literary styles and changing attitudes towards combat and return.

CURRENT EVENTS

NY Times Archive: Iraq
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/
This page collects the wealth of articles and multimedia that the New York Times has published. A great start point for student research.

NY Times: Iraq Five Years In
http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/03/18/world/middleeast/20080319 IRAQWAR_TIMELINE.html?#tab1
A more focused timeline / slideshow that introduces viewers to the major events from each year, complete with photos and links to articles.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Big Picture Blog: Scenes from Iraq
28 large photographs showing both US soldiers and Iraqi citizens.

Scenes from Baghdad
"Video, photos and written reports" from different moments of daily life for Iraqi citizens -- weddings, parks, shops, etc.
Faces of the Dead
An interactive feature with basic information and a photograph for each American serviceman or woman killed in Iraq.
At the age of 17, Kevin Powers enlisted in the Army and eventually served as a machine-gunner in Iraq, where the sky is “vast and catacombed with clouds,” where soldiers stay awake on fear and amphetamines and Tabasco sauce daubed into their eyes, where rifles bristle from rooftops and bullets sound like “small rips in the air.” Now he has channeled his experience into “The Yellow Birds,” a first novel as compact and powerful as a footlocker full of ammo.

In the northern city of Al Tafar, 21-year-old Pvt. John Bartle and his platoon engage in a bloody campaign to control the city. Before his deployment Bartle promised the mother of 18-year-old Pvt. Daniel Murphy he would take care of her son, bring him back alive. It is a promise that, as Powers reveals from the earliest pages, he will not keep. But in the meantime they suffer through basic training together, followed by Iraqi street fights that leave rooftops covered in brass casings and doorsteps splashed with blood — all under the command of the growly, battle-scarred Sergeant Sterling, who punches them in the face one moment and claps them on the back the next, ordering them to combat both the insurgents and the mental stress that threaten to send them home in a box with a flag draped over the top.

Though a colonel in a crisp uniform smelling of starch does his best “half-assed Patton imitation” and tells the young soldiers to “give ’em hell,” Bartle feels little sense of drive or destination or purpose. He knows this is not his grandfather’s war. He will kill some. He will drive away others. And then, while he patrols the streets, he will “throw candy to their children with whom we’d fight in the fall a few more years from now.” There is a helpless resolve when he dodges bullets and ducks mortar blasts and studies corpses and considers going AWOL, doing his best to survive while wondering how he can honor his promise to keep Murphy intact, when he feels as if he himself is disintegrating.

The novel moves, fitfully, through Virginia and Iraq and Germany and New Jersey and Kentucky, from 2003 to 2009. Recalling the war, Bartle says, is “like putting a puzzle together from behind: the shapes familiar, the picture quickly fading, the muted tan of the cardboard backing a tease at wholeness and completion.” This serves the story in two ways. First, it turns readers into active participants, enlisting them in a sense as co-authors who fit together the many memories and guess at what terrible secret lies in wait, the truth behind Murphy’s death. Because they lean forward instead of back, because they participate in piecing together the puzzle, they are made more culpable.

Then too, the fractured structure replicates the book’s themes. Like a chase scene made up of sentences that run on and on and ultimately leave readers breathless, or like a concert description that stops and starts, that swings and sways, that makes us stamp our feet and clap our hands — the nonlinear design of Powers’s novel is a beautifully brutal example of style matching content. War destroys. It doesn’t just rip through bone and muscle, stone and steel; it fragments the mind as a fist to a mirror might create thousands of bloodied, glittering shards.
When Bartle ends up confined to a military prison, he has only his memories to keep him company, memories he tries to chase down even as their logic and sequence evade him: “My first few months inside, I spent a lot of time trying to piece the war into a pattern. I developed the habit of making a mark on my cell wall when I remembered a particular event, thinking that at some later date I could refer to it and assemble all the marks into a story that made sense.” But the marks begin to run together, and disorder predominates. Eventually, he knows, the walls will appear scraped over entirely, scoured down to a blind white patina.

Bartle’s uncertain memory — a willful forgetfulness partnered with the inability to control images of so many bullets tearing through bodies and making them dance — makes it impossible for him to return stateside. Throughout the war, he has wanted nothing more than to come home, but once home, everything reminds him of something else. His hand closes around the stock of a rifle that isn’t there. From the moment he steps off the transport plane and walks through the airport, “the ghosts of the dead filled the empty seats of every gate I passed: boys destroyed by mortars and rockets and bullets and I.E.D.’s to the point that when we tried to get them to a medevac, the skin slid off, or limbs barely held in place detached, and I thought that they were young and had girls at home or some dream that they thought would make their lives important.” When his mother embraces him and tells him he’s home at last, he doesn’t believe her. A fan whirs, a train rattles in the distance and Bartle’s pulse flutters up into his eyes, every little thing a trapdoor sending him into that dark place where the alligators wait with widening jaws.

In this way, “The Yellow Birds” joins the conversation with books like Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Ceremony,” Brian Turner’s “Phantom Noise” and Tim O’Brien’s classic, “The Things They Carried” — and wakes the readers of “the spoiled cities of America” to a reality most would rather not face. Here we are, fretting over our Netflix queues while halfway around the world people are being blown to bits. And though we might slap a yellow ribbon magnet to our truck’s tailgate, though we might shake a soldier’s hand in the airport, we ignore the fact that in America an average of 18 veterans are said to commit suicide every day. What a shame, we say, and then move on quickly to whatever other agonies and entertainments occupy the headlines.

Powers earned a master’s degree in poetry at the University of Texas at Austin. This is evident in the music of his sentences, the shining details he delivers like tiny gems in so many of his descriptions. The soldiers wake to the “narrow whine of mortars as they arced over our position and crumpled into the orchard,” and Bartle’s body pulses with “an all-encompassing type of pain like my whole skin was made out of a fat lip.” His language is as dazzling as the flashes of a muzzle.

Of course, fancy phrasing can be a distraction as well, and Powers occasionally stumbles — especially when Bartle is thoughtfully processing the war or staring moodily out at the landscape. Consider this half-page passage about clouds bunching over the ocean: “I knew, watching them, that if in any given moment a measurement could be made it would show how tentative was my mind’s mastery over my heart. Such small arrangements make a life, and though it’s hard to get close to saying what the heart is, it must at least be that which rushes to spill out of those parentheses which were the beginning and the end of my war. . . . ” On it goes, with lengthy brow-furrowing meditation and descriptions of the Iraqi desert’s enclosure and how lost Bartle felt among the “innumerable grains of sand.” Passages like this seem better suited to
sonnets about strummed lutes and foggy moors. The emotional recoil of the war is strongest when Powers remains in scene, when he keeps his soldiers on the march.

Midway through the novel, a group of soldiers huddle around a gut-shot private. His skin pales even as his lips go dark purple. His body shakes and spittle runs down his chin. Everyone leans in to hear what he will say. But when he dies without speaking, his comrades cast down their faces in frustrated surprise before wandering aimlessly away. Bartle wishes aloud that the dying soldier would have said something, and his sergeant responds: “They usually don’t.”

But Kevin Powers has something to say, something deeply moving about the frailty of man and the brutality of war, and we should all lean closer and listen.


‘The Yellow Birds’ by Kevin Powers: the Novel of the Iraq War

by Doug Stanton | September 11, 2012 5:45 PM EDT

Kevin Powers’s unforgettable debut novel, *The Yellow Birds*, opens with a line that is elegiac, measured—captivating: “The war tried to kill us in the spring.” That’s his youthful, weary narrator—“Holden Caulfield” channeled through “John Grady Cole” in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*—speaking to us in a voice that we sense might as well be from the grave, but is—exuberantly—not. John Bartle, age 21, is a soldier in the middle of combat in Iraq and his one job is to stay alive, and he’s made a promise to the mother of a fellow soldier, Murphy, 18, that he would keep him alive, too. It’s the honoring of this promise that propels the book backward and forward in time and across landscapes in Iraq and the U.S. I won’t, of course, tell you how it turns out; but while reading the novel—part elegy, prose poem, and page-turner—you have to remind yourself that this is, in fact, fiction. That’s a compliment and a bravura achievement, in an age when most people you meet at dinner say, “I just don’t read fiction—‘cause it’s not real.”

What Powers achieves in his prose and storytelling is a sense of eternity haunting the margins of one’s own vision as you glimpse the book’s pages, a clarifying of tangled emotions and of vast internal spaces otherwise rendered chaotic by experience into sun-shot prose. He’s written fiction that seems more real than the “real” thing—in this case, nonfiction about the same subject—which is what art is supposed to do. About imminent combat in an orchard, the narrator Bartle recounts, ”The world was paper thin as far as I could tell. And the world was the orchard, and the orchard was what came next. But none of that was true. I was only afraid of dying ... When the mortars fell, the leaves and fruit and birds were frayed like ends of rope ... We stepped carefully, looking for trip wires or any sign that the enemy was there.”

Powers, 31, deployed in Iraq in 2004–2005; a native of Virginia, he had entered the Army at the age 17. In 2012, he received an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a Michener Fellow (he also received a B.A. in English, in 2008, from Virginia Commonwealth University). Powers is an artist who was a soldier who lived to tell the tale. One can hear the American poets Richard Hugo and James Wright
in his narrator’s autumnal voice. Bartle says, "Clouds spread out over the Atlantic like soiled linens on an unmade bed. I knew, watching them, that if any given moment a measurement could be made it would show how tentative was my mind’s mastery over my heart. Such small arrangements make a life, and though it’s hard to get close to saying what the heart is, it must at least be that which rushes to spill out of the parentheses which were the beginning and the end of my war: the old life disappearing into the dust …" You don’t know quite what to think of Bartle’s war story, so much as you feel it.

Coincidentally or no, and at least tonally, the novel’s opening line is pleasingly reminiscent of the first line of Hemingway’s short story “In Another Country,” also about war—World War 1—and the narrator here, too, is windblown, shell-shocked: “In the fall the war was always there but we did not go to it anymore.” Powers’s novel arrives as a reading experience akin to one you might have had in the early 20th century had you picked up Wilfred Owen’s WWI poetry or stopped at the book shop for Hemingway’s In Our Time. Powers is writing out of a once more recognizable tradition—Pablo Picasso’s 1937 “Guernica” after the Spanish Civil War; John Steinbeck’s 1939 The Grapes of Wrath; Kurt Vonnegut’s 1969 Slaughterhouse-Five after WWII—that instinctively tilts world events toward the light until they refract as art. I don’t know anyone today writing The Grapes of Wrath after the last Wall Street crash. I hope to be corrected.

For worse, in this YouTube/Twitter-of-the-moment age, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become The War, they’ve all run together, everybody’s paying attention to them and nobody’s paying attention to them, and these technologies—TV included—have piped whole oceans of adrenaline and trucked vast smoldering cities into our consciousnesses so that we can review this carnage on our phones while shopping the produce aisle. In other words, this “nonfiction” reality comes at us as a continuous movie—as fiction-like, if we’re even paying attention. One of the thrills of reading Power’s The Yellow Birds is that it’s a “movie” that reads like nonfiction. What is unusual but satisfying is that you have the long-lost sensation of being in the hands—the mind—of an artist who’s taking in reality, shooting it through the fluttering curtain of his own mind, giving you back something—a gift, a story, a rendering, a picture, a sense of the sense of being alive in a time and place—Iraq, the war, the buddy he has to save—as his own humanity is mirrored back to us in shining straps of prose.

Think about it. In an age of unfiltered beer, unfiltered news, and having to listen to every crank prattle on with his/her opinion in the comments section at the end of every newspaper story on the Internet—you hunger for something filtered. You want the artist to order the universe, still the chaos with a sentence as haunting as Matthew Arnold in his poem “Dover Beach,” or as smart as Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl. It’s a glorious swoon to suspend one’s disbelief. We are creatures of the imagination at the beginning of a century already filling with undeniable horrors—but it has always been thus, right? Drought, famine, genocide, war, but in this age we have such a tonnage of information at a granular level pouring in around us that the info stream approaches the consistency of quick sand. We don’t need anymore “information,” “facts,” “reality.” We need story, and fewer pixels. We need crisp canvas, a brush. Powers’s The Yellow Birds allows us to walk into The War—his war, our war—that has cost so much in so many ways over nearly a decade, in a way so granular and humane that we sense the tragedy of his Bartle and his Murphy as the tragedy itself pushes us down, damn near to the ocean floor, just as the novel’s sentences shoot down for us—as lifelines.
Nothing but hurt left here.
Nothing but bullets and pain
and the bled-out slumping
and all the fucks and goddamns
and Jesus Christs of the wounded.
Nothing left here but the hurt.

Believe it when you see it.
Believe it when a twelve-year-old
rolls a grenade into the room.
Or when a sniper punches a hole
deep into someone’s skull.
Believe it when four men
step from a taxicab in Mosul
to shower the street in brass
and fire. Open the hurt locker
and see what there is of knives
and teeth. Open the hurt locker and learn
how rough men come hunting for souls.