Lesson Plans and Resources for *The Yellow Birds*

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at
[www.freelibrary.org/onebook](http://www.freelibrary.org/onebook)

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.
OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- War is an experience that often makes no logical sense.
- There is a huge divide between those who have experienced war and those who have not.
- The human mind is resilient and will attempt to overcome even the most intense traumas.

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- What are the different ways humans deal with violence and death?
- How do we decide what's right in times of war?
- How can the experiences of war be shared with those who don't experience it themselves?

Book-Specific

- What was each character's strategy for dealing with the death and violence they witness?
- How do the characters decide what "the right thing" to do was during the war?
- How does Bartle tell his story to the reader? (How did the author choose to compose the novel?)

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently.
IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing The Yellow Birds to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

Note: This book has graphic violent content, as well as profanity in the dialogue. Teachers may want to address this before reading so that students know what to expect.

1. Distribute books and have students turn to the page with the epigrams. Read the epigrams aloud (with a discussion about profanity in the text beforehand, if necessary.)

   - For the first quote, discuss what a military cadence is.
   - For the second quote, spend time breaking down the meaning until all students understand, either in pairs, small groups, or with the whole class. Have them guess the era that Thomas Browne is from (17th Century England.) Do they agree with what the quote is saying?
   - Discuss: what is the purpose of each of these quotes? And why have the two of them next to each other? Why would the author want this kind of juxtaposition at the start of his book? What might the main themes of the book be?

2. Introduce the class to the author, Kevin Powers. Have them read the short story on the back of the book, and show them this photograph (which features his military tattoos.)
3. As a class, read the first 2+ pages of the book, up through the first paragraph on page 5 ("We waited.") If possible, you can start by playing them this video of the author reading the first page himself: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2012/10/conversation-kevin-powers-author-of-the-yellow-birds.html

4. Discuss: where are we? Using the map provided below or other materials, show students the geography of Iraq. (See if anybody picks up on the fact that Powers was a gunner in Tal Afar, and the setting of the first chapter of the book is Al Tafar. Tal Afar is just north of Al Mawsil in the northern end of Iraq.)

5. Poll students to see what they know about the Iraq wars. Collect relevant information on the board.
6. If time permits, have students explore this NYTimes Timeline on the Internet:
http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/03/18/world/middleeast/20080319 IRAQWAR_TIMELINE.html?#tab1
It introduces viewers to the major events from each year, complete with photos and links to articles.

7. Give students time to continue reading the chapter on their own.
Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature
1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Speaking and Listening Standards
1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (oneon-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature
4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Language Standards
4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards
1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)

5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 - Pages 3-25

In the first pages, it is "the war" that tries to kill and is personified. Why does Bartle describe the war like this? Why does he implicate "the war" and not soldier with guns?

On page 12, Bartle says "we thought if we remained ordinary, we would not die." What causes this belief?

Why does Bartle say that he both hates and loves Sargent Sterling? (19-20)

In this chapter, the soldiers witness the deaths of both their translator (11) and an old woman (23) with little or no emotion. Why this lack of reaction?

Chapter 2 - Pages 29-48

Bartle mentions a letter he has written to Murph's mother, pretending to be her son. At this point in the book, what do you think he wrote about?

On page 35, Bartle states that "eventually, I had to learn that freedom is not the same thing as the absence of accountability." What does this statement mean, and why does it bother him?

When Bartle first meets Murph, he "didn't want to be responsible for him (36). Why?

On page 47, why does Sargent Sterling punch Bartle in the face?

Chapter 3 - Pages 51-72

Why does leaving Al Tafar for Germany make Bartle feel "very strange?" (51)

The priest that Bartle meets tells him "you are only as sick as your secrets" (58). Do you agree?

Bartle thinks, "I had less and less control over my own history each day." (59) What does he mean by this statement?

Bartle remembers seeing Murph's body for the last time, and says he has an "obligation to remember him correctly" (61), but that he can't. Why not?

Sargent Sterling threatens Bartle by mentioning "UC motherfucking MJ," which is the Uniform Code of Military Justice, aka martial law, in reference to Murphy. What do you think he's referring to, and why is Bartle convinced he won't give him up to the courts?
Chapter 4 - Pages 75-95

What is Murph's reaction to his girlfriend leaving him? How does Sargent Sterling react? Why the different approaches? Which one do you think makes more sense? (81)

Why does Bartle say that he wants Murph to "resist now?" (82)

Before a major advance, the colonel tells the troops that "you may never do anything this important again in your entire lives" (89) Do you agree with this statement?

Before the fighting begins, Sargent Sterling spreads salt over the ground and says it's from Judges. The reference is to Judges 9:45, and the tradition that spreading salt over a conquered city cursed its rebuilding. Why does he do this? Do you think he's crazy, like Bartle and Murph do?

Chapter 5 - Pages 99-112

On the flight home, Bartle says that history is "imagination or it's nothing," and that memory can be made and unmade like "the threads of a rope can be unwoven" (100). Do you agree with his viewpoint?

Why does Bartle try to count all of the dead on his flight home? (101)

Why does Bartle insist on paying for his beers, even when the bartender offered them for free? (107)

When Bartle arrives home, why does he connect getting undressed with becoming a casualty? (111)

Chapter 6 - Pages 115-127

Why do the soldiers crowd around the gut-shot soldier as he's dying? (118)

What is a body bomb?

Bartle says that "grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved for those we knew. All others who died in Al Tafar were part of the landscape" (124). Do you agree with this mindset?

Why do Bartle and the other soldiers think about the last moments of the man who was made into the body bomb? Why get into the mind of the victim? (127)

Chapter 7 - Pages 131-148

What do you think of Bartle's routine now that he has returned home? He says that "all pain is the same. Only the details are different" (132). How does the pain of being home compare to the pain of combat?

Why does Bartle find it so hard to remember Murphy, to "reconstructing him" in his mind? (138)

Bartle reveals how he's feeling in a 2 page sentence in the middle of this chapter. (144-146). What is
bothering him, and why do you think this release comes at this point in the book?

What is the meaning of Bartle's dream about the horse? (146)

At the end of the chapter, Bartle suggests that "a fall is every object's destiny." Do you agree with this description?

**Chapter 8 - 151-173**

Why does Sargent Sterling claim that Murph is a "dead man" (155)?

Why does Bartle imagine his own death after his discussion with Sterling?

Murph spends much of his time at the base watching a female medic. Why?

**Chapter 9 - 177-189**

Why doesn't Bartle ever shoot the birds with his rifle?

Bartle says that his cowardice meant he "accepted the fact that a debut would come due, but not now" (180). Do you think he did something wrong? Do you think he is a coward?

What do you think of the psychological assessment question on page 184? Do you think Bartle made the right choice with how he answered it?

What does Bartle think about when he hears of Sargent Sterling's "accident?" Do you think his imagination is correct? What about his final opinion of the man? Do you agree with his assessment on page 187?

**Chapter 10 - 193-211**

Why does Murph leave the base?

Why does Sargent Sterling suggest they "fix this like it never happened?" (208) Why does Bartle go along with it? Is he just following orders, or does he agree with Sterling?

**Chapter 11 - 215-230**

Why does Bartle make a mark on the wall when he remembers an event from the war? why does he eventually decide that "the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern" (217)?

Why does Ladonna Murphy come to visit Bartle in prison?

By the end of the chapter, Bartle says, "I do feel ordinary again" (224). Do you believe him?
Why does Murph appear so clearly to Bartle at the end of the book? Why is he able to imagine the last moments of his body?
VOCABULARY

CHAPTER 1

Deprivation (3) - While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation.

Pocked (4) - Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals.

Minaret (5) - It passed over the minarets that rose above the citadel...

Acrid (6) - I had grown accustomed to it, the way he'd punctuate it's rhythm with a well-practiced spit into an acrid pool of dark liquid that always seemed to be growing between us.

Brusque (10) - "She did not try to replant them this year," he finished brusquely.

Correlation (12) - We confused correlation with cause and say a special significance in the portraits of the dead, arranged neatly to the number corresponding to their place on the growing list of casualties we read in newspapers, as indications of an ordered war.

Adherence (16) - There was something restrained about him, something more than simple adherence to nonfraternization.

Contorted (23) - She tried dragging the body, her face contorted by effort as she pulled the old woman by her one complete arm.

CHAPTER 2

Dormant (31) - And that as she pulled down the long gravel path leading to their little house, on the winter-dormant apple orchard Daniel had talked about so often, she kept sneaking glances at the return address.

Skepticism (31) - She must have taken those glances with an unusual level of skepticism for a rural mail carrier as experienced as she was...

Askew (35) - While Sterling's jaw line could have been transferred directly from a geometry textbook, Murph's features were nearly imperceptibly askew.

Elaboration (37) - So we'd come here, where life needed no elaboration and others would tell us who to be.

Dilapidated (40) - The sound of magazines being loaded by the range detail carried over the thin water air from the dilapidated ammo shed.

Unadulterated (43) - It was narrowly focused, but it was pure an unadulterated.
CHAPTER 3

Buoyant (52) - In the plane, the sun had a kind of buoyant dominance, but it had hidden itself away beyond clouds that appeared like pale, soot-colored sketches of themselves.

Opaque (56) - Their breath rose in one opaque breath, as it had risen in one small voice that hung above our heads briefly...

Commensurate (62) - Despite an age-old instinct to provide an explanation more complex than that, something with a level of profundity and depth which would seem commensurate with the confusion I felt, it really was that simple.

Morose (68) - He was drunk. I'd never seen him like that: on the edge of losing control, morose and somehow sentimental in his own way.

Veneer (70) - I imagined his body collapsing in on itself, the flesh rotting and then gone, the skin on his lips cracked until only dust remained in a thin veneer over his skull.

CHAPTER 4

Wadi (75) - I woke for my shift as the sun set into a wadi.

Naivete (79) - And yes, it was full of naivete and boyishness, but that is all right, because we were boys then.

Pungent (81) - The smell was sweet and pungent and filled the calm air.

Intermittent (82) - In the intermittent light Sterling seemed to flicker also, appearing and disappearing.

Predicament (83) - For a moment we forgot our predicament and were just two friends drinking under a tree...

Staccato (87) - His voice became a blunt staccato as he gained confidence in his capacity to motivate us...

CHAPTER 5

Innumerable (99) - ...it seemed I had left the better portion of myself as one among innumerable grains of sand...

Lurched (103) - The doors opened and we lurched down the gangway towards the bright shine of the airport.
Preoccupation (108) - It took her hands on my face to rouse me from my preoccupations.

Apparition (108) - Her grasp was firm, and she touched me hard as if to prove I was not a fleeting apparition.

CHAPTER 6

Momentum / Detritus (115) - Everything was in its proper place, waiting for a pause in time, for the source of all momentum to be stilled, so that what remained would be nothing more than detritus to be tallied up.

Lethargy (117) - I was stuck by a kind of lethargy, in awe of the decisiveness of every single attenuated moment...

Downcast (119) - When he only died, their faces became downcast and surprised.

Disintegrate (120) - I was disintegrating, too. How was I supposed to keep us both intact?

Morbid (123) - Some lay at odd angles with backs curved slightly off the ground and others were wrenched at absurd degrees, their decay an echo of some morbid geometry.

CHAPTER 7

Deteriorate (131) - I had deteriorated more than one might expect in the short time I’d been home.

Silhouette (134) - ...I’d look back and see my mother’s face silhouetted in the kitchen window and I’d smile back at her and wave...

Vividness (135) - I was tired of my mind running all night through the things I remembered, then through things I did not remember but for which I blamed myself on account of the sheer vividness of scenes that looped on the red-green linings of my closed eyelids.

Tentative (136) - "I really think you should. Just think about it." She smiled tentatively.

Oxidized (142) - I moved to the edge where the ties met the structure of the bridge itself and moved along the oxidized metal, occasionally swinging my foot down out over the water flowing down below while watching the kids laugh and swim in the fresh water.

Gratitude (144) - Or like I'll give away that I don't deserve anyone's gratitude and really they should all hate me for what I've done but everyone loves me for it and it's driving me crazy.

Pitiable (147) - When they dropped me off at my house one of the cops looked at me with pitiable concern and said, "Try to keep it together, buddy. You'll be back in the swing in no time."
CHAPTER 8

Taut (152) - All his gear was on, as taut and orderly as ever...

Periphery (152) - On the periphery of our gentle domestic activities, citations were read.

Deviant (156) - "You've got to stay deviant in this motherfucker."

Savagery (159) - We were unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence.

Abrasive (161) - The white painted boards were chipped and peeling from the abrasive wind...

Volition (165) - He wanted to have one memory he'd made of his own volition to balance out the shattered remnants of everything he hadn't asked for.

Prostrate (168) - I was still prostrate on the ground. My face and body had plowed a small plot in which I lay.

CHAPTER 9

Meander (177) - A stray tortiseshell cat would occasionally settle in an unkempt flowerbox hanging from my window. It had a habit of meandering over ledges and sills, humping between air conditioning units and the building's few balconies.

Culpability (179) - It probably wouldn't matter what our level of culpability was. I was guilty of something...

Reprieve (181) - I should have asked the snow to stop, for one reprieve, to not have to face another next.

Disquiet (184) - I had in me a profound disquiet.

CHAPTER 10

Catacomb (194) - The city, past curfew, seemed vast and catacombed, its black alleys a tightly wound maze.

Remnants (194) - It was impossible to know... if we'd come back as one body or if we'd leave remnants of ourselves out along the dank canals or in the dry fields.

Furtively (196) - "Oooh," the man responded furtively," I don't know.

Goad (202) - He goaded the mule along.
CHAPTER 11

Entropy (217) - Entropy increased in the six-by-eight-foot universe of y single cell.

Dignified (219) - Her grief was dignified and hidden, as is most grief, which is partly why there is always so much of it to go around.

Obtuse (219) - The world clean and obtuse, no angles, nothing hard.

Deferece (220) - The men, fulfilling their obligation with all the grace and deference that men could be asked to, finally left a card in Mrs. Murphy's hand that gave the address of the room's they'd rented while they waited for a break in the weather.

Reconciliation (222) - I was glad she came. Not because there was any unexpected reconciliation, but because she was tolerant and seemed to want to understand what happened to her son...

Obstructed (224) - I'd rather look out at mountains. Or to have my view obstructed by a group of trees.
Tracking Death in *The Yellow Birds*  

Name: ______________________________

Note each time the soldiers witness a casualty and their reaction to that death, as well as the page number. Then analyze: Why do you think that was their response?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Death Witnessed, Reaction, Page #</th>
<th>Why did they respond that way?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Bartle’s Thoughts about Murph in *The Yellow Birds*  

Name: ________________________

Note each time Bartle has a concrete, detailed thought about Murph. Then analyze: Why did he have THAT thought in that particular moment? Pay close attention to thoughts in Murph's presence compared to after he's died and Bartle has returned to the US.

**Bartle’s Thought + Page #**  
**Analysis – why did he think that at that moment?**
SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via Powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. Read one or both reviews of *The Yellow Birds* (see Print Resources). One review very positive; the other one mixed. Respond to the review(s) – do you agree or disagree with their statements? Use support from the text to back up your position.

2. Variation on #1 - Doug Stanton's review states that, "We don’t need anymore “information,” “facts,” “reality.” We need story, and fewer pixels. We need crisp canvas, a brush." Compare and contrast the novel with journalistic and non-fiction reporting on Iraq (see Online Resources). What are the benefits and limitations of each approach as a way to inform the reader? In the end, which do you think is more effective?

3. Powers includes two epigrams for the novel-- one from an Army marching song, and the other from a 17th Century British author. How does each quote connect to the text, and how do they connect to each other? Provide thorough support from the text.

4. *The Yellow Birds* takes us into the world of the U.S. Army and the nation of Iraq, but does not always explain the cultural and military references that are being made. Pick out a set number of places, names, ideas, or practices that are mentioned in the book and research their meanings. Share your findings to the class via an audio-visual presentation.

5. Look at timeline of *The Yellow Birds*. Place the events into chronological order, and then analyze why the author chose to tell the story in the order that he did.

6. Compare and contrast *The Yellow Birds* with Brian Turner’s poem “The Hurt Locker” (see Print Resources.)
SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. *The Yellow Birds* makes frequent mention to different types of birds and trees. What theme speaks to you? Pick a category of symbolic items and weave them into a short story of your own.

2. One reviewer stated that *The Yellow Birds* "wakes the readers of “the spoiled cities of America” to a reality most would rather not face." What else do you think the world needs to be woken up to? Write a creative response.

3. After Murph’s death, Private Bartle wrote a letter to Murphy's mother LaDonna, pretending to be her son (pg 29). What do you think he said? Write the letter.

4. Kevin Powers has also studied poetry, and many of the sentences in the book have a poetic, lyrical feel. Select one sentence from each chapter, and then organize those sentences into a “found poem.” (Additional task: write an explanation of why you picked those pieces, and why you organized them that way.)
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

NYTimes 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.

NYTimes: 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 not, 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.
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