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 re-building. 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?