
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

The Yellow Birds

A Novel

by

KEVIN POWERS

Author's note

The Yellow Birds began as an attempt to reckon with one question: What was it like over there? Sometime in 2007 I thought I might be able to find an answer to that question, not only for the many people who had asked me, but also for myself. As soon as the first words of the book were put down on the page, I realized I was unequal to the task of answering, that if there is any true thing in this world it is that war is only like itself.


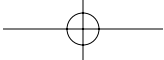
People, however, are all the same: grief and fear, shame and anger, are as alike in each of us as is our breath or blood, in spite of differences of scope or scale or the useless divisions between their common or uncommon causes. I hoped that I could begin again with this in mind, understanding now that the difficulty of contending with this question was not that it remained unanswered, but rather how I might find a way to say that the answer could be known to each of us if we'd only allow ourselves to be reminded of it.

Over the course of almost four years I tried to find a way to do this. I started making something like progress that

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summer of 2007, writing late into the night in my rented room in the Jackson Ward neighborhood of Richmond, Virginia. Sometimes I dedicated whole days of my tenuous employment at a credit-card company to furtive work on the novel. I wrote as much as I could whenever I could. I spent the last of those four years stripping away anything and everything that didn't seem essential.

I finished *The Yellow Birds* in Austin, Texas, in late September of 2011. What ended then was not just the writing of a book, though it was mostly that, but also something else I had begun seven years before and seven thousand miles away from the wooden porch where I went to have a smoke when it was finished. Though I hope I've told one small part of the truth about that war, what I've written is not meant to report or document, nor is it meant to argue or advocate. Instead, I tried with what little skill I have to create the cartography of one man's consciousness, to let it stand, however briefly, as my reminder.



A conversation with Kevin Powers and Jonathan Ruppin of Foyles Bookshop, London

How did you come to join the army at the age of seventeen?

I wasn't a particularly good student in high school, but I knew that I wanted to go to college. And given the fact that there is a long tradition of military service in my family, enlisting always seemed like a viable option. It was neither encouraged nor discouraged, but I had by then inferred that the military was where a person went to develop the qualities I had come to admire in my father, my uncle, and both of my grandfathers. The cliché, in my case, was true: I thought that the army would "make me a man."

*First World War poet Wilfred Owen wrote in the preface to his poems: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." Does this apply to *The Yellow Birds*?*

I can only say that the impulse to write *The Yellow Birds* came from a desire to look for some truth that I hoped could

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be found at the core of that most extreme of human experiences. I also thought that by placing the emphasis on the language, using it to demonstrate Bartle's perpetual, unbearable sense of awe and wonder, I'd have at least a chance of connecting to another human being on an emotional level. I wanted to engage with the imagination above all else, because I believe that empathy is an imaginative act.

What sort of reactions have you had from those with combat experience in Iraq?

I don't know if many vets have had a chance to read the book yet, but I have had several kind messages of encouragement and support, for which I am deeply grateful.

You're also a poet and this comes across in the deeply lyrical quality of your prose. Was this intended in counterpoint to the rawness of the dialogue?

I intended it as counterpoint not just to the rawness of the dialogue, but also to the rawness of the experience. In that respect it is more point than counterpoint. In trying to demonstrate Bartle's mental state, I felt very strongly that the language would have to be prominent. Language is, in its essence, a set of noises and signs that represent what is happening inside our heads. If I have faith that those noises and signs can be received and understood by another person,

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then I should also have faith that they can be made more finely tuned.

You've said that you were asked most often on your own return what it was like in Iraq. Do you feel that fiction works better than reportage in overcoming people's squeamishness and portraying the reality of combat?

I wouldn't say that it works better, only that it works in a different way. The benefit is that it can confound expectations, particularly in the case of these wars that have been going on so long. It is perfectly understandable that people become inured to the violence when it is presented to them in the same way for ten years or more. Art will sometimes allow you to see the same thing in a new way. But this is only possible because artists don't have the same kinds of responsibilities as journalists. The work that journalists do during wartime is utterly essential and, to me, incomprehensibly difficult.

One particularly poignant moment comes when Bartle promises the mother of his future comrade-in-arms Murphy that he'll make sure her son makes it home safely, by which time in the book we know he will not be able to do so. Is Bartle's guilt fueled more by Murphy's death or his own survival?

I would not be able to separate the two. The root of his guilt is that he wanted to be good, and he tried to be good, but he

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failed. His conflict is between his desire to redeem that failure and his acceptance of complete powerlessness.

The *Yellow Birds* has already brought comparison with books as diverse as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. *Were there any particular books that served as an inspiration to you?*

Those books were all very meaningful to me. I would include *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright, as well as the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa.

Can you tell us anything about what you're working on at the moment?

I have a collection of poems I'm nearly finished with. And I've begun work on my second novel, about a murder that takes place in Virginia just after the Civil War.

Interview by Jonathan Ruppin of Foyles Bookshops (foyles.co.uk)

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Discuss the title, *The Yellow Birds*, and the U.S. Army marching cadence that inspired it. What does the cadence mean to you? How does the cadence and the title influence your reading of the book?
2. John Bartle and Daniel Murphy first meet when Sergeant Sterling orders them to work as a team. From that moment on, they spend every minute together. How does their relationship evolve, and how is it shaped by the war? In what ways do you read *The Yellow Birds* as a novel about friendship?
3. The story unfolds in a nonlinear narrative, with scenes alternating between Bartle's time as a soldier at war and Bartle's time as a veteran. What effect do you think this structure achieves? Is the story better told this way than chronologically? Why or why not?

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4. When Bartle returns home, the first person he sees is his mother. How has their relationship changed, and why? What does Bartle's experience reveal about the effect of the war on veterans' families?
5. Bartle believes that cowardice is what motivated him to join the military; he also believes it's what prevents him from becoming a man. When in the novel is Bartle truly a coward, and when is he truly brave? How do you think his notions of cowardice evolve or change throughout the book? And how are they intertwined with his feelings of guilt?
6. "Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed," Bartle thinks early on in *The Yellow Birds*. What do you make of his attitude toward death and how it evolves through the course of the novel?
7. When thinking about the letter he writes to Murphy's mother, Bartle reflects, "If writing it was wrong, then I was wrong. If writing it was not wrong, enough of what I'd done had been wrong and I would accept whatever punishment it carried." Why do you think Bartle felt compelled to write the letter? How did it affect Murphy's mother, and how did it affect Bartle? Was it the right decision? Why or why not?

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8. In an interview, author Kevin Powers said, “If I tried to summarize what I was exploring in the book it would be this: what does it mean to try to be good and fail?” Discuss this question with your group. Have you ever experienced this personally? If so, how did you come to terms with it?

9. In reviews, *The Yellow Birds* has been compared to the works of great writers of war, such as Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, Wilfred Owen, and Tim O’Brien. In O’Brien’s novel *The Things They Carried*, he writes, “A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.” Discuss your perspective on the intersection of truth and fiction. What truths do you find in *The Yellow Birds*? How does your experience of reading fiction about war differ from your experience of reading nonfiction accounts, such as newspaper articles?

10. Discuss the ending of the book and your emotional reaction to it. Do you read the ending as melancholy, hopeful, or both? What do you imagine lies ahead for Bartle?