



The yellow birds

By Kevin Powers

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Genre & subject

Soldiers' fiction

Iraq War, 2003-2011

War stories

Synopsis

"The war tried to kill us in the spring," begins this breathtaking account of friendship and loss. In Al Tafari, Iraq, twenty-one-year-old Private Bartle and eighteen-year-old Private Murphy cling to life as their platoon launches a bloody battle for the city. In the endless days that follow, the two young soldiers do everything to protect each other from the forces that press in on every side: the insurgents, physical fatigue, and the mental stress that comes from constant danger. Bound together since basic training when their tough-as-nails Sergeant ordered Bartle to watch over Murphy, the two have been dropped into a war neither is prepared for. As reality begins to blur into a hazy nightmare, Murphy becomes increasingly unmoored from the world around him and Bartle takes impossible actions.

Author biography

Powers was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, the son of a factory worker and a postman, and enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of seventeen. In 2004, he served a one-year tour in Iraq as a machine gunner assigned to an engineer unit. Powers served in Mosul and Tal Afar, Iraq, from February 2004 to March 2005. After his honourable discharge, Powers enrolled in Virginia Commonwealth University, where he graduated in 2008 with a Bachelor's degree in English. He holds an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a Michener Fellow in Poetry.

Discussion starters

- The Army tells the soldiers that death is the "great unifier," that it brings people "closer together than any other activity on earth." But Bartle thinks the more common belief among soldiers is that "if you die, it becomes more likely that I will not." What are your thoughts on either philosophy of death. Is the concept of death in civilian life different from war? Is death in war simply a matter of numbers, lacking any significance?
- What do you make of the troops killing the single man, alone in front of a wall, and the older couple in the car? Why are they summarily killed?

- Birds, the orchard, and hyacinths are mentioned repeatedly throughout the book. What might their significance be? Dust and footprints are also referred to frequently. Why? What is their thematic significance—any ideas?
- Talk about the colonel who addresses the troops while in front of the cameras. Do you think his concern for the troops is genuine...or is he preening before the media? He tells the soldiers that some will not return. Why does he tell them that? The colonel also tells the troops that in the coming battle "you may not do anything more important in your life". How do Murph and Bartle respond to that statement? Whose perspective do you agree with?
- What do you think of Sterling? Does your opinion of Sterling change?
- Bartle says that "we were unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence." What do you make of that statement?
- Murph seems to give up. What precipitates his loss of will? Does it start with his girlfriend's letter telling him she has found someone else? Bartle tortures himself that he should have been able to pinpoint the moment. To what degree is Bartle responsible for Murph?
- What is Murph's attraction to the young female medic? Why does he sit and watch her? Even Bartle finds her compelling—why? What does she mean to both of them?
- On the plane home, Bartle feels he has "left the better portion" of himself behind. What does he mean? By the time he arrives in Richmond, he has lost his way—and his will—as if he had "vanished into thin air." How would you describe his condition? Is his behaviour typical of returning vets?
- What do you think the letter to Murph's mother says? She comes to visit Bartle at Fort Knox. Why—what does she want? Bartle says she offers him no forgiveness, yet he is glad she came. Would you have visited Bartle under the circumstances?
- Bartle's own mother has no ability to understand her son when he returns. Is there any way that any of us can grasp what a soldier's experience in battle is like? How are we ever to integrate them back into society? How are we to heal them? Can they be healed?
- What is Bartle's emotional state by the end of the novel? Has healing occurred? Why does the book end with Bartle's vision of Murph's floating remains?

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