

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

- Why does leaving Al Tifar 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 Tifar 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). 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?"

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.

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 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...

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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...

Innumerable (99) - ...it seemed I had left the better portion of myself as one among innumerable grains of sand... **Preoccupation (108)** - It took her hands on my face to rouse my 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.

Deference (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 whiel 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.

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.

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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?

Death Witnessed, Reaction, Page # Why did they respond that way?

Bartle's

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?

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:

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