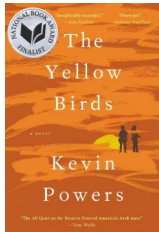


The Yellow Birds

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I'm not one for war novels, but this little gem hooked me from the start. The writing is stellar and the characters speak and act with a naturalness that only comes from actual combat experience.

Kevin Powers, the author, is an Iraq War veteran. The story he has written about his experiences is heart-breaking. The narrator, 21 year old Private Bartle, had literary aspirations in school and received a lot of taunting from his friends, so he decided to prove his manhood by becoming a soldier. This mirrored the author's life who enlisted at age seventeen. At basic training, he meets, the pimple-faced newbie, Murph, whose mother begs Bartle to promise to bring him back from Iraq unharmed.

Of course, no experienced soldier would ever make such a promise but something about the woman reminds the private of his own mother, so he readily agrees. Big mistake. They soon get sent to Al Tafir where a series of bloody battles, including civilian deaths, jade both men.

Their sergeant, a tough and brutal man named Sterling, shows the pair no mercy and expects them to be killing machines. Powers describes several battles to take Al Tafir, and the smoke, gunfire, fear and bravado experienced by both privates seems very authentic. One scene describes the death of a beautiful American medic. The descriptions make everything seem immediate, the dust, the river, the Iraqi civilians abandoning cars in a traffic circle when the soldiers approach.

Things end badly in Iraq in ways that I won't reveal but Powers also manages to give a vivid account of a soldier's reentry into civilian life. It's not pretty or easy and involved lots of solitude and beer, and little contact with friends from the past. This small book will join the war classics and be read for decades. It does what all great literature does, describes the most impossible human situations and makes them believable and moving.

Other great war novels include Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five* and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Posted by Dory L. on January 20, 2014

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