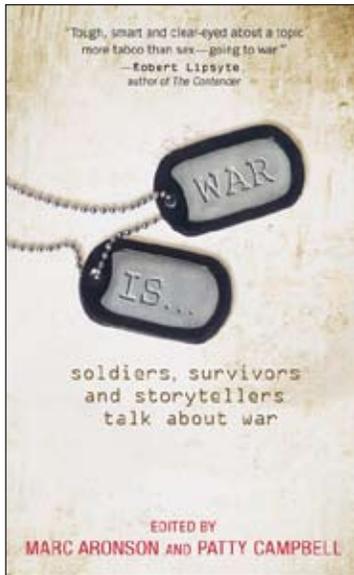


YA AUTHORS AND WAR: A PANEL DISCUSSION



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The idea for War Is . . . Soldiers, Survivors, and Storytellers Talk About War came from a panel, “The Author’s Responsibility: Telling the Truth About War,” at a workshop for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN). ALAN is an independent assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that celebrates excellence in writing for teens. The panel included four leading young adult authors and was moderated by Marc Aronson. The following article is based on speeches given by the participants. To illustrate their separate writing styles, we have added a short scene from a book by each author. The ALAN workshop and panel were held at the NCTE conference in Pittsburgh on November 21, 2005.

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MARC ARONSON, MODERATOR

*All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys,
The champions and enthusiasts of the state.*

Herman Melville wrote those lines in July 1861, just as the Civil War began, and his words get to the heart of what we are here to discuss today. We are fighting a war now. All of us here in this room write, edit, review, teach, or evaluate books for teenagers who will soon have the chance to be the “champions and enthusiasts” on the battlefield. Can those books play any role in helping those young men and women? What role might that be? American soldiers are in harm’s way. Can any book help protect them? American soldiers, too, have been in the position to notice, participate in, or expose torture and abuse. Could any book be of use to a person who finds himself in that terrible position of moral choice and social pressure?

Melville’s words, though, are just as important when read in reverse: in his time it was assumed that young men would be fascinated with war, would be preoccupied with imagining themselves as heroes in combat. Yet outside of books by the authors on this panel—all males, as you can see—it is very rare to find realistic books for young adults in which armed combat is central to



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the story. There are wars in fantasy novels and in science fiction; video and computer games are filled with weaponry and clashes of arms. But in the novels and nonfiction produced for teenagers, you are far, far, far more likely to find emotional combat, the storm and stress of dating, parents, friendships, than tales of bands of brothers on battlefields.

Some part of this is the result of the YA lag—most people get around to writing about coming-of-age a decade or so after the fact. Perhaps ten years from now if ALAN holds this same panel, all of the chairs will be filled by people in their twenties who made their mark writing about coming of age in Iraq. But mostly I think that we, as an industry, have responded to the first set of questions—how can YA books help young people face war?—by deciding that war is bad, and best ignored. We treat war the way Victorians did sex—something that we know people like but that we do not want to promote so had best keep secret. The phrase used over and over is, “We don’t want to glorify war.”

We, as an industry, determined to be the antidote to John Wayne, to the Green Berets, to the boosterism of war. Fine, except that, as I see with my own five-year-old, boys have not changed. They crave fighting, crave combat, crave heroism in battle. And, as I have discovered in writing nonfiction books about American and British history—war is fascinating to research, exciting to write about, and is, often enough, the essential turning point of both personal and national histories. We simply cannot be true to the past, to the present, or to our readers, and silence war.

I have never, ever, seen a reviewer say we should not write books about two girlfriends having a fight because we don’t want to glorify animosity between girls. Just the opposite: reviewers praise authors of such books for their insightful realism. Similarly, there is a whole industry of books about the most intimate moments in a girl’s physical maturation: getting her first period, anxiously tracking the development of her breasts, experiencing a range of sexual sensations. And yet I am certain that a book that was as detailed in describing the gore of combat would be criticized for being too graphic.

There is another interesting thread in this panel—the play of fiction and nonfiction. Harry Mazer served in World War II and has written a trilogy whose titles—*A Boy at War*, *A Boy No More*, and now *Heroes Don’t Run*—exactly match our theme today. Personal brushes with war appear in Walter Dean Myers’s work in two ways: through the clashes on the streets of Harlem, and in the story of his brother in Vietnam. As far as I know, neither of the authors of our nonfiction books related to war—Jim Murphy and Paul Fleischman—has made use of direct personal experience of combat. And yet Jim has told me that his book *The Boys’ War*—again directly our theme—is one of his most requested school publications. And Paul’s *Dateline: Troy*, which is just now being revised and updated—most directly deals with the war being fought today.

I hope that this panel, with these four accomplished writers, will mark a new moment for our industry. We are at war. As the world’s only superpower, I suspect that war of one sort or another is in our national future. Here together we can end the policy of Victorian delicacy and silence and instead revisit the question Melville suggested so long ago: Where do boys, war, and writing meet?

HARRY MAZER

*Harry Mazer is a veteran young adult novelist and the author of many acclaimed books for teens. His novels have earned him various honors, including the ALAN Award, given by the National Council of Teachers of English for distinguished lifelong contribution to young adult literature. Here he discusses how his classic novel *The Last Mission* is based on his own teen experiences in the air force.*

When World War II started, I was sixteen years old, and when I was seventeen, I was so worried that the war would end before I could get in that I volunteered for the air cadets. I was going to be an officer, I hoped, but I washed out of that whole program. I ended up volunteering and ultimately wound up becoming a B-17 gunner, a waist gunner on a B-17 heavy bomber. Our first mission was Berlin, early February 1945. It was such a new experience that I wasn't scared. The city lay beneath us like a huge rusted grid. I have no memory of where we dropped our bombs. What I remember vividly is seeing one of our bombers, one of our B-17 bombers, split in half and the back end of it, the tail end of it, spin away from the plane. After that I was a shareholder in the war.

On April 25, 1945, thirteen days before the war in Europe ended, we flew out on our twenty-sixth mission, over Plzeň, Czechoslovakia. Six hundred bombers went out that day. The target was the Skoda Armament Works, a big munitions factory. The Germans were waiting for us; they knew we were coming. Of the six hundred planes, two were shot down. One of the planes that was shot down was mine. When we were hit, we were at 26,000 feet, I was in waist gun position, and the explosion threw me off my feet. It tore off my oxygen mask and my intercom, and when I looked, I saw that the wing on the port side of the plane was gone. It had been blown off and the plane was falling.

I was wearing an emergency parachute and harness, and I crawled to the emergency door, but the door was stuck. I had no oxygen. I turned away from the door and saw the turret gunner on his knees right behind me. Behind him I saw my best friend, Mike Brennan, the radio operator. We were both nineteen years old, both from the Bronx, and I would like to believe that I yelled to Mike, "Come on!" or something of that sort. I threw myself against the door and fell out of the plane. I had never parachute-jumped before in my life nor have I since.

I remember everything that happened after I fell out of that door. I fell and fell, and it felt like I was floating. I fell and fell and didn't pull the chute. I fell and I fell and I fell, and I didn't pull the chute until I fell into a bank of clouds. And then I did, and for a moment, I blacked out. When I woke, I was under the chute; the chute was billowed out, and looking down, I saw a beautiful day—a blue and white sky, and a beautiful spring day. There were two other chutes nearby, but I couldn't tell who the men were. Where bombs had been dropped were great columns of black rising in the sky.

I seemed to fall into a giant bowl, and I could see them waiting for me before I hit the ground: German soldiers in blue uniforms, Luftwaffe—the German air force. I was taken prisoner. Another gunner from my plane was also taken prisoner, but at a different place, by the German air force. I was raised on the movies; I was raised on John Wayne, and this wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

After the war, I visited Mike Brennan's parents. His brother was there, and Mike's father sat there and listened as I told them what I knew. Of the eight men on the plane, only two had survived, and Mike wasn't one of them. I felt ashamed to be sitting there. I was here—Mike wasn't here. As soon as I could, I left.

In those days, I told my story almost compulsively to anybody who would listen. Years later, when I became a writer, after Norma, my wife, and I had gotten together and I had begun to write stories, I wrote a novel from my experiences called *The Last Mission*. The book is about fifteen-year-old Jack Raab, who is from the Bronx, fakes his age to join the army air corps, and becomes a waist gunner on a B-17. It has been in print for twenty-six years.

I wrote *The Last Mission* for many reasons, not the least of which is that boys love war books. And clearly, I'm not speaking for all boys or all girls, but that was just one of the reasons for writing the book. Unlike life, we expect stories to make sense, and so maybe by writing the book, I hoped to finally make sense of what had happened to us. I wanted to remember; I wanted never to forget. I wanted the world to know about and to honor their sacrifice. I wanted an answer to why I had lived and Mike had died.

Now, you don't have to serve in a war to write about war. It's not a requirement that you do what I did. Imagination makes all things possible. But writing about things I had not been part of, I felt the need to learn more. I spoke to veterans, I read first-person accounts, wartime memoirs, and all of them talked of the wounded, the dead, the living wandering around half mad. . . .

How do you translate things like that into a book for young readers? How realistic should I be? What was my responsibility to young readers and to those who had been in that war? I had to remind myself that I was a novelist and not a historian. I wasn't an authority. I wasn't writing polemics against war. My job was to write a story, and I have learned that in telling a story, a little goes a long way.

If there was a message in my book, it had to be contained within the story. After a writer friend of mine had just finished reading *The Last Mission*, he let me know that he liked the scene at the end of the book, after the war, when Jack Raab is at a school assembly, and he is asked to say something, and he finally blurts out: "War is one stupid thing after another." This particular writer was especially moved by those words, and he wanted me to know that, and he added, "I think so, too."

At the end of World War II, I would never have uttered those words. I would not have written those words because World War II was a necessary war. People speak of it as a good war, but

that doesn't really make sense because there are no good wars. It was a necessary war, but then there was Vietnam and everything that has followed since then.

Let me tell one last story. Fifty years after the end of World War II, I was invited to come back to where our plane had gone down in Czechoslovakia for a ceremony honoring my crew. I went to Prague first, where one of the engines of my plane sits in the Czech Air Museum. Then I was taken to the place where we crashed, a farmer's field where bits of our plane still could be found. And it was here that I found out something I had not known for fifty years: Mike Brennan had not died on the plane. He had been the third man out, and he had landed near a Czech cemetery not too far from where we came down. As he landed, a German Wehrmacht officer was closing in on him in a car, and he approached Mike, pistol drawn, and shot and killed him. This had been witnessed at a distance by some Czech girls. Why didn't we come down next to that cemetery? What would it have taken? A little rearranging of the way we went out of the plane. Or parachutes opened a little later or earlier, just a wisp of wind.

It was Mike's bad luck; it was war.

From *The Last Mission*:

"Chuckie, the wing's shot off," Jack said. He couldn't see Chuckie's face. The mask covered it. "Chuckie." Jack pushed him. Chuckie's head flopped forward. Where the back of this head should have been was just a wet red jelly.

Now Jack saw that he was crawling in blood. His hands and knees were covered with blood. Something skidded under his knee. He looked down at a piece of Chuckie's skull with hair and white stuff still sticking to it.

Jack threw out his hand, hit the wall, then pulled himself toward the rear. Dave was climbing up out of the ball. His mask was gone. His face was black. Jack crawled to the waist hatch. Through the tunnel he could see the tail position. Paul was gone.

Clumsily Jack pulled the red emergency hinge releases on the hatch door. He was lightheaded, passing out. No air to breathe. He yanked the hinge free. The door hung there. It was supposed to drop out when the hinges were pulled.

Jack looked around. Behind him Dave was clipping on his chest pack. In the doorway to the radio room he saw Chuckie's arm. He had to get out. He had to get out. He checked his chest pack, glanced at the red rip cord, then threw himself against the hatch door. It gave way beneath his weight. He fell backward out of the plane.

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PAUL FLEISCHMAN

Paul Fleischman has written thirty-two books for children and teens—eleven novels, two collections of short stories, three books of poetry, three books of nonfiction, nine picture books, and three plays! And Dateline: Troy, which doesn't fit in any of those categories. His works are often new and surprising, like Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices (which is based on insect sounds and won the Newbery Medal) and the radio play Seek. Here he tells about the making of Dateline: Troy, his contemporary retelling of one of the oldest war stories ever written, illustrated with newsclippings that suggest modern parallels to the ancient story's themes.

The Iliad is often described as a glorification of war. The vividness and detail of the descriptions—which ribs the spear entered between, what sound it made, a long simile comparing the spurting blood to a freshet in spring—would seem to support this. In a way, *The Iliad* is the ancestor of those Hollywood movies that switch to slow motion to show shells exploding and bodies flying through the air. It lets us not simply hear or read about battle, but smell and feel and taste it.

But Homer doesn't describe only battle this way; everything is evoked in rich detail: the waves striking the shore, the donning of armor, the flames from the Greeks' cooking fires in the evening. It's for this reason that Homer is such a valuable reporter on Greek life of the period, filling in the sorts of details not found in tombs and middens.

Though Homer praises the martial virtues of strength and courage, *The Iliad* doesn't resemble an Army recruiting film. Though he flits from earth to Olympus and back to tell his tale, the war is seen largely through an infantryman's clear-sighted eyes. Leaders are foolish, selfish, spiteful. Achilles, the book's and the Greeks' star, is a vain, hot-tempered churl, willing to let his fellow Greeks be slain by the score just to spite Agamemnon, with whom he's feuding. The gods are a curse upon the soldiers, keeping the war simmering for their own ends, breaking truces, feuding above like the generals below.

When a soldier dies in *The Iliad*, he doesn't ascend to Valhalla in glory. Far from it. His soul journeys down to the underworld, a land of shadows whose inhabitants spend eternity pining for the feel of sunlight, the taste of wine, the sight of their wives and homelands. Homer's standardized description of death makes no mention of honor, courage, justice, self-sacrifice. The phrase is rather, "And darkness covered his eyes," a chilling catchphrase that never loses its power for me. I would argue that for Homer war is a tragedy—a bloody, unnecessary, disaster foisted upon us, cruelly taking the lives of men of valor before their time.

War for Homer is also a moral mixed bag. Though the Greeks start out as the righteous plaintiffs, soon neither side has a monopoly on virtue. After ten years of fighting, the men can barely remember why they're fighting. The war has assumed a momentum of its own, drawn out by spells of tedium. It was said that only Palamedes's invention of dice from the knucklebones

of sheep kept the Greek soldiers from going mad. No glorification there. Rather, *The Iliad* is the spiritual grandfather of *Catch-22*, *MASH*, and *Jarhead*.

It's this honesty, I think, that has kept *The Iliad* alive all these years. Propaganda is predictable, one-dimensional. Literature is just the opposite. It's the humanity of the Trojan War story that originally appealed to me. How can you resist a story that starts with a seer advising a pregnant queen to kill her baby when it's born lest it bring ruin upon their city? How can you not keep reading when the king and queen can't bear to kill the child, so they entrust the deed to a herdsman, who leaves the baby on a mountain, then finds him still living five days later, and decides with his wife to raise him in secret, taking a dog's tongue to the king and queen as evidence that the baby is dead? Driving past the Argonaut Motel near my house, I realized that the ancient world still lives. And that accompanying the story with actual newspaper articles paralleling the events described was the perfect way to bring one of our oldest stories into the present.

I quickly decided to start the story before *The Iliad* and to continue past it, since there's so much drama aside from the Achilles-Agamemnon-Hector story. The war, after all, lasted ten years. *The Iliad* covers only a few weeks. I broke down the story into scenes and tried to find modern parallels. The first one was easy. The king and queen of Troy relied on a seer; Ronald Reagan consulted an astrologist. The second clipping dropped into my lap as well, and epitomized what I was searching for. The herdsman left the infant on a mountain to die — standard practice in ancient Greece for unwanted children. Then, one day, at the bottom of page one of my local paper, was the headline "Newborn Found in Dumpster," the story of an infant left to die, but rescued. What the mountain was for the ancients, the Dumpster is for us.

The Trojan War story is ageless, but newspapers keep rolling off the presses. And in teenagers' eyes, the first Gulf War marches quickly in reverse, receding to join Vietnam, the French and Indian War, and Hannibal's invasion of Rome. Meanwhile technology marches on. In the ten years after the first edition was published, the Internet sprang into being. Suddenly I could search hundreds of papers all over the country, instead of just the local and national papers. And then came a new war in the Persian Gulf. I decided it was time to improve on some of the first edition's clippings, and time as well as to bring the Trojan War into the new millennium, with warnings about 9/11, with President Bush's "Bring 'em on" added to the collage of boasts from overconfident leaders clamoring for war.

Back when I was in college, I had little thought of writing for a living. I thought I might go into history, perhaps teaching at the high-school level. *Dateline: Troy* was written for the teacher I didn't become, or rather for the one I would have become, and for the kind of teachers who show students why history and great literature never go out of date.

From *Dateline: Troy*:

On rollers, the horse was pulled to Troy's gates, where the lintel had to be removed to allow it to pass into the city. The crowd trailed it to Athena's temple and there laid armloads of flowers about it.

That night, while all Troy feasted and danced, the Greeks in the horse trembled with terror, still dreading that they might be discovered. Odysseus had to strangle one man and held his sword at Epeius's ribs to keep the frantic carpenter quiet. Slowly, the sounds of celebrating faded. After a long silence, there came footsteps.

"It's Simon," a voice called softly. "Come down."

The trapdoor opened. Warily, the Greeks climbed down. All was still. Worn out with revelry, filled with wine, the Trojans were sleeping deep as the dead.

Odysseus quickly dispersed his men. The sleeping sentries' throats were cut. The gates were opened. A beacon was lit as a signal to Agamemnon, who'd not sailed for Greece but had hidden the fleet behind the island of Tenedos. The ships landed. The army raced into Troy, and the slaughter began. Awake and asleep, young and old, the Trojans were butchered by the pitiless Greeks. It was not a battle, but a massacre.

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JIM MURPHY

*Jim Murphy is the author of more than twenty best-selling nonfiction books for young adults, including *An American Plague*, *The Great Fire*, and *The Boys' War*. He is the winner of numerous awards, including a Newbery Honor and a Boston Globe–Horn Book Award, and has been a National Book Award Finalist. In this speech, he is remarkably candid in sharing his own changed attitudes toward war—as a teenager and as an adult.*

I've written four books that deal with the subject of war: three on the Civil War—two nonfiction, one fiction—and one, nonfiction, on the American Revolutionary War. It's important to know that I have never personally been in a combat situation or even trained as a soldier. But when I was young, I did have this odd, weird experience that helped me decide how to approach this subject in my books.

I was eighteen in 1965, and as you all know, the Vietnam War was going on. On the day I turned eighteen, I left my house, marched across our little town to the high school where the draft board had its office, and I signed up. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't enlisting in the army. I was only registering my name for the draft. So I signed my name and marched home, and I never told anyone what I'd done.

A couple of weeks later, I came home from school, and my mother was furious. A letter had arrived from the draft office and my mother had opened it (she did that with any mail addressed to my brother or me that looked official and could contain bad news). She looked in the envelope, saw that the card inside said I was "1-A," meaning I had been cleared to serve, and started screaming.

My mother was at best five feet tall. She was a short little Italian woman, but when she got angry, the entire neighborhood knew what was going on.

“How could you do this without telling your father and me?” she wanted to know. “Who gave you permission?”

I told her (in my calm, supercilious eighteen-year-old voice) that I did it because that’s what the law required. When you turned eighteen, you were required to register, period, and I didn’t want to be any different from all of my friends who were turning eighteen. That did not make my mother happy. Or quiet her down.

Several weeks later, I came home from school again, and another draft card had arrived for me in the mail. This one said “4-F,” meaning I had been deemed unfit to serve. When you see “4-F” and your name on the draft card, the “4-F” looks huge, like it’s about a foot tall. I had gone to register, originally, because I wanted to be a normal, law-abiding kid. Suddenly, now, this “4-F” made me completely different from all my friends. It was a clear indication that I was inept, that I was not physically qualified to be in the army or to defend my family, relatives, and neighbors from attack. From whom didn’t matter. A general rule for all parents to remember: you do not suggest to any eighteen-year-old that he is physically unfit. It’s a clear challenge that will be met with blind, incoherent stubbornness.

The way this terrible “4-F” thing came about was that my mother worked as a bookkeeper for a doctor, and I had fainted a couple of times while at track practice. I think this happened because I never ate my school’s really awful lunches, and by the time afternoon practice rolled around I was completely done in, weak and light-headed. Which didn’t mean I begged off practice. Why not? Because I didn’t want to be treated any differently from anyone else, of course. I’d go out, run as far and as fast as I could—and then pass out. Ever sharp, my mother took these incidents and convinced the doctor that I must be epileptic and therefore eligible for a medical deferment. So, now it was my turn to inform the entire neighborhood about the situation.

We had two or three weeks of conflict, which eventually turned into negotiation on the doctor’s report. And then a third draft card appeared. This one said I was “2-S,” given a deferment to go to college. It was a compromise. My mother was not completely happy. I was not completely happy. It took a few years—and watching those grim TV pictures of wounded and dead soldiers in Vietnam night after night—before I realized how utterly dopey I’d been and how amazingly smart my mother was. I had put myself in line to go to Vietnam without really knowing what was going on there. I didn’t know anything about the Vietnamese people or why we were fighting them; I didn’t know how the war was being handled militarily. I didn’t even know what it was like to be in the army, how it felt to shoot at and kill another human being, or even the consequences of being wounded. I was completely uninformed and stupid.

And when I thought about it, I realized that this complete lack of information made me the perfect soldier. Because the more you know, the more questions you tend to ask, and the more questions you ask, the more likely you are to say no to an order. Trust me, no army wants that.

They want to train a blank slate into someone who will fit the army's very special needs. And that means saying, "Yes sir," no matter what you're told to do.

I didn't realize it then, but this experience had a powerful influence on my writing. Fast-forward twenty years or so, and suddenly I am working on the first book I did about the Civil War, called *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk About the Civil War*. It's about boys sixteen years old and younger who enlisted to fight in the Civil War. Not to be drummer boys, but to actually fight in the infantry. I did a lot of research on the Civil War and the soldiers who fought in it and read many diaries, journals, memoirs, and letters from these soldiers.

I discovered that, essentially, they really didn't know what they were getting themselves into when they went off to war. They just wanted to be with their friends, who had all rushed off to volunteer. They saw fighting in the war as a grand adventure that they would all come out of as heroes. And I thought, "Wouldn't it have been nice if someone had told me what Vietnam was going to be like that day as I marched across town to sign up for the draft?"

I decided my book was going to be an attempt to let kids, my readers, see and feel what it's actually like to join an army in wartime. I would follow these young soldiers start to finish, from the time they hurried off to enlist, through their brief period of training, and into their first chaotic battles, death and suffering included. I'd let readers experience camp life, camp food, and all the other discomforts away from home. And I'd let readers see the lucky ones come marching home, changed forever.

When I signed the contract for this, my editor was Ann Troy. She was extraordinarily supportive when I said I wanted to do a book that was very realistic and presented war in as powerful a way as I could. She was an extremely good editor, although when I showed her a photograph of body parts strewn across a field, she did hesitate slightly. I remember she looked at the photo and then back at me. "Now, don't make the battle scenes overly graphic," she suggested. "We don't want to scare kids."

I blurted out, "Yes, I do!" That's the kind of from-the-hip response some authors believe shows how brave they are. You know, willing to risk censure for the good cause. But when I really thought about the question, it made me analyze what I hoped the book's impact would be. Did I want to scare readers? Well, to a degree, yes. But I didn't want readers to think I was putting anything in simply for shock value or to create controversy. I wanted them to experience war in an immediate and dramatic way that left them with lasting images and impressions.

I went back over what I'd written and found myself wondering if maybe I had gone over the line in my enthusiasm to produce realistic scenes. Were my descriptions detailed to the point of being distracting? I tried deleting a word or phrase, but then the scenes seemed paler and less alive. What to do? I don't know how other writers handle such situations, but my response is to escape into research (and hope something vaguely intelligent enters my head as a result).

I went back over my notes and began rereading all those firsthand accounts I'd hunted out. And it was while doing this that I realized something I probably should have earlier. These

kids—some just fourteen years old with a modest amount of formal education—were masterful writers. Clear, direct, innocent, and eager to see and tell about the world around them. What surprised, shocked, or just gave them a chuckle, they wrote down on paper. I decided I was going to bring in as many of their personal accounts as I possibly could, letting their combined voices present as complete a picture of war as possible. My hope was that by the end of the book—by letting modern-day kids take this imaginary trip into a very real past, by letting them experience war through the words of people who were really there—when the time came for them to march across town to sign a registration paper, they might stop, step back, and really think about what the consequences might be.

That's what my four books essentially try to do: draw readers into the text who (usually) have a highly romanticized view of war and let them muck through the mud and blood and waste that is the inevitable consequence of battle.

From *The Boys' War*:

Most likely, [the drummer boy] saw himself always drumming in parades or in the safety of camp. He would soon learn differently.

The beat of the drum was one of the most important means of communicating orders to soldiers in the Civil War. Drummers did find themselves in camp sounding the routine calls to muster or meals and providing the beat for marching drills. But more often than not, they were with the troops in the field, not just marching to the site of the battle but in the middle of the fighting. It was the drumbeat that told the soldiers how and when to maneuver as smoke poured over the battlefield. And the sight of a drummer boy showed soldiers where their unit was located, helping to keep them close together.

Drummers were such a vital part of battle communication that they often found themselves the target of enemy fire. "A ball hit my drum and bounced off and I fell over," a Confederate drummer at the Battle of Cedar Creek recalled. "When I got up, another ball tore a hole in the drum and another came so close to my ear that I heard it sing."

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WALTER DEAN MYERS

*Walter Dean Myers is the author of more than seventy best-selling works of fiction and nonfiction. He has been a National Book Award Finalist and has received more than fifty of the highest awards in literature, including multiple Coretta Scott King Awards, the Michael L. Printz Award, and the first Virginia Hamilton Award. A veteran himself, Myers is the author of the classic Vietnam War novel, *Fallen Angels*, and its Iraqi War sequel, *Sunrise over Fallujah*.*

Teenagers grow up to be decision makers. They grow up to be people who send other people off to war. They grow up to be people who make decisions about war, often without ever really knowing about it, without understanding what it truly is.

One of my sons is an artist, and he and I work together. My second son is career air force. He called the other day, and we—my wife and I—asked about something we felt had been inadequately explained. “What’s going on in Colombia? What are we doing in Colombia?” And he replied, “You don’t want to know. There are wars going on all over the world that nobody knows about.” That’s pretty scary.

I joined the U.S. Army on my seventeenth birthday. I left school and enlisted. Later, my younger brothers saw me in my uniform and thought I was pretty cool; in fact, one of my younger brothers joined the army after me. I think it used to be that one out of every nine soldiers in the U.S. Army went into combat, and now it’s one out of every eight, but the war in Vietnam was picking up, and my brother was sent into combat. He was killed there.

He was not just a number for me; he was my brother.

I had two pictures of him in my mind. A picture of him doing things around the house—he wanted to be an artist. And then I had another picture of him, dead. I had to somehow unite those two pictures because if they could be united for *me*, so could the idea of this reality that he was gone.

At that time, there was still some hope that the South Vietnamese would take over and fight that war. So they were shipping South Vietnamese officers over to Fort Dix and Fort Monmouth and trying to train them. And they were bringing some prisoners over at the same time, and one prisoner was scared out of his mind. He was asked, “Why are you so scared? You’re in America, now; no one is going to shoot you.” What had happened was that the people who had captured him in Vietnam had been told to “bring back *a* prisoner,” and they had captured two of them, and then decided to kill the other guy. Which was routine. If they were told to bring back *one* prisoner, and they’re out in the field, they didn’t risk the mission with an extra one. And they would kill the other one, usually with a knife. They would cut his throat.

I think that’s an important concept of war that people need to learn and understand. I have been reading about the atrocities at the prison at Abu Ghraib, and people don’t seem to understand that the torture of prisoners is routine during war. What they’re saying is, “Oh, no! This is something different,” but this is what happens. In war, they capture prisoners and they routinely kill them and routinely torture them. It’s what happens, but who wants to say that?

Who should tell young people that this is what war is about? Who?

I was seventeen and prior to when I joined the army, I had just read Siegfried Sassoon, and all these World War I poets. “Yes! Wherever I fall, there shall be a piece of Harlem.”

This is the sort of thing we want to teach, the idea of passing a person you had lunch with lying on the ground, dead. You have to walk by that person and leave them behind because they’re dead. We ought to teach that.

Young boys are interested in war. Young men are interested in war. If you don't know what it's about, if you haven't experienced your first dead body yet—you think it's just a game, that it's wonderful. I watch war on television now, and I hear the talk about “*smart* bombs”—what a bunch of bullshit! They're feeding you this sanitized version of the whole thing.

I wrote *Fallen Angels* based on my brother's death in Vietnam, and I wrote *Patrol* based on another friend who served in Vietnam. I also wrote a book about D-day, the Invasion of Normandy, called *The Journal of Scott Pendleton Collins*. What struck me about that invasion was that it was one of the biggest screw-ups ever. One group of soldiers, young boys from Bedford, Virginia, were told before they hit the beach that none of the landmarks on their maps would be there because “we're going to bomb them all down.” But when they landed, they didn't know that they had completely missed the beach they thought they were landing on, and so thousands of soldiers were killed. (The little town of Bedford, home of the Virginia National Guard's 116th Infantry Regiment, Company A, lost more men per capita than any other place in the U.S.)

They want to tell you that the plans for conducting a war will work. They tell you, “We'll do this, we'll do the other thing, and this is going to be the result, and this is accurate,” and it's not true—none of it's true. War is chaotic. People are killed at a tremendous rate. And it's all sanitized. It's sanitized by the media; it's sanitized by the military. If you read the “After Action Reports,” however—and any time there is combat, there is an After Action Report—you will find a completely different story.

Who is going to tell the children the truth about war *if not authors*? Who?

From *Fallen Angels*:

The next hut looked empty. There were two bowls on the table. One still had some kind of food—it looked like a thick soup—in it. The VC must have caught them by surprise, in the middle of a meal, maybe saying grace.

There were pictures on a small wicker chest. I went to see them. A thin Vietnamese man in shirt-sleeves stood squinting at the camera. On one side of him was a woman and on the other side a bicycle. He had both of his hands on the bicycle.

A click! Another!

I turned to look at the muzzle of a gun.

Click! Click!

I couldn't move. It was like a dream. I was watching it, but I couldn't move. It was a dream of my death. A gun was pointed at my chest. A small brown man was pumping the bolt frantically to get it to work.

Click! Click! Click!

He came at me and swung the butt of the rifle toward my head. I blocked it with my arm and backed away. He swung again and hit my shoulder, the rifle glancing up from my shoulder into the side of my face. I pulled the trigger of my rifle without lifting it. He went down on one knee. Then it was as if I were suddenly awake. I lifted the M-16 and started firing it in his face. I emptied the clip. I snatched another one from my belt, slammed it in, and fired that point-blank.

"Don't move!" I screamed at him. "Don't move!"

"Perry! Back away!"

Sergeant Simpson's voice snapped at me from the doorway.

"Back away, man!"

I backed away, keeping my rifle pointed at the VC. Sergeant Simpson went over to him. Then he lowered his rifle.

"He ain't in this war no more," he said.

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