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An Interview with Kevin Powers

Lucie Jammes

- 1 Kevin Powers served with the U.S. Army in Mosul and Tal Afar, Iraq, in 2004 and 2005. He is the author of *The Yellow Birds*, a poetic and lyrical novel inspired by his personal experience of war. *The Yellow Birds* received The Guardian First Book Award and the 2013 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. In 2014, Kevin Powers published a collection of war poems entitled *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. His second novel, *A Shout in the Ruins*, was published in 2018 and continues to explore the subject of the war, this time focusing on the Civil War and its ripples through time.

Lucie Jammes: I would like to begin this interview with a question regarding the literary works that have influenced the elaboration of your first novel. Critics have compared *The Yellow Birds* to war narratives as diverse as O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Who are the authors who have inspired you, as you were writing *The Yellow Birds*?

Kevin Powers: It's hard to tie influences to a specific work because my view is that they contribute to one's writing in a broader way, but certainly the poetry of Larry Levis, Yusuf Komunyakaa and Bright Pegeen Kelly has been extraordinarily important to me. David Jones' *In Parenthesis* and Steven Wright's *Meditations in Green* are the two books I turned to most often as a lens through which to examine my own experience of war. Tim O'Brien has left a massive legacy as writer and certainly I am a great admirer of his work, especially *Going After Cacciato*. Cormac McCarthy and Marilyn Robinson are among the living writers I return to most often, though I don't think my writing resembles theirs beyond an overlap of concerns. I also thought a lot about JMW Turner when writing the book, not just the pictures but also the writing that John Ruskin did about him. I could go on but it would quickly turn into simply a list of writers I like.

LJ: According to specialist Jean Kaempfer, contemporary writers have tried to renew and reinvent the genre of war literature by freeing themselves from its codified norms – so much so that modern war narratives all seem to have one common feature: the desire to be

uncommon. Do you agree with this idea? In what manner would you say *The Yellow Birds* abides by or departs from the conventions of war literature?

KP: It's an interesting idea, but I'm not sure departing from conventions was a conscious goal. I suppose my models, to the degree that I was aware of them, were probably older. I always connected to the poets of the First World War, so there very well may have been a desire to work in a mode closer to theirs than ours. I'm not at all interested in irony, for instance.

LJ: A major stylistic contrast seems to structure *The Yellow Birds*. Indeed, the dialogues are often raw, crude and feature coarse language, while the descriptive passages are marked by poetry and lyricism. Would you say that this tension captures in a way the complexity of the war experience?

KP: I hope so. It came from a desire to differentiate between cause and effect, between the objective world of what actually was happening around the narrator and his deeply and inevitably subjective response to those events. I also wanted to show the difference between the external and internal life of the narrator, and by inference of the other main characters as well. I don't know if this is entirely true, but my sense is that very few people ever say what they mean. For soldiers, like many other aspects of their lives, this common feature of humanity is exaggerated.

LJ: You are also a poet: in 2015 you published a collection of poems entitled *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. Like *The Yellow Birds*, this collection deals with a subjective experience of the Iraq war. Why did you choose to resort to poetry instead of prose this time? Did the use of poetry allow you to explore the experience of the war from a different perspective?

KP: We read poetry differently than we read fiction, or anything in a primarily narrative mode. I guess I felt that working with writing that was more sensory dependent, more interested in image and sound and rhythm than the order of events in time, I thought I'd have a chance of describing and providing access to a more immediate depiction of the experience. Apprehension precedes comprehension. Poetry tends toward engagement with the former rather than the latter. The common complaint about poetry from modern readers is that they don't understand it. I would argue that understanding isn't necessarily the intended result of reading a poem. Not that it should be incomprehensible, only that it's more about those first layers of perception.

LJ: In *The Yellow Birds*, you often set up a particular rhythm that seems to slow down the pace of the story by highlighting each moment of experience. What is your approach to the rhythmic dimension of the text? In what ways do you feel that rhythm impacts your story?

KP: On a very practical level, I hoped that by writing sentences that engaged the reader as more than mere tools to deliver information, I could encourage them to keep going. I understood I was saying things that are uncomfortable, violent, perhaps difficult to read. There's also a way that the rhythm of language can both orient and be disorienting. If the pace is matched with the intensity of the experience described, that's all to the good. If it's mismatched, it can approximate the very real feelings of disorientation experienced by characters in the moments described. My goal was to give the reader an approximation of the narrator's experience, so the opportunity to linger or elaborate or have things flash by quickly seemed like a way to help achieve that goal.

LJ: During their time in Iraq, the soldiers of *The Yellow Birds* have to bear the presence of a reporter, whom they mock for his cowardice and lack of understanding of the war. The

presence of a camera crew also changes the colonel's behavior and the soldiers' responses to it, alienating their modes of interaction and momentarily turning them into stereotypical, parodic versions of themselves. In what manner is fiction a more trustworthy means of conveying war experiences than mainstream media?

KP: I wouldn't go that far. I would just say that the best way of appreciating the totality of the experience is to engage with as many forms or modes of expression that try to address the experience as possible. In this specific instance I was just trying to show that the characters realize and resent the performative aspect of what they're going through. They recognize they are content providers, as we would say nowadays. Of course, that sucks. And I wanted to show how that feeds into the larger resentment many soldiers come to feel against home. You become entertainment, a political proxy, everything except an individual. But I personally have great respect for the work that journalists do in war zones.

LJ: I would like to pursue with the notion of homecoming. Homer's *Odyssey* and other canonical war narratives represent the return of the hero as a moment of celebration and triumph. On the contrary, your novel explores the aftermath of war and reveals how complex and problematic homecoming can be for soldiers. How does your writing question the possibility of homecoming and in what way does it challenge the traditional "return of the hero?"

KP: As I mentioned in the last answer, I think the primary feature of homecoming as it relates specifically to the war in Iraq is resentment. The only sound conclusion from fighting in that war is that it was unnecessary, and this realization is entirely mismatched from the reactions and perceptions from the people at home. If the return of the hero is meant to have a cleansing effect and process for reintegration on and for the warrior, as anthropologically speaking most cultures have had, then coming home from the war in Iraq made it evident that no such process was truly available to you. It's a kind of cultural abandonment. The trappings are there but it's a simulacrum of an essential function of society across all human cultures throughout history. When you send your children to war, you have to give them a way back.

LJ: I am interested in the possible autobiographical dimension of your work. You were a soldier yourself, deployed in Iraq as a machine gunner from February 2004 to March 2005. To what extent did this personal experience influence your writing? Does the story of Private John Bartle draw upon yours?

KP: In some details, yes. The larger arc is not mine, though I think my experience allowed me to speculate and put me in a position to tell a story that I hoped would be both authentic and accessible to readers who had no relationship to the war. I guess you could say, I'm not Private Bartle, but I could see him from where I was.

LJ: I am interested in your commitment. Do you feel like your book might be a literary testimony for veterans who are not able to testify by themselves? How was *The Yellow Birds* received among military personnel?

KP: It wasn't intended to be that. I didn't approach the task with the desire to speak for other veterans. I was trying to respond to questions from civilians who wanted to know what it was like, to have a way to access that experience for themselves. The idea of likeness, of approximation, seems to be the territory of the imaginative writer. As far as how it was received by veterans, I have had the same variety of reactions as I've had from the population at large. The uniform distracts us from this

fact, but soldiers don't think monolithically. Though I must say I am especially grateful when a veteran tells me they've appreciated it.

LJ: I would like to follow with a question about your latest work, a novel entitled *A Shout in the Ruins* (2018). It also tackles the subject of war, but covers a period of a century and starts during the Civil War. Did you write about the Civil War using the same narrative techniques you used to evoke the Iraq war in *The Yellow Birds*, or did you feel you had to resort to a different form of discourse or to a different style in order to write about a different war?

KP: It's very different beginning with the fundamental level of perspective. The new book is told from a wandering third-person perspective, sometimes omniscient, sometimes very close. I was interested in the legacy of the American Civil War in specific locations, mainly the part of the South where I'm from, but also across time. I knew I needed many characters to even approach depicting the significance of these people's relationships to each other and the way they were constrained by, maybe even determined by, a broad sweep of social forces. Ultimately I care about the people over the politics, but I felt the story required an entirely different approach.

LJ: I would like to conclude this interview with a question about your projects. Since you started your literary career with three war-related works, do you think you will continue writing about the war in the future? In other words, do you consider yourself as a war writer, or will you pursue other subjects? Are you working on anything specific at the moment?

KP: I think if I had to define my subject it would be violence. The violence of individuals and the consequences that result therefrom, the violence of communities toward the other, and the inherently destructive and self-destructive nature of humankind. Right now I'm working on a book that is engaged with the latter subject. It's about an ecologist studying the last extant member of a species, and so also how we are destroying the world, but it's a love story too. I probably only care about love and death when it's all said and done, so I don't think I'll run out of stuff to write about.

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AUTHOR

LUCIE JAMMES

Université Toulouse- Jean Jaurès