

Reading the Literature of War: A Global Perspective on Ethics

A high school teacher reflects on how reading literature of war can open students' eyes to the needs of others and help them understand the importance of humanitarian action. Contemporary literary works and examples of classroom assignments are described and recommended.

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hy do we keep reading about all these poor people?" "Is everything this bleak?" "Aren't there any happy endings?" These questions inevitably come up near the end of October in my course *The Wisdom of Camouflage: The Literature of War in the Non-Western World* after only two months of readings that generally don't have happy endings. I have to admit that I used to take a little offense at some of these questions, particularly the one about impoverished people. Wasn't everyone at least somewhat aware of the state of the world? Didn't the students want enlightenment enough to face what were sometimes terrible, dark endings? Shouldn't everyone's initial response be bleeding-heart compassion? The first couple of semesters that I had to face such questions from the students, I braced myself, thinking that we were in for a long ride ahead. But every semester of the course, after seeing both their intellect and their hearts develop, I found that students didn't mean these questions to be elitist or aloof. These places, these people, these events that we read about were simply so foreign, so unusual to the world of the US teenager, that they simply had to find a reference point before they could even begin to put these stories into a real and human context.

When I came to the Hockaday School many years ago, a similar course on the literature of war was already in place. I must admit I did a bit of a double-take on seeing this in the course catalog. Hockaday is, after all, an all-girls school. Would teenage girls be so interested in war? I see now what a prejudicial thought that was, assuming

what teenage girls would or wouldn't like. Now, I know better, so when my peers at the all-boys school down the road ask me the same question, I take delight in commending the versatility of the adolescent female mind.

Early Versions of a War Literature Course

That early version of the course covered some classic and fantastic literature: Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and lots of Shakespeare, among other authors and texts. Let there be no doubt about the power and importance of these works. They teach so much so eloquently about war, violence, courage, fear, and human nature. Some of the works, especially Vonnegut, seemed to open students to a whole new way of looking at literature, sending them off into a sudden burst of pleasure reading.

But something was missing, too. Something about these texts, something about the overall context didn't speak to the students urgently enough. They approached the readings with sincere engagement and deft analytical ability, but when a text was over, it was over and time to move on to the next. It was little more than an intellectual exercise. We would talk about courage, and we would even try to draw comparisons from our own lives in hopes of understanding and feeling out the themes in question, but so much of what we found ended up vague and without emotion or deep response. At home, watching events unfold around the world, seeing US

troops deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq, watching documentaries about Rwanda, reading news reports about the extreme situations in Darfur, Uganda, and the Congo, something inside nagged at me. While it was admirable that we were even tackling the topic, while the texts we read were indeed classics, and while we could certainly draw some parallels, even if only tangentially, I came to realize that what the students needed, what they might respond to, was something current. They needed to know and face the stories of those affected by the many conflicts raging around our world. Not only did they need it, but I needed it—I needed to feel like I wasn't simply teaching literature as ancient history, but as a breathing and viable thing, capable of speaking to and changing the world. Our hearts needed to be confronted more directly. We needed more immediate literature so that our response would be more immediate. I wanted students to understand how our actions here have impact far away, how we live in a global society, and how there are many even here in our own community who have experienced war and have come to the United States as refugees. We needed a better and more human understanding of the politics involved, a better understanding of blood diamonds, land mines, child soldiers, torture, suicide bombings, conflict minerals, fair wages, disease, shortages of food and water, problems with aid, and the many issues of gender, age, race, and class. We needed to know more about Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and surprisingly even more about Christianity in many cases. We even needed to open ourselves to perspectives about democracy and capitalism that came from outside of our own American way of thinking so that we could understand what others around the world might be thinking and feeling. Not only did we need to look at our own personal ethics, but as our nation and the entire world seemed to be at a crossroads, we needed to look at the American system of ethics and place it in a more informed context of what the ethics and morals of other cultures looked like. And there was plenty of good literature that could do this for us.

A New Version Develops

Thus, it was because of these revelations and because of the encouragement of a supportive department chair that I formed a new version of the

course, *The Wisdom of Camouflage: The Literature of War in the Non-Western World*. The phrase “wisdom of camouflage” comes from Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai’s poem “Anniversaries of War.” In the section titled “What Did I Learn in the Wars,” Amichai says that he “learned the wisdom of camouflage, / Not to stand out, not to be recognized, / Not to be apart from what’s around [him]” (412). This serves as the perfect introduction to the course, one that sets non-Western literature apart from the US sense of bravado. It establishes the deep questions of identity that are a continual thread throughout all of our readings.

We begin the course with several poems by Amichai, a poet who was respected by both Palestinians and Israelis, and discuss the personal nature of violence. In an interview with Esther Robbins for the Lannan Foundation, Amichai himself says that all poetry is political, even love poetry. So Amichai’s poetry provides some fantastic imagery for students to understand the intimacy and passion involved in conflict. In the age of smart bombs, drones, and violent video games, there is perhaps no more pertinent issue than to remind students of the necessity to stop and consider the effects of our decisions on other human beings. It would seem at times that mainstream America has replaced a moral sense of ethics with an ethics more related to safety, efficiency, and the economy.

We also begin with an excerpt from Pascal Khoo Thwe’s *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, a memoir about Thwe’s involvement in the rebellion against the dictatorship in Burma. The excerpt is always one I read in class so that I can help to immediately alleviate any distress that comes from Thwe’s description of his lover’s murder at the hands of government agents. It’s not that the description is graphic, but it is the starkness and simplicity, the rawness with which Thwe describes the

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event and its after-effects that often leaves students with a sudden realization that our work at hand is quite serious and a matter not just of the mind, but of the heart. This first topic of violence being so personal and these first readings help us to put a human face on the issue of global conflict and help the students to realize that it might not only be our attention that is needed, but also a shaping of our ethics and our willingness to respond.

Our first novel of the semester is Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul*, a story set in Taliban-era Afghanistan that follows the lives of two couples, one of them of the disappearing middle class. Khadra's descriptions of Afghanistan and

the lives torn by war there are haunting and bleak but beautifully written. From Afghanistan, we travel to Sudan and read *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, a memoir of three of the Lost Boys of Darfur, Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak. Though the boys' trials are frightening, feel never-ending, and at times even seem unreal, the book serves as a nice follow-

up to the desolation of *Swallows*, for *Fire* offers some hope. Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin survive; they ultimately make it to the United States and start new lives. And after looking at a selection of poems, essays, and stories from places such as Iraq, India, China, South Africa, and Vietnam, we end the semester with journalist Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, a graphic novel about the reporter's travels through Palestinian refugee camps. The graphic-novel format lends itself well to the urgent nature of the course material. We watch the films *Osama*, *The Fog of War*, *God Grew Tired of Us*, and *Promises*. If there's time, I still like to show *Dr. Strangelove* for a bit of comic relief.

I also highly recommend Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. It's a text all students read in their World Literature course, so I don't repeat it in this course, but it otherwise would be a perfect fit. The portrait Satrapi creates of herself represents a feminine strength important and sometimes overlooked in the context of war. This is a semester course, so there are many wonderful texts we don't get to, and I offer an extensive recommended reading list in

the sidebar. There are other strong female protagonists represented there as well as important work by a wide range of poets, fiction writers, essayists, and even a few Western writers who reflect on war in other important and unusual ways.

To refer to some scholarship in this area and to find even more readings surrounding the conflict in the Middle East, I encourage you to check out two previous articles in *English Journal*, Allen Webb's "Literature from the Modern Middle East: Making a Living Connection" and Linda R. Silver's "Israeli Encounters: Books for Teens about Israel." These articles are interesting to look at side by side, Silver's article being a response to Webb's, and the dialogue that results from comparing them proves yet again how multifaceted the problems of war are.

Reflecting on the Faces of War

In addition to the personal nature of violence, we look at several other themes. In a unit on the problems of exile, we include philosophers, poets, and essayists such as Edward W. Said, Salman Rushdie, Edmund Jabès and Marcel Cohen, René Char, and E. M. Cioran. Perhaps our most important theme of the year is that of redemption. For one major paper, I ask the students to simply respond to the question, "How do we redeem a culture torn by war?" I ask them to go beyond the pat answers that would boil down to "Why can't we all just get along?" Point-of-view writing also plays a large role in the course. Writing from the point of view of another person, particularly an oppressed woman, gives the students a chance to imagine more deeply the problems those in war-torn countries may face. I encourage students to respond in a variety of modes: poetry, creative nonfiction (both personal narrative and essays), fiction, even their own visual texts (in the style of the graphic novel, but at the length of a short story or poem).

It's difficult work. There are tears, sometimes mine. In fact, even today I screened *God Grew Tired of Us*, a documentary I've shown probably five or six times before, and still found myself tearing up over one segment about the Lost Boys. The girls who take the course are incredibly brave. They bear it well. There are times we sit in silence, times we have to avert our eyes from an image, but rarely have I had a girl leave the room because she couldn't

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handle it. I've only had one girl switch out of the course early on because she found the material too difficult. In many ways, I don't blame her. I've often wondered how long I'll be able to sustain this work emotionally. Sometimes I can't decide if I should take a long rest from considering such things or run straightaway to one of these suffering places, sacrificing everything once and for all.

Turning to the Positive

I hope that as time goes on I'll lean toward the latter. I certainly hope that my students will run toward those who need help and never away. For when we talk about ethics, when we talk about living moral and meaningful lives, we're often not talking simply about attitudes, but about actions. The first semester I offered the course, I did indeed find it quite bleak, at times hopeless. I knew that wasn't right. That wasn't what I believed about the world, and I knew of so many others out there working for good things who believed all wasn't lost. So the next semester I had the girls offer presentations on individuals and groups working for positive change in the regions we read about and here in the United States as well. This opened up new ideas and possibilities for action. We could see and hear the stories of specific people in the world acting compassionately and ethically within situations that are often the most unethical and unjust conditions possible. We could see how people forgive and how they work to help and change and save. We could see how people who do such things must sacrifice. I've found that those presentations provided wonderful positive examples, but they also caused students to read the texts differently. Somewhere in the back of their minds was always a possibility, a growing desire to try to address the problems we were reading about. More fascinating and unique solutions to world issues began to pour out of our discussions.

The ethical and moral decisions I ask the students to consider and the actions that we end up discussing as possibilities are quite varied. We talk about voting, but not just in the traditional sense, as with political parties and the standard platforms. We talk about some of the seemingly minute issues that can have incredible impact on the lives of refugees. Take, for instance, public transportation referendums. Refugees in the United States need

increased access to better public transportation. Unfortunately, affluent communities in particular tend to vote down public transportation referendums or at the least limit them to certain parts of a city. I challenge the students to see this as an ethical and humanitarian issue by showing them a picture of the Dhamalas, a Bhutanese refugee family my wife and I mentor, and by telling their story and their struggles with transportation and how that affects their work and home life. And we talk about the importance of volunteering and giving money to causes, organizations, and individuals. We talk about writing letters, both politically and personally. One semester a class decided that as a final project they wanted to write encouraging letters to a group of children on an African island that had seen conflict. And being a class on the literature of war, we indeed must reflect on language itself and its relation to conflict. There are countless implications of the language used to describe the people and the situations we encounter.

We talk often about just how far we can take our ethics into the realm of action. Will we continue to simply talk, will we act enough to merely alleviate guilt, or will we stretch beyond comfort, sacrifice, and act for true and lasting change? When we discuss Nelson Mandela, I am sure to tell students about and read work from his fellow prisoner Dennis Brutus, the biracial poet who could have passed as white but self-identified as black because it was the right thing to do. What comfort he sacrificed to stand up for truth. I challenge the students to consider sacrifice as a desirable possibility and to see comfort as an all-too-easy enemy in the battle for progress. Humanitarian work is not exactly lucrative or cushy.

Questions and Dialogue

Going out and acting aside, even continuing to simply shape attitudes remains an important aspect of the course, for so much of what we encounter is new territory or an issue that is a touchstone in current

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**ADDITIONAL READINGS TO ENCOURAGE ETHICS STUDIES
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discourse. In some cases, we don't even necessarily come to an answer but recognize the importance of asking the questions and beginning dialogue. How should we view Muslims? How should we view anyone who is extremely different from us in some aspect? How should we feel about 9/11? Should we feel the same way forever, or should we forgive? Can war ever be justified? Have views about wars or actions in war that were justified at one point changed as time went on? Even if we take a stance for peace, what if it still comes down to "us or them"? Is there a humanitarian way to wage a war? Can the United States police the world? What will happen if we don't? How many refugees should we let in? What ethical codes should aid organizations operate by? What are acceptable compromises when negotiating with others? Should each country be subjected to the same human rights scrutiny when their values differ? Is it right to tell other nations they can't have nuclear weapons? What are the ethics involved

with the preemptive strike? How do we define evil in relation to war? Is torture ever right?

Though I may initially get the somewhat trivial and self-serving questions I began this article with, the students mainly respond with insight, justified outrage, compassion, and even tangible action. They often express shock, not just about the events themselves but also about what they didn't know; sometimes something even as large as millions of people dying in conflict in regions of Africa goes completely unreported in major US news outlets. Recently one student suddenly exclaimed that she knew she would learn things in the course and that some of her attitudes may even change, but she was surprised at what some of those attitudes were. She admitted that she unconsciously held certain stereotypes about the ways families around the world work, and only after reading *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* did she realize that people in places such as Africa cared about family as much as,

if not more than, we do in the United States. She said that she had, in a way, failed to imagine the full realities of the tragedy refugees face when torn from their homeland and their family because of war.

Changing Attitudes

I thought the realization an important one, so I had the rest of the class reflect on how some of their attitudes had been changed. Their responses at once filled me with joy but also with an overwhelming feeling of how much work there is to do in simply spreading awareness and changing attitudes so that we can find common human understanding in the 21st century. One student noted how the material made her think about herself less. Particularly on class days, she found that she cared just a bit less how great her hair looked. Our material pulled her out of herself and her own world and opened her thinking to others. Another student admitted that she came into the class a cynic and felt sure that she would hold fast to her dislike of Muslims and the Middle East in general. After reading *The Swallows of Kabul*, she said that she began to realize the danger and the error of her thinking. She was surprised to find characters there that were educated, middle class, not different from her. How their lives were then compromised and shattered by a situation out of their control made her rethink her position. Several students reflected on the necessity to know and appreciate each person we encountered as an individual and how lumping them together in a mass of suffering people in a sense erased their identity. I like that one, and I think it important in terms of keeping a human face on the issues we encounter. Many students said they didn't realize just how many children were involved in and affected by these conflicts. One student described that as her understanding of world problems moved from the realm of facts, statistics, and Hollywood movies into the realm of the personal, she was "heartbroken, shaken, and frustrated." But she was moved to act. To her credit, she had already traveled to Guatemala to do missions work with her church. But to further respond to what she found in these texts, to help spread more awareness of such world issues, and to involve others, she started a chapter of the Invisible Children organization at our school.

This particular course is still fairly young, so I haven't yet been able to see the full fruits of the

labor. However, three students who encountered similar material in my World Literature survey course have gone on to do interesting work. One is enrolled in an agricultural education master's program and hopes to work in third-world countries bettering their lives and access to food. Another recent graduate spent time in Nepal working at a community radio station that provided important education and information to local residents. And one former student, a recent Rhodes Scholar, founded an organization devoted to ending child prostitution in Cambodia. All three of those students already had an eye toward humanitarian work, so I know I can't take much credit, but I like to believe that at least some of what we learned ultimately led them in those wonderful directions.

I often sit back after class and hope that such will be the case—that more and more students will take what they have learned, go out, and act. I feel quite confident that all of them, regardless of their future vocational paths, will go out and act more ethically in regards to the questions of global conflict, refugees, suffering and need, and cultures that represent different viewpoints. Some of them may go on to found or work for charitable organizations. Maybe they even just volunteer their time or money to an already-existing organization. Or maybe it's as simple as kindness offered to a refugee working at the market down the road from our school. We can't afford for this next generation not to learn such lessons. Without such a response, so many in the world won't survive. And with more compassion, not only can we help others, but we can restore to our war-torn world a meaningfulness inherent in human life.

I'd like to close with a poem, "Jumpers," by a recent student, An Rhiel Wang. An Rhiel's poem about 9/11 is a poignant and heart-rending exploration of putting a human face on suffering and becoming aware of our response.

Jumpers

He soars—
drifting like a weightless paper.
One hundred and ten stories to the bottom.
He doesn't fight the fall;
rather, he embraces the will of the wind
and lets the sky cradle him into a deep sleep.
For the first time,
New York stops and the sidewalks are still,

waiting for the jumpers.
 From below, a woman grasps her mouth,
 screaming warm saliva
 into the palm of her hand.
 Tears slice through black ash that litters her face
 and the world watches her,
 I watch her,
 as if we have the right.
 The camera man pans away from her face and back
 to the twin towers;
 they stand like a shot man,
 waiting to drop to his knees and then double over,
 face down on hot concrete.
 Another jumper soars.

 I saw war in these suicides—
 attempts at maintaining dignity by leaping to their
 own fate.
 Valor gave them grace in the face of death.
 I saw war in her tears—
 in the way they violently ripped down her face,
 in the way they stained her.
 I saw war in the audacity of the camera man—
 invading the scene, curious of death.
 I see war in me—
 uninvolved.

Every time I read this poem, I am moved by An Rhiel's willingness to engage with the tragedies of war so thoughtfully. Though she ends with the word "uninvolved," it is clear that through her consideration of these images, she is now involved, having been so affected by seeing these faces. Awakening that kind of compassion is exactly what I'm hoping for. 📷

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Adapted from the NCTE book *Middle Ground: Exploring Selected Literature from and about the Middle East*, "Young Adult Literature about the Middle East: A Cultural Response Perspective" presents variations on traditional literature circles and exposes students to a variety of young adult fiction from and about the Middle East. Students read and share research and responses in collaborative groups. At the end of the lesson, students write a letter to welcome an immigrant student to their school and community. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/young-adult-literature-about-1136.html>