Narrating Trauma: Youth, Masculinity, and Storytelling in the Midst of War

Rebekah Smith
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Masters Theses. 4675.
https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/4675

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
Preserving, reproducing, and distributing thesis research is an important part of Booth Library’s responsibility to provide access to scholarship. In order to further this goal, Booth Library makes all graduate theses completed as part of a degree program at Eastern Illinois University available for personal study, research, and other not-for-profit educational purposes. Under 17 U.S.C. § 108, the library may reproduce and distribute a copy without infringing on copyright; however, professional courtesy dictates that permission be requested from the author before doing so.

Your signatures affirm the following:

- The graduate candidate is the author of this thesis.
- The graduate candidate retains the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the original research, creative activity, and intellectual or artistic content of the thesis.
- The graduate candidate certifies her/his compliance with federal copyright law (Title 17 of the U. S. Code) and her/his right to authorize reproduction and distribution of all copyrighted materials included in this thesis.
- The graduate candidate in consultation with the faculty advisor grants Booth Library the nonexclusive, perpetual right to make copies of the thesis freely and publicly available without restriction, by means of any current or successive technology, including but not limited to photocopying, microfilm, digitization, or internet.
- The graduate candidate acknowledges that by depositing her/his thesis with Booth Library, her/his work is available for viewing by the public and may be borrowed through the library’s circulation and interlibrary loan departments, or accessed electronically. The graduate candidate acknowledges this policy by indicating in the following manner:
  - [ ] Yes, I wish to make accessible this thesis for viewing by the public
  - [ ] No, I wish to quarantine the thesis temporarily and have included the Thesis Withholding Request Form
- The graduate candidate waives the confidentiality provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U. S. C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) with respect to the contents of the thesis and with respect to information concerning authorship of the thesis, including name and status as a student at Eastern Illinois University. I have conferred with my graduate faculty advisor. My signature below indicates that I have read and agree with the above statements, and hereby give my permission to allow Booth Library to reproduce and distribute my thesis. My advisor’s signature indicates concurrence to reproduce and distribute the thesis.
Narrating Trauma: Youth, Masculinity, and Storytelling in the Midst of War

(TITLE)

BY

Rebekah Smith

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2019

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE
Acknowledgements

First, thank you to my thesis adviser, Dr. Melissa Caldwell, for her guidance and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to my readers, Dr. Dagni Bredesen and Dr. Daiva Markelis, for their support and feedback. Thank you to my family for their support through my undergraduate and graduate studies and the start of my teaching career. Thank you to my fiancé, Cody, for his love and support every step of the way, for helping with historical research, and talking through sections with me. I could not have done this without all of you.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Invisible Wounds of War: The Navigation of Narration of Trauma.......1

Chapter 2: PTSD and Storytelling in the Iraq War: A Misguided Archaeology.........27

Chapter 3: Innocence in the Face of Combat: The Epidemic of the Child Soldier........60

Chapter 4: Hegemonic Masculinity: A Barrier to Psychological Treatment.................88

Works Cited.................................................................109
Chapter 1
The Invisible Wounds of War:
The Navigation and Narration of Trauma

The changes in war and combat have made an impact during the late 20th century and early 21st century, both on soldiers and civilians. This thesis project focuses on the young males fighting by the U.S. armed forces during the Iraq War and child soldiers fighting with rebel and militant forces during civil wars. It will discuss the nature of trauma, the specific experiences and narratives of each group, and finish with a discussion of masculinity following combat trauma. The Iraq War was fought by an all volunteer military, while countless African children have been kidnapped into rebel forces during civil wars. Whether experiencing war as an active participant in combat or as an innocent bystander, the trauma resulting from witnessing and causing death can be life altering and long lasting. For those returning home from war, physical wounds are far more noticeable than mental wounds, and thus are more identifiable and treatable. After experiencing combat and trauma, veterans and former child soldiers often feel undeniably different, as if they no longer fit in with the “normal” world around them. They have been shaped by their experiences, and they have psychological scars that are not always visibly evident. As a result, the recovery process can be incredibly difficult, especially when the survivors are uninformed or underinformed about psychological trauma or when they resist treatment due to stigmas surrounding mental illness. Through the process of storytelling, however, these invisible wounds can become more evident, and the stigmas can begin to fade in a way that will lead to understanding and recovery. In war narratives, veteran American soldiers and African former child soldiers use their stories as a means of healing and better understanding their trauma.
In his co-written fictional narrative about his experiences rehabilitating former child soldiers, Ricky Richard Anywar uses the metaphor of a tree to explain psychological trauma to a child. He takes the boy to a tree that was struck by lightning. He explains, “The wounds on the outside [of the tree], if treated, eventually scab over and heal, but they’re always visible . . . Decades after a strike a person may come across the tree and know by its scars the violence it has suffered. But often those are not the wounds that kill” (Hutton Soldier Boy 64-65). Ricky Anywar is referring to the cuts in the bark of the tree and the dead limbs, but metaphorically he is talking about physical wounds that soldiers have. If someone sees physical scars or missing body parts, it is immediately known that the person has experienced trauma. He then explains that “It is the invisible wounds that are fatal. The wounds that run so deep they paralyze the heartwood and deaden the roots” (Hutton 65). He is talking about the wounds hidden beneath the bark of the tree, which are representative of the mental wounds that plague survivors of war and combat veterans but are not outwardly visible. Ricky Anywar finally explains that most trees survive long after the lightning strike and do not die until years later. He says, “From the outside they look almost normal, but inside the damage done by the lightning eats away at the tree, leaving it rotted...empty...lifeless” (Hutton 65).

Left untreated, these mental wounds could lead to the death of the former child soldier or veteran of combat. In a recent The New York Times article, Jennifer Steinhauer reported that there are “approximately 20 suicide deaths every day among veterans, about one and a half times more often than those who have not served in the military” (Steinhauer). This higher suicide rate seems to correlate with the trauma that combat veterans have experienced. The trauma can also compound with potentially negative
reception when they return home or a lack of available job opportunities for the veterans. Rehabilitation centers and resources are available both during their transition home and after their return. Nevertheless, not all of those returning with mental wounds are open about their challenges or even knowledgeable about them, which leads to a lack of treatment for those that desperately need it. For some, shame and embarrassment prevents them from seeking treatment, but for others, they simply do not have an understanding of their condition. Many people, not just those returning from combat, are undereducated about PTSD and its signs and symptoms, and a greater understanding would lead to more productive conversations and support during treatment of PTSD. These mental wounds can have immense impacts on future development, especially when incurred at a young age.

For children and adolescents who have experienced trauma, which includes child soldiers and young men in the U.S. armed services, the adolescent stage of brain development greatly affects their reaction to their experiences. Since the age at which the brain is fully developed is twenty-five, and for a child or adolescent, the impact of trauma prior to the brain’s complete development changes the way in which they think, cope, and make decisions. According to the University of Rochester Medical Center, adults think with the prefrontal cortex, which is “the brain’s rational part,” and the prefrontal cortex “responds to situations with good judgement and an awareness of long term consequences” (Rochester). Because their prefrontal cortex is not fully developed during childhood and adolescence, the young think with the amygdala, which is the emotional part of the brain. They often cannot articulate or explain why they react in the way that they do, and the ability to understand long-term effects is sometimes lacking. Trauma,
especially the kind of trauma that results from war, death, and combat, is something that demands attention. Not only do they have to deal with seeing their friends die, they have to deal with the fact that they nearly had the same fate. Because they tend to act and function with their amygdala, that is with emotion rather than logic, they may not be able to fully process what they have seen.

Trauma must be processed and understood in order before it can be overcome, but for children and adolescents without a fully developed prefrontal cortex, such processing is nearly impossible. Studies in the field of education continually stress that children with childhood trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACES) are more likely to struggle with attention deficits and emotional connections. People who have a higher number of ACES on average have shorter lifespans and are at a higher risk of suicide, thus, it should come as no surprise that children and adolescents who are a part of armed forces, witness frequent deaths, and experience ACES, would also suffer decreases in lifespan and higher rates of suicide than non-combatants. One way that a young person can be encouraged to process their experiences of trauma is by allowing them to tell their stories.

In this thesis, I will discuss stories of war-related traumatic experiences among two groups of people: African child soldiers and young Americans under the age of 25 in the armed forces. Despite the obvious differences in these two distinct groups, including culture, types of warfare, and willingness of enlistment or service, the effects of the traumatic combat experiences take similar tolls on their development, their feelings of guilt or responsibility, and their rehabilitation and reintegration back into their home countries and societies. As many trauma scholars, including Cathy Caruth and Judith Hartman, explain, storytelling is an integral component for the healing process of these
invisible wounds of the mind. In each section I will analyze and discuss the stories, both fictional and nonfictional, told by each particular group, focusing on their experiences during the war as well as their treatment processes. The primary authors for the American soldiers and Marines will be Kevin Powers, an Iraq War Army veteran, and Maximilian Uriarte, an Iraq War Marine veteran. These men both wrote works of fiction, but the emotions and trauma expressed in their stories have been shaped by their own experiences. For these two men, converting their real life experiences into fiction provided emotional distance that allowed them to cope with their own traumas. Further, storytelling devices are used to engage readers with the emotional and psychological challenges faced by those returning home from combat. In the child soldier section, I will primarily focus on the memoirs of Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone who is now a human rights activist, and Ricky Richard Anywar, a former child soldier from Uganda who founded the Friends of Orphans organization to rehabilitate rescued children forced to engage in combat. Beah’s story is told entirely through nonfiction from his early abduction through his rehabilitation. Anywar’s story is a hybrid, telling his own story through nonfiction as well as telling the stories through fiction of the thousands of children he helped through the rehabilitation process. These writers do not simply detail the manipulation and coercion of the children by the military and rebel leaders, they seek to inform the public of the worldwide crisis of child soldiers. Despite the differences between the Iraq War and civil wars in Africa, the experiences of trauma and the means of recovery through narrative seem remarkably similar. In both cases, telling one’s story of trauma aids in the healing process and raises awareness about the issues of war and the psychological impact of war.
Throughout the world, children engage in combat both willingly and unwillingly, as a result of the humanitarian crisis of child soldiers. Likewise, young men, still in their adolescent years, willingly enlist in the armed forces, and many are unprepared for what they will have to see and do during their time of service. Regardless of willingness or unwillingness, the trauma experienced, especially during important stages of brain development, can cause major consequences physically, mentally, and emotionally, which could last a lifetime. Survivors of war utilize storytelling as a means to examine their own experiences, begin a process of finding closure, and spread awareness of trauma and mental wounds as a result of war. The genres of these stories vary, but their intentions remain similar. Ishmael Beah, who was forced into a militant group during the rebel-caused civil war in Sierra Leone, is among the growing number of former child soldiers writing about their experiences. His story is nonfiction and details what it was like as the battlefront entered his town, as he and his friends literally ran for their lives, as he was coerced into the fighting, and as he began recovery with the United Nations. A major purpose of his writing is to spread awareness of this humanitarian issue of child soldiers that continues to happen today. Beah, after writing his novel, has spoken at conferences and done interviews because this is an issue that many people do not realize is happening. For veteran soldiers of the Iraq War, a common choice is fiction because it allows the writers to be more intentional about the direction of their stories. When telling a true war story, the author is tied to the reality of the experience to maintain accuracy, but authors of fictional war stories can mold their stories around the emotional outcome that they intend to portray. Kevin Powers, an army veteran, and Maximilian Uriarte, a Marine veteran, choose to focus their works on the homecoming and the struggles that
arise following a deployment. Both of their main characters have experienced the loss of a close battle buddy, and both feel guilt for those deaths. They struggle with alcoholism, reconnection with those from home, and suicidal thoughts. Through fiction, the authors can broach these extremely sensitive subjects with a degree of control rather than being thrown back into their own traumatic experiences by writing nonfiction.

Regardless of literary genre or difference in ethnicity, young American soldiers fighting on foreign soil and child soldiers fighting in their home nations experience similar trauma and follow similar trajectories of their recovery. A major disparity, however, is a lack of access to treatment, particularly for child soldiers. They are in crucial times of brain development, and trauma can produce a chemical imbalance or alter this development. Many do not fully understand the wars in which they are fighting, so they are following orders given to them because they have to. The child soldiers are coerced and manipulated into fighting a war, and they are given empty promises. They are told that they will be protected, all the while they are being forced into danger. Similarly, the Iraq War is so complex, and its causes are not palpable or clear, but rather are ideological and political. Without doing extensive study, these young men are fighting the enemy that they are told to fight. In the later stages of the war when the enemy was not as clear cut, they were ordered to shoot at and kill potential insurgents, many of which turned out to be innocent civilians. The child soldiers often were forced to kill civilians, their fellow countrymen, during training and raids. For both adolescent American soldiers and African child soldiers, there is a sense of necessity without complete comprehension as to what they were doing. They fight because that is what they are supposed to do, and for some, they fight because they have no other option. Their
psychological struggles are similar due to their stages of development, regardless of differences in ethnicity and willingness or unwillingness.

In this thesis, I will examine the effects of war and combat on young men and adolescents and the stories that they tell about the trauma that they experience as a result. The storytelling process can be one of healing because it creates opportunities to better understand the nature of trauma and the alterations it brings on a developing brain. My analysis of the role of narrative in the healing process draws on the work of leading researchers in the field of trauma studies and trauma theory, thus, in this introductory first chapter I examine the physical and psychological effects of trauma, the result of that trauma, and the resolution process of healing. The second chapter of the thesis moves into the stories of Iraq War combat veterans, specifically focusing on young men, survivor’s guilt, and coming home. The third chapter will focus on African child soldiers, the brutal manipulation by those in charge, and the identity crisis that often comes as a result of unwillingly fighting a war at such a young age. The final chapter will be a discussion of masculinity and the effects that combat has on young fighters. By examining the stories of these writers, we learn that the danger does not subside when the combat ends, it merely transforms. The enemy is no longer a physical entity with a weapon, it becomes flashbacks and fear lurking around every corner.

**Psychological Scars: Trauma Theory and the Impact of PTSD**

In an interview conducted by Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, a pioneer in trauma studies, explained that “trauma is not modern. You don’t need a theory of trauma to ‘experience’ trauma” (Caruth, *Listening to Trauma* 223). With the creation of a
diagnosable label for trauma in the medical and psychological fields, trauma theory has risen into the forefront of narrating difficult experiences. Trauma theory is still relatively new territory in literary studies, but the experiences and impacts that this theory examines have plagued mankind for the entirety of human history. Stories, novels, and plays throughout history have depicted men going off to war and coming home changed. They struggle, and they feel lost. Even before trauma became a recognizable subject of study, its stories were told. Diagnosable labels, however, allow for conversation about trauma to become more clearly articulated. Trauma and the crippling mental effects of it previously plagued survivors of war, but it existed without a specific diagnosis. In 1980 the American Psychological Association included PTSD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) for mental health practitioners. Before PTSD became diagnosable, however, there were stigmas of cowardice and weakness associated with combat soldiers who manifested the symptoms that are now recognized to be trauma related. Even with these advancements in medical terminology, these stigmas still exist; however, strides are being made in the mental health research and treatment for combat veterans. Treatment has been made available to survivors of trauma and combat veterans, but some who still hold onto the stigmas, even now, may refuse treatment in an effort to avoid seeming weak and vulnerable. Certainly in the past, young soldiers returning home felt the need to hide their psychological scars rather than to talk about them, understand them, and gain closure.

In addition, without a diagnosable label, these young soldiers may not have even recognized the fact that they had any psychological scars at all. Many combat veterans of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War who experienced what would later
be diagnosed as PTSD were afraid to seek help because they would be given the label of “coward” for not being able to deal with what they saw. The term “shell shock,” which was created by soldiers after WWI was “often diagnosed when a soldier was unable to function and no obvious cause could be identified” (Jones). Many of the symptoms of shell shock, which would later be identified as PTSD, are physical, including “fatigue, tremor, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing” (Jones). As a result, doctors searched for a physical diagnosis, and when one could not be found, “shell shock” was assigned. Although some doctors at the time sought psychological treatments to aid those returning with trauma, many people still continued to associate shell shock with cowardice. However, with a new understanding of trauma and PTSD following its inclusion in the DSM, and decreasing stigma, trauma survivors and combat veterans are empowered to get the help that they need and deserve. Likewise, the progress made in terms of identifying and treating PTSD among soldiers has increased awareness of the psychological effect of other forms of trauma, including sexual assault or abuse. This increased conversation about trauma allows those affected by it to have access to avenues of treatment and understanding.

When one thinks of trauma and PTSD, the first symptoms that come to mind are likely flashbacks, depression, and nightmares. These tend to be the most noticeable symptoms; however, trauma and PTSD are not limited to their psychological challenges. Traumatic experiences “can alter a person’s biological, psychological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint, and dominate, all other experiences, spoiling an appreciation of the present moment” (Levine xx). Survivors of trauma often feel stuck in that particular moment, unable to move
forward, and unable to have new experiences that are not shaped by the trauma. Even the
most joyous experiences are altered by the emotional impact of the experience. Leading
trauma specialist, Judith Herman, M.D. explains that even years “after the danger is past,
traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present.
They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts.
It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma” (Herman 37). Trauma alters the sense of
time, freezing the person in that experience, and often, the survivor feels an inescapable
weight from it. These experiences ultimately and unfortunately can result in an altered
future or no future at all. For combat veterans, their loved ones sometimes do not
understand the magnitude of the trauma. As a result, when the symptoms continue for
extended periods of time following the return home, they do not know how to help their
loved one.

What makes the exact moment of trauma so powerful is its ability to essentially
freeze time, to have a physical effect on the body as well as the mind, and to overtake the
reasoning and thoughts of the person impacted. Due to its power, the moment of trauma
does the victim to be “rendered helpless by overwhelming force” because it will
“overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection,
and meaning” (Herman 33). The body becomes so physically affected that the rest of the
body’s systems must take a back seat. Trauma’s impact is physical as well as
psychological, and the physical impact increases the psychological one. Within the
moment of trauma, adrenaline rushes throughout the person’s body, automatically
sending them into an alert state, making them unable to think about anything except for
the current situation (Herman 34). During the initial shock of the traumatic event, “there
is a ‘numbing’ process by which all affective and pain responses are blocked” (Caruth *Listening to Trauma* 80). Survivors of trauma often express that during the trauma, they did not feel anything, which is a result of this physical reaction of the body. In that moment, they are on alert with all focus on the immediate, but following the traumatic event, “the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment” (Herman 35). Physically, the survivor of trauma will continually feel the need to be on alert at all times in case of a returning danger, even if he logically recognizes that the danger will not be able to return. They feel unable to relax, their minds continually return to replays of the trauma, and their future actions are framed and shaped by the experience. According to Bessel van der Kolk, “Flashbacks and reliving are in some ways worse than the trauma itself. A traumatic event has a beginning and an end - at some point it is over. But for people with PTSD a flashback can occur at any time, whether they are awake or asleep” (67). As traumatizing as the particular event was, the aftermath can be even more traumatizing due to its unexpected nature.

**Surrounded by Death: Seeking or Refusing Help**

For soldiers in combat, trauma is often not one isolated moment; the trauma could be the entirety of their deployment for American military personnel. Even in times of rest, mortar attacks could happen at any time, IEDs could be hidden anywhere, and an insurgency attack could be just around the corner. For child soldiers, their trauma includes the killing of their families, their abduction, and their time with the rebel forces. The children not only fear the enemy troops they are fighting, they fear their own leaders,
who seek to make bloody and deadly examples of any act of insubordination. In these combat situations, they are on high alert at all times, making the moments of trauma even more heightened. Because of the extreme nature of these traumatic moments, the emotions and fears attached to the trauma stay with them long after their time in combat has ended.

Not only are soldiers concerned about the possibility of their own death, they constantly witness death all around them. They sometimes must shoot civilians because they could potentially be insurgents. The enemy often does not wear a uniform, and they could blend in to the civilian crowd. In addition, they see their friends and fellow soldiers die, and they sometimes blame themselves for those deaths. Former military personnel have described to psychiatrist Amy Amidon “experiences in which they, or someone close to them, violated their moral code: hurting a civilian who turned out to be unarmed, shooting at a child wearing explosives,” and they “are haunted by their own inaction, traumatized by something they witnessed and failed to prevent” (Puniewska). This type of “moral injury” is inherently tied to the feelings of guilt over the deaths that they witnessed, even if they were not directly responsible for them.

For soldiers who survive but witness the deaths of comrades, there is often a sense of survivor’s guilt and a heavy burden weighing on their conscience. In studies with combat veterans, the survivors “are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue” (Herman 54). Soldiers in the same platoon cling together and form bonds through the prolonged risks of danger, so when they witness that death, they carry a strong burden and sense of responsibility. Although many soldiers returning home from war experience PTSD to some degree, “witnessing the death of a buddy places the soldier at particularly
high risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder” (Herman 54). In combat, the close relationships that form between groups serve as anchors in the midst of the chaos, and in the most difficult times, those friendships become the most powerful supports. For the soldiers in David Finkel’s *Thank You for Your Service*, “the war came to mean less and less until it meant nothing at all, and meanwhile the other soldiers meant more and more until they came to mean everything” (Finkel 86). This closeness can keep one sane during war, but the loss of a close friend can be psychologically destructive. The narratives of combat veterans often portray the replaying of a friend’s death through nightmares and flashbacks, and the survivor continually questions “what if?” wondering if he could have done more, if he could have saved his buddy, or if he should have deserved to meet the same fate.

Judith Herman explains that recovery from a traumatic experience occurs in three stages. The first stage is a more physical one: the establishment of safety. The survivor must understand and recognize that he is safe and that the danger from the traumatic moment is gone, unable to hurt him again. The second stage is one of remembrance of the event and the people, often through a mourning for the loss. This stage allows for the survivor to achieve a deeper understanding of the experience and to begin to gain closure. The final stage is to form a “reconnection with ordinary life,” to move forward (Caruth *Listening to Trauma* 155). Unfortunately, for many returning from combat, these stages are rushed and not given enough scaffolded and individual attention, resulting in continued internal struggle with the trauma. They have families to care for, responsibilities to take on, and bills to pay, so the healing process often does not receive the attention and time that it requires. During their deployment, life at home continued
on, and hardships were experienced by their families as well. Unfortunately, many families are unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of trauma that their veteran loved ones experienced during their deployment, so when the soldier returns home, he is expected to continue on with normal life, regardless of whether he is ready to or not.

Even when a combat veteran does receive help following the trauma, the recovery may never fully be complete. He may not have to regularly attend therapeutic groups any longer, and he may not take as many medications to help with the symptoms of PTSD, but the “impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor’s lifecycle” (Herman 211). Although issues may have been resolved during the stages of recovery, another event in the future could trigger a response and cause the trauma and the psychological impact to be reawakened in the future. Something as simple as a sound could send him reeling back into a flashback, resulting in a feeling and experience just as bad as the initial ones during the early stages of treatment. Even with thorough and focused treatment, recovery is truly a lifelong process for some survivors. This could be difficult for loved ones to understand because the event could be years or even decades in the past, but the trauma could return, causing the survivor to feel as if he was still experiencing it in that moment. The added stress of this inability for the family to understand can add to the stress of the veteran.

Those who suffer from PTSD often have a difficult time coping with the world around them, especially when that world continues to move forward while he is still stuck in the moment of trauma. Bessel van der Kolk, explains that victims of trauma “continued to be ‘there’ and did not know how to be ‘here’ - fully alive in the present” (van der Kolk 47). They felt as though the threat of the enemy was still present and surrounding them,
trapping them mentally back in the war. Through flashbacks and memories, the soldiers are constantly reminded and retraumatized by the experience, which can feel like an inescapable black hole. van der Kolk urges that “In order to regain control over yourself, you need to revisit the trauma: Sooner or later you need to confront what has happened to you, but only after you feel safe and will not be retraumatized by it” (van der Kolk 206). Those who have experienced trauma struggle with maintaining some sort of control during their recovery, which is a term he calls “Agency.” He explains that “Agency is the technical term for the feeling of being in charge of your life: knowing where you stand, knowing that you have a say in what happens to you, knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances” (97). During war and combat, however, soldiers give up their rights to agency and replace them with duty. Their movements and their actions are controlled by their officers, and often the reasons behind the orders are not articulated. Soldiers must compromise their own moral codes for the sake of duty, which puts their own agency on hold. This duty is often imposed upon them by those in charge, and they do not have a choice whether or not to follow it. Young soldiers, both American and African, are placed in dangerous situations, often on the front lines of battle, and they are told to shoot. They do not always understand the enemy, but they must do what they are told. For child soldiers in particular, they are forced to do inhumane and gruesome things to captives, many of which are their fellow countrymen. Due to the coercion and manipulation, the children no longer view these villagers as their own countrymen but rather as enemies. For soldiers fighting on foreign soil, as is the case for the Iraq War, the enemy is more clear. For civil wars, however, the line between friend and enemy is completely blurred. The children are told to shoot anyone they see, and they are not given
an individual choice in the matter. During the time that they are involved in combat, they give up their agency and lose control over their own situations and potentially their own fates.

**Time and Trauma: Reestablishing Control**

For survivors of trauma and combat veterans, time is a major factor in the process of healing. In the time immediately following the event, the emotions can be so raw that they are not able to fully be understood. In the early stages, flashbacks appear to be frequent, as is evident during the narratives of reintegration of both child soldiers and U.S. military veterans. The timeline for trauma creates an important contrast between these two groups. For the vast majority of U.S. veterans, the trauma began at the start of their deployment overseas. For children, however, the trauma began with the initial attack of their village. Especially for child soldiers, who were kidnapped and coerced into brutal battle, there is a strong sense of distrust of others in the early stages, and this trust must be slowly earned back through treatment as is shown in the narratives I examine in this thesis.

For example, Ricky Richard Anywar, a man who was abducted by Kony’s rebel warriors at the age of fourteen to fight on the rebel side of the Ugandan Civil War in 1989, worked with author Keely Hutton to not only tell his nonfiction story of his experiences but to tell a fictional story about a boy named Samuel, who is rescued from Kony’s army in 2006. Ricky went on to establish the international rehabilitation organization called “Friends of Orphans,” which seeks to rescue and rehabilitate child soldiers. Samuel is a composite representation of the thousands of child soldiers that
Ricky had seen and helped through his organization. At the start of Samuel’s fictional narrative, it is explained that “Samuel lived by three rules. Never doubt Kony. Stay alert. And Trust no one. He didn’t just follow the rules. He lived by them. He lived because of them” (Hutton 5). Throughout his narrative, Samuel is deathly afraid to trust the people who are trying to help him, and he is plagued by “Splinters of a memory [that] prickled beneath Samuel’s muddied thoughts” (Hutton 6). During his rehabilitation, he is surrounded by other children, many of whom are overcoming their experiences and finding hope once again. Through Samuel’s flashbacks, however, “the joyful laughter on the field dissolved into terrified screams” (Hutton 6). Those screams are not really happening, but in Samuel’s mind they are as real as anything else. His complete lack of trust compounded with his flashbacks makes him feel as though the only way to save himself is to create distance and rebuff help. Samuel, like all other child soldiers, are taught on the battlefield that vulnerability will lead to death. Even after being rescued, they hold onto this belief. Telling one’s story of trauma requires vulnerability, which is terrifying for a former child soldier. When Ricky tells Samuel, “I know what you’ve been through, Samuel . . . and I’d like to hear your story,” Samuel avoids eye contact and says, “I have no story” (Hutton 27). Survivors of trauma feel reluctance to share their stories for various reasons. In some cases, they may feel shame for what they have done or experienced, in other cases, like Samuel, there is a lack of trust, which would bring comfort in vulnerability. African child soldiers who tell their stories can turn experiences of trauma and pain into stories of hope and calls to action. They can recreate their individual purposes and reestablish themselves as humans with value, which is something that is stripped of them during their coercion into war.
Likewise, author veterans choose to write their story as a means to process their experiences. After a traumatic event, such as combat, the veterans in established militaries may feel as if they no longer have control. When they revisit those feelings, strive to gain a better understanding, and start to share the story, they regain their agency because they gain a sense of control over what has happened to them. For example, Private Bartle, the main character of Iraq veteran Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, writes his story of combat and of homecoming. The fictional Bartle felt trapped by his experiences and choices in Iraq, but through the act of storytelling and putting his thoughts on paper, he finds a deeper understanding of their relevance. This use of metanarrative as Bartle gains insight into his experiences is a mirror to Powers himself as an author. Author veterans choose to write their story as a means to process their experiences. Likewise, African child soldiers who tell their stories, can turn experiences of trauma and pain into stories of hope and calls to action. They can recreate their individual purposes and reestablish themselves as humans with value, which is something that is stripped of them during their coercion into war.

Story-telling can also help in combating the effects of flashbacks. For many, the trauma returns suddenly and unannounced through flashbacks that can feel as real as the trauma did the first time. Cathy Caruth explains that “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing” and that it can be “threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experiences* 63). These flashbacks can have a negative impact both emotionally and physically. In these moments, the survivors feel trapped, and because flashbacks cannot be anticipated, they become an unknown surprise threat. The nature of
the flashback is not about “the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival” (Caruth Unclaimed Experiences 64). Especially for combat veterans, the shock of survival when others met a far more dire fate leads to flashbacks. They are blindsided with the visual memories of the deaths of their fellow soldiers, especially the ones they felt that they could have saved. Both flashbacks and storytelling force the survivor of trauma to revisit the experience, but the major difference is where the power lies. During a flashback, the person loses control as the flashback takes over, leading to another feeling of powerlessness. However, when telling the story, the power shifts to the writer, who can choose how events are portrayed and when the events come back to mind.

Finding Power in Storytelling: From Suffering to Healing

Many survivors of trauma choose to tell their stories, and this action brings them understanding and empowerment. Although they may never fully achieve closure following their trauma, through storytelling, they begin to take their power back. From a physical standpoint, for survivors of trauma, “the ‘action of telling a story’ in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory” (Herman 183). In addition, telling one’s story can help transform them from a victim to one in control. In The Wounded Storyteller, Arthur Frank explains this shift from powerless to powerful. He says, “As wounded, people may be cared for, but as storytellers, they care for others. The ill, and all those who suffer, can also be healers” (Frank xx). Storytelling shifts the power in the situation, and maintaining a feeling of power over the trauma can aid greatly in the healing process. In an interview
with Judith Herman conducted by Cathy Caruth, Herman discussed the action of telling the stories of trauma during therapy, so the survivor is “moving from passively experienced symptoms to an active understanding and retelling of what happened” (Caruth Listening to Trauma 141). During the moment of the traumatic event, one is powerless, but by taking ownership of the experience and transforming it, that power is returned, allowing him to move forward in life and to find the good in what initially felt overwhelmingly full of bad. A healing narrative “tells precisely what happened. It is accurate. It is rooted in time and in place” (DeSalvo 57). They are truthful, honest, and as accurate as the survivor is able to make them. Although authors including Kevin Powers, Maximilian Uriarte, and Roméo Dallaire write fictional stories, their narratives are shaped by their real experiences and they are still truthful, accurate, and rooted in a specific time and place. The writers have control over the narrative and the process, which facilitates a reestablishment of the feeling of control over their own lives. These are the stories that promote healing for the writer.

Each survivor of trauma is unique, and for some, there is a resistance to talking about the traumatizing experience. In an interview conducted by Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, a Holocaust survivor and current psychoanalyst, explains that “None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent” (Caruth Listening to Trauma 64). If the traumatic experience is not talked about and is allowed to continue to live in silence, it will continue to hold power over the victim, continually trapping him in its grip. Laub states that “The ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (Caruth Listening to Trauma 64). By telling
their stories and talking about their traumatic experiences, they are able to take the power from the trauma and transfer it back to themselves. Telling the story with control is active, while flashbacks are passive. Telling the story and controlling the narrative “reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it” (Caruth *Listening to Trauma* 74). Through the act of telling the story, those who have experienced trauma can create order out of chaos proving that they “are also capable of surviving, adapting to, and eventually transforming traumatic experiences” into something that is beautiful and inspiring (Levine xix). This transformation cannot come from silence; their stories must be told in order to effectively promote recovery. Many author veterans and former child soldiers encourage other survivors of trauma to share their stories, which creates an open conversation about trauma.

Initially after beginning the writing process the victim can “stop seeing it as a random, unexplained event,” and they are able to start finding its order. The expression of the trauma “in language robs the event of its power to hurt” the victim and gives them the ability to create order “from seeming randomness or chaos” (DeSalvo 43). Experiencing trauma, whether that means rape, war, or violence, the victims feel powerless as if they no longer have any control over their lives or their situations. Without a restoration of power, they struggle to move forward, beyond the constant reminder of the experience. Telling stories is a powerful tool in transforming chaos into order from a traumatic event, but the storytelling process must be done on the survivor’s own time. It cannot be rushed, and the way it is told must be completely up to the person who lived it. Regaining agency and having full control over the way the story is told allows the survivors to actually own
the story. They have full agency over telling what happened and they do so for themselves rather than for an audience. Telling a story and owning a story are two separate actions. By not only putting the traumatic experience into words but by creating order and reason, the survivor is able to feel power and strength once again. This process, while it cannot be rushed or forced, can produce healing and restoration.

Arthur Frank wrote *The Wounded Storyteller* after his own traumatic experiences with illness. By his definition, the wounded storyteller a “is anyone who has suffered and lived to tell the tale” (Frank xi). He explains that the act of writing this book was “as much a work of self-healing as of scholarship” (Frank xi). *The Wounded Storyteller* is not only a compilation of his own writing and his own experiences, but he also includes the experience of others. Because, in a way, every person who has experienced trauma can be a wounded storyteller, and there is a community of survivors waiting to connect, to share, and to heal together. Not all trauma survivors are combat veterans, but the psychological traumas and recovery processes are similar to those of survivors of other traumas, including sexual assault, abuse, or long term illness. Even for the survivor and storyteller, it is not only about verbally telling the story, it is about feeling understood, even though trauma is something that defies understanding. Although the action of telling a story can be emotionally challenging, “it is essential for this narrative that could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard” (Caruth *Listening to Trauma* 69). He will never fully recover from the trauma, but he will be able to begin to regain control and agency over his life. Sharing stories of trauma is a commonly used coping mechanism for victims of trauma, and “Getting perspective on your terror and sharing it with others can reestablish the feeling that you are a member of the human race” (van der Kolk 236).
When soldiers experience combat and trauma so devastating, they may begin to feel as though they are undeniably different, but by truly being heard and understood, they begin the road to recovery as human beings once again.

Stories serve different purposes; they can inform, teach, or entertain, but they can also serve a personal purpose in order to construct meaning, to create order, or to cope with a stressful or devastating experience. Soldiers and veterans of war often use stories to understand and portray the extreme emotions and fears that they experienced during their deployments and to process what they saw, felt, and did during their military service. Stories allow the soldiers to create meaning when they are unable to find it in the midst of chaos and disjointed events, especially in war when there is so much that cannot be explained, only felt. When they return home from war, soldiers are expected to explain what they experienced with words, which is all but impossible. Many soldiers returning from war are so traumatized that they “are unwilling, or unable, to talk about their experiences” (Russell 94). They have to decide how much to tell based on who asks—some want stories like the movies, full of action, while some want to know about the pain. Either way, their stories do not always have to be real because sometimes fiction is easier to tell than the truth and sometimes the battle scars are not always visible or physical.

Experiencing trauma in war changes a person, and it is often difficult to explain that change with someone who has never experienced war, and they can often only “talk about that with someone else who has been in that same place, emotionally and physically” (Russell 94). In the wake of the Iraq War, there has been a growing community of author-veterans, who engage in a similar conversation using their individual stories. Child soldiers, however, do not always have access to this type of community or a larger audience of
readers. For every child soldier story, there are thousands of others who will never be told. Many of the former child soldiers who became authors were given the opportunity to travel with the United Nations and various organizations that granted them a platform to make their voices heard. Unfortunately, countless other survivors of African civil wars never receive these same opportunities, or they return to a village which used to be home with people who have no way to fully and accurately understand what the former child soldier experienced.

Many author-veterans discuss the importance of remembering now and processing later. The processing and understanding cannot be ignored because it could lead to a detrimental mental break down the road. Ron Capps, who founded the Veterans Writing Project in Washington, D.C. spent 25 years in the military, including tours in Rwanda, Darfur, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and understands the importance of processing and how helpful writing and storytelling can be for veterans of war. After going through therapy and taking prescribed medication, his memories still caused extreme trauma that led to a suicide attempt. Finally, he found something that worked—writing. He began putting down his stories, and he said, “Writing helped me get control of my mind” (Hames 1). Those in the program are familiar with the saying, “Either own your story or it owns you,” and the instructors urge veterans to tell their stories because “by sharing and reliving traumatic events, a person is taking charge of what happened and acknowledging that he has moved on” (Hames 1). Many author-veterans find comfort in turning their true stories into fiction because it allows them to take charge and own their stories with a degree of separation from reality. As Johnathan Gottschall explains in *The Storytelling Animal*, fiction gives us the opportunity to experience our greatest fears and potential challenges,
but in the end “the hero of the story dies in our stead” (Gottschall 59). For combat veterans who choose to write fiction, they have a canvas to deal with death without needing to experience it themselves.

Creating narratives of war is less about traumatic experience and more about surviving the trauma. For most, the trauma never fully goes away, but the way that the survivors continue to live and function with regained power and understanding is what returns their autonomy. In the following sections of this thesis, survivor stories of various genres, including fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, and hybrid genres will be utilized to discuss this process. These combat survivors from both the Iraq war and African civil wars have experienced trauma and death in ways that at first seem unexplainable. Through the act of storytelling they create order, make meaning, and establish reality. Their stories grapple with these questions: What does it mean to survive? What does it mean to move forward?
Chapter 2
PTSD and Storytelling in the Iraq War: a Misguided Archaeology

Following the conclusion of a war, stories begin to be told about heroism, about death, and about personal struggles, and often these stories romanticize and idealize the war. These stories, however, often overlook the trauma and psychological challenges that the veterans face after returning home. Author veterans like Kevin Powers, Maximilian Uriarte, and David Finkel use their writing to shift the narrative. They seek to replace the romanticized hero stories and gory video game depictions with realistic stories that tell the truth of the war and of the trauma. Kevin Powers utilizes the term “misguided archaeology” when describing his protagonist’s story, and this metaphor accurately describes a narrative of trauma. In these stories, the survivor of trauma is digging for the truth without a full understanding of what that truth will look like. A story shaped by trauma is one of exploration in order to gain a better understanding of not only their experiences but of the emotional, mental, and physical consequences of their trauma. In less than a decade since the end of the Iraq War, these stories are beginning to be widely told, building and expanding the overarching narrative conversation that makes that particular war unique.

Unlike those sent to fight in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, the U.S. military deployed to Iraq was made up completely of volunteers. Many stories from these previous wars centered around the sense of disorientation that comes with being thrown into an armed conflict without a choice. All of the soldiers in the Iraq war willingly chose to enlist, but, for some, this choice was made out of a lack of other
options, a desire to prove one’s own masculinity, or a quest for a greater purpose. Despite having willingly enlisted, many of the author veterans depict characters who question their choices and struggle with the reality of war. These characters experience traumatic events that cause them to regret enlisting in the first place.

In this section, I discuss two semi-autobiographical novels produced in the aftermath of the Iraq War, which have been gaining popularity among readers since their publications. I analyze the accounts of PTSD and flashbacks that the characters experience after the war and the stories that they, as characters, and by extension, the authors tell that capture the emotional struggles of returning home. In both *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers and *The White Donkey* by Maximilian Uriarte, the protagonists of the works witness the death of a friend, question their own choices and responsibilities surrounding those deaths, and subsequently struggle with PTSD. In addition, both of these male protagonists enlist in the military at a young age, unsure of their reasons for doing so. Bartle, the protagonist of *The Yellow Birds*, thinks back to when he first joined reflecting, “I can feel how young I was. I can feel my body before it was scarred . . . I can see myself for what I was. Barely a man. Not a man” (Powers 38-39). The young men have an expectation for their experience, but they are unprepared for the trauma and the dire impact that it could have on their lives. Regardless of how much training they undergo in preparation, nothing could fully prepare them to witness death by their own hands or the hands of others.

Kevin Powers, an Army veteran, wrote *The Yellow Birds*, which was recently adapted into a film. Powers made this choice to fictionalize his story in order to understand his own emotions from a more objective lens. He portrays young soldiers
Bartle, his protagonist and narrator, and teenage Murphy, who are utterly unprepared for how emotionally and psychologically difficult war actually is. They develop a friendship due to their close proximity, which makes Murph’s eventual death even more challenging for Bartle. After his deployment, Bartle struggles with survivor’s guilt after his return home and the subsequent trial about his involvement in the cover up of Murph’s death. He reimagines Murph’s descent into death, and contemplates taking his own life. Cathy Caruth explains that the main factor behind flashbacks and trauma for someone like Bartle is not “the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival” (Caruth Unclaimed Experiences 64). Bartle is not only shocked at Murph’s death; he is shocked that he did not receive a similar fate. Despite constantly standing witness to death, Bartle was not vanquished by the enemy on the battlefront, and as a result, he faces a new enemy: his mind and his memories.

There are numerous similarities between The Yellow Birds and the second work in this section, The White Donkey, a graphic novel by Marine veteran, Maximilian Uriarte. Like The Yellow Birds, this fictional account details a friendship, a death, and a struggle. This graphic novel immerses readers into the experiences of the characters through both language and illustration. Like Powers, Uriarte utilizes his experiences as a basis for how his characters feel during their training and deployment. In an interview Uriarte explains that his “comic is obviously exaggerated and cartoony humor, but inspired by real life as a miserable lance corporal,” and when he writes, he “remember[s] how miserably it was being active duty and draw from that” (Ricks). The protagonist, Abe, joins the Marines for emotionally complicated reasons. Uriarte explains in an interview about his experiences in the Marines, “I don’t know if I ever found what I was looking for, but
maybe that was the point” (Ricks). Likewise, his protagonist, Abe, never has an epiphany of what he was supposed to find, although he knows that he was searching for something that felt missing. Regardless, he grows through his experiences, learns more about himself as a man, and finds closure and a reason to continue living.

Like Bartle, Abe continually struggles with his expectations of masculinity and the reality of his pain. The reader learns that Abe’s father died shortly after Abe’s eighteenth birthday. Before his passing, Abe’s father gave Abe a gun as a birthday present, and said he “was a man now” (Uriarte). Because of the loss of his father and the expectation of masculinity that came with that final gift, Abe struggles to prove his masculinity, ultimately enlisting in the Marines. Although in The Yellow Birds Bartle’s father is never mentioned and he lives with a single mother, Bartle may have enlisted for the purpose of filling the masculine void in his family structure. For both Abe and Bartle, friendship is crucial to their stories, both for joy through comraderie and for pain through loss. Early on in his training, Abe develops a friendship with a fellow Marine named Garcia, who helps him to gain a better understanding of himself. Garcia’s death sends Abe into emotional turmoil, and this trauma for The White Donkey’s Abe and The Yellow Birds’ Bartle is a result of their friendship with the one who dies. Many stories, both fiction and memoir, detail the extreme hardships following the loss of a friend in combat. They blame themselves, they feel guilt, and they struggle to find closure. Uriarte creates a somber yet happy ending for his protagonist, which has been a point of criticism from readers for being unrealistic. Regardless, this ending brings hope that closure is possible, even if one must reach the lowest point before finding it.
Not a Typical War: Phase 2

Given that literature is written in the context of history, and the stories surrounding a war are shaped by the events, the battles, and the sacrifices made during it, it is impossible to discuss the stories of a war and the PTSD it has caused without first discussing the war itself. The Iraq War, which spanned from 2003-2011, had an immense impact on the United States as well as the military personnel who fought and served during the conflict. The military forces of this war were all willingly enlisted soldiers, unlike previous wars which relied on the Selective Services Draft to gain troops. One of the many aspects that makes this war unique is the two distinct phases of the war. Phase one began on March 20, 2003 until President George W. Bush declared an end to the combat on May 1, 2003. This phase of the war was the combat that is what comes to mind when one thinks of war. The goal of phase one was to overthrow Iraq’s oppressive dictator, Saddam Hussein. The invasion was triggered because Hussein did not comply with the United Nations’ demands to search for potential Weapons of Mass Destruction. After the invasion, however, no evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction was found. Because the initial reason for invasion turned out to be incorrect, “Liberating oppressed Iraqis now became the advertised war aim,” which led into the years following phase one, which had only lasted a few weeks (Bacevich 329-240).

Phase two of the war lasted until 2011, and its ostensible goal was to fight back against insurgency groups, to rebuild Iraq’s government and infrastructure, and ensure that the nation could function independently without falling into civil war, which had happened historically in other countries. Phase two was not the action-driven fighting that soldiers had imagined when they enlisted. It involved a lot more sitting and waiting,
doing humanitarian work, and driving around keeping a lookout for insurgents. Phase two of the war was not seen as a “war” in the traditional sense of the war. It did not have as many formal firefights, and there was more of a focus on counterinsurgency and the rebuilding of the nation. Many of the narratives from this phase of war, including Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Maximilian Uriarte’s *The White Donkey*, and the third book I discuss in this chapter, David Finkel’s *Thank You For Your Service*, come from this phase. The fictional characters, like their authors, are consistently plagued by fear of surprise attacks, IED’s, and dropping mortars. Apart from these isolated attacks, the young men feel almost let down because they imagined going to war would be heroic like something out of a movie. Their experiences, however, were far from the nonstop action portrayed by Hollywood cinema.

Nevertheless, because of the nature of counterinsurgency in Iraq, U.S. military personnel had to always be prepared for an attack, and, at times, they unknowingly violate their moral codes. Insurgents could be around any corner, and even a child could have been coerced by the enemy to attack the U.S. military. In the course of maintaining this hyper-vigilance, the soldiers adopted the stance, “kill or be killed,” which inevitably led to violating their moral codes. Abe in *The White Donkey* struggles with this after killing a civilian. The car was approaching, and it did not stop, forcing Abe to shoot. After the car stops, a woman frantically gets out, and someone translates what she says: “He did not see us. He is not a terrorist” (Uriarte).

Unlike the events fictionalized by Powers and Uriarte, journalist David Finkel draws on the stories of soldiers from the 2-16 Infantry Battalion whom he followed during their homecoming from the front-lines of Baghdad, telling their stories in his
award-winning book, Thank You for Your Service. Many of these men struggled mentally and emotionally, contemplating suicide, struggling to become once again the husband and father their families needed them to be, and their seemingly impossible reintegration into normal life. A major theme that runs through the stories of these men and the war stories of other Iraqi War veterans was that of unmet expectations. Entering the war, these men expected action on par with the movies and video games that they had seen, but what they found during phase two of the war, was not in line with those expectations. Adam Schumann, one of the subjects of Finkel’s book, wrote in a journal during his deployments. During the initial phase one invasion, he had written, “it was a front seat to the greatest movie I’ve ever seen in my life,” but in his last deployment, during phase two, he would wake up thinking, “I’m still here, it’s misery, it’s hell” (Finkel 5). During phase one of the war, the fighting was what they expected, but phase two was much different. In Maximilian Uriarte’s The White Donkey, which takes place during phase two, the commander explains in training, that their “mission is to provide a stable environment for the people of Iraq to start rebuilding their infrastructure. Hearts and minds, people. The invasion is over. Iraq must now start rebuilding” (Uriarte). Although the work done in phase two was no less important than the work done during the initial invasion of phase one, the soldiers’ expectations of action lead to their frustration and disappointment.

Guilt and Memory: “What was it like?”

Because The Yellow Birds and The White Donkey take place during phase two of the war, the experiences they describe include long stretches of moments of monotony,
which are interrupted by mortars, IED’s, or insurgent attacks. For the characters of both novels, war is not exactly what they thought it would be, and the psychological consequences of the war are far more debilitating than they could have ever imagined. In addition to the boredom intermittently jarred by imminent threat, the main characters experience grief and self-blame when they lose a friend in the war, and both young men blame themselves for the deaths. When the main characters show signs of PTSD, they do not seek treatment or fully understand what they are feeling. Because they feel such guilt, even self-assigned guilt, they deny themselves the opportunities for closure following their return home.

Kevin Powers and Maximilian Uriarte draw on their own experiences of Phase Two in creating their characters. Powers served in the United States Army in Tal Afar and Mosul, Iraq from 2004 to 2005. Years after his return home, he wrote *The Yellow Birds*, a fictional narrative set in the fictional Al Tafar, focusing on two primary characters: Private Bartle and Private Murphy. In interviews, Powers makes it clear that he is not the narrator of *The Yellow Birds*; however, the emotional experiences within the novel emerge from his own experiences in Iraq. Powers chooses to write fiction as a result of flashbacks following his return home. In an interview with Alice Whitwham, he explains that through flashbacks, memories “assert themselves unpredictably,” and it is the task of the veteran to both “respond to them in the moment and figure out how to live knowing that this may be a condition that becomes constant” (Whitwham). For soldiers telling their stories, there is a strong desire to find an escape, but “freedom from the experience comes from acceptance of the condition as it is rather than as you might want it to be” (Whitwham). During the process of telling a story of trauma, memories may not
always be accurate. Powers asserts that with traumatic memories, reality is completed by
the imagination. For memories acquired during something as high stress as combat, they
may be misremembered due to the shock and adrenaline. With time, memories evolve
and change, even without the knowledge and recognition of the person. Psychological
studies on trauma and memory “document that people are susceptible to memory
distortion for experiences of trauma” (Strange 1). Memory is subjective, and the mind
naturally fills in the gaps with the imagination, and this is especially true in times of
combat. Gaps in memory as a result of adrenaline-infused action lead to recalled events
being altered or misremembered.

In interviews, Powers often explains that the question that people often asked him
was “What was it like over there?” He recognizes that they are not interested in the
climate, the landscape, or the events because all of that could be learned through an
internet search. He says that the question they really want to ask is “What was it like to
kill people?” Though incredibly challenging to answer an unanswerable question, Powers
strives to do so through his writing. He began to write stories and poetry, but he needed a
larger canvas to grapple with such a question. In his novel, Powers creates characters who
cause and witness death, and the results are catastrophic. Powers, like many other
veterans of war, chose fiction as the genre for his storytelling. In an interview with The
Madison Review, Powers explains that he is “a real believer in the benefit of the distance
provided by the imagination” (Namin 69). Instead of writing about his own experiences,
for many of which he likely still had not found closure, he was able to draw on his
emotions to create a fictional character dealing with the trauma that he has had to deal
with as well. Not all of Powers’ readers have experienced the trauma of war, and by
creating a distance to discuss these important questions, the readers invest in the emotionally traumatic experiences of the characters. Powers could continue to grapple with the emotional impact that he experienced as a result of his time in Iraq, and he could see that struggle play out objectively on paper, allowing him to transfer that same objectivity to his own emotions in order to better understand them.

Reestablishing Order: Structure and Storytelling

Following his return home from Iraq, Kevin Powers wrote poetry and stories, and *The Yellow Birds* created an opportunity to examine his own emotions on a larger canvas. His protagonist, Private Bartle, writes down his own story, as if he were the real veteran returning home. By writing his story, Bartle reestablishes order from the chaos, attempts to see where things went wrong, and gains closure from his guilt. Bartle undoubtedly struggles with PTSD after his return home, which plagues him with flashbacks and feelings of loneliness and guilt. Through this protagonist, Powers depicts what it looks like for a young person who has experienced life changing trauma to return home to a life that has not changed much at all. His experience in war was riddled with chaotic and traumatic experiences, all of which clearly had an effect on him psychologically. His PTSD in turn shapes the way his story is told; it is an explorative narrative, which gives him the opportunity to understand what happened and why. *The Yellow Birds* does not tell the story in chronological order; instead, it shifts back and forth between Bartle’s time in Iraq and his homecoming and ultimate arrest for his war crime. As the narrator, Bartle utilizes a nonlinear timeline to distance himself from the trauma, giving himself the opportunity to understand not only what happened, but what led to the catastrophe
and the impact that it had on him. Powers alternates chapters between Al Tafar and Bartle’s return home. Bartle reveals on the second page of the novel that Murph dies, and the rest of the Al Tafar sections tell the story of how he reaches that point. Bartle’s storytelling process functions in a way similar to that of memory. When one remembers a traumatic event, the memories do not follow order because the most traumatic moments carry the most weight.

During Bartle’s months after returning home, he is attacked by flashbacks as a result of various triggers. In the same way those flashbacks drag Bartle back to memories of Al Tafar, his narrative continually brings readers back to the war. From the first chapter the reader knows that Murph dies and that Bartle had something to do with it, and the rest of the novel reveals the truth little by little until it all becomes clear to not only the readers but to Bartle himself. This piecemeal strategy of uncovering details is similar to when one attempts to understand and cope with a traumatic experience. From the onset, the details are not always clear, but through the storytelling process, that understanding is created. Throughout the novel it becomes evident that Bartle saw the signs of Murph’s descent to his breaking point where he went AWOL and was killed by the insurgency, but Bartle chooses not to intervene. He does not want to be responsible for himself, let alone another person. After seeing Murph’s mutilated body, choosing to dispose of the body, and lie about what happened, he feels as if he is trapped within a whirlpool, spiraling and spiraling without any ability to stop. He expresses that he feels “a need for something to make sense” (Powers 30), and thus he writes the story. By putting it down and conveying what happened to Murph’s mother and others, he hopes to be able to make amends for the wrongdoing of which he was a part. Bartle compares
storytelling to archaeology, uncovering the truth, layer by layer. His story, however, is a “misguided archaeology” (Powers 138), digging haphazardly without much guide or intended purpose. When Bartle begins to write his story and the story of Murph’s death, he does not have an end goal or a clear reason. Through this process of writing his and Murph’s story, however, he eventually finds the closure that he never knew he needed.

In addition to discovering a deeper understanding of his and Murph’s experiences, Bartle writes to cope with the feeling of powerlessness that they face during their deployment. Powers’ deployment was during phase two of the war, and this phase was the time frame of *The Yellow Birds* as well. During a deployment, they see seasons change and they feel time pass, but there is a constant in war: the threat of death at any moment. The opening lines of the *The Yellow Birds* are incredibly poetic and utilize personification to emphasize the strength of war. He writes, “The war tried to kill us in the spring... It tried to kill us every day, but it had not succeeded” (Powers 3). Much of Bartle’s experiences are a result of his feelings of powerlessness. The war continues to have control, and he cannot do anything to stop it. During the fighting and during the quiet of the war, the soldiers felt as if they were on constant alert, as if an attack might suddenly occur, which it very well could. They went days without sleeping, and they “stayed awake on amphetamines and fear” (Powers 5). War narratives often portray this experience of suspended reality. Every moment feels like combat, and around every corner could be death. They must be on high alert, and every civilian, even women and children, must be considered the enemy, armed and dangerous.

Through *The Yellow Birds*, *The White Donkey*, and other war novels, there are scenes of shooting civilians who ultimately were not insurgents, and the resulting
emotions for the soldier can be jarring. They must develop a sense of separation because they are better safe than sorry, better to kill than be killed. When one experiences a terrifying moment of trauma, the body goes into shock with a burst of adrenaline. The physical body takes over, and the processing parts of the brain take a back seat until there is time and safety to stop and think (Herman 34). This mindset is one that must be adopted as a survival technique: act now and process later. Throughout his deployment, Bartle follows this same mantra. As he writes his story later, he notices signs that he missed of Murph’s descent into a breakdown. He only really begins to recognize these after his arrest because he was in survival mode. He could not take the time to stop and think about the impact of his choice to act or not to act. Despite his feelings of closeness with Murph, Bartle chooses not to step in because he does not want to feel as though he is responsible for Murph. When he sits down to write his story and beings to fully process everything that happened, he allows himself to feel the emotions and the guilt, which sends him on the trajectory to understanding and healing.

The Unavoidable: Death and Dying

Soldiers witness death on a daily basis, and it becomes almost normal to them. Bartle explained that they reached the point where “Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed” (Powers 11). It was a constant occurrence, commonplace. Bartle says that soldiers “only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare” (Powers 11). Deliberately ignoring the deaths of those who are not friends is their coping mechanism, their way of survival. If every death witnessed by a soldier had an impact on him, he would quickly deteriorate into a broken man. By only paying attention to the rare
occurrences and not death, he was able to normalize killing, at least for a time. The question that veterans often hear, “What was it like?” not only asks about the action of killing another human but of watching another die. When they are constantly asked “What was it like?,” they are forced to revisit these emotions that they would otherwise want to forget. Following a tragic event, “Grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew. All others who died in Al Tafar were part of the landscape” (Powers 124). Clearly from war narratives, it becomes evident that seeing someone you know die is incredibly devastating, so they must prevent themselves from feeling that grief and devastation over every single death. They create a hierarchy of deaths, and only the close ones get mourned.

Before they even deployed to Iraq, Bartle and his unit were told by their Sergeant, “People are going to die . . . It’s statistics” (Powers 39). In Maximilian Uriarte’s *The White Donkey*, they are told in training, “Take a good look at the Marines to your left and right. Some of you will not make it home. This is the real deal. This is not training. This is Iraq” (Uriarte).

When facing an impending deployment, soldiers understand to a degree that death is a real possibility, but it does not always feel as though it could happen to them. There is still a feeling of invincibility, and Bartle “never considered that we could be among the walking dead as well” (Powers 13). Trauma creates such a shock because it is unexpected, even if it is a known possibility. Without experiencing it, however, it is never fully understood, so no amount of preparation could fully equip a soldier for what could happen. Bartle was surrounded with death, and Murph was showing signs of a mental and emotional breakdown, which led to his death. In his chapter “Bringing the War Home,”
Martin Barker explains that for soldiers who do not support a war, as was the case for many in Vietnam, or for soldiers who do not necessarily understand the war, as was the case for some in Iraq, there are destructive results. In cases like this, their behavior could become unpredictable leading to self-destruction or “to shapeless hatred of those who threaten them” (Barker 87). Murph began to question his purpose in Iraq, and in the final days of his life, he expressed that he never wanted to tell anyone that he had been in the military.

There were numerous warning signs of Murph’s self-destructive state, but Bartle never acted on them to intervene while Murph was still alive. As Bartle writes his narration of remembrance and comes across one of these signs, he remarks that perhaps if he had stepped in at that point, that Murph would not have died. Whether or not he recognized these signs while they were happening or if he did not realize until after the fact, Murph’s death was a traumatizing shock to Bartle. Although he never saw Murph in the physical pain from the torture by the insurgents before his death, Bartle becomes obsessed with imagining Murph’s. This obsession stems from Bartle’s interior struggle with his feelings of guilt and responsibility for what happened. He does not allow himself to move forward from that moment in an effort to bring honor in death that Murph never received. Bartle’s use of his narrative to remember Murph in life, not the mutilated body that plagues his mind, establishes another purpose of narrative. Not only does he seek to write in an effort to gain a better understanding of what happened and why it happened, he strives to bring dignity to Murph after his death. He is not just writing for the purpose of therapy, he is writing as a gift to his lost friend. Bartle and Sargent Sterling sent Murph’s mutilated body down the river, never to be seen again, in an effort to pretend it
never happened. Murph never got a proper burial, but by writing this narration of remembrance, Bartle takes a small step in returning that dignity that was stolen from Murph in his death and the subsequent cover up. The reader does not have to support Bartle’s decision to make Murph’s death “like it never happened” (Powers 208), but they are expected to support Bartle’s tribute of remembrance for Murph.

Refusing Help: Guilt, Shame, and PTSD

On his way home, Bartle experiences numerous flashbacks, which make him feel as if he was physically still in combat. He remarks that during this travel, “I knew where I was . . . But my body did not” (Powers 54). His fingers reached for a rifle that was not there, and he had the feeling of fear. On the plane ride home, his “hand went to close around the stock of the rifle that was not there,” and another soldier smiled at him saying, “Happened to me twice today” (Powers 101). For many soldiers returning from war, they express this physical reaction. For some, hearing a slamming door causes them to duck and cover, as if there was a mortar dropping. Their logical mind recognizes that the danger is gone, but the physical body does not. Rather than receiving treatment or talking to anyone about his difficulties reintegrating to his normal life, Bartle chooses avoidance. At the conclusion of the deployment, Bartle was aware of that fact that “We would be evaluated. Our ability to reenter the world would be assessed” (Powers 183). They were given a form with questions, and the officer explained, “We have this questionnaire down to an exact science,” (Powers 184) and the results would determine whether or not they needed psychiatric recuperation before going home. Regardless of whether or not this is truly “an exact science,” the returning person’s response may not be completely truthful.
Many knew what boxes to check in order to go home, which meant that some who needed help deliberately chose not to receive it. Following his return home, Bartle’s mother continually tries to talk to him, but he blows her off, refuses to have a conversation with her that was more than a few words, and he does not care that he is bringing immense pain to this single mother. Her son, her only family member at home, left on deployment, rarely contacting her while he was gone. Naturally, she would want to know what happened during the deployment, specifically what is ultimately plaguing him. Instead of talking, he sleeps, drinks heavily, and wanders around town alone.

The major cause of Bartle’s refusal to start on a path of healing and recovery is his shame and his guilt, making himself a willing victim. When Murph’s mother asked Bartle to promise to bring her son home safe, Bartle said yes, without recognizing that this could have been a promise that could not be fulfilled. He feels guilty for not fulfilling that promise and for playing a part in covering up Murph’s death and lying about it. He does not talk about it and share the burden; instead, he continues to carry the weight alone. Due to his shame and regret, Bartle states, “I felt an obligation to remember him correctly, because all remembrances are assignations of significance, and no one else would ever know what happened to him, perhaps not even me” (Powers 61). During their deployment, Murph changed in appearance, in action, and in feeling. When his mutilated body was discovered, Murph was unrecognizable. When Bartle feels obligated to remember Murph “correctly,” he means the real Murph, the one before the war broke him. He must remember Murph as he was: alive. Bartle recreates the story, imagines what was happening inside Murph’s head, and continually tries to reconstruct and understand his own choices and actions. During the Iraq War, the American civilians
often did not understand what was happening, but through the narratives of veterans, it becomes clear that even those who have experienced the war firsthand have a limited understanding of the magnitude of its impact. The war killed Murph; the war broke him, caused him to wander off like a ghost in the night, and destroyed everything he once was. Despite this, however, Bartle blames himself, and he feels the weight of responsibility and guilt for Murph’s death. He does not allow himself to ask for help or to move on with a future. Murph will forever be eighteen, and Bartle feels guilty growing older. Because Murph felt pain, Bartle feels the need to inflict emotional pain upon himself as well. Although he will never feel the same pain that Murph did, he recognizes that “All pain is the same. Only the details are different” (Powers 132). Bartle’s pain comes when he is alone. He remembers and he imagines, which is painful. However, he does not do anything to alleviate this pain because he does not deserve it. Many of his moments of pain come through dreams. Thinking about these night terrors, he reflects, “You don’t dream when you are dead. I dream. The living dream, though I won’t say thanks for that” (Powers 104). Yes, he is alive, but does he feel as though he deserves to be?

At multiple points during his first few months home, Bartle contemplates suicide due to the guilt and shame that he feels. He explains that this desire is “not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever” (Powers 144). Again, when he sees his peers joyously celebrating their freedom and youth at the river, he walks into the water, “drifted a little, a little down, a little to sleep” (Powers 146) until one of the others notices him. He had sent Murph’s body drifting down the river in an eternal sleep, and that is echoed in his own desires to sleep. It is as if he feels shame for being alive when he was not able to keep Murph alive.
Powers explained in a PBS interview with Jeffrey Brown that “the danger doesn’t end when you step back on U.S. soil. It may be a danger of a different kind but it’s just as grave and the results can be just as deadly” (Brown). The suicide rate among military veterans is heartbreakingly staggering. Regardless of if a veteran receives treatment, he is still at risk for suicide. Adam Schumann from *Thank You For Your Service* undergoes treatment for his PTSD, yet he consistently contemplates suicide. In a moment where he holds the gun to his head, he reflects, “So this is where he will die, then. Not in a Humvee like James Doster. Not in the war, but here in the furnace room, next to the room his daughter wants him to paint, under the room where his son is asleep, and a few inches from his terrified wife” (Finkel 103). Following this conversation, he talks about wishing he had died in Iraq and about feeling guilt that others had. The veterans, like the real-life Adam Schumann and the fictional Bartle and Abe, survive so much during their time in combat, and the shock of their own survival brings them guilt. The danger that they face at home is not always palpable or recognizable, which can make them even more deadly. Physical wounds can be recognized and treated, but in order for a psychological wound to be known, the person must speak up. Bartie’s refusal to speak up bars him to miss out on treatment. He willingly chooses not to seek help, and thus he perpetuates his own downward spiral.

Combat veterans do not just come into therapy for the sake of fear, rather for shame, according to Judith Herman in an interview by Cathy Caruth. She gives the example of a soldier “who sees his buddy killed in the war and feels guilt: ‘I should have done more, but I was afraid’” (Caruth *Listening to Trauma* 149). Herman explains that this soldier “doesn’t just think ‘I should have rescued his body and I didn’t’ – that’s guilt.
He also thinks ‘I’m a coward’ – that’s shame” (Caruth Listening to Trauma 149). Bartle does not go into therapy for these same reasons. He avoids interacting with others because he thinks he is a coward. Because of what he had done and not done, he does not feel worthy of working to achieve a normal life again. Perhaps if he had not sent Murph’s body down the river, or if he had stepped in to prevent the death in the first place, he would be worthy of normalcy. Witnessing the death of another causes the survivor to feel the need to remember the one who died and to bring some sort of justice “because it’s at the center of what one very quickly perceives to be one’s responsibility as a survivor” (Caruth Listening to Trauma 138). Because Bartle sees himself as the primary influencing factor leading to Murph’s death, his view of justice must be against himself. He believes that there is no other blame apart from his own actions. His self-inflicted pain is his own form of justice for Murph.

**Storytelling: Finding Truth in Trauma**

Throughout the novel, both during his time in the war and reflecting during his time in prison, Bartle struggles with the truth. It is difficult to face, but it is impossible to ignore. Despite what they were told, “It was hard to believe that we’d be OK and that we’d fought well. But I remember being told that the truth does not depend on being believed” (Powers 24). In the same way that the truth about fighting well does not need to be believed, neither does his story. His story is one of reflection; “it is necessary or simply inevitable to remember one’s experience in war but impossible to communicate that experience to others” (Wright 105). He must write his story and ultimately share it, but it does not matter how well he can communicate it or how much of it is believed.
What matters is the action of reflection and recreation of the events. In *Thank You For Your Service*, these soldiers recovering from PTSD enter various recovery programs which follow a specific theory: “Return to the traumatizing event. Remember it in detail. Think about it through therapy and by writing about it” (Finkel 37). This is what Bartle must do to recover from his feelings of guilt for not only Murph’s death but for what he did to cover it up. Bartle recognizes that “all remembrances are assignations of significance” (Powers 61), and even if he did not grant Murph the significance he deserved in life, perhaps he could make up for it after Murph’s death. Through this coming-of-age experience for Bartle, he started to recognize the importance of responsibility for his own actions. After beginning to release his naiveté, Bartle realized “that freedom is not the same thing as the absence of accountability” (Powers 35). At first after his return home, Bartle simply wanted to avoid facing what had happened, which is why he isolates himself. Eventually after reflection and consequences he had this realization that finally set him on the path to making amends and finding closure.

Many author-veterans discuss the importance of remembering now and processing later. The processing and understanding cannot be ignored because it could lead to a detrimental mental break down the road. Ron Capps, who founded the Veterans Writing Project in Washington, D.C. spent 25 years in the military, including tours in Rwanda, Darfur, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and understands the importance of processing and how helpful writing and storytelling can be for veterans of war. After going through therapy and taking prescribed medication, his memories still caused extreme trauma that led to a suicide attempt. Finally, he found something that worked—writing. He began putting down his stories, and he said, “Writing helped me get control
of my mind” (Hames 1). Those in the program are familiar with the saying, “Either own your story or it owns you,” and the instructors urge veterans to tell their stories because “by sharing and reliving traumatic events, a person is taking charge of what happened and acknowledging that he has moved on” (Hames 1). When Bartle first returned home, he would not allow himself to return home, and he refused to talk to anyone about what happened in Iraq. When he begins writing Murph’s story, he begins to allow himself to move forward. The book ends with a detailed description of Bartle releasing Murph’s body down the river, which signifies Bartle’s ability to finally let Murph go.

The ability to tell a story about one’s traumatic experience, either through memoir like Bartle or through fiction like Powers and Uriarte, begins the process of finding closure. Kevin Powers wrote *The Yellow Birds* as a means to better understand the emotional and psychological impact of his experiences in Iraq. Many other Iraq veterans have chosen to write fiction to understand their experiences as well. Maximilian Uriarte served his first tour with the U.S. Marine Corps in 2007, and his second deployment was in 2009. During this second tour, Uriarte utilized photography, illustrations, and writing to document the daily life for the Marines. This sparked his satirical online comic *Terminal Lance*, and later his graphic novel *The White Donkey*. Both the online work and the graphic novel feature the same fictional primary characters, Abe Belatzeko and Jesus Garcia. What makes Uriarte’s work unique is its genre. The story does not solely rely on words; it utilizes graphics as well. It is the first graphic memoir to be published from the Iraq war, giving a unique viewpoint for the ongoing narrative conversation about the war. From the start, before even opening the cover, the reader is met with a striking image: the face of a Marine with the thousand-yard stare of a person who has seen something
terrible. Like the cover, Uriarte’s illustrations throughout bring power to the events. When the Marines are struck by an IED and when Abe has flashbacks, the looks on the faces portray such powerful emotions that could not otherwise be captured or described with words. Although Uriarte does not use color for his drawings, but the backgrounds change in shade slightly to differentiate between flashbacks and real-time action. The subtlety of his illustrations emphasizes the emotional experience for the readers of his work.

_The White Donkey_, like _The Yellow Birds_, seeks to answer the question “What was it like?” Both works contain very little descriptions of battle plans or troop movements; instead, the novels focus on the day-to-day life for the soldiers, which is often monotonous, as well as the immeasurable amount of pain that follows the loss of a close comrade. These are not war books, but rather are books about the personal effects that arise following the experience of war. Uriarte also brings in depictions of the misconceptions of the war by those at home, who are only informed by the media. At the end of the book, Uriarte brings in a short afterward saying, “We live in a unique time in America with an all-volunteer military . . . fighting the longest war in American history” (Uriarte). He states his goal for the work as well: “In the end, I just wanted to tell a story that mattered” (Uriarte). His story of _The White Donkey_ is a story that matters because it focuses on the impact that war has on those who return. The focus of the graphic novel is not about the war itself but rather on the internal war within Abe as he seeks to gain closure.

Uriarte’s graphic novel sets out clear information for the reader about IEDs, which is shown in the midst of a pre-deployment training. This is partly done because
IED training is crucial for soldiers entering Iraq, but a major reason is to provide that information to the readers. Uriarte ensures that his readers understand more about these weapons because Garcia is killed as a result of an IED on the road in Iraq. Their training officer explains that IEDs are "cheap, dirty, and very effective," explaining that they pose "the single greatest threat" to the soldiers (Uriarte). On the day of Garcia's death, Abe had to be the Vehicle Commander, filling in for a sick officer. They were driving, with Garcia up top serving as the sniper, and they were singing and laughing. Out of nowhere, they hit an IED, Garcia was thrown, and Garcia was dead. Much of Uriarte's illustrations are monochromatic, but the depiction of Garcia's dead body is a stark red. It stands out from the page in the same way that it stands out in Abe's mind permanently. Although he is reassured by the commanders that Garcia's death was not his fault, Abe still blames himself, refuses to talk to the chaplain, and denies help, stating "I'm fine." He has an angry and violent outburst a week later when an officer reads a briefing and says that they might receive a Combat Action Ribbon for the day of Garcia's death. According to studies conducted by researchers from the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, Washington in 2007, soldiers returning home with PTSD are far more likely to show signs of aggression and violence than those without PTSD (Jakupcak et al. 946). Because of Abe's experience of the Humvee explosion and discovering his closest battle buddy dead, Abe likely has undiagnosed PTSD, resulting in his angry outburst.

**On the Homefront: Fluctuating Support**

For military personnel, support on the homefront, or lack thereof, influences their reintegration back into the normal civilian world. This opinion from the homefront comes
not only from the general public but from the individual families of the veterans. Throughout the long spanning Iraq War, there were often times of civilian protest and a lack of support for the war as well as times of complete support. Many Americans associated Iraq and Saddam Hussein with the September 11, 2001 attacks, although these were conducted by the terrorist group Al Qaeda and not the Iraqi government. In the immediate time following the September 11 attacks, “Americans – united in righteous anger – would have done just about anything that Bush as commander in chief asked of them” (Bacevich 223). There was blind support and sky-high patriotism, partly because there was a lack of clear understanding about the origin of the attacks. The issues with terrorism were often misunderstood by the public because “not every terrorist attack conducted by Al Qaeda targeted Americans, and not every terrorist attack targeting Americans was attributable to Al Qaeda” (Bacevich 202). During phase one of the war and the early months of phase two, there was a large amount of American support. However, the longer the war continued, the more that support dwindled. American citizens began to lose their support, thinking that the war was being drawn out, that the U.S. military did not need to be there, and that the sole purpose of the war was for oil. When it comes to public opinion, citizens “weigh the costs of the war - especially the number of U.S. casualties - against the benefits of the war and the likelihood that those benefits will ultimately be attained” (Coe 488). At the start of a war, when the number of casualties is low and the goals are articulated to the public through the media, support tends to be higher. It has been found that “When political leaders are united in their support for a war, the public is more supportive. When leaders begin to split, however, citizens use partisan cues to determine whether their ‘side’ is still supportive and adjust
their views accordingly” (Coe 488). During the U.S. involvement in the war, opinion varied significantly depending on the time. A major time of opposition came when it was found that Iraq did not, in fact, have Weapons of Mass Destruction, and public opinion began to shift that the invasion had been a mistake. Throughout the nearly decade-long phase two of the war, there were protests against the U.S. presence in Iraq, claiming that they no longer needed to be there. During these times of protest, “The New York Times concluded that there were actually ‘two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion” (Bacevich 249). Regardless of public opinion, however, the long drawn out phase two of the war continued, bringing more and more young men and women overseas.

During war time, American civilians are only given certain amounts of information, causing them to not fully understand the large-scale reasons for being in the war. A major initial reason for the war was to “maintain America’s privileged position” within the world and to maintain its power (Bacevich 361). This is a more abstract reason for entering the war, and it was one that the general public did not understand. In WWII, the civilians could see Hitler and his quest for world domination as a concrete purpose for being there. For wars like Vietnam and Iraq, where the purpose is more political, ideological, and power-oriented, these reasons are not concrete for the common people. As a result, as years went by and the number of casualties rose, the support declined. When this happens, the people who get lost and forgotten in public opinion are the common soldiers, even if they do not have influence in the grand scheme of political war. For soldiers returning home, facing a lack of support for the war from family members or others can lead to feelings of isolation and an avoidance of talking about their
experiences. For characters within war literature, both fiction and nonfiction, many come home without having someone to talk to who truly understands what it was like.

Because of the abstract ideological reasons for the war, which in part led to public misunderstanding of the war, as well as the anti-war movements which arose at various points during the long war, those actually fighting the war sometimes got lost in the shuffle. For civilians, both in favor of and opposed to the war, it is very easy to talk about the war while forgetting the people. Flags are flown or protest signs are hung without much though about the individuals. Authors who choose to write about war, including Kevin Powers, Maximilian Uriarte, and David Finkel, write for the purpose of bringing humanity back into the conversation about war by shifting the focus back to the individual. The U.S. presence in Iraq was much more than IED’s, oil, and insurgents; it was the daily existence for countless American military personnel. As a result, these authors do not tell stories of specific battles or military operations, they tell the stories of the people, their challenges, and their, at times, overwhelming emotions. When reading The Yellow Birds, The White Donkey, or Thank You For Your Service, one will not find stories of heroism in line with Hollywood cinema; instead, the pages will be filled with raw emotion, loss, and inner turmoil. Stories are so much more than a string of facts or events; they are the living, breathing experiences of those who lived them. They are the means by which those returning from war regain their control over the experience, create order from chaotic tragedies, and share their stories and struggles with the world. Through fiction and nonfiction, these authors tell of their experiences, or stories influenced by their experiences, in an effort to bring the reader back to what is most important: the human experience.
It becomes clear very quickly that Abe’s older sister is not happy about his decision to join the Marines. When he first enlisted, she yelled, “THIS IS THE STUPIDEST THING YOU’VE EVER DONE! You know they’re going to send you off to die right?” (Uriarte). When he came home between training and deployment, she picked Abe and Garcia up from the airport. During their conversation, she explains, “I just… Don’t support this bullshit war for oil” (Uriarte). During a controversial war, the American civilians who do not agree with the war tend to forget about the individuals fighting it. Abe’s sister fits into this category. She is so caught up in only viewing it was a “bullshit war for oil” and forgets that it has a traumatic impact on her brother. Abe needed the support from home in order to cope with his experiences, but he does not receive this from the one person who had a chance to offer it. Readers are informed in the graphic novel that their father had died of cancer shortly after Abe’s 18th birthday, and their mother is never shown. Abe’s sister is his only immediate family member, and her lack of support is a factor in his inability to cope with Garcia’s death and his own actions during his deployment. In studies of trauma and war, family support is cited to be important in the aiding of recovery, which is not something that Abe has. Even if he wanted to talk, she would not be supportive enough to understand or offer much comfort.

**Thank You for Your Service: Public Misconception**

By contrast to Abe’s sister, Abe’s uncle is shown twice, and he is a representative of the excited supporters of war. On their short break between training and deployment, they ran into his uncle who said, “Thank you for your service. Both of you,” to which Abe replied, “We…haven’t really…done anything…” (Uriarte). When he sees the same
uncle after returning home, the uncle tells his son that Abe “just came back from Iraq! He’s a hero you know! What do we say when we see a military man?” (Uriarte). With this prompting, the boy says the five words that veterans sometimes struggle hearing: “Thank you for your service.” Immediately, the boy asks the question “Did you kill anyone?” (Uriarte). This question is challenging for those returning from combat. In a way, this question is asking, “Did you lose your humanity?” because killing is deemed immoral in other aspects of life. This question does nothing but cause further damage for the person hearing it. Although the uncle immediately ends the conversation, leading his son away, Abe mutters “…Just one person,” meaning Garcia. The death was not his fault, but he carries the burden and convinces himself that it was. For soldiers who feel guilt, whether that guilt is warranted or imagined, hearing the words “Thank you for your service” can feel unearned or undeserved.

Because Abe feels such a weight of guilt and responsibility, he does not feel as though he is worthy of thanks, which is why he struggles with hearing it. Abe mutters that he had not done anything and that he had killed someone, which puts an unnecessary weight on his shoulders on top of his trauma. Even when there is no actual blame for a death, which is the case for Abe, he still believes that there is. For soldiers in this type of situation, it can be a difficult road to acceptance after they return home. Many soldiers returning from war are called “heroes,” but as is made clear through the literature, many do not feel as if this is a title that they have earned. By placing blame on themselves for the deaths of others, they remove themselves from the category of bravery. The psychologist who treats Adam Schumann in Thank You For Your Service explains that “a hero isn’t someone who doesn’t feel fear, they’re someone who in spite of their fear does
the right thing and really risks their own safety” (Finkel 37). By this definition, these men are heroes, but due to their guilt and responsibility, whether real or perceived, they eliminate themselves from this definition.

For those who have never actually experienced war, the media, movies, and video games have an impact on the understanding of what it is actually like. In The White Donkey when Abe and Garcia were on a short leave before deploying to Iraq, they went out with Abe’s friend, Spencer. He asked, “Are you excited to go to Iraq? I would be, your life is like a real life Call of Duty or something” (Uriarte). For a civilian, Call of Duty was perhaps his main frame of reference, consisting of lots of the action with none of the emotional turmoil. Following his return home, his friends ask him questions such as, “Did you like...kill anyone?” and “So did you see a ton of action?” (Uriarte). Spencer, just like Abe’s cousin, just wanted to know about the killing, which is a result of their main frame of reference. Movies and video games about war are saturated with the action, violence, and heroism, but they rarely touch on the internal pain that plagues those returning from war. In addition, soldiers returning from war often feel disconnected from the “normal” world. Back home, life has continued as usual, and the soldiers feel as though they have seen and done too much to just return to normal. Those at home do not always know how to talk to them about their experiences in war, sometimes the questions are not appropriate or insensitive, and no matter what the soldier says, he risks not being understood.

Phil Klay, an Iraq veteran and author of the short story series Redeployment, writes that “There are two ways to tell the story. Funny or sad. Guys like it funny, with lots of gore and a grin on your face when you get to the end. Girls like it sad, with a
thousand-yard stare out to the distance as you gaze upon the horrors of war they can’t quite see” (Klay 53). Spencer and the cousin fall into the first category with the gore and the grin, which is a result of the expectations of masculinity associated with war. Klay also explains that no matter how the story is told, or whether or not it is even true, “even if it had happened, more or less, it was still total bullshit” (Klay 54). Talking about their experiences is crucial for coming to terms with what happened and taking the road to recovery, but if they feel as though they must cater the story to the listener to provide entertainment on par with Call of Duty, they are unable to participate in the action of storytelling that promotes healing. In an article written about his novel, Uriarte explains, “War movies tend to follow the same tropes, but are commonly told from the perspective of exceptionality. War movies are usually written by civilians, viewing the military experience from the outside, with awe and the standard Hollywood glamour” (Marine Corps Times). Because of this, he explains, there is much more focus placed on the glory, and as a result, “Life, death, and the return home are often overlooked in these stories in favor of the explosive display of combat and heroism” (Marine Corps Times). Combat veterans who tell stories tend to avoid telling stories of battles and glory because in the grand scheme of life for a soldier, that is only a small part. Novels such as The Yellow Birds and The White Donkey are working to shift the narration from the video game style action tales to more realistic tales of trauma and recovery.

**Emotions: Detached or Overwhelmed**

Both Kevin Powers and Maximilian Uriarte emphasize through their main characters a sense of emotional detachment as a result of feelings of guilt and
responsibility. After coming home, Abe continues to use the phrase, "I’m fine" when others ask about his feelings to avoid talking about his experience, and he begins to drink heavily, similarly to how Bartle coped (or refused to cope) with Murph’s death in The Yellow Birds. He pushes away anyone who tries to talk to him and lashes out in anger. In numerous full-page images in The White Donkey, Abe is depicted in his room blank-faced, with a bottle of alcohol in his hand and numerous empty bottles and cans scattered around him. He drives drunk with his gun in the seat next to him, and he contemplates suicide. Standing at Garcia’s grave, he talks to his lost friend, and holds the gun to his head until he stops, puts the gun down, and remembers that Garcia was an inspiration to him to keep going. Likewise, Bartle drank heavily, isolated himself, and contemplated ending his life. The weight of their emotions was so heavy that they actively chose not to deal with it and rather to avoid it, which led to further emotional turmoil. In an article about his book, Uriarte explains that his goal was to show Abe struggling with the challenges of returning home, which is something that many Marines and soldiers face. He says that readers “will be with him every step of his journey, with the intent of understanding the many issues that plague the veteran community” (Marine Corps Times). This is Powers’ intention as well, to shed a light on the challenges of coming home. Authors who have actually served choose not to have the bulk of their writing focus on the war itself because they want to put their readers alongside the struggle in order to help them fully understand the challenges.

In an interview with The Madison Review, Powers explained that he thought of John Bartle as “bring suffocated by his emotions, or his thoughts and memories… I wanted that element of his internal experience to be a presence in the novel, and a big
presence, but I wanted to make sure it was clear that he can’t see what it is that’s
suffocating him, at least not for a long time” (Namin 69). This is not only the case for
Bartle but for Abe as well. Both men are suffocating and feeling trapped, yet neither man
truly understands the root of the issue. Through the action of facing the truth, which for
Abe was visiting Garcia’s grave and for Bartle telling his story to Murph’s mom, they
were able to find closure. Through this closure, they were able to reestablish their own
worth, thus beginning their journeys of healing. Both of these works have relatively
happy endings, which have earned them some criticism. Many true war stories do not
have such endings, but because The Yellow Birds and The White Donkey are works of
fiction, the authors have the power to create a happy ending to present readers with hope.

By shifting the narrative of war literature from the glamorized films of glory,
authors like Kevin Powers and Maximilian Uriarte instead focus on the reality for the
soldiers. The war does not end when the soldier returns home; he is still fighting an
enemy, except this one is invisible. The mental and emotional toll that PTSD takes is
immeasurable, and the impact can have a ripple effect into other aspects of their lives.
Powers, Uriarte, and other authors who have actually experienced war firsthand, brings
readers into the lives of the soldiers, allowing them to feel and understand their trauma.
Because the Iraq war is so recent, literature is still being written about the experiences of
soldiers, which means that the community of author-veterans is continuing to grow as the
conversation expands.
Chapter 3
Innocence in the Face of Combat: The Epidemic of the Child Soldier

War’s mental and emotional impact is extreme for those who have experienced combat, even for trained soldiers. The trauma is even more scarring for child soldiers, who range in age from six to eighteen-years-old. These innocent children are unprepared cognitively, emotionally, and experientially for the violence, loss, and bloodshed that they experience in war. In this section, I examine the written stories of former child soldiers from Sierra Leone and Uganda as well as that of former adult peacekeeper who witnessed the atrocities firsthand in civil war-torn Rwanda. All of these stories use hybrid narratives of memoir and fiction to convey their experiences. I begin with discussion about the ethics of child soldiers, which affects not only the way soldiers must view them in combat but how the reader must view them. Child soldiers occupy the spaces of victim as well as perpetrator, which makes the ethical and judicial processes incredibly uncertain at times. For the reader, the decision about ethics is difficult because the children, the epitome of innocence, are performing the ultimate acts of evil. While I discuss the two primary texts authored by former child soldiers, A Long Way Gone and Soldier Boy, I examine the manipulation and coercion of the children and the grave psychological and traumatic effects these have on the children. For many, there is no choice for the actions because the alternative would be death by the hands and weapons of their leaders and their fellow child soldiers. Therefore, they act in ways that are directly counter to their own humanity and morality. Finally, I discuss the use of storytelling as a method of understanding and rehabilitation of the former child soldiers. Their stories are told as a
way of healing, but they are also told in order to educate readers worldwide about the epidemic of child soldiering and to give voices to the voiceless.

The vast majority of children do not choose to fight but instead are kidnapped and forced conscripted into whichever war is going on in their locale. Even the ones who appear to join on their own volition do not do so by choice; they join because it is their only viable option for survival. Even when a child “voluntarily” joins, these “children usually run out of options or engage in soldering in order to be protected or get associated benefits like food and protection of their families” (Gamboriko 7). Many former child soldiers report that they were abducted “under circumstances of extreme coercion, violence, and fear” (Denov 794). Often the rebel troops kill their families, and then when the children are left alone and vulnerable, their only option is to join the ranks of the very same ones who killed their families. By creating conditions that ensure a child’s dependence on the perpetrator of their suffering, the perpetrator achieves his untimate goal, which is “the creation of a willing victim” (Herman 75). A willing victim is easier to control and blame, and for the perpetrator the potential guilt is easier to brush off when the victim appears to be willing. Children are “psychologically more vulnerable than many adults,” and their trusting innocence leads them to “accept more dangerous tasks without scrutinizing them” (Dudenhoefer). Because children are so easily convinced and manipulated, it can seem as if they are content to be there.

In a 2012 interview with Public Radio International, Ishmael Beah, former child soldier and current activist and author, explains that children are a target because the leaders “can corrupt them pretty easily, especially after they have lost everything that is dear to them” (Public Radio International). In situations where children are coerced into
war, they are forced into the false illusion that the situation of war is better than any other alternative, especially when there is no longer a home or a family to which they can return. Trauma that occurs during childhood “is marked by an overwhelming sense of terror and powerlessness” (Steele and Kuban 19), and powerless victims are easier to control because they do not feel as though they have the ability to stand up for themselves against their perpetrator. During their traumatic experiences, which encompass their entire time as child soldiers, they are robbed of any potential hope for a better life away from the war. During the process of rehabilitation, trust must be established in order to recreate hope.

African civil wars that utilize children as soldiers are differ vastly from governmentally sanctioned wars, with which Western readers might be more familiar. The groups are largely paramilitary, rebel forces, and the kidnapped children do not receive regular training. Due to the lack of formal training, the trauma that they experience differs from that of the veterans discussed in chapter two. The children did not willingly enlist, and they were not given the option to leave. Consequently, their trauma is more distant from Western cultures who have not experienced a war on their own soil, especially one that utilizes child soldiers. For the children in these African nations, warfare is a constant and unavoidable state, in some cases, plaguing their homelands for as long as they can remember. The disruption of stability and normalcy by ongoing atrocities and death inevitably traumatizes these children. Telling their stories serves a dual purpose: to heal and to teach. For survivors of trauma, telling and owning a story promotes the finding of understanding and closure personally for the survivor of trauma. Because of the great distance readers in the Western world have from these African civil
conflicts, another goal is teaching through stories in order to promote awareness and activism. Western readers are captivated and heartbroken by the stories, which do not typically receive media coverage.

Many former child soldiers who become authors and activists choose to tell their stories of captivity and combat through memoir or through hybrid genres. The use of memoir as the genre brings the reader into the experience of the child soldier in a very real way, and it reveals the horrific truths of the child soldier epidemic. Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* is told through memoir as Beah explains what he saw, felt, and experienced as a child soldier. His memoir has begun to be used in high school reading curricula across the country, teaching American students about the reality of child soldiers. Hybrid genres, which shift between their true stories and fictional ones, give the author the opportunity to not only share their story but to dramatize the conflict. Many hybrid genre books about child soldiers are written, or co-written, by former child soldiers who went on to become activists, creating foundations and helping with the rehabilitation of other children. The memoir portions of the books tell their real experiences, and their fictional portions create a story for all of the child soldiers who never receive the opportunity to have their voices heard. Hybrid genres allow the child soldier authors or co-authors to explore the emotions and experiences of the many while telling their own story.

The use of child soldiers, particularly in African civil wars, is a phenomenon that continues to plague many countries into the present despite humanitarian efforts. Because it is not addressed by the media often enough, the rest of the world remains ignorant and inattentive and the use of child soldiers continues to be common practice in many African
nations. It is estimated that between “300,000-500,000 children are involved with fighting forces as child soldiers” (Drexler). These children are manipulated and coerced into performing actions that are directly counter to their humanity, such as attacking villages, participating in the punishments of fellow children, and killing innocent people. When they become so utterly broken after betraying their morality, the primary way to reestablish their membership in the human race is to share their stories. In addition to telling their stories as a healing process, former child soldiers seek to raise awareness of the issue worldwide. Two of the activists on the forefront on the war against the use of children in combat are Ishmael Beah, who was forced into combat during the Sierra Leone civil war, and Ricky Richard Anywar, who was kidnapped into the rebel army in the Ugandan civil war. Following their rescues and rehabilitation, both Beah and Anywar have become noteworthy authors and have joined the movement to end the use of children in war.

Ishmael Beah’s novel *A Long Way Gone* is a memoir that details the true story of his experiences as a child soldier. He and his friends escape before the warfare reaches their village and attempt to run from the war, but they are ultimately captured by the rebel forces and forced to join. The novel follows his experiences in combat and his rescue and rehabilitation. *A Long Way Gone* has gained a great deal of popularity in recent years, and it is becoming integrated into high school curricula. Beah wrote his memoir for the purpose of education, particularly for people who are not aware of the reality of this humanitarian crisis. In an interview Beah explains that he “can put a human face to what seems so distant to a lot of people, and also remembering, even though it’s difficult, is a small price to pay” (*Public Radio International*). By putting a face to the stories, readers
can better understand the trauma that children experience and the feeling of a loss of humanity. He is also hopeful that his story will help people “understand that it is possible to help these children regain their lives again” (Public Radio International). Through memoir, Beah humanizes child soldiers and conveys to readers that even though they have been soldiers, they are still children.

Ricky Richard Anywar’s *Soldier Boy* is told both through fiction and nonfiction, and it is co-written with author Keely Hutton, who is the primary author of the book. The chapters titled “Ricky” follow the true story of his experiences as a child soldier, and the chapters titled “Samuel” are a fictional story about a child soldier in 2006 who was rescued and rehabilitated. A composite character, Samuel represents the countless former child soldiers that Anywar helped during his time working with his humanitarian organization, Friends of Orphans. The hybrid genre allows for unique possibilities for the storytellers because they are able to humanize the epidemic in the way that memoirs do, but they are also able to create order out of an otherwise chaotic experience. In the case of Anywar and Hutton’s *Soldier Boy*, the fictional chapters give a voice to the countless children that Anywar helped rehabilitate. He gives them a voice and emphasizes the challenges faced by both the child and the person helping in the recovery process.

Beah’s and Anywar’s books portray the experience of the child soldier before, during, and after their forced combat. Their narratives juxtapose the innocence of the child against the masculine automatic weapon wielding fighter. They describe the horrors and traumas that they experienced both on and off of the battlefield and the innate fear that they felt throughout their captivity and forced service. In battle, they faced an enemy, but at camp, they faced others. Their leaders mistreated them, threatened them, and
manipulated them, which stole their youth, their innocence, and their joy. Child soldiers truly are victims in their situations, but they also occupy another place: the perpetrator. They are experiencing pain, but they are also causing pain. Despite the fact that they did not voluntarily take up arms to attack innocent villagers, the fact remains that they attacked. This dual position as victim and perpetrator creates an ethical dilemma, especially for those attempting to end the conflict. This creates an ethical dilemma for the soldiers, who are forced to stop these children, as well as for the readers, who must bear witness to the atrocities that the children commit.

Roméo Dallaire, a former Lieutenant General of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda, experienced this ethical dilemma firsthand when he found himself face-to-face with child soldiers. Through his writing, Dallaire has given a voice to the other side, the ones who must make the decision to end the life of a child soldier if it means saving other innocent lives. His book’s title alone, They Fight Like Soldiers They Die Like Children, in the dichotomy it poses, sets out a poignant understanding of the challenge. When a child is pointing a weapon at the soldier, they take on the role of the soldier, but when they die, they transform back into the innocent children.

**Violent Innocence: The Ethics of Child Soldiers**

Roméo Dallaire experienced the heartbreaking and difficult reality of the child soldier first hand when he was stationed in Rwanda with the Canadian military during the genocide of 1994. Dallaire used a hybrid of academic writing, memoir, and fiction, as the vehicle for most of his story, a genre choice that allowed him to portray multiple perspectives. At times, the narration follows closely the perspective child soldier, but the
narrative perspective then shifts to that of a U.N. peacekeeper, who must take the life of
the child to prevent more killing. This death is tragic not only for the child, but for the
peacekeeper as well, who continues to be haunted by this action. The opening section and
the closing section of *They Fight Like Soldiers They Die Like Children* comprise
Dallaire’s commentary, while the middle section is a fictional story about a child soldier,
a composite portrait of the experiences of those children he has worked with through his
foundation, the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative. The latter section of the
fictional narrative changes the perspective to that of the UN soldier who must shoot and
kill the child soldier in an effort to prevent her from taking more lives with her automatic
weapon. The unique perspective provides readers with insight into the psychological
trauma that any peacekeeper or soldier experiences after coming face-to-face with
children holding deadly weapons.

When Dallaire saw the child soldiers in Rwanda, he grappled with the questions
adult soldiers would think, including “Is a child still a child when pressing the barrel of a
gun to your chest?” (Dallaire 2). Soldiers are trained to take down the enemy no matter
the cost, but this training could never prepare them to have to make a decision to kill a
child. When faced with a gut wrenching decision like this, peacekeepers “are told that
they just need to do their jobs, trust their training, keep their focus on the mission and
apply the rules of engagement” (Dallaire 185). Clearly those instructions do not take into
account the ethical dilemma of adult soldiers confronting child combatants.

Ricky Richard Anywar’s story *Soldier Boy*, written with and by author Keeley
Hutton, talks about the ways that commanders of rebel forces would play on the power
imbalance when sending child soldiers up against government forces. According to
Anywar, the smallest children were placed on the front lines because they were expendable and the ethics of the government soldiers would cause the enemy to hold their fire. The leader handed guns to children who could barely carry them, and he said, “The government troops may not be so quick to pull the trigger when they see our new front line” (Hutton 204). The overpowering and inevitable pause experienced by adult forces when confronted by child soldiers comes from the recognition that these children are not always fully aware cognitively or morally of what they are doing. They have been coerced and manipulated into combat situations – many of them drugged – and, act without a full understanding of what is actually going on. The indoctrinated children are told that they are fighting on the good side, the side for freedom, but more often than not this is a lie.

In a similar way that Dallaire’s UN peacekeeper was not prepared to take the life of a child, readers also struggle with the ethical challenge that child soldier narratives present. We, as readers, are not in a role to judge whether or not the children are guilty because it is our role to strive to understand. Because the readers are not face to face with them in combat, we focus more on the reestablishment of innocence that comes with the recovery process. For a soldier, the child using the deadly weapon to take innocent lives must be viewed as a perpetrator that must be stopped. During their rehabilitation, however, they clearly are once again viewed as victims. They are still children without a mature enough mentality to realize what they are doing. Regardless of this, however, in that moment they are still using deadly weapons. As absolutely terrible as it is, in battle, adult soldiers striving to save lives must view the child soldiers as killers, not children. After they have been removed from combat and begin their rehabilitation process, they
transform back into children who need support and understanding. When they were a part of militarized forces, they were manipulated into killers, but during recovery, they become vulnerable children once again. “Child soldiers are a complex group who cannot be essentialized as victims or violent actors” (Cahn), and how they must be viewed changes based on the context.

That is the moral dilemma posed by the child soldier phenomenon comes down to the question: are they children or not? Because of their training and brainwashed minds, “They are not truly children in any definition except biological” (Dallaire 4). This is what makes the situation so much more difficult and heartbreaking because although they are still children, they are threatening mortal harm without hesitation. The grown soldier has a difficult choice: kill the child or risk his own men being killed by the child. It is not an easy choice at all, but sadly due to the reality of the child soldier epidemic, it is a choice that must be made all too often. The use of child soldiers does not only have an impact on the children but on the soldiers that are faced with the decision of whether or not to kill them in an effort to save others. In Dallaire’s section following UN peacekeeper, who is more than likely a projection of himself, the peacekeeper is forced to make this decision. He has to shoot and kill a young girl who is terrorizing a village with an automatic weapon. After looking down at her in her final moments of life, he was “observing the transformation of a warrior back into a child and that child was now dying - of wounds that [he] had inflicted on her child body” (Dallaire 197). When they are fighting, they are deadly killers, but when they are dying, they are innocent children. This is an experience that the reader of child soldier narratives must grapple with as well. It is horrifying to read about children performing such brutal acts, but because the story is being told during
the recovery process, readers view them as victims, as children. Because of the distance in which the stories are being told, the former child soldiers rediscover themselves through the process of narration.

_A Long Way Gone: Kidnapped, Coerced, and Broken_

Ishmael Beah’s story provides a first-hand account of the process of manipulation and coercion that the leaders used to corrupt the innocence of the children and solidify their allegiance to the militarized ranks. During an incredibly tumultuous time, especially for those who have recently seen their families murdered, their identities are easily altered to those of coldblooded killers. Many of these tactics not only create a dangerous, blind loyalty to their fellow soldiers and leaders, they cause long term psychological effects on the children. The general welfare as well as the physical and mental health of the children is never a concern for the troop leaders, only their ability to blindly follow orders. The trauma that they experience as a result of taking lives plays a major role in the development of PTSD, and the threats, drugs, and words surrounding them in the “safety” of the camp increase their psychological trauma as well. While I examine the various methods of manipulation, I will discuss the psychological impact that the children will then face during their rehabilitation.

Ishmael Beah’s nonfiction memoir, _A Long Way Gone_, tells the story from his initial departure from his village in an attempt to escape the war and continues through his time in captivity as a child soldier and into his rehabilitation. The rebel insurgency group in Sierra Leone was the Revolutionary United Front, or RUF, whose goal was to overthrow the government. In Sierra Leone’s civil war, the RUF rebel forces targeted
younger boys to enlist as child soldiers because they were so easy to manipulate. After the fact, former RUF youth fighters “described how they were abducted and then inducted into the rebel forces through violence and utter fear and a sense of helplessness” (Gbrie 62). The RUF would target Sierra Leone villages and settlements, and they would use weapons and threats to scare the people away, which would allow them to loot the Sierra Leonean villages, take what they needed and wanted, and move on to the next target. In addition, they would also murder and mutilate innocent civilians who had done no crime but existing in the path of the RUF. Fear was a major tactic used by the RUF, which is why they were able to persist for so long. They would “raid and set up ambushes along the major highways in the country, indiscriminately burning down villages and towns, and taking hostages. They thereby created the impression of great power which was vastly disproportionate to their actual strength” (Gbrie 81). The RUF are often described as purposeless criminals because they claimed to want to help the Sierra Leone citizens, yet those were the ones who were being hurt the most.

Many of the child soldiers lost their lives, either as a result of battle wounds or by the weapons of their leaders as an example of punishment. Those who managed to survive the war faced a continuous battle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of what they had seen and done during their time as soldiers. These children were robbed of their childhood and forced into combat and drug addiction. In his research-based book analyzing trauma and recovery titled *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk, explains, “Our rational, cognitive brain is actually the youngest part of the brain and occupies only about 30 percent of the area inside our skull” (van der Kolk 55). At the time, many of these child soldiers are entering the war, their brains are still developing
the cognitive and rational part of the brain, so the trauma of war interrupts that essential
development. This causes the young soldiers to lose some aspects of cognition and
rational thinking, which is why it is so easy for them to be trained, brainwashed, and
manipulated. For a rebel force the child soldier is the perfect weapon; they are easily
controlled, and there is an abundance of potential new soldiers to take following each
village raid. A report written by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers states that
“children are cheap, expendable and easier to condition into fearless killing and
unthinking obedience” (Gamboriko 5). Often, the child soldiers are the ones in the front
of the fighting because the leaders see them as disposable. Rebel leaders do not want to
put their trained men up front, so the children are the easiest and most viable option. The
stories told by the former child soldiers detail the fear that they feel on the front lines
during battles, especially during the early weeks of their captivity. They must be
constantly aware, never fully resting because “the human system of self-preservation
seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment” (Herman
35). An attack by the opposing forces could happen at any time, and the leaders of their
own troop could bring traumatic threats and actions at any time as a means to keep the
children afraid and in line.

In order to better control the child soldiers, rebel and military leaders get the
children addicted to drugs. This increases their adrenaline, causes them to sleep less, and
makes it easier to manipulate them. During their time in captivity, the children are
“exposed to drugs that make them unaware of the cruel tasks that they are required to
engage in. It is also believed that the drugs give them courage to carry out the tasks
assigned” (Gamboriko 2). When drugs are combined with the trauma that they are
already experiencing, the psychological and physiological effects are increased. In his memoir *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah writes, “The combination of these drugs gave us a lot of energy and made us fierce. The idea of death didn’t cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water. My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed” (Beah 122). The first time he shot his gun and took a life, something in his brain changed because he was still just an immature child. He quickly became desensitized to killing, and he consistently woke up sweating and crying out at night because of violent dreams. The way the military leaders “helped” him was by giving him more drugs, which prevented him from being able to sleep. This was a quick fix at his own expense because it did not correct the deep-rooted problem caused by the trauma. The drugs simply added to the long-term problem while making him a better weapon for their use in that moment.

Again, in situations like this, the leaders show no concern about the individual children and their future physical and mental health, only how they could be used to accomplish the goals.

Beah and his fellow child soldiers were given tablets that “looked like capsules, but they were plain white” (Beah 116). The boys were told that they would boost their energy while they were fighting. In time, the youths turned to consistent smoking of marijuana, “sniffing brown brown, cocaine mixed with gunpowder, which was always spread out on the table, and of course taking more of the white capsules, as [he] had become addicted to them” (Beah 121). During his rehabilitation, Beah experienced extreme withdrawals that caused him to fight others and rebel against authority. The methods of control by the rebel forces were physical, psychological, and emotional. The
children were deprived of sleep, brainwashed with constant war movies, and forced to do unbelievably terrible actions. To the leaders, they were not children, they were tools to be used, manipulated, and discarded when they were no longer necessary. As Dallaire observes, child soldiers are “cheap to sustain, have no real sense of fear, and are limitless in the perverse directions they can be manipulated through drugs and indoctrination since they have not yet developed a concept of justice and have been ripped away from their families” (Dallaire 3). The child soldier is essentially a disposable weapon that, if lost, is of little to no consequence to those in charge.

**A Willing Victim: Breaking Humanity for Stronger Control**

By being forced to act in ways that are directly counter to their morality, the children become accustomed to betraying their humanity. Judith Herman explains that, “the final step in the psychological control of the victim is not completed until [the willing victim] has been forced to violate [his] own moral principles” (Herman 83). Once that line has been crossed, the children continue on the trajectory without looking back.

In many cases of child soldiers, the children’s families were killed by the very same troops that kidnap and force them into combat. Still, the children are convinced that killing others will avenge the deaths of their families. Roméo Dallaire, author of *They Fight Like Soldiers They Die Like Children*, explains that the child soldiers were so brainwashed that they felt elation in their killing, which shows a full disintegration of their ethics and morals. Dallaire saw teenagers who “wore the blood that spattered all over them with pride. They hacked, mutilated, all the while smiling at the faces of fear and honor they created” (Dallaire 40). The most useful child soldier is one who will not
only commit horrible acts, but one who can be manipulated into enjoying those acts. If they are made to enjoy the acts, they will eventually begin to commit them without even being told. Dallaire’s view of child soldiers is from the outside looking in, but the internal conflict is not as visible. Beah, on the other hand, knows full well the moral struggle between right and wrong. Through the manipulation, coercion, and addiction, the moral line for the children becomes blurred.

As a member of the Sierra Leone RUF, whenever they captured prisoners, the boys were “supposed to slice their throats on the corporal’s command. The person whose prisoner died quickest would win the contest” (Beah 124). For the rebel forces, children are the ideal soldiers because “children are considered obedient and in most cases do not question the orders that they are given” (Gamboriko 24). The most important and distressing part of the contest was the fact that they were supposed to look their prisoner in the eye for the duration of the killing. Beah says, “I didn’t feel a thing for him, didn’t think that much about what I was doing. I just waited for the corporal’s order. The prisoner was simply another rebel who was responsible for the death of my family, as I had come to truly believe” (Beah 124). The last phrase of “as I had come to truly believe” makes it evident that through the drugs, war movies, and brainwashing, the child soldiers were stripped of every remaining shred of their humanity, replacing it with the lies they were being told. The desire for revenge for the death of one’s family is a completely human impulse, and it is one that is natural, even if it is not ethical. Regardless of what the children view as moral, they must follow orders or risk death. Their own morality must be suppressed in order to survive. For a child who is still developing a personal moral code, being forced to contradict this code leads to confusion.
As can be seen in Beah’s account, children are slowly manipulated until they lose their full sense of self, which makes them easier to control. The initial tactics of “Terror, intermittent reward, isolation, and enforced dependency may succeed in creating a submissive and compliant prisoner. But the final step in the psychological control of the victim is not completed until she has been forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments” (Herman 83). By making the children kill war prisoners who are unable to defend themselves and then rewarding them for doing so, the children are forced to give up their ethics as their senses of right and wrong are compromised. Eye contact with the prisoners is another action that is encouraged and reinforced in the killing games. The idea of looking an unarmed person in the eye while slitting his throat seems incredibly evil and menacing, but the child soldiers lose all sense of right and wrong because of the manipulation, drug addiction, and constant order to kill. This is especially true for a Western reader, where wars are becoming more and more distant. There is a greater degree of separation for the West because a bomb can be dropped and the victims may never be seen by the ones dropping it. Murdering a prisoner of war, especially an unarmed one goes against the rules of warfare and the Geneva Convention, and the actions that the children were forced to commit as a part of the “game” are directly counter to these guidelines.

To begin his memoir, Beah writes, “There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land. It wasn’t until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was actually taking place in our country” (Beah 5). This is one reason why this epidemic is continuing to persist. People in other countries might hear about it on the news, but moments later
something else takes away their attention. Even though they might have seen a glimpse, they do not act on it because they do not see the direct impact. In Beah’s experience, these were just stories at first, and when the war actually moved into his village, it became real and overpowering. After being orphaned and displaced, Beah and his friends felt as if they did not have a choice, and instead they were forced to give in to whatever happened to them without a struggle. This feeling of helplessness made it so much easier for them to be manipulated when they were brought into militarized ranks.

When Ishmael Beah was first conscripted the Sierra Leone rebel forces fighting against the government military, he was told by a fellow soldier, “You will get used to it, everybody does eventually” (Beah 100). These young boys were suddenly thrown into the war as if they were full grown, cold blooded killers. The belief that children will simply “get used to” death, destruction, and senseless killing seems incomprehensible, and yet in combat zones like civil wars in Africa, this is the norm. For the displaced children, this reality cannot be escaped, so their choices are to either get used to it or to face the consequences of resisting, which more than likely would mean mutilation, torture, or death. So often victims of trauma feel as though they must simply “get used to it” because the experience causes them to lose their sense of control and agency over the situation. In the midst of the trauma, the victims feel powerless. It is not until afterwards when they have established safety and trust that they can transform into survivors who do not have to “get used to it” any longer.

During their training and fighting, Beah and his fellow child soldiers were told over and over to “Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you” (Beah 112). It is
not until after Beah leaves the war and goes through his rehabilitation that he realizes what a vicious cycle the civil war is. The RUF kills the family of a boy, that boy grows up to kill rebels, and the families of those rebels grow up to fight against the army. This war in particular with Sierra Leonean against Sierra Leonean was fueled by revenge that led to the deaths of many innocent people. It is a vicious and terrible cycle that destroys families, lives, and nations. If left alone, this cycle would continue to bring destruction.

**Soldier Boy: Building Blind Loyalty**

*Soldier Boy* tells the story of Ricky Richard Anywar and his experiences both as a child soldier in Kony’s rebel army and as a rehabilitator and founder of the Friends of Orphans humanitarian organization. Similarly, to Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*, Ricky Anywar’s story shows the manipulation, indoctrination, and coercion tactics from the rebel leaders to steal the humanity from the boys. Throughout his true story, the young Ricky feels fear, commits actions directly counter to his morality, and seeks for any semblance or shred of hope. Author Keely Hutton worked closely with Anywar himself in order to tell his story with accuracy of the experiences and emotions. Like Sierra Leone’s RUF, Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was a rebel militant group who opposed the government and killed innocent Ugandans under the façade of liberation. Their leader, Kony, was placed on a godlike pedestal, and everyone claimed that he could hear the thoughts of his followers, allowing him to kill anyone who questioned him. When the children are put through this manipulative mind game, “any hope they had was replaced with fear. Fear is a powerful weapon” (Hutton 178). This instilled further fear and made the children blindly follow or risk death.
In the narrative following the young Ricky, the LRA leaders are portrayed as bloodthirsty killers with no remorse. When they attacked and ransacked a village, the LRA took the young boys to become soldiers, and they locked the adults and small children in schoolhouses or churches, setting them on fire. They wanted to ensure death, and “If the fire did not claim the villagers, their bullets would” (Hutton 69). In the immediate aftermath of their kidnapping, the boys were threatened over and over, “If you say one more word...I’ll kill you where you stand” (Hutton 73). Children are easily controlled with threats, especially if they had just witnessed the murder of their family by these very same men. An effective way for the leaders to maintain power was to make an example of the children, punishing or killing them in front of the others. To do this, “The leaders searched for the smallest infractions – a poorly handled weapon, a misstep in cadence, a sideways glance. They sought weakness in the pack on their hunt for the next kill” (Hutton 166). In some cases, the new recruits were forced use their machetes to cut the child being punished until he was dead. Not only do these children witness death, they are made complicit in the deaths of their comrades. These threats and unexpected brutal punishments make the children feel as if they have no choice but to stay and follow all commands to the letter. In order to gain ultimate control, “The perpetrator’s first goal appears to be the enslavement of his victim... Thus, he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, or even love” (Herman 75). A willing victim, even if the willingness is an illusion, is the easiest to control.

Rebel leaders demand blind loyalty. The Ugandan child soldiers are forced to call the military leaders “Afande,” which means “sir” and was the word they would use with their teachers and respected elders back home. Even though these leaders have done
nothing to earn the respect associated with this title, the child soldiers must always call them “Afande.” Within the Ugandan culture, “Afande” would have been reserved for the elders of the community, the ones who have earned that respect. For the rebel troops leaders, this respect is demanded rather than earned. In the creation of a willing victim, the perpetrator demands respect and threatens in order to further solidify it. For children who are still too young to fully understand what is happening to them, the willingness is created.

Warned not to try to escape, the children are told, “there’s nowhere to run. There’s no one waiting for you. There’s no one looking for you. They’re all dead” (Hutton 95). Once isolated, they are told, “We’re your family now” (Hutton 95). The concept of “family” for children who have witnessed the murders of their own family is confusing to them because despite their fear, they are still clinging to some semblance of safety. During an attack on a village, the screams caused Ricky to have flashbacks, which “shuddered through him. With every cry for mercy, his parents’ and sisters’ voices grew louder, until theirs were the only voices he heard” (Hutton 99). These flashbacks remind the children that their homes and families are gone. They are constantly reminded that if they try to run, they will be killed. If they evade death and somehow make it to their village, it will either have been destroyed or they, themselves, will never be accepted at home again. Once the children have been isolated, the LRA manipulates them into feeling at home with the rebels. They have no hope of safety or home, and all they find with the LRA is fear. These conflicting emotions prevent them from believing that they would have anywhere else to go. When one has lost everything, security, even at the hands of the murders, seems to be better than nothing at all.
In addition to demanding blind loyalty, the rebel leaders make the children feel as though anyone else they encounter is an enemy. They are sent into the villagers of their fellow innocent countrymen, and they kill adults and children and kidnap the boys. What began as an enemy in a government uniform transformed into anyone who was not a member of the LRA. The leaders instructed the child soldiers, “Our enemy is no longer only within the government troops. Our enemy is in every village and town in northern Uganda. Our own people have betrayed us to our enemies, so now they are our enemies” (Hutton 168). This is another contradiction to their morality and humanity, and they become the perpetrators of violence, of which they were victims. After the children have killed innocent people, the rebel leaders convince them that their villages will never accept them after what they have done. The children are manipulated into believing that they will never belong at home again, and thus their only choice is to remain with the rebel army. Through the creation of a willing victim and convincing them that they have no other option, the children’s time in captivity lengthens, preventing them from moving forward. For those who are lucky enough to escape, the mental captivity can continue. Trust must be reestablished because of their negative experiences with the previous authority. Even after they are no longer in combat, the stress and trauma follows them, even after they have begun the path to closure and understanding through rehabilitation.

**Rehabilitation: Rebuilding Trust and Recreating a Future**

The narratives of Beah, Anywar, and Dallaire depict the immense challenges that result from the use of child soldiers. The children are forced to betray their moral codes by committing violent acts, and after their time in war ends, they must attempt to
reconcile their identities. A crucial step in their rehabilitation is the recognition of their trauma and the telling of their story. Beah, Anywar, and Dallaire told their stories through memoir and hybrid genres in order to better comprehend their experiences and begin to facilitate healing.

Former child soldiers “suffer nightmares, intense sadness, intrusive thoughts, and recurring violent images” (Drexler). These extreme emotional experiences add to the trauma that they experience, and “those who committed extreme acts of violence, or were its victims, tend to suffer the most persistent mental problems and need the most intensive care” (Drexler). For victims of kidnapping, similarly to the abducted child soldier, “years after the event, the children retained a foreshortened sense of the future; when asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, many replied that they never fantasized or made plans for the future because they expected to die young” (Herman 47). Trauma at such a young and vulnerable age robs the children of their futures because it prevents them from feeling as though they have one. It is nearly impossible to think about or plan a future when one is attempting to survive the day. In the process of rehabilitation, “Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self” (Herman 196). Trauma inevitably changes the victim, but a survivor takes that trauma, actively works to continue the healing process, and creates a new self. Such is the case for Ishmael Beah and Ricky Richard Anywar. Despite their trauma resulting from their time as child soldiers, they both utilized their rehabilitation as a catalyst. They work as activists, helping to aide child soldiers in their own recovery.
After traumatic experiences that have deadly results for others near, survivors often feel extreme survivor's guilt. With this, not only do they have to struggle to cope with fear from their trauma, but they have other difficult emotions to work through as well. In situations like war, "Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience" (Herman 54). Surviving, particularly when the survivor could not have done anything more to try to save others, is nothing of which to feel ashamed. However, survivors often run the situations over and over through their minds wondering if there was something more than they could have done. This is another instance of being owned by the story rather than the other way around. Researchers assert that "In combat, witnessing the death of a buddy places the soldier at particularly high risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder" (Herman 54). So many war memoirs include reflections about fellow soldiers and friends who died, which takes a large emotional toll on the survivor.

Because trauma robs the victims of so much of themselves, the process of rehabilitation can take years or even decades to process and recover. Even long after the trauma has passed, "many traumatized people feel that a part of themselves has died" (Herman 49). The sense of self must be rediscovered after the breakdown from the time of trauma. It is common for survivors to explain that they feel trapped, which is how the UN soldier in Dallaire’s fictional narrative felt after he had to kill the young girl who was shooting a deadly automatic weapon. Killing her went against his human nature because killing a child is immoral. However, due to the fact that she was killing innocent people, the UN soldier really did not have a choice. In a situation like that, there is no right
choice, but he had to make a choice nonetheless. From that moment forward, he knew
"There was no escape from that moment, and because there was no escape, I was
uncertain about the future, whether I’d ever be whole again" (Dallaire 206). Directly after
the trauma and during the early stages of the recovery process, the feelings of fear are
powerful and overwhelming. Scientific researchers report that “Neuroscience confirms
that trauma is experienced in the deep affective and survival areas of the brain where
there are only sensations, emotionally conditioned memories, and visual images. These
define how traumatized youth view themselves and the terrifying world around them”
(Steele and Kuban 19). The feelings of fear, terror, and anxiety are biological and cannot
be prevented. Although they are in no way the fault of the victim, it often feels as though
they are.

During the healing process, “Once a sense of basic safety has been reestablished,
the survivor needs the help of others in rebuilding a positive view of the self” (Herman
63). Sometimes after trauma, victims will blame themselves for what happened to them.
They will try to find fault in themselves that caused the trauma to occur. They do not feel
as though they belong to the human race any longer because they feel damaged and
broken beyond repair. When they are trying to reestablish their sense of self, they feel “at
this stage of recovery as though they are refugees entering a new country. For political
exiles, this may be literally true” (Herman 196). Recovery cannot be done alone, and the
survivor needs a support system to help them feel connected to humanity again. In order
to promote healing, “Trusting bonds and repetitive safe and structured activities provide
new opportunities to view themselves and their world with hope and resolve” (Steele and
Kuban 20). At the moment of trauma, the victims feel hopeless, but during the process of
recovery, survivors begin to feel hope, which was previously robbed from them. This stage of the recovery process is about understanding “that our greatest shocks do not separate us from humankind. Instead, through expressing ourselves, we establish our connection with others and with the world” (DeSalvo 43). In the early stages of their recovery process, the former child soldiers feel utterly distance from the rest of the world because they feel as though no one can understand what they have done.

Finding a Purpose: Storytelling to Heal and to Teach

After experiencing trauma, survivors can feel as though they are alone on an island, so reconnection with the outside world allows them to heal and begin to feel whole again. Sharing the story allows the survivor to gain a better and more full understanding of the trauma and why it happened, and it helps them to begin to cope with the emotions and move forward with their lives. Trauma often leads to a feeling of lack of hope, and it can make them feel as though they no longer have a viable future. By first establishing safety and then establishing connections and a support system, the survivor can begin to start feeling “normal” again. Through the process of recovery, “Getting perspective on your terror and sharing it with others can reestablish the feeling that you are a member of the human race” (van der Kolk 236). In the fictional portion of Soldier Boy, Samuel distanced himself from the people in the rehabilitation facility after his arrival. The older man working there, who readers later learn is Ricky himself, says, “I know what you’ve been through, Samuel...and I’d like to hear your story” (Hutton 27). Because of the lack of trust that was instilled in him by Kony’s army, his reply was, “I have no story” (Hutton 27). Despite the fact that he was no longer owned by the rebel
forces, their indoctrination still had a hold on him. In order to help Samuel feel normal again, the man said, “We all have a story” (Hutton 27). Those who have experienced trauma feel as though they are the only ones with trauma and shame, but by establishing a community of survivors, they regain a sense of belonging.

During the rehabilitation process “the ‘action of telling a story’ in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory. With this transformation of memory comes relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder” (Herman 183). For former child soldiers, however, the establishment of a protected relationship is incredibly difficult to create. During their time as child soldiers, none of the adult leaders of the rebel forces actually cared about the children; they merely saw them as disposable weapons. During the rehabilitation process, the former child soldiers struggle to believe that this new adult stranger actually cares about them. They live in constant fear and distrust. During therapy sessions in recovery, “The patient scrutinizes the therapist’s every word and gesture, in an attempt to protect herself from the hostile reactions she expects. Because she has no confidence in the therapist’s benign intentions, she persistently misinterprets the therapist’s motives and reactions” (Herman 139). When a war story becomes a healing narrative the victim not only can begin to develop emotional healing with a regained sense of power and control over the situation, but he can also begin to experience physiological improvements with the relief of some PTSD symptoms. Again, these may never fully vanish, but through the healing narrative process the victim regains control along with the relief.
Because stories serve a multitude of purposes, they also extend responsibility. In Michel Chikwanine’s graphic novel, *Child Soldier: When Boys and Girls Are Used in War*, he says, “I share my story, as painful as it is for me to tell and as sad as it is for you to hear. In doing so, I have discovered that people do care! I am part of a movement of young people who want to help, who are passionate and who will take action so that what happens to me will not happen to the children of the future” (Chikwanine 40). It is true that history repeats itself when action is not taken to prevent it. It is clear that this is true because civil wars, conflicts, and child soldiers are continuing to be a common theme throughout Africa in the last century. By using their stories to spread the world, these former child soldiers can make a change.
Chapter 4
Hegemonic Masculinity: A Barrier to Psychological Treatment

In the previous three chapters of this thesis, I have examined the use of storytelling as a means to excavate memories and begin healing the war trauma that affects young American military personnel in the Iraq War and child soldiers in civil war Africa. In addition, I have discussed the use of storytelling as a “misguided archaeology” to begin healing their emotional and psychological wounds. In this final section, I discuss the perception of masculinity within military forces and the negative outcomes that result from not living up to those expectations. I will primarily draw on articles on hegemonic masculinity and war masculinity, and I look at how these ideals also affect young American military personnel and African child soldiers. For young Americans, the ideals established through stereotypical masculine military culture affect their expectations and thus their consequences after deployment. For former child soldiers, the loss of home and family as well as war’s imposed childhood trauma leads to massive challenges for the reintegration into society. The children are stripped of the stability of a family, and their male role models force them to contradict their morals. Thus, their view of masculinity is tainted.

Traumatic experiences in wartime have many ties to gender, specifically with the masculine role of protector. Many young men join the military because it gives them a strong masculine role, but it is this very same desired role that can cause crushing trauma. This trauma “is not about the loss of safety, but the loss of trust – in oneself, in others, in the military, and sometimes in the nation as a whole” (Puniewska). For men in the military, there is a sense of duty to protect one’s fellow soldiers and to do the right thing.
In a war against insurgents, however, the line between right and wrong can become blurred. U.S. military personnel must fire their weapons at potential threats, but sometimes the perceived threat turns out to be an innocent civilian. In their war narratives, combat veterans discuss the feeling of responsibility for the innocent deaths that they directly cause as well as the ones that they indirectly witness. In his book *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien writes, “I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough” (O’Brien 179). Even if the combat veteran was not directly responsible for the death, the moral trauma plagues them even if they are only bearing witness.

**War Expectation: The Hyper-Masculine Warrior**

Masculinity, and specifically hegemonic masculinity, is recognized as “a man in power, a man with power and a man of power” (Kimmel 2009, 61). Hegemonic masculinity is the pinnacle, which dominates over all other forms of masculinity. Through the media and war films, particularly in American Hollywood cinema, the hyper-masculine image of the powerful military man becomes the ideal for young men entering the armed forces. They imagine themselves becoming that image, but if they fail to achieve that over-exaggerated and unrealistic expectation, they feel as though they are a disappointment, a failure. The psychological toll taken by combat trauma is, thus, complicated and compounded by feelings of inadequacy, which, in turn, makes the transition back to “normal” even more challenging.

Naomi Cahn explains that “Men dominate most national and international militaries. A swathe of research evidences that the military trains its members to see
desirable masculinity as intertwined with violence in an effort to create the appropriate mindset of soldiers who are prepared to fight aggressively to defend their countries” (Cahn). This is seen as necessary in order to create a mental toughness for the soldiers before they enter combat, and it is done through a variety of tactics. For American military, the troops engage in training exercises before deployment, many of which simulate firefight with the trainees “dying” in the practice fights. For the child soldiers, this includes their “games” of killing prisoners as a race. These training exercises serve to normalize violence before combat begins, but this can be damaging long-term when they return home. The idea of “home” is difficult and varies greatly in relation to these two distinct groups. For American military, “home” tends to be constant, a place of comfort and of normalcy. For those returning with PTSD, however, there is a massive difficulty in reestablishing this feeling of “normal.” After a deployment and the trauma that they have experienced, they are undeniably different with a new set of challenges to face. For African child soldiers, there may not be a home to which they can return. Their families may have been killed, and their villages may have been pillaged or burned. For most, everything is different following their captivity. A lack of consistency or a lack of home coupled with a disparity of resources for the treatment of their trauma would result in countless former child soldiers in the dark, struggling with their PTSD on their own.

Military culture adheres to a specific code of conduct and an entirely different legal system than the one in America, which the personnel’s behavior must follow. This moral code and legal system “separates the actions of warriors during warfare” from similar actions committed by civilian populations (Talbot 2). Killing within the civilian world is murder, but killing during war is duty. Additionally, the military personnel “kill
for a purpose – usually for a ‘just’ or greater cause” (Talbot 2). Despite this accepted code of conduct, returning military personnel struggle with guilt over what they have done. According to the military’s code of conduct, they have not murdered, but their deep-rooted morality and humanity can cause them to struggle with separating the action of pulling the trigger with their deep-routed morality. Even if “just killing” and “murder” are recognized as separate by the military, the humanity of a person can override this distinction. They experience PTSD and depression as a result of the shots that they fired and the lives that they took as well as the deaths that they witnessed around them.

Former military personnel have described to psychiatrist Amy Amidon “experiences in which they, or someone close to them, violated their moral code: hurting a civilian who turned out to be unarmed, shooting at a child wearing explosives,” and they “are haunted by their own inaction, traumatized by something they witnessed and failed to prevent” (Puniewska). For Bartle in The Yellow Birds and Abe in The White Donkey, this is clearly the case. They violated their moral codes because during phase two of the Iraq War, the mentality had to be “kill or be killed.” Insurgents could be around any corner, and even a child could have been coerced by the enemy to attack the U.S. military. Bartle and Abe are also haunted by their inability to prevent the death of a close battle buddy, which happens through flashbacks or reminders after they return.

Experts in the field of psychology have created a new term to describe this conflict, which does not necessarily align with PTSD caused by fear. This psychological trauma as a result of guilt has begun to be called “moral injury” (Puniewska). The narratives of combat veterans often portray the replaying of a friend’s death through nightmares and flashbacks, and the survivor continually questions “what if?” wondering if he could have
done more, if he could have saved his buddy, or if he should have deserved to meet the same fate. They feel as though their masculine duty is that of a protector, and if a friend dies on their watch, they feel as if they have failed. For Bartle and Abe, their traumatic experiences are partly a result of fear and PTSD, but they are also heavily impacted by their moral injuries from feeling helpless in preventing the death of a friend and thus failing as a protector.

War and the way it is fought has changed drastically, especially in the latter 20th century and early 21st century. There is less face-to-face organized battle, there is more insurgency, and there is more use of technology. Regardless of how much war has changed, the warrior has remained the prominent symbol of masculinity. Howard and Prividera identify the archetypal warrior as often and generally conceptualized as “heterosexual, white, of unrivalled physical and mental constitution, sexually potent, morally and nationally superior, and surpassing non-warriors in most respects” (Howard and Prividera 222). The media and Hollywood war films typically portray this stereotypical hyper-masculine fighter, even if this image is antiquated or unattainable. Likewise, propaganda utilized to promote enlistment in the 20th century has created a stereotyped view of courage and masculinity, which is still influential in the 21st century. For many young men, the decision to join the military is situated on what the experience can do to benefit through their time of service. Both training and combat “offers men unique resources for the construction of a masculine identity defined by emotional control, overt heterosexual desire, physical fitness, self-discipline, self-reliance, the willingness to use aggression and physical violence, and risk-taking, qualities aligned
with the military” (Hinojosa 180). This identity that they create, one which is fueled by aggression, does not transfer back into the civilian world.

Likewise, child soldiers are manipulated into roles that counter the morality of themselves and their communities. They are ultimately changed by their experiences and trauma. Child soldiers who are integrated into violent armed groups are continually exposed to violence through movies, battles, and violent training practices. Violence becomes the norm for the children, creating a misconstrued sense of masculinity and normalcy. Ishmael Beah explains that with their indoctrination, “killing had become as easy as drinking water” (Beah 122). At such a young age, a reliable normal is crucial for development, but when their sense of normal is so drastically changed, they lose sight of what is moral within the context of normal society. In a study of former child soldiers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the “findings indicate that growing up in an armed group is linked to higher levels of trauma-related disorders, aggressive behavior, and failed reintegration. Consequently, particularly former child soldiers burdened with trauma-related illness and substantial appetitive aggression pose challenges for successful integration into civil society” (Hermenau et al. 7). As Hermenau states, the “substantial appetitive aggression” is fueled by the constant exposure to drugs, death, and violence as Beah details from his own experiences. After such constant exposure, reintegration into society, which for many is different after their own was destroyed, is incredibly difficult.

**Internal Struggle: Stigmas of PTSD and Fear of Inadequacy**

Because there is such a strong expectation of what it means to be a masculine warrior in the military, those who struggle with PTSD develop feelings of inadequacy for
having failed to meet this portrayal. Young men, in particular, are at risk for inner turmoil because of the expectations placed upon them by society, by the military, and by themselves. Because of society’s firm hold on the view of masculinity, “boys are typically inculcated into cultures whose normative underlay is based on the suppression of emotion” (Cahn). With this view, the expression of emotion or vulnerability is seen as weak and in direct opposition to the ideal masculine portrayal. In a study of military personnel returning with PTSD, many “stated that they fear that if others knew what had happened, they would be determined to be vulnerable, defenseless, and helpless, countering their efforts to achieve an impression of strength and power” (Elder et al. 202). In an effort to protect themselves from this perceived weakness, they hide their psychological scars, deny the existence of any issue, and avoid seeking help. According to Wilson, Gettings, Hall, and Pastor, twenty percent of veteran military personnel who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan experience mental health problems including PTSD and depression when they return home from deployment. However, of those who face these mental health challenges, only 30-40% actually seek treatment (Wilson et al.). By not seeking treatment, these veterans continue to struggle in isolated silence, and the symptoms of PTSD increasingly have negative impacts on their lives, families, and futures.

In the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the prevalence of returning military personnel with PTSD refusing or avoiding treatment was higher than in the later years of the war. This is primarily due to the stigmas of psychological trauma. There was still a disparity of understanding of the particular traumas that resulted from counterinsurgency, where the enemy could not be as easily recognized. Although these
stigmas began to diminish in the later years of the war as more information on mental
health became available, they were incredibly prominent at the start of OIF. After
returning from combat, “Male victims may feel caught between the hyper-
masculinization of war and their own feelings of vulnerability and stigma” (Cahn). They
feel and experience trauma, but the image of masculinity contrasts with their internal
vulnerability. They are afraid that if they seek treatment, they will be seen as weak due to
the stigmas surrounding mental health. This stigma, which is often compounded within
the mind of the individual until it becomes over exaggerated, “is an important barrier to
care among soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Quartana et al. 1671). Because
of the existing stigmas, any signs of mental health issues could make the veteran fear
being viewed as frail or vulnerable. As a result, “it appears that a substantial proportion
of those suffering from mental health problems either do not access, delay, or fail to
complete an adequate course of mental health treatment” (Chapman et al. 56). The
veteran suicide rate in alarmingly high, recognized as 22 per day, and this is in large part
due to the suppressed trauma as a result of stigma. When trauma is ignored, it does not
always fade away; the trauma often augments in the silence.

The military emphasizes masculinities with a focus on physical fitness and mental
fortitude, which allows them to maintain their strength and discipline during their
deployments. However, this expectation can cause barriers for returning military
personnel to seek treatment. Surveys have been conducted with those returning from the
military about their reasons for avoiding or denying treatment for their combat-related
psychological trauma. Their answers vary, but they all connect with the juxtaposition of
the warrior and the weak. In 2004, Hoge et al. conducted a survey with members of the
U.S. Army and Marines about their fears and perceptions about mental health and treatment in the military. 731 of those screened were identified as having a mental health disorder, but among those, many expressed reasons to avoid seeking treatment. 65% of the 731 feared that by seeking help they “would be seen as weak,” 65% felt as though the leadership “might treat [them] differently,” 59% expressed that their fellow troops “might have less confidence in [them],” and 50% felt that seeking treatment would “harm [their] career” (Hoge et al. 21). All of their responses connect with the idea of appearing to others as weak rather than masculine. From decreased job prospects to a lack of confidence by fellow military personnel, those struggling with PTSD still hold on to the exaggerated view of the hegemonic masculine warrior.

According to Whitworth, “emotional pain and fear fundamentally contradict the ideals of hypermasculinity so carefully inculcated into the soldier,” and PTSD and mental health concerns are seen as a “profound betrayal of the norms of hypermasculinity” (Whitworth 122). The United States military has recognized the high rates of psychological trauma and suicide among veterans during the early years of OIF, and has increased its efforts in aiding recovery, which includes access to quality treatment. There has been more frequent discussion of mental health in an effort to help those returning from war feel more comfortable seeking help. Despite these efforts, however, “mental health stigma is a deep-seated cultural problem that may take decades to attenuate” (Wilson et al.). Strides are being made to normalize mental health conversations and PTSD treatment, but the stigmas, which have existed for decades, are ingrained in the military culture and the contrast of masculinity and weakness.
Suffering in Silence: A Reluctance to Seek Help

For males who have experienced combat, many choose not to receive help. Beginning the process of treatment “requires recognizing as well as labeling problems, admitting a need, and relying on others. For a man to accomplish these tasks, he must violate traditional norms pertaining to self-reliance, toughness, and emotional regulation” (Perkins 11). Because of the over-exaggerated perception of the hegemonic masculine warrior that young men idealize, young men struggle with putting a label on their psychological trauma. The archetypal warrior is not supposed to be affected by combat, and he does not show his emotions. Returning military personnel are caught in the middle of their inner turmoil and their fear of vulnerability. Although treatment is desperately needed, far too many refuse it. One in five returning military personnel show signs of psychological stress, yet only 30-40% of the affected actually seek treatment (Wilson et al.).

When troops return home from combat, they fill out a Post-Deployment Health Assessment, and if someone’s assessment shows risk of severe mental health concerns, they will be sent to work with mental health professionals for treatment (Hoge). This is one of the strides made by the U.S. military to provide access to help for those returning. Despite its good intentions, some of those returning lie during their assessment, intentionally marking the answers that they know will allow them to pass without being taken to treatment. There are various reasons why those returning from combat may underplay their symptoms, which in turn prevents them from being pulled for psychological treatment. These include the “sense of relief about having returned home that may overshadow mental health symptoms,” and “fear that medical treatment will
interfere with taking time off” during their already-short leave time (Bliese et al. 142). In addition to these reasons, others deliberately fake their assessment because of the guilt that they feel, which is the case for Bartle from *The Yellow Birds* and Abe from *The White Donkey*.

During his return home from Iraq, Bartle clearly was having intense psychological challenges. He would have benefited greatly from receiving treatment, but he did not feel as though he was deserving. Bartle explains that through this survey, “If it is determined that you are overly stressed, you will be given the opportunity to recuperate in the presence of the best doctors available” (Powers 185). Bartle obviously is in need of that help and treatment, but he “thought of something Sterling had said after Murph died,” dishonestly filled out the survey, and went home (Powers 185). Much of Bartle’s psychological pain is self-inflicted because of the responsibility that he feels for Murph’s death as well as the masculine persona that Sergeant Sterling and the military placed upon him. Both during his deployment and following his return home, Bartle maintains steady in his emotions, but it is clear that he desires the opportunity to actually show his vulnerability. After Bartle returns home and hugs his mother, he felt as if he’d “somehow returned to the singular safety of the womb, untouched and untouchable to the world outside her arms” (Powers 109). He feels powerful emotions, but in an effort to maintain his hardened persona, he refuses to let them show to others or to let anyone else in no matter how much he might wish that he could.

Likewise, Abe lies on his assessment in order to hide his guilt and confusion about his actions and responsibility during his deployment. He clicked “no” to all three questions, which asked if he had nightmares, went out of his way to avoid thinking about
traumatic experiences, and was constantly on guard (Uriarte). Throughout the course of *The White Donkey*, Abe experienced all of these frequently, but his self-blame and fear of vulnerability causes him to ignore it. He shot a man in a car, and after the car was checked, it was clean with no explosives. Even though the man did not die, Abe felt an immense amount of guilt. He was reassured that he did the right thing because the car was not stopping, and that was protocol in case the car was controlled by insurgents. His sergeant explained, “You point a gun at someone and you have to make a decision. Out here there aren’t always good decisions... Just *decisions*” (Uriarte). In the time following, he distances himself from his comrades, feeling shame for what he had done, even though there was no way to have known that the car coming toward them was not a threat. The archetypal warrior would be unaffected by this decision, but the humanity of Abe overpowers his ability to brush it off. Between the constant insurgency fighting and the loss of his closest battle buddy Garcia, Abe has deep psychological scars. Rather than exposing his vulnerability and seeking treatment, Abe fades into a fog, avoiding connection and refusing to acknowledge his trauma.

**The Inventory: Invisible Wounds of Combat**

When one returns from war with a visible injury, such as a missing limb or scars, everyone who sees that person knows what they have experienced in war. When one received psychological wounds that are not seen, there is not an automatic understanding of what happened. A veteran could look perfectly fine on the outside but be devastatingly wounded on the inside. Adam Schumann, one of the soldiers that David Finkel followed for his book *Thank You For Your Service* discussed the invisible wounds of PTSD. He
says that he will look at himself in the mirror and do “the inventory” to find that there is
“Nothing missing. Symmetrical as ever. No scarred-over bullet holes. No skin grafts over
bomb burns” (Finkel 11-12). During this inventory Schumann recognizes that he is
“physically unmarked, so how can he be injured? The answer must be that he isn’t. So
why was he sent home with a diagnosis of severe PTSD? The answer must be that he’s
weak” (Finkel 12). Schumann was affected by the stigmas relating to mental health in
war. To him, psychological wounds automatically designated him as weak, and he
struggled with this misconception. His family’s life began to fall apart, and he struggled
with treatment. While attending group sessions, Adam Schumann felt guilt because of his
PTSD. When he looked around and saw soldiers with physical wounds, he would be
invaded by “the inevitable thoughts. Those soldiers are injured. He’s not” (Finkel 127).

Although their wounds are not physical, they are incredibly life-altering. Many
who return from war with invisible wounds take their own lives because the pain is so
difficult. In Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Sergeant Sterling, the epitome of the
masculine warrior, takes his life. From the first time the protagonist, Bartle, met Sterling,
he respected him because of his masculine warrior persona. During his earlier tours in
Iraq, Sterling was decorated with medals, and Bartle describes him as “harsh, but fair,
and there was a kind of evolutionary beauty in his competence” (Powers 33). Almost
every sentence Sterling forms has a curse word in it, making him seem tough and mature
to the younger Bartle and Murph. During leave, he drinks and visits brothels, asserting
his hegemonic masculinity over the powerless women. Throughout the deployment
storyline of *The Yellow Birds*, Sterling remains harsh and unaffected, even by Murph’s
death. The lie covering up what happened to Murph was Sterling’s idea in the first place,
and in that moment, he seems completely calm. Unfortunately, despite his hyper-masculine persona, there was an interior battle that he continued to ignore.

Sterling never received treatment following his deployments, and he acted out in violent anger and did not reach out for help. Maintaining his macho persona had been such a daunting task for so long that he ultimately could not continue on. The Army had controlled him for so long, and his various deployments made him snap. Bartle says that Sterling “cared nothing for himself,” and Bartle was not sure if Sterling “would have realized he was permitted to have his own desires and preferences” (Powers 187). He did what he felt he had to do for the sake of duty, even if it compromised his own morals. Early on in their deployment, Sterling’s psyche began to break down. There was a car that ended up being civilian, but they had to open fire in case of insurgency. After the car was shot numerous times, it stopped in the middle of the road, “but Sterling did not stop shooting” (Powers 22). His self-restraint began to weaken, and the disastrous deaths during the deployment continued to break him. Sterling kept up the masculine act until it became too difficult. Bartle reflects that after giving so much of himself to the Army that Sterling had “been able to do only one thing for himself, truly for himself, and it had been the last act of his short, disordered life” (Powers 188). After metaphorically sacrificing himself in commitment to the military and refusing treatment for the sake of his masculinity, he reached such a low point that the only act he felt that he could do for himself was to take his own life.

In Maximilian Uriarte’s *The White Donkey*, the protagonist Abe has crippling invisible wounds as a result of the self-assigned guilt he feels for Garcia’s death. A role of masculinity is that of protector, one who is able to prevent disaster from affecting close
ones. Because Garcia died while Abe was supposed to be on the lookout for potential IED’s, he feels as though he has not fulfilled his role. Additionally, he does not seek treatment following his return to the United States. This reluctance to seek help is a combination of his guilt about Garcia’s death as well as his deeply rooted personal struggles with masculinity. As a result, Abe leaves home, drives drunk, goes to visit Garcia’s grave, and brings a gun with him, contemplating suicide. In the illustrations on these pages, Abe’s eyes look empty as he points the gun at his head. He blames himself for Garcia’s death because he was not focused when they hit the IED and he was not fulfilling his role as protector and leader. Abe was the first one to see Garcia’s body after the IED explosion, and “witnessing the death of a buddy places the soldier at particularly high risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder” (Herman 54). Following his return home, Abe clearly shows signs of PTSD and a lack of coping skills. He turns to drinking and isolation, leaving him alone with his self-blaming thoughts. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, men who experience PTSD are two times more likely to develop alcohol problems than men who do not have PTSD (USDVA). Among veterans, binge drinking “may be in response to memories of trauma” in an effort to avoid thinking about their trauma (USDVA). Like Powers’ Bartle, Abe never sought help or treatment because he did not feel as if he deserved it. He did not fulfill the protector role of the masculine military man. These young men witnessed their closest combat companion die, and they felt responsible. By denying themselves the opportunity for recovery, they convince themselves that they are making amends for what they had allowed to happen.
Dangerous Contrast: Masculinity of a Child

Masculinity is a term that is typically equated with adult men, but in African nations plagued with civil war, children are forced into roles that require them to achieve the masculine ideal despite their young and immature age. For the young males, there is an expectation that they must participate in violence without remorse, and this presumption is “further compounded in societies that have deeply stratified gender roles, leaving little room for the expression of positive masculinities in either the public or private sphere” (Cahn). This is compounded to be even more negative for children kidnapped and coerced into armed forces, which present masculinity in brutally violent ways. These children, who are forced to grow up far faster than they should, are manipulated into feeling no hesitation when it comes to killing. Their process of maturation becomes short-circuited by what they confront, ultimately changing who they are to become Ishmael Beah explains in *A Long Way Gone*, “My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed” (Beah 122). From the early days of their captivity as child soldiers, they are sent to the front lines. Not only are the children expendable, the leaders must break their morality to transform them into killing machines who do not talk about their fears.

For young males growing up in war torn countries, the development of a positive form of masculinity is challenging because of the examples that are present. The ones who are violent and who kill swiftly are the victors, so to a confused child, this could become the example. Child soldiers take on the masculine and violent persona when they begin to fight, but it is necessary to remember that, for many, this was not a willing choice. When discussing the masculinity of a civil war insurgency soldier, “it is vital to
acknowledge that men and boys may also have been victimized throughout violent conflicts – possibly by abduction, possibly by sexual violence, almost certainly by the violent ritualization that frequently accompanies male initiation into predominantly male military fraternities” (Cahn). The soldiers take drugs, engage in brutal killing “games,” utilize fear tactics, and rape young women. The children are brought into such a haphazard situation, and their idea of what masculinity is becomes skewed. Looking up to the leaders of their groups does nothing to help because the masculinity portrayed by the leaders is incredibly negative. They use threats and make brutal examples of children in order to instill a sense of authority that will not be questioned. For children who are brought into these militant groups, the leader is the example of masculinity, and thus they struggle to form their own positive masculinities.

Within the context of civil wars that utilize child soldiers, the perpetrators are the ones associated with hegemonic masculinity. They are the ones with power, and they assert their dominance over the young children that they control. Within these militarized forces, the children look up to these leaders and strive to be like them, even just for the sake of safety and security. Within these powerful hierarchical situations, the perpetrator is viewed as masculine and the victim is seen as weak. Child soldiers, however, “occupy a unique space by inhabiting the boundaries of being both victims and perpetrators simultaneously” (Cahn). Because they are caught in between, there is sometimes a reluctance to talk about their experiences out of fear for being blamed. For many, their villages were destroyed and their families were killed, so following their freedom from the militarized groups, they must find a new home. When they arrive at a new village, however, a fear would develop that the villagers would see the child as a monster, like the
leaders who caused the attacks. There are treatment and rehabilitation centers set up by organizations such as UNICEF and Friends of Orphans, but they can only reach so many children. Countless more leave the armed forces, both government and rebel, with no access to psychological treatment. Thus, they are left to their own devices despite the fact that they are so young and vulnerable that they have not developed the necessary coping skills. Their sense of safety and sense of belonging must be reestablished in order for them to decide once again that they are deserving of care.

**Conclusion: Far-Reaching Trauma**

Throughout the previous sections of this thesis, I have analyzed the impact of trauma on a developing mind, the challenges of navigating combat, and the immense struggle of recovery and PTSD. When one experiences such extreme trauma as combat, one can be “rendered helpless by overwhelming force,” leading to an inability to comprehend what happened (Herman 33). There is a feeling of isolation and a denial of the need for connection with others to cope. The moment of trauma is so overpowering that the sufferer struggles to move forward in life. Those who are plagued by PTSD following combat “continued to be ‘there’ and did not know how to be ‘here’ - fully alive in the present” (van der Kolk 47). Psychological trauma can trap the victim, forcing them into denial and a refusal to seek treatment.

Veterans of the Iraq War, including Kevin Powers and Maximilian Uriarte, have chosen to write fictional stories as a means to better understand their own experiences. Their protagonists, Bartle and Abe, struggle with feelings of guilt and responsibility after the loss of a close comrade during combat. After returning home, these protagonists hear
the words “thank you for your service,” causing them to question whether or not they are deserving of thanks. Their guilt is self-inflicted, and they intentionally cut themselves off from the world and connections with others. The trials with psychological trauma are made worse because they do not feel as if they are allowed to seek treatment after what they feel they have done. These narratives are not glamorous, and they do not focus on the hero in the traditional sense. Powers and Uriarte instead focus on the reality of psychological challenges for combat veterans. The physical enemy is gone, but the internal one is as present as ever, ready to strike with flashbacks at any point. For combat veterans, there is an expectation of masculinity, and if they do not live up to this expected standard, they feel even more guilt. The action of owning their stories and embracing the vulnerability brings the escape from the desperation that so many desperately want but refuse to admit. This freedom from the traumatic experience “comes from acceptance of the condition as it is rather than as you might want it to be” (Whitwham). In order to begin the recovery process, one must first accept the reality and embrace the uncertainty.

Child soldiers exist in the gray area, inhabiting the realms of both perpetrator and victim. For the vast majority, they were manipulated and coerced into joining the militarized ranks, and they experience extreme trauma and abuse. They are forced to kill their innocent fellow countrymen, and they are expected to do so without hesitation. Between the drugs to which they are addicted and the constant commands they hear, they must release their morality and act in the way that they are told. Not following these commands could result in their own torture or death. Ishmael Beah and Ricky Richard Anywar experienced the trauma firsthand, and they found power in telling their stories. By utilizing memoir and telling their own true, personal stories, they can spread
awareness of the heinous use of children in combat, and they can promote activism. By
telling their stories, they give a voice to the countless voiceless child soldiers who were
silenced and robbed of any opportunity to speak their truths. Those who have experienced
trauma often feel “as though they are refugees entering a new country. For political
exiles, [and former child soldiers,] this may be literally true” (Herman 196). For those
children who have survived combat often no longer have a home to which they can return. There is no normal, and for many, there is no family. The trauma does not end
when the combat does; they simply face a new challenge, which is the recreation of the self.

When one joins the armed forces, there is an expectation of masculinity, that is
often unattainable. There is the impact of the hyper masculine warrior, who shows no
emotion and handles combat without vulnerability. When one returns from combat and
experiences trauma, their struggles are compounded with their own sense of insecurities.
Because of the stigmas surrounding trauma, they believe that by seeking treatment, they
would no longer fit the criteria of the masculine warrior. Instead, they suffer in silence as
their psychological wounds continue to overpower them. Nearly one in five people
returning from military service struggle with PTSD, but only 30-40% of those struggling
actually seek treatment (Wilson et al. 2015). The stigmas that are still prevalent cause
insecurities among those who struggle with psychological trauma, preventing many from
receiving the help that they so desperately deserve.

The “misguided archaeology” of storytelling to understand and cope with trauma
is crucial to the recovery process for those who have experienced combat. Further
research and study could be done in the area, taking the conversation of trauma, self-
inflicted guilt, and storytelling to other groups of trauma survivors. Studies could be done about women in the United States military, girls who have been kidnapped and used as “wives” for rebel leaders in African rebel troops, and civilians whose entire lives are uprooted as a result of war and destruction. The trauma that comes from war does not only affect those who are actually fighting. It impacts far beyond the immediate reach.
Works Cited


“Understanding the Teen Brain.” *Understanding the Teen Brain - Health Encyclopedia - University of Rochester Medical Center*.


Wright, Geoffrey A. “‘A Kind of Misguided Archeology’: The Iraq War and Postmodern Memory in Kevin Powers’s the Yellow Birds.” *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 105-122.