

The Adolescent War:

Finding Our Way on the Battlefield

Adolescence is a war zone—an emotional, hormonal war zone filled with angst, uncertainty, and fear. By nature, adolescent literature tends to capture the emotions and struggles faced by characters in their various coming of age stories as they search for their own identity. So, when that conflict is complicated by the harsh realities of war, the internal battles of adolescence are shadowed by the destructive forces and cruel emotions of the battlefield. Adolescent war fiction is not a new genre. From as early as 1895 with Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, authors have been combining the tensions of these two kinds of war—the external and the internal. While many books such as Bette Greene’s 1973 *Summer of My German Soldier* and Janet Taylor Lisle’s *The Art of Keeping Cool* from 2000 have centered the story on the home front and the adolescent’s struggle with a friend or family member’s involvement in war, others like Harold Keith’s 1957 *Rifles for Watie* and L. M. Elliott’s *Under a War-Torn Sky* from 2001 have focused on a young person’s direct involvement in battle. The latter best illustrates the unique search for identity that takes place as adolescent protagonists face the firsthand trauma of war.

When a nation is at war, its teachers have an unfortunate “teachable moment.” They can, of course, ignore the topic in an attempt to escape any political conflict, but good teachers often find themselves looking for ways to teach adolescents about the complexities of real world problems, including the nature of war. Pretending that students are not capable of understanding world conflicts is often a way of hiding from the truth. With the ready availability of a

variety of media materials—including music, videos, movies, newspapers, and magazines, not to mention the human resources of soldiers and their families—we have a rich supply of resources to supplement the study of these novels. But when we take on the role of educating adolescents, we also take on an obligation to lead them to their own search for identity—a search that includes contemplating the world we live in. That world—at least part of it—is, unfortunately, at war.

I suppose there is also a bit of the personal in my rationale—a bit of my own search for self. Here in Clarksville, Tennessee, near Fort Campbell amid the franticness of the 101st Airborne’s preparations to return to Iraq, there is a bustle that reminds me of Emily Dickinson’s poem as the Black Hawks and Chinooks circle the city. My students, many of them veterans or the wives, sisters, husbands of soldiers, prepare to teach the children of soldiers in local schools. At a faculty luncheon yesterday, our substitute waiter—obviously flustered—explained that one of his workers had collapsed in the kitchen after finding out that her husband was returning to Iraq. We teased his clumsiness and ate our soup. Today, I cry for her—and say a prayer. And I talk to my son every day, thankful for his safe return from Afghanistan and thankful that he seems himself, but I worry over what he has seen, and I wish quiet dreams for him each night. We are a nation at war, but most of us are without the daily reminders or even the World War II sacrifices of rationing and can drives. Instead, in our helplessness, we hang ribbons on our cars and swear that this cannot be another Vietnam—and we teach. So, it is in my helplessness that I write this article as a

suggestion for others who feel helpless.

While there is a wealth of adolescent war fiction, the primary analysis here centers on four books written by American authors since the Gulf War. *I Had Seen Castles*, Cynthia Rylant's 1993 novel, and *Soldier's Heart*, Gary Paulsen's book published in 1998, focus on the experiences of young men who are drastically changed by their experiences on the battlefields of World War II and the American Civil War. Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in My Hand*, from 2002, relates the experiences of an eleven-year-old girl's struggles in 1988 Gaza City, while Meg Rosoff's 2004 book, *How I Live Now*, tells the story of an American girl's adventures in an all-too-real hypothetical war in England. These particular books were chosen to reflect not only the variety of young adult war literature available, but also the unique struggles faced by adolescent protagonists—both male and female—searching for an identity on battlefields of drastically different historical time periods.

The early 1990's saw a huge influx of adolescent war books, perhaps because of Desert Storm and other conflicts in the Middle East. Many of these books, including Paul Fleischman's *Bull Run*, Isabelle Holland's *Behind the Lines*, and Clifton Wisler's *Red Cap*, are set in the American Civil War, a natural draw for adolescent war stories because so many young people fought and died in America's bloodiest war. What sets Gary Paulsen's book, *Soldier's Heart*, apart from these other books is his graphic description of the battles and the main character's, Charley Goddard, final demise. But Cynthia Rylant chooses World War II for her *I Had Seen Castles*, a book that she set in 1939 Pittsburgh. The first-person narration of her seventeen-year-old male protagonist, John Dante, is the personal account of one young man's transformation on the battlefields of Europe, as well as his family's struggle to come to terms with their role in the war. Both books are filled with graphic descriptions of battle, as well as the harsh struggles of daily life for a soldier. Both books also address the life the young men leave behind, but from the soldier's perspective so that the reader gets a clear image of life at war. The teenagers in both novels enter war with eagerness and a sense of duty, yet neither book celebrates war as a glorious notion or the young men as particularly heroic. While many adolescent war stories contain characters who face battle and perform some outstanding heroic act,

Paulsen and Rylant create ordinary young people struggling to find an identity through their life at war.

Charley Goddard from Gary Paulsen's *Soldier's Heart* is fifteen years old when he lies his way into the First Minnesota Volunteers to fight for the Union in 1861. Charley convinces his mother that he should join because it's his "chance to be a man" (5). In his words, "A boy wouldn't go off to earn eleven dollars a month and wear a uniform. Only a man. So I'm going to be a man and do what a man can do" (5). Cynthia Rylant's protagonist, John Dante, from *I Had Seen Castles*, is equally anxious to enter the war and describes the feelings of a nation that has been attacked. "Every man I knew wanted to fight. . . . The bombs that dropped on Hawaii sent a shock wave straight into the outraged soul of every man in America, and like Neanderthals, we had a primitive, fearless, screaming desire to kill" (13). John wants to accompany his friend Tony who wasn't waiting for graduation. "Yes, I wanted to go. I wanted to go with Tony . . . We'd look out for each other. We'd come home together after we'd destroyed the Japs" (14). Like Charley, John also considers lying about his age. "But I was ready to go to war, and, of course, it was war I was too young for, war we were all too young for, and the reality of that is what we could not find at our dinner table" (16). His parents, however, refuse to let him go at seventeen but are only able to keep John at home for a few more months. When he turns eighteen he claims, "there was no question that you were not considered a man unless you signed up. No question that you would be regarded with utter contempt and loathing if you chose not to volunteer" (31). Both young men see war as a right of passage to manhood. In John's words, "I needed to affirm my manhood, my worth" (31). Each young man feels society's pressure and judgment, pushing him to become a man by going to war.

Rylant and Paulsen both show the concerns of family left behind, as well as the difficulties the young men face in trying to communicate with their parents. The Dante and Goddard families share a belief that the war will be over quickly. Perhaps all families promise themselves that when they are sending a soldier to war. Charley's mother consoles herself with memories of songs, parades, politicians, and newspapers who all told her "it would be a month or two, no longer. It would all be over by fall" (6). The Dante family also

believe in a speedy victory as they sit down to dinner. “We deceive ourselves into believing we can clean up the enemy, put him back in his place, and have our chicken parmigiana another night. Soon. A quick war and, intact, we all sit down again to eat” (16). When John enlists, he is concerned about his parents. In his words, his father “supported the war. He supported the draft—but it is one thing to believe in an idea. Quite another to give up your child to it” (62). His mother, who had never worked outside of the home, goes to work for a factory which produces artillery. Years later, John understands that by working these extra hours, she was hoping to produce enough weapons to “singlehandedly wipe the Germans and the Japanese off the face of the earth” (28). She “wanted her only son to be spared this war. She wanted to save his life” (27-28). As each young man goes into battle, he finds himself unable to share the horrors of war. John expresses his concerns for writing home. “My letters home were brief. I found that I grew less and less able to be cheerful and reassuring in them, so those that I did write were mainly for the purpose of telling my family I was still alive” (80). Charley’s letters are even more brief, “Here is some money. I’ve been in a battle. I was scart some but it’s past now. I can’t come home” (42). This he writes after witnessing the horrors of Bull Run.

Both books are also filled with graphic scenes of battle, something oddly missing from many adolescent books about war. Neither author spares young readers from a view of the realities of war. From Paulsen’s book, Charley witnesses the following scenes.

Next to him Massey’s head suddenly left his body and disappeared, taken by a cannon round that then went through an officer’s horse, end to end, before plowing into the ground. (21)

He could not identify men he’d known for months. They were all bloated, pushing out against their uniforms; clouds of flies were planting eggs in the wound openings and eyes and mouths of the bodies. The smell was sweet, cloying, the smell of blood and dirt and decaying flesh—the smell of death. (36-37)

. . . the screams of the wounded horses hit by soft, large-caliber expanding bullets, horses with heads blown open, horses with jaws shot away, horses with eyes shot out or with intestines tangling in their hooves, horses torn and dying—screamed louder than a thousand, louder than a million men. (80)

He helps a wounded soldier commit suicide, drinks from a stream tainted with blood, and piles bodies of dead soldiers as a barricade against the cold wind. In his angry words, “I am not supposed to see this, God. No person is supposed to see this. How can You let this happen?” (25). Rylant’s book also reveals the horrors of war as John witnesses the traumas of the battlefield.

There are the horrifying specters we carry with us forever. A buddy crouching out in the open during a barrage of artillery. “What the hell is he doing?” I yelled, and I ran to him. When I touched him, his head fell off. (78-79)

The shoes with feet and legs up to the knees still standing, and nothing more. The rest of the body is gone. Or the chest cavity blown wide open so that the heart can be seen, still beating, and the boy to whom the heart belongs reaches out and asks to be helped to die. (78)

I saw sheep standing in a green meadow on this beautiful sunny day. Then mortar shells began to land in that meadow, and the sheep were hit and lay bloody, half-alive, their bowels spilling among the meadow flowers, and we were all in it. We were all in the Second World War. (71)

He comments on the contrast between the battlefield and home as “people were making more money than they ever dreamed possible” (78) and dancing at the USO. “At the drugstore the young women behind the counters lined up the lipsticks to form a V. And in Europe someone was sobbing for his mother and searching for his arms” (79).

Charley and John also come to the same realizations about fighting the enemy. Charley wants “to kill them. . . . All of them. Stick and jab and shoot them and murder them and kill them all Kill them all. Before they could kill him” (51). At the beginning of his struggles on the battlefield, John believes in a “divine mission” and that they “would all be finer human beings” for their part in the war (73). After three months in war, he realizes that he cannot fight for ideals. “. . . I could not kill them for words. Not for *democracy*, nor *freedom*, and certainly not for *religion*. No one I knew fought for these words. I killed to keep from dying. I killed to protect the boys in my squad” (75). They kill to keep from being killed. By the end of the war, Charley also experiences an “insane joy, the joy of battle, the joy of winning, the joy of killing to live” (84) as he slashes and stabs men with his bayonet. While each soldier is certainly changed by his experiences at war, neither young man

can find happiness in later life. “What does one say after transformation?” John asks himself as he tries to speak with his mother at the end of the war in Europe. He cannot return to his “boy’s room” in his parents home and spends much of his life drifting until finding his way to Canada because he could not “stay in America because America had not suffered” (95). Charley, at age twenty-one, suffering from what might now be called “battle fatigue” or “shell shock” as well as several war wounds, contemplates suicide at the end of his story.

Each young man is “transformed,” to use John’s word, and each searches for his own identity through the foxholes and ramparts of war in an attempt to find manhood. According to John, “I wasn’t anyone then. I had so little sense of self I don’t know that I could have told anyone what I cared about, what I loved, what I wanted” (75). Instead of each young man finding himself on the battlefield, each seems more lost by the end of the war. Both Cynthia Rylant and Gary Paulsen use their stories to illustrate the complete disorder of war and to show young people that the battlefield is not the best place to find an identity. In the classroom, these two books are not only excellent tools for illustrating the history and sentiment of two entirely different conflicts, but are also good resources for demonstrating the realities of the battlefield. Young people need variety in their reading choices, and they especially need books that do not romanticize the grim realities of war.

Much has changed in the decade or more since Paulsen and Rylant wrote their stories. Since the year 2000, adolescent war fiction has continued to stretch into new directions. America’s acceptance of women on the battlefield has been a slow process, so we are just beginning to see stories of young women at war. Books such as Bette Greene’s 1973 *Summer of My German Soldier* and James Lincoln and Christopher Collier’s 1983 *War Comes to Willy Freeman* and Seymour Reit’s *Behind Rebel Lines* from 1988 have featured female protagonists, but the conflicts faced by some of the more recent female adolescents have become even more complicated. To gain a female perspective on the subject of war, we can turn to Cathryn Clinton’s *A Stone in My Hand* and Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*. Clinton’s book set in 1988 Gaza City could not be more different from Rosoff’s present day to not-too-distant future novel of rural

England. Their characters, a shy introverted eleven year old and a fifteen-year-old New Yorker with an eating disorder, are also quite different. Unlike John and Charley, they do not kill, and neither believes in war, but both find themselves protecting the young men of their lives as the battlefield comes to their homes. These young women portray the reality of war in modern times in which sometimes no one has to “go to” war, since war comes to them.

Malaak, the eleven-year-old narrator of *A Stone in My Hand*, dreams of living in the eyes of her pet bird, Abdo, so that she can fly high above Gaza City. “I soar out of the Gaza Strip. Nothing stops me, not the concrete and razor wire, not the guns, not the soldiers” (1). These are the visions of a young Palestinian girl trapped by war in her own home, where she and her family slowly come to terms with the death of her father, a mechanic who happened to be working on a bus when it exploded. Malaak, her mother, and sister try desperately to keep her brother Hamid out of the fray of battle, but the twelve-year-old boy is determined to fight the soldiers with stones. He shouts, “We are fighters. The stones speak. The soldiers will have to listen” (3). Like Malaak, the fifteen-year-old Daisy of *How I Live Now*, is also faced with war in the homeland, but like Malaak, she is not actually living in her own homeland. Malaak’s family was driven out of their home by the war, and Daisy was sent away from her home in America by her father and step-mother. Daisy’s wry New York sense of humor comes through in her attitude about the possibility of war.

I didn’t spend much time thinking about the war because I was bored with everyone jabbering on for about the last five years about Would There Be One or Wouldn’t There and I happen to know there wasn’t anything we could do about it anyway so why even bring the subject up. (15)

Malaak and Daisy have no desire to enter battle and seem content to live a quiet life, but modern war sometimes comes to the home land when it is least expected. Each young girl is forced to find the courage in her own search for self to save the life of those she loves—but once again, like John and Charley, neither girl commits the huge heroic act to save the day. Instead, their rescues are quiet acts of courage.

Unlike the young men of Rylant and Paulsen’s novels, these female protagonists resist war rather than running toward it. Malaak believes her mother’s words, “Bravery is not seen in one act. It is measured

by the choices and deeds that fill every day of our lives” (42) and tries to help her brother listen. Later, she pleads with him in anger as he accuses her of being “just a girl.”

Yes, yes. Just a girl. . . . But does the Islamic Jihad think about the people who die? Real fathers, mothers, and children die when someone sets off a bomb in a bus or a car. Does Islamic Jihad think about those who are left? No, no. (116)

Daisy responds to the bombing of London where “something like seven or seventy thousand people got killed” (24) with more humor and denial, saying “it didn’t seem to have that much to do with us way off in the country” (24). She and her cousins welcome the break from any parental authority, and she and Edmond become romantically involved. The young people plan for a siege by collecting food, but none seem particularly afraid of war as Daisy jokes about “the end of the world about to happen” (26). Both Daisy and Malaak want to keep the world from changing around them, and each resists war in her own way. In Daisy’s words of denial, “I guess there was a war going on somewhere in the world that night but it wasn’t one that could touch us” (64).

But, regardless of the resistance or denial, war comes to both families. Like Paulsen and Rylant, Clinton and Rosoff also use graphic scenes to capture the destruction and waste of war. Although Clinton’s book is less explicit, the storyline is dark and a bit hopeless. Malaak’s brother’s best friend was quite small when he witnessed his father’s death. He carried home a piece of his father’s shirt, moaning into the night, “The pieces, the pieces” (77). When Hamid is shot for throwing rocks at soldiers as Malaak runs to stop him, he falls on top of her. She screams for help and watches the blood pool behind his head. “As I wait, I breathe in Hamid’s blood, his sweat. I open my mouth and pant” (158). The scenes of *How I Live Now* are even more vivid as Daisy and Piper, her cousin, witness several deaths. At a routine checkpoint, a man riding with the two girls begins shouting at the soldiers and “there was a loud crack and part of Joe’s face exploded and there was blood everywhere” and later Daisy realizes that “Joe was still alive, gurgling and trying to move the arm that wasn’t caught under his body” (104). In another killing, she describes “blood welling up in holes all over him” and “brains splattered everywhere” (105). Still later she and Daisy

witness the after effects of a massacre where she chases away foxes and birds as they “were pecking at a dead face . . . tugging at the skin and using their beaks to pull jagged purple strips of flesh free from the bone” (141). Daisy methodically checks each of the seventeen bodies of men, women, and children to see whether they are family members.

Both Daisy and Malaak mature as they find the strength to help their loved ones through the trauma of war. Malaak first struggles to convince her brother to resist violence through words, but her brother resists by claiming that “There are widows and orphans in every war, Malaak. It is no different now” (116). Malaak remembers her father’s words, “Terrorism is like a wild dog. It only breeds violence,” but Hamid responds with, “Terrorism may be the only weapon for people who have no army” (45). When words repeatedly fail Malaak, she risks her own life to save her brother. She jumps in front of a speeding car, leaps before an armed soldier, and in the end, smuggles her father’s Palestinian flag into the hospital in hopes of giving Hamid the strength and reason to recover. In *How I Live Now*, Daisy gains new respect for her own life as she fights to save Piper and get her home to her brothers. She plans their journey and keeps them moving through the backwoods journey, and in helping to find food for Piper, Daisy conquers her own eating disorder. After witnessing the results of the massacre, Daisy keeps Piper moving through her shock toward home, assuring her all the way that she loves her. And in the end, when she is finally reunited with Edmond, Daisy is the strength that slowly begins to bring him out of shock—the result of witnessing a traumatic battle. Through their own sacrifices for family, both Malaak and Daisy grow to find a strength of purpose and self.

Searching for an identity on the battlefield proves to be a difficult and risky feat as we see John and Charley lose themselves in the confusion, but Malaak and Daisy find a sense of purpose. Regardless of the tragedy that each character faces, we see a senseless brutality represented by all four authors. From Cathryn Clinton’s Malaak who believes the Square of the Unknown Soldier is funny since “all Palestinians are unknown soldiers” (102) we see a war without hope of ever ending. From Gary Paulsen’s Charley, we see a young man at age twenty-one contemplating suicide and feeling too old.

Not old in years—in years he still hadn't started shaving or learned about women. But in other ways he was old, old from too much life, old from seeing too much, old from knowing too much. (98)

And from Cynthia Rylant's John, we also learn about the importance of youth in war. In his words, "Only the young are easily shipped to the front. Innocent and hopeful, they willingly go" (74). But it is Meg Rosoff's Daisy that puts everything so bluntly in words that haunt us. "If you haven't been in a war and are wondering how long it takes to get used to losing everything you think you need or love, I can tell you the answer is No time at all" (111).

"Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" asks Mary Rose O'Reilly in her *The Peaceable Classroom*, a question Virginia Monseau also raises in the introduction to her edited collection *A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from English Journal* (xiv). In "New Wars, Old Battles: Contemporary Combat Fiction for the High School Canon," Randal Withers answers that by teaching antiwar novels, "educators can not only help today's students understand our world, but can educate them so that the tragedy of war is not repeated" (55). These are incredibly huge goals, but English teachers believe completely in the power of literature—the power of words—to transform the world.

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