

Revisiting the Vietnam War:

Chris Lynch's Vietnam Series and the Morality of War

As the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War is being commemorated, there is renewed debate around the moral justification for the United States' armed intervention in Vietnam and the ethical issues relating to the conduct of military personnel. Chris Lynch has revisited the Vietnam War for young adult readers in his five-novel series: *Vietnam: I Pledge Allegiance* (Lynch, 2011), *Sharpshooter* (Lynch, 2012a), *Free-Fire Zone* (Lynch, 2012b), *Casualties of War* (Lynch 2013), and *Walking Wounded* (Lynch, 2014). Teaching about war, argues Paul L. Atwood (2005), involves exploding the myths associated with war and helping students critically examine the rationales and justifications for going to war, including the concepts of patriotism and heroism. Lynch's series can engage young adults in critical thinking about the Vietnam War through the experiences of four young soldier protagonists who serve in the US Navy, Army, Marines, and Air Force. Drawing upon just war theory and writings on the ethics of war, I examine how Lynch's series addresses moral and ethical issues that have been raised post-Vietnam and use examples from Lynch's novels to suggest topics for classroom discussion.

Summaries of Novels

Lynch's novels trace the friendship and service careers of Morris, Ivan, Rudi, and Beck, four young men from Boston who pledged friendship in fourth grade and agreed not to sign up for the Vietnam War unless one of them received a draft notice, in which case they would all sign up. When 19-year-old Rudi receives his

draft letter, his friends honor their pledge. Each young man tells about his combat experiences in Vietnam in one of the novels in the series.

In the first, *I Pledge Allegiance* (Lynch, 2011), Morris describes his first assignment as an aviation electrician's mate on the missile cruiser USS *Boston*. He witnesses the superior firepower of the American Navy bombard the Vietnamese coast before the ship is damaged by friendly fire and must return to Boston. When Morris returns to Vietnam, he is reassigned as a radioman on a heavily armed Riverine Assault Force vessel on the Mekong River. Morris's experiences are key to discussions of the ethics of a guerilla warfare waged by a superpower using technologically advanced weapons.

Ivan, the narrator of the second novel, *Sharpshooter* (Lynch, 2012a), is a superior marksman assigned to the Ninth Infantry where he undergoes extensive training as a sniper. Coming from a military family, Ivan willingly honors the pledge to serve in Vietnam. He shares his thoughts as he is tested on his ability to be a sniper in the field, shoots his first Viet Cong sniper, survives a deadly ambush, and participates in a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol operation before volunteering for the Ninth Division's Sniper School.

Rudi, the narrator of *Free-Fire Zone* (Lynch, 2012b), the third novel in the series, struggled in school but thrives in the Marines because he can obey orders without having to think for himself. Rudi describes the patrols, the booby-trap in a deserted Vietnamese village that injures his leg, and his experienc-

es of combat and killing individual Viet Cong soldiers. From Rudi's story, readers gain an understanding of the moral and ethical issues faced by soldiers, including the murder of officers and the implementation of American war policies.

Beck, the narrator of the fourth novel, *Casualties of War* (Lynch, 2013), delays his scholarship to the University of Wisconsin–Madison against his parents' wishes and joins the Air Force. The crew of the plane to which he is assigned sprays Agent Orange on the Vietnamese forests, an act with which he disagrees and one that later informs his pacifist stance. After a group of service men is killed in an explosion while loading bombs, Beck is shaken, but despite his Captain's reservations, he insists that he continue flying missions. When his plane crashes in the jungle, his life is spared by a Christian Viet Cong soldier. Return-

ing to Vietnam after retraining, he serves on an AC-47 gunship and struggles with his pacifist leanings when ordered to fire a gun. Beck's story is key to discussion of the tension between pacifism and patriotism.

In the fifth novel, *Walking Wounded* (Lynch, 2014), the voices of the four friends are brought together after the death of Rudi, who speaks from beyond the grave. Morris describes his journey accompanying Rudi's coffin back to Boston and his decision to return to Vietnam as a mortician. Beck writes to Morris to explain that he plans to join a veterans' anti-war group once his tour is over. Ivan must make a decision after he is awarded medals for his heroic actions in helping a convoy through enemy fire—a convoy he was using for escape following his shooting of Rudi in friendly fire. Morris persuades Ivan, holed up in his family's cabin, to do the right thing and give himself up. This novel places value on forgiveness and the moral responsibility of the individual.

Just War Theory

Political philosopher Michael Walzer (2002) states that it was the opposition to American intervention in Vietnam that prompted him and others to think seriously about the moral argument for war and how, in looking for a "moral language," they focused on the concept of a just war (pp. 928–929). In his seminal work, *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), Walzer explains that his definition of the "moral reality of war" consists of *jus ad bellum*, which refers to whether a "particular war is just or unjust," and *jus in bello*, which refers to how a war is fought, such as the "observance or violation of the customary and positive rules of engagement" (p. 21). For a war to be considered just, it must be declared by a legitimate authority, involve self-defense against aggression, demonstrate proportionality between the good it achieves and the harm it does, and have a reasonable chance for success (Lee, 2012, p. 70). Walzer (1977) argues that the American war in Vietnam was unjustified because the US was "propping up a government . . . without a local political base" (p. 99) and that "it was an American war, fought for American purposes, in someone else's country" (p. 101).

The justness of a war fought on behalf of American interests is questioned by Lynch's soldier protagonists who express limited understanding of what they are fighting for in Vietnam. Ivan, for example, states in *Walking Wounded* that no American GI that he has met understands the mission in Vietnam. An acknowledgment that the Americans may be fighting an unjust war is heard in Ivan's admission that the Vietnamese are on "their home field" (p. 63); if their positions were reversed, and the Vietcong had come to his country "looking to shoot up the place," he would be just as vicious in defending his home ground (p. 64). The following sections focus on specific moral and ethical issues confronted by Lynch's protagonists, issues that contribute toward an exploration of the justness of the Vietnam War and how it was fought.

Ethics of the American War Machine

Lynch's novels draw attention to policies in the Vietnam War that seem to violate "the principle of proportionality," or the balance between the good a war achieves and the harm it does, required for a just war (Walzer, 1977, p. 192). America's military might,

Lynch's novels draw attention to policies in the Vietnam War that seem to violate "the principle of proportionality," or the balance between the good a war achieves and the harm it does, required for a just war (Walzer, 1977, p. 192).

viewed through Morris's observations in *I Pledge Allegiance*, is particularly pertinent to discussing the morality of a war in which the possession of a sophisticated weaponry by one side far exceeds the military capability of an adversary. Morris tells how he and his fellow recruits on the USS *Boston* touch with reverence the Navy's cannons that are going to "unleash" the "awesome power" to "change lives" (p. 50). Morris later describes the bombardment of the Vietnam coast from the USS *Boston* at the Gulf of Tonkin as he watches the bombing and shelling, the explosions and the columns of fire, and a sky filled with smoke, ash, and chemicals that represent, as Morris's crewmate puts it, "institutional, industrial-strength violence" (p. 60). Steven P. Lee (2012) points out that new weapons technology, such as precision-guided cruise missiles, was developed for "military effectiveness" and not for "moral effectiveness" (p. 223). An example of Lee's point is evidenced in Morris's recognition that in watching from a distance, it seemed that there was no "human presence" on the coast and that it was just as if they were "blowing up inanimate stuff" (p. 61). When Morris uses the phrases "it seemed" and "just as if," he confirms rather than disallows civilian deaths; he then compounds this sentiment when he goes on to report that the enemy had stopped firing: "From the explosions and ongoing villages of fire we have created, it seems we got our man, and then some" (p. 70).

The above episode can also be used to illustrate and challenge the doctrine of double effect, or justification for the bombing of military targets in which a "foreseeable but unintended side-effect of the action" (i.e., civilian deaths) will result. Under this doctrine, the bombing witnessed by Morris would be "permissible" because the objective is not to "intentionally" kill nearby civilians (Norman, 1995, pp. 83–84). These unintended consequences fall under the category of "collateral damage," to which little attention was paid in Vietnam (Goldstein, 2012, p. 5). The bombardment of the Vietnamese coast by the USS *Boston* in *I Pledge Allegiance* illustrates again the consequences of an asymmetrical war: lesser risk falls on those who kill from a distance. As the USS *Boston* fires on the Vietnamese coast, a Navy gunner comments that infrastructure, such as "tunnels and bridges, and supply lines" can be blown "right off the map," but "nobody even needs to get hurt." As Morris comes to under-

stand, that is only because these "don't tend to shell you back" (p. 70).

Ethics of a Guerilla War

Moral and ethical issues are raised especially in a war like the Vietnam War—a guerrilla war in which military action occurs in the midst of a civilian population. War violates intentionally, or unintentionally, the basic rights of civilians (Lee, 2012, p. 137). In the Vietnam War, American policies resulted in the destruction of villages, the death of many civilians, and the displacement of thousands of rural people from their homes. Additionally, attacks on the infrastructure necessary for the enemy's survival in his or her country, such as destroying crops, livestock, and basic access to food and water, violate the criterion of proportionality in a just war. This violation on the part of US troops in Vietnam is acknowledged in *Casualties of War* when Beck states, "We are burning the life out of the country we are here to fight for" (p. 23), uttered as he sprays Agent Orange on the jungle foliage in South Vietnam.

Distinguishing between civilians and insurgents in a guerilla war requires that soldiers make distinctions between combatants in military uniform and noncombatants and civilians (Benbaji, 2007, p. 559). The difficulty of distinguishing between innocent civilians and the guerrilla fighters who live among them is acknowledged by Rudi, who comments in *Free-Fire Zone* that he has "never yet worked out a reliable method for deciding which of the local people are innocently going about the business of living and which are hoping to skin [him] like a rabbit supper" (p. 128). An episode in which Rudi watches a Marine severely beat an old man and threaten to puncture him with a "Punji stick" dipped into "animal waste" (pp. 25–26) illustrates how guerilla fighters hiding among noncombatant civilians resulted in exposing noncombatants to attack and to being categorized between "loyal and disloyal, or friendly and hostile noncombatants" (Walzer, 1977, p. 193) rather than being identified as

Moral and ethical issues are raised especially in a war like the Vietnam War—a guerrilla war in which military action occurs in the midst of a civilian population.

specifically engaged in military activities. Rudi is told that the old man is a Viet Cong with information, but when he asks how his superior officers “know” that, he is told that they are the “professionals” and that he, Rudi, is “dismissed” (p. 26).

The Combined Action Program (CAP) was designed by the US Marine Corps to prevent guerilla fighters from hiding within villages in Vietnam. The village Chu Lai in which Rudi observes the beating is a CAP village in which units of Marines live full-time among the women, children, and older men left behind. Once you cannot separate guerilla fighters from civilians, the war cannot be morally

won because it becomes “an anti-social war” against the people (Walzer, 1977, p. 187). In *Free-Fire Zone*, Rudy reveals the failure of the CAP program in Chu Lai. He describes a deserted, dusty village whose inhabitants remain inside while American soldiers take turns patrolling the streets, where they are ambushed by Viet Cong hiding out in the surrounding land once farmed by locals. Rudy learns from the sergeant in charge that the CAP program’s casualties and desertions have earned the program a reputation of being a “suicide mission” (p. 167). The much-repeated ideological objective of “winning the hearts and minds” of Vietnamese civilians is reiterated by the sergeant in charge of the failed CAP village, but a corporal voices the opinion that despite all they had done for the community, the people “ain’t never coming over to our side” (p. 172).

During the Vietnam War, free-fire zones, in which anyone who is unidentified is considered an enemy combatant, were introduced after “pressure was applied at each level of the [US] military command structure to record higher body counts” (Taylor, 2003, p. 115). In *Sharpshooter*, a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) leader’s opinion that everywhere is a free-fire zone and that there are no civilians is illustrative of how a moral critique of the Vietnam War is embedded in Lynch’s war narrative (pp. 168–169). Examples of military action in villages with real or

questionable evidence of insurgent activity are found in *Sharpshooter* and *Free-Fire Zone*. In *Sharpshooter*, Ivan accompanies the LRRP to a village in Cambodia where he is posted as a guard. As the men of the village are gathered, two young men with American M-16 rifles emerge from a hut. Ivan, knowing nothing of the men, does not hesitate to kill them (p. 180). Soon after, as the women in the village return from fetching water, they witness the American soldiers leaving, each of them pushing a bound “mountain man” with a “bruised and bloodied mess on his face” before him (p. 181). As Ivan notes, other villagers would not be leaving the hut. In *Free-Fire Zone*, Rudi narrates how his unit is engaged in a firefight with guerrillas who are using a village as a communication center and depot for Viet Cong arms. In this village, the civilians have either fled or are among the dead when the Americans enter the booby-trapped huts (pp. 87–92).

An Ethics of Killing

An ethics of killing defines the circumstances under which killing in the context of war is acceptable or not. “At the cutting edge of combat,” states Steven M. Silver (2006), “ethics are what separate soldiers from mercenaries and criminals” (p. 76). Pivotal to Lynch’s novels are explorations of the differences between a soldier who kills and one who murders. From the beginning of their training, it is made clear to the four young recruits that their mission is to kill. In *Walking Wounded*, Morris explains that they “spend every day trying to slaughter as many as possible of the people we think need killing” (p. 51). He points out that most of the young soldiers “were not allowed to kill people before they arrived in Vietnam, but now they are “urged to do it” (p. 52). In *Sharpshooter*, Ivan, a superb marksman, is told at sniper school that he will become “very familiar with the concept of intimate killing” (p. 158). Also in *Sharpshooter*, Ivan describes how he spots and kills a Viet Cong sniper whose shot had just missed his lieutenant (pp. 118–127). Later, taking part of the dead Viet Cong’s skull, Ivan holds it in his hands as if praying and bows to the “dead warrior” (p. 127). Ivan sees this as a “righteous” kill (p.130).

In *I Pledge Allegiance*, Rudi writes a letter to Morris describing in graphic terms his first confirmed kill

Pivotal to Lynch’s novels are explorations of the differences between a soldier who kills and one who murders.

of a Viet Cong soldier, first by stabbing him with a bayonet and then cutting his throat (pp. 166–167). In *Casualties of War*, Rudi shows a photo of a Viet Cong soldier he has mutilated by carving a large capital “I” on his forehead in honor of his hero, Ivan (p. 176). In her survey of young adult novels about Vietnam published between 1985 and 1997, Overstreet (1998) noted an undermining of morality in her sample of young adult platoon novels, as soldiers were continually exposed to the brutality of combat (p. 130). In *Free-Fire Zone*, Rudi, shown to be fearless in dangerous situations, is Lynch’s example of a soldier who, unmoored from the accepted rules and principles governing the ethics of combat, becomes addicted to killing.

Just war theory also addresses the question of whether and under what circumstances a soldier has the right of self-defense. The moral justification for self-defense in war is determined by whether a soldier is a responsible representative of a just or unjust war (Benbaji, 2007; McMahan, 2004). In order for an individual “to rebut the prohibition against the taking of life, one has to show that killing in self-defence [sic] is a necessary response to a threat to one’s own life, or to some comparable threat” (Norman, 1995, p. 191). In *Free-fire Zone*, as one of the physically smaller members of his unit, Rudi volunteers to enter a Viet Cong tunnel. After crawling through the dark, he is struck from behind by a Viet Cong who makes a grab for his knife and successfully wrests his bayonet from him. Rudi shoots the Viet Cong, who lunges at him with the knife (pp. 131–144). This scene highlights Lynch’s understanding of self-defense (and the complicated realities of right and wrong) in war.

Also related to the morality of killing, dehumanization of the enemy contributes toward the distancing and depersonalization of the enemy—a tactic deemed necessary to shield combatants from the moral and psychological inhibitions of killing (Norman, 1995, p. 185). Episodes and descriptions in the novels where Lynch exposes the amoral and dehumanizing effect of war can be identified in Morris’s description of shooting napalmed Viet Cong soldiers on the banks of the Mekong River in *I Pledge Allegiance* (pp. 177–178) and Rudi’s description of how he kills and mutilates in *Free-Fire Zone* (pp. 166–167). Rudi’s actions, in particular, make the case that strong leadership is required for instilling a moral and ethical stance toward war.

Ethics and Leadership in the Military

Within the military, leaders are expected to instill ethical behaviors and values within their soldiers, emphasizing the “manifestations” of certain desired ethical behaviors: “loyalty, integrity, courage, and honor” (Silver, 2006, p. 76). Within Lynch’s novels, military discipline and loyalty to a leader are addressed through the character of Rudi, who is represented as a young man with learning disabilities who had been regarded as a failure in school. He welcomes the discipline of the Marines and develops a new confidence and sense of power in his ability to follow orders. In *Free-Fire Zone*, Rudi’s letter to Morris states that he is “great great great at taking orders no matter what they are” (p. 45). When Rudi

tells his lieutenant that the best lesson is not to think, he is told that he is a “perfect soldier” (p. 120). In a search-and-destroy mission, Rudi is the only Marine to unequivocally follow the questionable orders of Lieutenant Jupp, who wishes to leave the field of action before visually confirming that the Viet Cong and village are destroyed. Rudi opines that he is a “good soldier” and that it is not his job to judge an officer’s decisions (p. 77). It is “easy” for soldiers to free themselves from taking consequences for their actions in a context in which they are relentlessly trained to follow orders, but “it is a mistake to treat soldiers as if they were automatons who make no judgments at all” (Walzer, 1977, p. 311). Individuals are always responsible for their own “murderousness” (Walzer, 1977, p. 308).

However, discussion can also focus on how the absence of responsible leadership contributes to Rudi’s actions in killing the bound Viet Cong described in *Free-Fire Zone* (pp. 32–37). Without strong ethical leadership, unethical behavior can be contagious because of peer loyalty (Silver, 2007, p. 77). The “three excellent guys” on Rudi’s patrol encourage him

In *Free-Fire Zone*, Rudi, shown to be fearless in dangerous situations, is Lynch’s example of a soldier who, unmoored from the accepted rules and principles governing the ethics of combat, becomes addicted to killing.

Lynch's novels can usefully contribute to a teaching unit on war in that they present a perspective on the Vietnam War that encourages readers to ask questions about the morality of the war and to think critically about the ethical and moral issues faced by the young men who fought in that war.

as he mutilates the trussed up Viet Cong soldier (p. 167). Additionally, the negative influence of a lack of leadership on the morale among soldiers is illustrated

by the fragging (murder) of Rudi's commanding officer, Lieutenant Jupp, by some of his own men. Jupp admits to bottoming out and being a "bad leader" during his second tour (p. 105). In this environment of lawlessness resulting from a lack of leadership, "nothing" can be done to maintain military justice (p. 116). This lingering sentiment is contained in the final novel, as well. In a letter to Morris in *Walking Wounded*, Beck writes that soldiers are refusing to fight and are "basically at war" with officers whom they see as failing to care about the lives of the men under their command. He even confides that officers are being killed (p. 154).

An Ethics of Pacifism

In defining pacifism, Steven P. Lee (2012) distinguishes between *unconditional pacifism* in which no exceptions are made; *conditional pacifism* that accepts that in war, a moral duty to save others overrides a duty not to kill; and a *relativistic "individual preference"* rather than a "universal moral view" (pp. 22–23). These definitions and the ethics of a pacifist stance to the war can be explored through the character of Beck, who delayed his scholarship to the University of Wisconsin–Madison to honor his pledge to his friends. Because of what he is asked to do in the war, Beck has "reason to form justified beliefs about the morality of the war" in which he is asked to fight (McMahan, 2004, p. 701). Beck's narrative is especially useful in exploring the contradiction he faces between his pacifist position and his patriotic duty.

A pacifist stance is taken up by Beck from the time he signs up for the war. In *Casualties of War*, he

narrates that despite his choice to serve, he has "made a decision to fulfill [his] duty without deliberately and consciously taking one person's life" and that his goal when leaving Vietnam "will be to have learned everything possible about the machinery of organized killing, without actually killing" (p. 21). This is his "pledge" to himself, to "keep" him "right": "It was a pledge that got me into this thing, and it's a pledge that's going to get me out" (p. 21). He reiterates that he will neither kill nor get to know anyone he does not have to know because, he rationalizes, then he will not feel that person's loss (p. 27). Beck's pacifist stance is represented as a personal, inner struggle, as he cannot "acknowledge" the "brutality of war" (p. 26).

Pacifism and patriotism are shown to be contradictory positions for Beck when, deployed as a flight engineer on a gunship, he is conflicted between his pledge not to kill and his moral duty as a soldier. In *Casualties of War*, he is called upon to man one of the guns. He initially refuses until he realizes that not to fire is "absolutely, unequivocally, not a possibility" (p. 135). The overriding call to fulfill his duty causes Beck to begin firing a gun as "the rightest thing there could be" in the circumstances in which he finds himself (p. 136). Beck realizes that, morally, it is his "function" to protect his people, one of whom could be his friend, Ivan (p. 136). He therefore makes a moral choice based on what seems most important to him in terms of moral responsibilities. He asks himself whether he is "any different" after killing somebody than before and knows that the answer is "yes" (p. 137).

Jeff McMahan (2004) argues that it is reasonable for soldiers who are concerned that the war they are fighting be a just war to also question their leaders about the violation of *jus in bello*, or how the war is fought. But Beck is the only airman in his unit to question the military actions to which he and his peers have been assigned. In *Walking Wounded*, Beck refuses to man a machine gun and protests the action of the gunners who are "pouring heavy, brutal fire . . . into a human ants' nest of a village" that Beck believes is "plainly no threat to anybody" (p. 167). "The war was always stupid," he writes to Morris (p. 153), announcing his intention to "join up with Veterans Against the War," and "scream . . . out about the wrongness of the war" (p. 154).

A Warrior Ethics

In their analysis of post-war Vietnam films, Jennifer A. Lucas and David M. McCarthy (2005) note a move from films that seek to justify the Vietnam War, such as *Green Berets* (1968), to films such as *We Were Soldiers* (2002) that depoliticize the war and focus instead on the idea of “fighting men united by shared loyalty and purpose” (p. 169). They argue that a “war ethics” gave way to a “warrior ethics” that focuses “on bonds of fidelity experienced by fellow soldiers amid the inhumanity of war” (p. 176). I use this concept of a warrior ethics to categorize Lynch’s war narrative not only as one that emphasizes the bonds of friendship among Lynch’s four protagonists, but also as one that focuses on the personal ethics of four young warriors in the midst of war.

A pledge of allegiance to friendship displaces the nationalistic concept of allegiance to one’s country by dissociating the word “allegiance” from the “flag.” The last sentence of *Walking Wounded*—“And if war has an opposite, it’s friendship” (p. 197)—echoes the opening sentence of the first book, *I Pledge Allegiance*, emphasizing that allegiance to their pledge of friendship (a “warrior ethics”) has more meaning for Morris, Ivan, Rudi, and Beck than the nationalistic objectives of war. From the beginning of his training, Morris sees his moral mission as protecting his friends. He rationalizes that if his work as a soldier also helps fulfill the Navy’s mission, then it is a win for all. This moral mission, Morris avers in *I Pledge Allegiance*, rather than the official mission of the Navy to stop “the spread of communism,” is what will keep him sane in a “crazy” war (p. 57). In *Casualties of War*, Beck’s reason for being in Vietnam has “more to do with three bozos from Boston than it does with Ho Chi Minh and his trail” (p. 64). The narrative strategy of including Rudi’s ghost voice in *Walking Wounded* also works as a device to emphasize the importance of the bond of allegiance among friends by bringing the voices of the four young men together again.

Redemption, forgiveness, and moral responsibility become important to maintaining a pledge to friendship. Lucas and McCarthy (2005) write of a “redemptive warrior ethics, a politics of fidelity and union which can redeem a fractured nation” (p. 175). They refer to post-war Vietnam films, such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986), in which the murder of soldiers who represent the brutality and horror of

war has a redemptive purpose. *Walking Wounded* is composed of interrelated discourses on fidelity, redemption, forgiveness, and justice. Readers can debate Beck’s justification of Ivan’s shooting of Rudi that appears in the subversive *Grunt Free Press* and begins with the line, “There is hardly a single person here with a gun who has not thought about using it on somebody he is not supposed to,” and continues:

To kill.

But—to kill only part of that somebody.

To kill the part that is unrecognizable and wrong and new.
The part that is hateful and living like the river leech off
the good and sweetest
nature.

The part that was born here in Vietnam. (p. 189)

“Don’t put your eye out,” Rudi’s mother tells her son in this same novel (p. 115). The justice encoded in the old code of retribution, “an eye for an eye,” carries real meaning for Ivan, who loses an eye in a fight against Viet Cong forces.

Finally, the death of Rudi tests the morality and ethics of a young soldier who kills the friend whom he has called a monster. Heroism and hero are devalued when Ivan gives away his Purple Heart—“the loser’s medal” (p. 135). He can take no pride in being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross “for extraordinary heroism” in engaging with “an armed hostile force” that occurred as he was riding in a convoy away from the scene of his crime (p. 181). The belief in the power of friendship in Lynch’s novels is sutured to justice as Morris helps Ivan take moral responsibility for his actions and reassures Ivan that he and others will support him.

Teaching about War

Walzer (2002) states that “The ongoing critique of war-making is a centrally important democratic activity” (p. 93). Lynch’s novels can usefully contribute to a teaching unit on war in that they present a perspective on the Vietnam War that encourages readers to ask questions about the morality of the war and to think critically about the ethical and moral issues faced by the young men who fought in that war. The following prompts can be used to generate conversation with students on the conduct of war more generally:

- When Ivan accuses Rudi of being a murderer, Rudi justifies his action with the claim, “We’re all mur-

derers in this job, only difference is some of us are good at it and some aren't" (pp. 25–26). Consider this, along with Ivan's comment that "War doesn't create monsters, it just explains them" (p. 177), to discuss the ethics of killing in war.

- Analyze examples of the treatment of civilians in a guerrilla war, namely the use of coercion on suspected informants and the form that coercion takes, in *Free-Fire Zone* (pp. 25–26) and *Sharpshooter* (pp. 180–181). Discuss the morality of such acts.
- Discuss the killing of Rudi by Ivan together with Beck's published justification, "To Kill" (p. 189).

The images and rhetoric of war are constantly before us as the media reports on the increased instability in the Middle East. As the United States considers how it should confront current crises in that region, it is important, as Atwood (2005) and Kieran (2012) point out, that young people do not depend on the myths of war and patriotic discourses of a nationalistic ideology to understand war. The following discussion topics may serve to link Lynch's Vietnam War narrative with ethical and moral issues of current American political and military policies in the Middle East:

- Goldstein (2012) claims that since the Vietnam War, in which the principles of *jus in bello* were ignored and thousands of civilians killed, the "United States has taken significant steps to minimize its own casualties and to reduce the chance of collateral damage" (p. 6). In light of this statement, discuss the moral and ethical implications of the United States' current policies of employing drone attacks and the consequences of aerial bombing.
- Discuss the argument made by Jerry Kaplan (2015) that employing weapons based on A.I. (artificial intelligence) to do "dangerous jobs" is a "moral obligation" if, by so doing, soldiers' lives are saved. Discuss this statement in conjunction with passages from *I Pledge Allegiance* in which Morris describes the effects of America's superior weaponry and firepower. What are other moral implications of using new weapons technology?
- Discuss the violation of citizens' rights, humanitarian issues, and the destruction of infrastructure in current conflicts in the Middle East in the context of just war theory.

A retired associate professor and graduate coordinator of the School Library Media Program at Kean University in Union, New Jersey, **Hilary Crew** holds a MLS and PhD in Communication, Information, and Library Studies from Rutgers. As a librarian, she has worked in public, school, and university settings. Her publications include *Is It Really Mommie Dearest?* (Scarecrow, 2000), *Donna Jo Napoli: Writing with Passion* (Scarecrow, 2010), and *Experiencing America's Story through Fiction* (ALA, 2014). Her articles have been published in *Children's Literature in Education*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, and *Children in Libraries*. Crew has served on several award committees, including those for the *Printz* (ALA), *Phoenix* (CHLA), and *Hans Christian Andersen* awards.

Additional Resources for Educators

- Hibbert, G. (Author), & Hood, G. (Director). (2015). *Eye in the sky* [Motion picture]. Beverly Hills, CA: Sierra/Affinity. [This film centers on a drone attack in Somalia and examines whether the military should strike a house containing known insurgents.]
- Marlantes, K. (2010). *Matterhorn: A novel of the Vietnam War*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press. [Emphasis is placed on the ethics of leadership.]
- Marlantes, K. (2011). *What it is like to go to war*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press. [Marlantes writes about his combat experience.]
- O'Brien, J., Lawrence, N., & Green, R. (2015). To war or not: Engaging middle school students in an ongoing online discussion. *The Social Studies*, 105, 101–107. [Curriculum is suggested for an online discussion with middle students on the justification for war.]
- O'Brien, T. (1998). *The things they carried*. New York, NY: Broadway Books. [This collection of short stories brings an emotional truth to the experience of war in Vietnam.]
- Sheehan, N. (2015, November 15). At the bloody dawn of the Vietnam War. *New York Times*, p. SR2. [This piece offers a description of America's "military might" in Vietnam.]
- Sheinkin, S. (2015). *Most dangerous: Daniel Ellsberg and the secret history of the Vietnam war*. New York, NY: Roaring Book Press. [This book examines the leaking of the Pentagon Papers.]
- Soli, T. (2010). *The lotus eaters*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. [The Vietnam War is viewed through the lens of a female photographer. Questions are raised about the ethical use of photography.]

References

- Atwood, P. L. (2005). Teaching about war in a time of war. *Radical Teacher*, 72, 31–36.
- Benbaji, Y. (2007). The responsibility of soldiers and the ethics of killing in war. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 7, 558–572.
- Coppola, F. (Producer & Director). (1979). *Apocalypse now* [Motion picture]. USA: Omni Zoetrope.

- Davey, B., McEveety, S., & Wallace, R. (Producers), & Wallace, R. (Director). (2002). *We were soldiers* [Motion picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Goldstein, C. S. (2012). Just war theory and democratization by force: Two incompatible agendas. *Military Review*, September–October, 2–8.
- Kaplan, J. (2015, August 17). Robot weapons: What's the harm? *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/opinion/robot-weapons-whats-the-harm.html?_r=0.
- Kieran, D. (2012). "What young men and women do when their country is attacked": Intervention discourse and the rewriting of violence in adolescent literature of the Iraq war. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 37, 4–26.
- Lee, S. P. (2012). *Ethics and war: An introduction*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lucas, J. A., & McCarthy, D. M. (2005). War is its own justification: What Americans think about war. *Political Theology*, 6, 165–192.
- Lynch, C. (2011). *I pledge allegiance* (Vietnam: Book 1). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Lynch, C. (2012a). *Sharpshooter* (Vietnam: Book 2). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Lynch, C. (2012b). *Free-fire zone* (Vietnam: Book 3). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Lynch, C. (2013). *Casualties of war* (Vietnam: Book 4). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Lynch, C. (2014). *Walking wounded* (Vietnam: Book 5). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- McMahan, J. (2004). The ethics of killing in war. *Ethics*, 114, 693–733.
- Norman, R. (1995). *Ethics, killing, and war*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Overstreet, D. W. (1998). *Unencumbered by history: The Vietnam experience in young adult fiction*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Silver, S. M. (2006). Ethics and combat. *Marine Corps Gazette*, 90(11), 76–78.
- Stone, O. (Producer & Director). (1986). *Platoon* [Motion picture]. USA: Orion Pictures.
- Taylor, M. (2003). *The Vietnam War in history, literature, and film*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Walzer, M. (1977). *Just and unjust wars: A moral argument with historical illustrations*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Walzer, M. (2002). The triumph of just war theory (and the dangers of success). *Social Research*, 69, 925–944.
- Wayne, J. (Producer & Director). (1968). *Green berets* [Motion picture]. USA: Warner Bros./Seven Arts.