

# Teaching about the War in Vietnam

by

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"I wish I had taken a course similar to this course years ago. I'm disturbed and disappointed that high schools in our nation do not teach about the Vietnam War. Looking back to the beginning of this semester, I'm almost embarrassed at my level of ignorance about the Vietnam War. I've learned and broadened my horizons 100 times over.

I now know what happened in Vietnam.

I know how the war began.

I don't know if I will ever understand why."

—Rachel O'Rourke

Rachel wrote this comment in May as a final log entry in a college course I teach called Literature about the War in Vietnam. I teach the course every other year, and it is always a very emotional experience for me and my students. Before we part, either in their anonymous student evaluations or in their journals, most students make a comment similar to the one above. I quote it here not to brag or to mount a criticism of high school English teachers, but because it raises this question: Should high school English teachers teach works on the Vietnam War? I'd like to take up this question, and also these: For those teachers who do decide to teach works on the war, what works might they choose? What are some possible approaches to teaching literature on the war?

But first let me describe the course as I teach it in college. It is a three-unit, fifteen-week course that meets twice a week for an hour and twenty minutes. It is an elective open to all majors. Usually only a few students are English majors. Writers have responded to the war with a variety of genres. My focus is on personal narrative, novels, and works like Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night and Micheal Herr's Dispatches which some people call New Journalism. In addition to Mailer's and Herr's books, last spring we read Graham Greene's The Quiet American, Philip Caputo's Rumor of War, Lynda Van Devanter's Home Before Morning, and two books by Tim O'Brien: If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato. I also assign some history for background—usually excerpts from Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History or George C. Herring's America's

Longest War. To provide more historical background I give a talk on Vietnamese history and we view several segments of the PBS series Vietnam: A Television History (I also discuss criticisms leveled at this series by Accuracy in Media, a conservative organization). We also read oral history, excerpts from Al Santoli's Everything We Had and To Bear Any Burden and from David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai's Portraits of the Enemy (Wallace Terry's Bloods, a collection of accounts of Black veterans, and Keith Walker's A Piece of My Heart, the stories of American women who served in Vietnam, are also sources of oral history).

The focus is on works by Americans but Greene is, of course, British, and we read some works by Vietnamese in translation, usually excerpts from Portraits of the Enemy, the oral history mentioned above—a collection of personal accounts by Vietnamese; and one or two selections from Vietnamese Short Stories, translated by James Banerian. Students insist on discussing the movies and so we see several. Last spring we read excerpts from Robin Moore's The Green Berets and then saw the movie by the same name starring John Wayne. We also saw and discussed Hearts and Minds and Platoon. Often veterans take the course and younger students learn as much, probably more, from them as they do from me. I also invite vets in the area to talk to my class. Last spring a vet, a Native American who was a tunnel rat in Vietnam, talked to the class about what it is like being an Indian in the U.S. Army and hunting Viet Cong soldiers in underground tunnels.

Students keep a reading log/journal in which they make two closed (I assign the topic) responses per week to the reading and one open response, which can be about anything related to the course and the war. Students have three options for the course paper: a narrative of their reading and viewing experiences—an account, based heavily of their log entries, about how the course affected them; a more traditional term paper in which a thesis is stated and defended; or a journalistic account based on interviews with Vietnam veterans, anti-war activists, or refugees from Indochina. There is no mid-term or final exam.

That's the course as I teach it and it works well in

college. In fact, in over 20 years of teaching I have never taught a course that resulted in the kind of responses this course receives; never with any other course have I been so sure that students came to class and did the reading not because they had to, not for a grade, but because they had questions (What happened in Vietnam? How did the war begin? Why?) and were looking for answers.

But would it work in high school? Clearly, in high school one wouldn't want to spend a whole semester on literature about war—this war or any war. "War stories aren't really anything more than stories about people anyway," Herr says in Dispatches (p.245), which is true, but war stories are, almost always, sad stories, and stories about the Vietnam War may be the saddest stories of all. How can anyone justify exposing young people on the threshold of life to 15 weeks of unrelieved gloom and doom?

Even if we shorten the time, talk of a unit rather than a semester, the problem of how works on the war will affect high school readers emotionally remains. The works I mention above are not just moving; they are profoundly disturbing. I don't think I'm belittling the suffering of Vietnam veterans when I say that students who have read books like Philip Caputo's Rumor of War, Michael Herr's Dispatches, and Lynda Van Devanter's Home Before Morning may experience something that resembles post-traumatic stress. These works are that powerful. One (college) student told me she had to stop reading Dispatches; it gave her nightmares. Another student, who was having some health problems that might require surgery, told me she was sorry, that this course had affected her more than any other, but she could not read any more about mangled bodies. History teachers don't need to worry so much about this problem because most historical accounts are distanced: The writer, who probably never was in Vietnam, distills his story from other more immediate accounts and writes from an objective point of view. But writers like Caputo, Herr, and Van Devanter give us first hand accounts and use the techniques of the novelist, particularly full scenic description, to convey what it was like to be there.

Some students, however, may not be bothered at all by the violence—may even seem to relish it—and this raises a different kind of problem. In teaching works on the war we may feel we're catering to the same impulse that forces us to stare at grisly car accidents. And there are other problems, anyone of them formidable enough to cause a teacher to chuck plans to teach about the war. The Vietnam War is very controversial—always was and still is. President Reagan thinks it was a noble cause; others are sure it was an unmitigated disaster. You may have in your class the children of veterans, war protesters, and Indochinese immigrants (who may also be veter-

ans—former soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Your students and their parents will have different views about the war and about the appropriateness of reading books that force one to confront it.

The Vietnam War is also complicated. If you begin teaching a novel or personal memoir about the war, it will elicit a host of historical and political questions. Writers will refer to the Tonkin Bay incident, the Tet Offensive, My Lai, Khe Sanh, Kent State, Ho Chi Minh, and Nguyen Cao Ky. To understand these references your students will need some historical background. Your English course will inevitably become also a history course, and you may decide that you cannot teach about the war in Vietnam because you do not have enough preparation time or class time to answer all the questions that your students will have.

Despite these problems, I would still urge high school teachers to teach literature about the war. There are some ways around the problems, and some of the problems, looked at in a slightly different way, become opportunities. Take the point that these works may upset some students. They may. This is a real possibility. But shouldn't students be made aware that war is horrible? Are we content to let the view of war presented by Sylvester Stallone's Rambo pictures be the only view available to our students? As for the morbid fascination some students have with war, this is an issue that the authors of the works I mentioned above deal with very honestly. Herr, for example, writes: "Maybe you couldn't love the war and hate it inside the same instant but sometimes those feelings alternated so rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until you were literally High On War, like it said on all the helmet covers" (p. 63). After searching his mind for a comparison that would convey the experience of combat, Herr finally finds one: "It was the feeling you'd had when you were much, much younger and undressing a girl for the first time" (p. 136).

I have my students read a short piece from Esquire by William Broyles called "Why Men Love War." To answer the question posed in his title, Broyles, a Vietnam veteran, first lists some reasons we can talk about "without risk of disapproval, without plunging too far into the truth of ourselves": war is an escape from the boring everyday world, war is the ultimate game. Then he moves on to reasons similar to the ones Herr is suggesting in the lines I just quoted—reasons more painful to contemplate: war is for men, like childbirth for women, "the initiation into power of life and death"; it is a "turn-on" that brings intensity to love and sex. (pp. 61-62).

Since most works on the Vietnam War, like this article by Broyles, are by men, it's easy to give only a male perspective. I tried to avoid this by including works by women—short selections from the oral his-

tories mentioned above and Van Devanter's personal narrative. My students did a journal entry comparing Caputo and Van Devanter's reasons for volunteering for the Vietnam War. Some semesters I've also included Bobbie Ann Mason's In Country, a novel that might be a good choice for a high school class because it is about a girl just out of high school who tries to understand a war that left her father dead and her uncle sick from exposure to agent orange.

But one shouldn't feel the feminist perspective can only be raised when a work by a woman is being discussed. In teaching Greene's The Quiet American, one can ask: How would you characterize Pyle and Fowler's attitude toward Phuong (the Vietnamese girl they both love)? How would you characterize their attitude towards the Vietnamese people in general? In exploring these questions one can introduce a feminist (and ethnic) perspective. In a chapter on basic training in his If I Die in a Combat Zone, Tim O'Brien portrays the attitude toward women that prevailed at Fort Lewis in Washington. O'Brien intersperses his comments with marching songs:

I know a girl dressed in red,  
Makes her living in a bed.  
Honey, oh, Baby-Doll.

There is no thing named love in the world.  
Women are dinks. Women are villains. They  
are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-  
skinned people and hippies. We march off to  
learn about hand-to-hand combat...[after the  
training] We march away, singing.

I don't know, but I been told,  
Eskimo pussy is mighty cold.  
Am I goin' strong?  
Am I right or wrong?  
Sound Off! (p.59)

This chapter could be used as a springboard for a discussion of men and women and war.

In short, we should not avoid teaching about the war because we fear that it will upset students. Because literature about the war disturbs and fascinates students, it puts them in the mood to consider the most important political, cultural and moral issues of our time—perhaps of any time. Over four million Vietnamese and fifty-eight thousand Americans died in the Vietnam War. The U.S. could easily become involved in a war in Latin America. High school students need to know what war is really like so they can make well-informed political and personal decisions. They also need to confront the myths and fantasies and strange yearnings that drive people to war so they can begin the job of conceptualizing

some peaceful alternatives. To begin this process, I have students read some selections from John Hellmann's American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam and William James' essay "The Moral Equivalent of War." Chapter two of Hellmann's book, "The Return of the Frontier Hero, National Purpose, and the Legend of the Green Berets," is excellent background reading for a discussion of The Green Berets—both the book and the movie. High school teachers may not wish to have students read Hellmann or James, but they can read them themselves and introduce their ideas into class discussion.

The war is controversial, but this, too presents as many opportunities as problems. The Vietnam War is controversial because it raises important questions: What is the role of the U.S. in the Third World? Why do people become communists? Do American citizens have the right to refuse to fight in a war they feel is unjust? How well have we treated the veterans of this war? I believe these are issues that high school students will want to talk about. Leading a discussion of them is not easy. The teacher must strive always to present both sides of every issue. If students perceive the teacher has some hidden political agenda and is arranging the syllabus or class discussions to promote it, they will be turned off and some will grow hostile. The best approach is not to teach a view of the war, but to teach some works about the war and let students develop their own views by listening to works they read and any guest speakers you invite to class.

The Vietnam War is complicated. One of its legacies is a long list of names for people, places, and events that evoke in older readers predictable responses but may mystify our students. But this, too, is an opportunity disguised as a problem. Lynne Cheney in American Memory, an influential report on the humanities in the public schools, worries that by not teaching history we're inflicting cultural amnesia on a generation of students. She laments that students can't identify the Reformation or the Magna Carta (p.6). My students, like Rachel whom I quote above, are "embarrassed" that their generation has already forgotten the Vietnam War! I had my students listen to popular songs about the war and comment in their journals about them. Many wrote how in high school they would dance and party to songs like Billy Joel's "Goodnight Saigon" and Crosby, Hart, Stills, and Nash's "Ohio," not realizing what they were about. Now, they would add, they mean much, much more.

By teaching about the war we give students a cultural memory so that many things they read and hear will mean much, much more. One way to introduce history is to present a list of names that will be appearing in the novels or personal narratives you will assign later—Dien Bien Phu, Tet Offensive, Kent



State, etc. In class you can say just a little to identify the item and then have each student choose a name that intrigues her and prepare a short oral report on it. If you have the reports presented in chronological order, you can fill in around them so the students have an overview of the history of the war. Another possibility is to cooperate with a history teacher and have him or her teach the history of the war before or during your unit on literature.

Assuming I've at least got you thinking about teaching about the war, let me suggest two works to start with: Tim O'Brien's personal narrative If I Die In A Combat Zone and his novel Going After Cacciato. Why these two works? First, because they are well written. If I Die is an honest book, a loosely connected series of vignettes about O'Brien's year as an infantryman in Vietnam. It includes sections on how he got drafted, agonized over the rightness of the war, and almost fled to Sweden after completing advanced infantry training. Going After Cacciato is, in my opinion, the best novel about the Vietnam War but, like all war stories, it's not really about war: it's about the difficulty of making decisions and the power of memory and imagination. Paul Berlin is on patrol one day when another soldier named Cacciato decides to walk away from the war. He tells Berlin he's going AWOL to Paris. The novel tells how Berlin and his squad pursue him—all the way to Paris. It's awhile before the reader realizes that this trip is a flight of Berlin's imagination, his way to forget the war and explore some other possibilities.

Readers who have read If I Die will realize that there are interesting similarities between O'Brien and Berlin and Cacciato. Students enjoy discussing these relationships—another reason for choosing these two works. Taken together they provoke useful discussions about non-fiction and fiction and how both relate to a writer's life. Cacciato itself is about the difficulty of separating fact from fiction, of distinguishing what happened from what might have happened. Students enjoy trying to figure out exactly when Cacciato's "real" flight becomes Berlin's flight out of the imagination. In teaching Cacciato I don't tell students where, in my reading, facts blend into dream. Instead I pose it as a problem and have students work at it in groups. I use groups throughout the course so that more students will have a chance to talk, to puzzle over these works, and to compare interpretations with peers.

These works have other qualities that make them suitable for high school. O'Brien doesn't preach about the hawks or the doves. Like so many Americans he was torn in two by the war: on the one hand, he doubted that it was a just war; on the other hand, he felt great affection for his country, for the people in his hometown, and for his father. He went to Vietnam, finally, because he did not want to disap-

point the people he loved. Not everyone will agree with his choice, but most readers will appreciate the agony of his decision. In If I Die and Cacciato there are arguments for fighting and arguments for refusing to fight and both are presented sympathetically. O'Brien helps a teacher be fair to both sides and to convey the moral complexity of this war.

O'Brien's books will teach students how horrible this war was but they shouldn't give them vicarious cases of post-traumatic stress. In both books soldiers and civilians die, sometimes in painfully graphic ways. A chapter called "Man at the Well" in If I Die and one called "The Things They Didn't Know" in Cacciato are two of the saddest commentaries I know on Vietnamese-American relations in Vietnam. But these books have no sections as grisly as those in Caputo's Rumor of War; I'm thinking especially of scenes from his sections called "Officer in Charge of the Dead" when he describes his duties as a Regimental Casualty Reporting Officer. Nor do they contain passages comparable to Van Devanter's detailed descriptions of the grotesquely wounded in Home Before Morning. This is not to deny the power or appropriateness of these descriptions in these other works. It's just to say that O'Brien's books may be more appropriate choices for required reading in high school.

No one should take the decision to teach literature about the war lightly. This decision is, like the war itself, complicated—loads of arguments for and against. I urge teachers to do so because the students want the information and understanding that this literature can supply them. "I want to know why Vietnam is such a big deal," one student told me when I asked him why he'd signed up for my course. After reading these works, students no longer ask this question. They know why Vietnam was a big deal. And they are left with Rachel's question: Why? It is a good question to leave with our students.

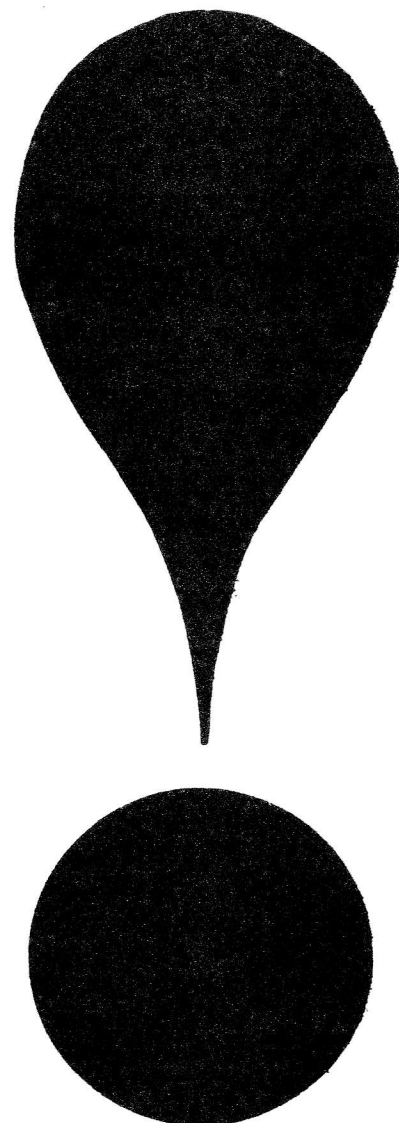
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#### INFOBANK 4

Percent of US colleges & universities

- where a single history course is not required: 38
- where a single US history course is not required: 83
- where no foreign language courses are required for graduation: 77
- where a single American or English literature course is not required: 45<sup>1</sup>

- Percent of Hispanics who complete 4 or more years of college: 10
- Percent of non-Hispanics who complete 4 or more years or college: 21
- Percent of Hispanics over 25 who have completed 4 or more years of high school in 1988: 51
- Percent in 1970: 32<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Education Reports 10(February 13, 1989):7-8.

<sup>2</sup>US Census Bureau. Hispanic Population in the United States: March 1988 (Advance Report).