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*The Yellow Birds: A Classic Modern*

No experience of a literary work happens in a vacuum. As a reader, one is affected (and, in a sense, effected) by what has been read before. The writer is no different, taking his own history of reading and putting it into the context of his life experience to forge a new work.

Wartime can become a crucible for such creation, as in modern American fiction from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* though *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Vonnegut to O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The combat experiences that help create the war novel can also destroy the character within it. John Bartle, from Kevin Powers' Iraq War novel *The Yellow Birds*, suffers from an unnamed mental condition that brings to mind posttraumatic stress disorder--PTSD. His unit-mates Sterling and Murphy suffer through the same Iraqi spring and summer of 2004, but while they succumb to suicides (active and passive, respectively), Bartle reaches the novel's end alive and on the road to emotional recovery. In a text that draws upon Powers' own experiences in the U.S. Army in Iraq, the narrator Bartle can be seen as Powers' surrogate in a kind of *bildungs-roman à clef*, something of a cross between a coming-of-age story and a memoir with only a shell of fictionalization around it. In a simple narrative reading of *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle's descent into PTSD is chronicled, and his recovery is achieved by gaining geographical and temporal remove from the war; in a more nuanced reading of the novel, however, Powers' metafictional use of nonlinear structure and present-tense insertions, along with his intertextual

allusions--to works from authors as varied as Melville, Vonnegut, and Shakespeare--make the literary experience one of not merely character recovery, but authorial healing as well.

Before one can see how Powers conveys the hellish effects of PTSD, it would be helpful to define some terms. For a diagnosis of PTSD, a number of standards must be met. First of all, there is the symptomatology of which most clinicians agree there are four: (1) re-experience, reliving the trauma through nightmare, flashback, and the like (NCPTSD Symptoms); (2) avoidance of anything that might remind the subject of the trauma (Whealin 190); (3) negative thoughts, encompassing anything from paranoia to loss of interpersonal relationships (NCPTSD Symptoms) to self-blame, guilt, and shame (Whealin 191); (4) hyperarousal, feeling "on edge" or "keyed up" (both NCPTSD Treatment). If these symptoms are all found within the subject, and if they cause the subject distress, disrupt home or work life, and last for more than three months, then PTSD may be diagnosed.

At 14 years, the current War on Terror, with its components of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF), is the longest continual conflict in the history of the United States, from which there is a wealth of PTSD data. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD, over one million soldiers left active duty in the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters, and were eligible for VA care between the years 2002 and 2009; of these nearly half sought VA services, and within that group, nearly half were diagnosed with a mental health problem (NCPTSD Effects). Concurrent research has also suggested that between 10% and 18% of returning OEF/OIF troops are likely to suffer from PTSD. Increasing the odds of having PTSD are exposure to certain war-zone stressors. In 2003, of returning Army troops (like the characters in *The Yellow Birds*), 95% had seen dead bodies, 93% had been shot at, 89%

had been attacked or ambushed, and 86% had known someone killed or seriously injured (NCPTSD Effects). There is a correlation between stressors and mental health: the more exposure to combat stressors, the higher likelihood of mental health problems. The three main characters from Powers' novel--the narrator/protagonist Bartle, Private Murphy, and Sergeant Sterling--have each been exposed to all of the stressors noted above.

The narrator John Bartle has seen battle and has experienced these combat stressors. And he certainly suffers from PTSD's first symptom, re-experience. Even as he first leaves the combat zone, he physically relives the war: in Germany, just "only one week removed from [Iraq]" (Powers *TYB* 51), Bartle recalls,

My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not listen, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much faster than I thought reasonable. (Powers *TYB* 54)

This is an excellent example of what clinical psychologist John Marzillier calls "intrusive body memory" (Marzillier 349). This same kind of tactile hallucination (O'Conghaile & DeLisi 249) emerges again when, on his flight Stateside just weeks later, he recalls, "My hand went to close around the stock of the rifle that was not there. An NCO from third platoon sitting across the aisle saw it and smiled. 'Happened to me twice today,' he said. I did not feel better" (Powers *TYB* 101). Like others, Bartle is reliving of the kinesthetic memories of war in the weeks immediately following his exit from Iraq.

At home in Virginia, well over three months later in August, Bartle is still re-experiencing the war, writing of the "sheer vividness of the scenes that looped on the

red-green linings of [his] closed eyelids" (Powers *TYB* 135). These visions of "the husks of dogs filled with explosives and arty old shells and the fucking guts and everything stinking like metal and burning garbage" (Powers *TYB* 145), would disturb anyone, and for him, they just seem to get worse and worse; they return, he writes, "Like you've bottomed out in your spirit but yet a deeper hole is being dug" (Powers *TYB* 145). Being "brought back" (Powers *TYB* 134), these re-experiences--the first symptom of PTSD--are distressing and seemingly never-ending, and keep him from even talking to old friends on the phone, as his mother notes, "You've got to talk to people, John. It's not good to be by yourself so much" (Powers *TYB* 135). What she fails to understand, but what clinicians might recognize, is that this desire for isolation can also be seen as one manifestation of PTSD's symptom of avoidance.

Even before Bartle leaves the theater of combat, he begins demonstrating examples of this avoidance. After his unit's interpreter has been killed, Bartle is "not surprised by the cruelty of [his] ambivalence then" (Powers *TYB* 11). This sort of emotional detachment is necessary for the soldier to keep from thinking too much about the loss of someone he's known. And this is not just for acquaintances during wartime, but for brothers-in-arms, as well. Even one's unit-mates become reminders of where one is, as Bartle reveals after seeing Murphy kneeling next to a newly killed comrade, "I could have gone to Murph, but I did not. I didn't want to. I didn't want to be responsible for him" (Powers *TYB* 120). Any type of emotional outreach is dangerous, something that might accelerate one's own "disintegrating" (Powers *TYB* 120), one's own disappearance into the memory of the trauma.

With Bartle's exit from Iraq, his opportunities for and his examples of avoidance multiply. Even on the flight home, "the battalion scattered throughout the plane" (Powers *TYB*

101); the soldiers take their first opportunity to put distance between themselves and the trauma, between themselves and their comrades, who are “people...that remind you of the events” (NCPTSD Treatment 5). Even after months at home, Bartle still craves avoidance and isolation: in the woods of Virginia, he revels in the immensity of nature, as he remembers, “I was hardly a speck on the landscape and I was glad” (Powers *TYB* 143). Only by becoming small, barely noticeable, can Bartle find happiness. Being a part of society is distressing, but being apart from it disrupts one’s ability to work or have a normal home life. In the months that follow, he “lived in an apartment on an upper floor and had little in the way of companionship. It was perfect for a while” (Powers *TYB* 177). Bartle achieves perfect avoidance--the second PTSD symptom--where no one can remind him of Iraq.

Even with the avoidance of these triggers, Bartle is still victim of these negative thoughts, another of PTSD’s symptomatology. While still in Iraq, Bartle’s feelings of shame and guilt are subtly displayed, like the previously mentioned lack of proper “surprise” (Powers *TYB* 11) over his ambivalent feelings for the killed interpreter or his desire not to be “responsible” (Powers *TYB* 120) for Murphy, a comrade whose mother Bartle had promised to bring home safe. Bartle compartmentalizes his emotions: grief, he writes, “is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew” (Powers *TYB* 124). The poor man who has been turned into a body bomb is “impossible to know” (Powers *TYB* 124), and thus easy to ignore. Bartle’s mention of the expected emotion, of course, belies his guilt at not feeling grief.

Not feeling grief is something that rests just below the surface in Iraq, like a seed in soil; Bartle’s feelings of “self-blame, guilt, and shame” (Whealin 191) emerge, grow and blossom after he leaves the country. As early as his visit to the brothel in Germany, he sees himself as not

deserving: he recalls when he orders a whiskey, “[The bartender] went for a bottle on the top shelf. I shook my head and pointed down. ‘Lower,’ I said” (Powers *TYB* 64). The top shelf is where the high quality liquor is kept; by telling her, “Lower,” he’s subconsciously saying that he doesn’t deserve quality alcohol, not after what he’s done. While he’s quick to mention his “shame...[and] disgrace” (Powers *TYB* 132), the crescendo of Bartle’s self-loathing and “sense of culpability...comes in a two-page stream of consciousness” (O’Gorman 551), in which he unleashes a torrent of negative feelings:

because there isn’t any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and ... you failed at the one good thing you could have done, the one person you promised would live is dead, and ... because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the murderer, the fucking accomplice, the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight, and you can’t explain it but it’s just, like, Fuck you, but then you signed up to go so it’s all your fault, really, because you went on purpose, so you are in the end doubly fucked. (Powers *TYB* 144-5)

This, five months after his return, removes any doubt as to the extent to which these negative thoughts--PTSD's third symptom--have distressed him and have disrupted his life, so much so that following this passage he allows the river to take him, and he must be saved.

In Iraq, something that could save him is a sense of heightened alertness, a kind of hyperarousal, PTSD's fourth symptom; in that context, this super-awareness could be the difference between finding the threat, and the threat killing the soldier. This "keyed up" (NCPTSD Treatment) feeling is a state so important that Bartle and his unit "stayed awake on amphetamines and fear" (Powers *TYB* 5). At home, though, that feeling of being on edge manifests itself differently. While looking at the fields on his drive home from the airport, Bartle "looked for where [he] might find cover in the field ... good cover and concealment from two directions until a base of fire could be laid down which would allow us to fall back" (Powers *TYB* 110). He cannot simply see the countryside, but he dissects it in such a way as would have ensured his survival just months earlier. Five months later, when he "woke at random intervals" (Powers *TYB* 131)--"difficulty falling or staying asleep" (Whealin 190) is a common manifestation of hyperarousal--he listens to "the school bus down the street loading and unloading different grades and ages of children, telling [him] the time based on the pitch of their chattering voices" (Powers *TYB* 131). Like a soldier on patrol performing "Identification: Friend or Foe" or IFF, Bartle is able to recognize not only the other unit (the schoolchildren) but also their ages and the time of day by the sound alone. His sensory "lookout for danger" (NCPTSD Symptoms), his hypervigilance, has altered his home life. Bartle simply cannot relax, even at peace, even at home.

Clearly, Powers' narrator and protagonist Bartle suffers from PTSD despite the fact that the author uses neither the current phrase “posttraumatic stress disorder” nor its acronym “PTSD” in *The Yellow Birds*. What Powers does use, however, are allusions to past works of literature. Writing a piece for the *Critique* literary journal, Daniel O’Gorman posits that “Bartle’s name is almost certainly a reference to Melville’s short story ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’” (O’Gorman 550). O’Gorman goes on to link Bartleby’s work at the Washington Dead Letter Office to Bartle’s “letter to Murph’s mother in her son’s guise: a grimly literal take on the notion of the ‘dead letter’” (O’Gorman 550). Other critics have made the Bartleby connection as well, going so far as to equate Bartle’s “preference for a cabin hemmed in by mountains...to...the blank wall outside Bartleby’s window” (Hagan 11). More complex than the Melville connection is Powers’ referencing of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This book, like *The Yellow Birds*, is nonlinear in structure. Many events in the novel are told in flashback or in time-jumps, but the main thrust of the novel is that of an American soldier trapped in the hell of a foreign war--in this case, the firebombing of Dresden in World War II. Near the midpoint of *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle writes of his stateside return: “Back home, everything had begun to remind me of something else...I was lost to whatever present I was in” (Powers *TYB* 134). Here, Bartle is uncannily similar to Vonnegut’s protagonist Billy Pilgrim, who is described as being “unstuck in time” (Vonnegut 28). It’s no surprise then that Powers ends this paragraph that begins “Back home” with a simple three-word sentence: “So it goes” (Powers *TYB* 135). These same three words form a refrain in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, used over 100 times in the 97-page novel, mostly in relation to death.

While the references to *Slaughterhouse-Five* are relatively straightforward and shallow, a deeper explication must be endeavored to discuss the complex ecosystem of literary allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hagan, in his essay on *The Yellow Birds*, notes that the three main characters' fathers are absent (Hagan 10). Prince Hamlet is famously fatherless, and is haunted by the specter of what he believes is his father's ghost. Unlike Bartle who joins the U.S. Army with the comforting thought that he'd "never have to make a decision again" (Powers *TYB* 35), Hamlet is confronted with many decisions to make, most of which are binary: Do I believe the ghost? Do I revenge my father? Can I trust anyone? And then there's the most classic question of all: "To be or not to be" (*Hamlet* 3.1.56), a question that launches arguably the most famous soliloquy in the Western Canon. Throughout the novel, Powers make backhanded allusions to the speech.

When, after a visit from the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, Bartle's mother asks, "What did you do?" (Powers *TYB* 148), his internal mental response--"What happened? What fucking happened? That's not even the question, I thought. How is that the question? How do you answer the unanswerable?" (Powers *TYB* 148)--reads like a reversal of the remainder of the *Hamlet* soliloquy's opening line: "that is the question" (*Hamlet* 3.1.56). Given the soliloquy goes on for 34 lines with no easy answers, the Dane's question may very well be "unanswerable." In the airport upon his landing in the States, Bartle sees "the ghosts of the dead" (Powers *TYB* 104) and remarks, "They had been wrong of course. You don't dream when you are dead" (Powers *TYB* 104). With that, Bartle seems to answer haunted Hamlet's questioning, "In that sleep of death what dreams may come" (*Hamlet* 3.1.66). By the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet opts for no action, saying, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (*Hamlet*

3.1.83). On the other hand, near the beginning of *The Yellow Birds*--temporally speaking, coming in the earliest dated chapter--Bartle realizes, “The world makes liars of us all” (Powers *TYB* 48). In the world of the novel, there’s no conscience, only the world itself; in this military culture, there are no cowards, only liars.

Interestingly, a single verb from this same soliloquy links not only the play to the novel, but also Murphy to Bartle. Hamlet describes death as being “when we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (*Hamlet* 3.1.67). During both Bartle’s meeting of Murphy and an Iraqi man’s description of Murphy’s naked escape from the base into the town, Murphy shuffles: the young man leaves the basic training bunk-room “with a shuffle” (Powers *TYB* 34), and he “shuffled his feet” (Powers *TYB* 196) into town. Bartle’s first and last visions of Murphy (watched and heard, respectively) both describe Murphy’s walk as that of “*Hamlet*-onian” death. In much the same manner, Bartle describes his own walking twice in the same way. When Bartle--in the acting out of a seeming death wish--walks over the railroad tracks that span the river a hundred feet below, he describes it as having “shuffled across the bridge” (Powers *TYB* 142). Months later, he recalls how his “gait had withered to a shuffle” (Powers *TYB* 178) since his return. Like Murphy, Bartle is a kind of dead man walking.

Moving beyond the soliloquy, Powers references the end of *Hamlet* and Hamlet’s last words: “the rest is silence” (*Hamlet* 5.2.341). Only in the world of *The Yellow Birds*, “The rest is history, they say. Bullshit, I say” (Powers *TYB* 100). Powers, through Bartle, again destroys the classic allusion with hard-won, un-poetic wisdom. When Powers ends the novel with Bartle’s reimagining of Murphy’s body drifting out to sea, it becomes a “regenerative pastoral elegy” (Samet), in much the same way as Gertrude’s poetic description of Ophelia’s drowning (*Hamlet*

4.7.164-181) tempers the ugliness of her death with nature imagery that softens the news. The final onstage appearance of Ophelia is when, distracted, she hands out flowers to King, Queen, and brother (*Hamlet* 4.5); it is fitting that Powers, “attuned to flora” (Samet), makes such great use of nature imagery throughout the novel.

It is not surprising that Powers alludes to both Ophelia’s suicide and Hamlet’s soliloquy, which itself is often interpreted as a debate over the taking of one’s own life, as Powers has said that with “the number of veteran suicides [having] now surpassed the battlefield casualties...[he] wanted to show the whole picture” (Crown). For the year in which the novel was published, 2012, the suicide rate for the U.S. Army was over double that of the national rate (30 per 100,000 as opposed to 12.5 per 100,000 [Zoroya]). Between 2001 and 2012, the annual number of military suicides more than doubled, from 145 to 321; over the same period, the percentage of suicides committed by members of the Army in particular grew from just under one-third of all military suicides in 2001 to over one-half in 2012 (Zoroya). Since this period covers the beginning of the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts, the assumption had been that deployment was a major factor, yet a Journal of the American Medical Association *Psychiatry* study found that this is not the case. Instead, the major factor seems to be “direct experience with a traumatic event” (Childress). According to a study by Craig Bryan, the head of the National Center for Veterans Studies, for soldiers “exposed to killing and death, the risk of suicide rises by 43 percent” (Childress). The correlation is there, but real-world causation is unclear.

The three main fictional characters in the novel are each exposed to “killing and death” (Childress), and thus have a higher risk of suicide. The arresting officer from the CID tells Bartle of an “accident” (Powers *TYB* 188) that had befallen Sterling, but Bartle intuits the truth and in

his mind can see “Sergeant Sterling on the side of a mountain. Saw the rifle barrel in his mouth. Saw the way he went limp, so limp in that impossible moment when the small bullet emerged from his head” (Powers *TYB* 188). This is no accident, but rather an “act” (Powers *TYB* 188), one that Bartle had known was possible all along: “He would put himself on the gallows in another boy’s place for no other reason than that he thought the noose was better suited to his neck” (Powers *TYB* 43). Sterling sacrifices his own life without exposing the truth, and in doing so may have saved Bartle from facing trial for the civilian deaths in Iraq. If Sterling’s suicide is “the last act” (Powers *TYB* 188) of his life, then Murphy’s “final willful act is to wander off the base naked” (Jelly-Schapiro 45), willful because the Iraqi townsfolk had “pleaded with him to return to the outpost” (Powers *TYB* 196), but he walked on to his fate anyway. Murphy could not have possibly thought that his naked stroll into the hostile town at night could end well. His suicide, though willful, is ultimately the passive act of a devastated mind, not the conscious self-performed act that Sterling’s was.

The deaths of Murphy and Sterling are caused--metaphorically--by the psycho-emotional open wound of PTSD. At the novel’s close, however, Bartle survives. Why? Some wounds, superficial scrapes, will scab over, heal on their own over time. But Bartle’s wounds are not superficial. These wounds, the more severe gashes, will need closure first--stitches in this extended metaphor. This externally imposed, physical closing of the wound is what allows it to heal. Closure becomes physical, and so too does Bartle’s PTSD closure: he must put physical distance between himself and Iraq.

If Bartle stays in Iraq, there is no way to heal. New traumas will accumulate onto the re-experiencing of the previous ones; the metaphorical sutures are ripped open. This seems to

have applied to Powers as well; he changes the area in which he served from Tal Afar to the novel's "Al Tafar," a fictionalizing that creates the "space" Powers needed to make sense of the war (Hawkins 557). Only by removal (metaphorical for Powers, physical for Bartle) can the soldier recover. Home is good, but for Bartle, isolation is better; this is why the companionless upper floor apartment at the edge of the river is "perfect for a while" (Powers *TYB* 177). He is alone here, and he is "happy" (Powers *TYB* 215) alone in his Fort Knox prison cell, a setting that becomes "an asylum of sorts" (Hagan 10); Bartle finds his ultimate destination in a "quiet quarantine in a cabin in the hills below the Blue Ridge" (Powers *TYB* 223). The further away from the deadly desert of Iraq the better for Bartle, the more complete the closure.

The psychological wound, now geographically closed by distance, can heal. But only over time. The temporal element cannot be denied nor ignored, neither for the author nor the character. In an interview with Andrew Slater for *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Powers reveals, "I needed to let the intensity of the experience subside somewhat before I could approach the writing with what I felt was the necessary perspective. Not objectivity, but something approaching a kind of critical distance" (Slater). The key words here are "distance," the geographical remove needed for closure, and "before," showing the importance that the passage of time in Powers' healing and writing process. Powers also shows the importance of time in the narrative of Bartle. In the central section of the novel set in Iraq, after he recounts the death of the "gut-shot" (Powers *TYB* 48) private and seeing Murphy with the body, Bartle remembers, "It is possible that I broke my promise [to Murphy's mother] in that very moment, that if I'd gone to comfort him a second earlier, he might not have broken himself. I don't know" (Powers *TYB* 120). The sudden imposition of this present-tense section--the verb in the preceding sentence is

“was,” the following “did”—shows the passage of time between the events in the narrative and this post-narrative commentary. Enough time has passed to create Powers’ “critical distance” for Bartle.

But that “critical distance” of healing will only exist in the future; the narrative’s moment in time now is still fraught with PTSD suffering, an ongoing hell that brings about the active and passive suicides of Sterling and Murphy, respectively. Bartle himself uses the word “passive” when leaving his mother’s house in August, a trip that will lead to his own “passive wish” (Powers *TYB* 135) of death. He questions his own motives and even his awareness of them:

Sure, there is a fine line between not wanting to wake up and actually wanting to kill yourself, and while I discovered you can walk that line for a long while without even noticing, anybody who is around you surely will, and then of course all kinds of unanswerable questions will not be far behind. (Powers *TYB* 135)

These kinds of “unanswerable questions” are, of course, the kinds of questions found in Hamlet’s soliloquy of whether or not to kill himself. But Hamlet’s suicide query is never a question that Bartle asks himself. He wants “to go to sleep and stay there, that’s all” (Powers *TYB* 135), a desire that grows into “want[ing] to die...more like wanting to be asleep forever” (Powers *TYB* 144). Never does he think of actively killing himself, only of the wish to “curl up and die” (Powers *TYB* 145) and “go to sleep and not wake up” (Powers *TYB* 146). Bartle wades into the river and he “drift[s]...a little to sleep” (Powers *TYB* 146). If Hamlet asked what dreams may come in that sleep of death (*Hamlet* 3.1.66)—and remember Bartle says earlier, “You don’t dream when you are dead” (Powers *TYB* 104)—then Powers now creates “the river [that] had a

dream in it" (Powers *TYB* 146). Bartle wades into nature and Powers' nature shows Bartle a dream, a reprieve from his PTSD.

This dream is not some nightmarish re-experiencing of Iraq. Having drifted into this, he isn't actively avoiding any triggers, either. And while the horse in the dream is injured, Bartle is plagued by no negative thoughts, nor is he on edge; instead, he is relaxed, his PTSD in respite. Bartle "feel[s] the power" (Powers *TYB* 147) of the horse, of nature, and in that power, the river has made the dream Bartle's: "This was *my* vision as I woke" (Powers *TYB* 147 *emphasis mine*). Powers the author gives Bartle the character ownership of the river's dream.

In a darker version of the novel, Powers might have easily rearranged the other chapters (excising chapters nine and eleven), and ended the novel with Bartle's suicide. But he doesn't. Bartle is able to walk away and tell the tale of the river and its "opposite bank...dotted with dogwood and willow" (Powers *TYB* 146), a seemingly random pairing--only it's not random. Not only does it provide for a poetically alliterative phrase (**dotted with dogwood and willow**), but the choice of plants is purposeful, as well. Both dogwood and willow have medicinal uses for pain relief ("Cornus" and "Willow" wiki); symbolically, the setting of the dream is a balm for Bartle's PTSD. Additionally, on an intertextual level, the use of a river with willows on its bank is another allusion to Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning: "There is a willow grows askant the brook (*Hamlet* 3.1.66). The description comes from Gertrude, who survives the scene to tell the tale; by transferring the horse vision from the river to Bartle for him to tell, Powers makes explicit Bartle's survival, his *non-suicide*. Author Powers saves the life of character Bartle not only through the intertextual link to *Hamlet* but also by the placement of the scene in the middle of the structure of the novel.

Powers creates a complex structure for *The Yellow Birds*, and not just because he alternates the Iraqi sections with sections from out of theater, a technique critics have described as “disordered, digressive” (Samet), “shattered” (Dew 253), and “temporally juxtapose[d]” (Barta 87). This nonlinear structure has an effect on the reader, who is put in the position of becoming Bartle’s surrogate. The reader encounters these events not “in the ordered way of autobiographical memory” (Marzillier 349) like a *roman à clef*, but rather in a stylistic analog for the workings of the traumatized mind. Yet Powers does not go for a complete disregard for time and space *à la* Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*; instead, his “two intercutting timelines” (Crown) each follow their own separate but naturally chronological orders. As Hawkins notes, “chapters rarely move between locations, creating a set-piece feel that intensifies the reader’s growing awareness of Bartle’s alienation” (Hawkins 99). While the structure is complex, it’s complex in a metafictional way, as it calls attention to itself, and shines a light on other authorial choices as well.

Like most authors, Powers has his narrator impose memories on the narrative, like when in the midst of the mission in which the unit’s interpreter Malik is killed, Bartle remembers seeing the names and portraits of fallen soldiers. But in a story that is so dependent on memory and reliving the past (re-experiencing as a PTSD symptom), Powers extends this stylistic technique. As mentioned earlier, Powers regularly pulls the reader out of the moment by having Bartle switch to the present tense for a short passage. For example, as Bartle leaves the German church, he recalls:

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. I *haven't* made any progress, really. When I *try* to get it right, I *can't*. When I *try* to put it out of my mind, it only *comes* faster and with more force. No peace. I've earned it.

“And what should I pray?” he asked. (Powers *TYB* 61, *emphases mine*)

In the midst of the past-tense recollection of the church, Powers imposes Bartle’s thoughts from a later time. It might seem subtle to a casual reader, but to someone attuned to rhetorical devices, the effect can be jarring. By having Bartle suddenly insert a present-tense moment into a past-tense narrative, Powers takes any fear for Bartle’s ultimate fate and puts it to rest: Bartle must survive, if he can talk to the reader in the past from the present. If suicide (or death, for that matter) is not longer a concern, then this *bildungsroman* novel becomes less Bartle’s coming-of-age story than his coming-of-recovery and healing.

But what if *The Yellow Birds* isn’t *about* Bartle’s recovery and healing but *is* Powers’ recovery and healing? Powers has spoken about the “definite alignment between [Bartle’s] emotional and mental life and [his own]” (Crown). This is where the metafictional and intertextual intertwine like the two separate narrative strands in the novel. A revisit to the allusion to the Melville short story becomes revelatory. Take the title: “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Break it down and it becomes phonetically “Bartle be the scrivener” and visually “Bartle, by the Scrivener.” Phonetically, Bartle the character becomes the “scribe” (OED); in a *roman à clef* reading of the novel, Bartle is Powers’ surrogate. But visually, Bartle is the subject of the scribe Powers; while the simplistic reading of the novel is, of course, that Powers the scribe creates the novel, in a *bildungsroman* reading of *The Yellow Birds*, the character becomes a fictional tool of the author. These new titles work as both an introduction to the main character, and a statement

of authorial power and control. “Read this novel, the product,” these reinterpreted titles seem to say, “but never forget the writer, the writing, the process.”

Part of that process for Powers is how writing has played a role in his own recovery. He was suffering early on from re-experiences like thinking during Fourth of July fireworks that people were shooting at him (*Powers Parade*). What has helped him recover is the power of writing and time. In an interview with PBS’s *Art Beat* in 2012, Powers stated that it was only after the passage of several years that he “had more clarity on [his] experience,” saying that “other people...are still kind of working out how to tell their own story” (*Powers Art Beat*). Here, he links his own coming to terms with trauma to the power of writing in the healing of others (“their own story”). It’s no surprise then Bartle comes to the same conclusion: “It’s imagination or it’s nothing, and must be, because what is created in this world, or made can be undone, unmade” (*Powers TYB* 100). Imagination, writing, can undo the trauma; but to get to that point, time must pass.

The sobriquet “a modern classic” has become something of a mongrel--half oxymoron, half cliché. In the case of Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, however, there may be no better descriptor. From a purely sociological perspective, the novel, with its view of a current war, the concurrent issue of PTSD, and the contemporary rising trend of military suicides, is most certainly modern. Modern, too, is Powers’ masterful and metafictional use of style and structure to not only replicate the mental state of its troubled narrator and authorial surrogate, but also to inform the narrative with Bartle’s ultimate survival and non-suicide. Powers’ use of intertextual allusions to works including Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is where the concept of “classic” comes in, linking Bartle to the authorial power of the “scrivener”

and his suffering to the “melancholy Dane” and the greatest suicidal debate in literature. On a purely simple and narrative level, Bartle’s healing is achieved through his reality-based geographical and temporal remove from the Iraq War, but Powers supports this through his own modern metafictional view of the present and his intertextual consumption of past classics. And in doing so, from the crucible of war, Powers has forged a new kind of literary experience.

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