

The Yellow Birds

John Marzillier on Kevin Powers' novel and what it can teach us about trauma

If you wanted to learn about the psychological problems soldiers have on returning from war, where would you look? You could usefully start by reading the report of a 15-year project at the King's Centre for Military Research (2010), where you would find detailed statistics on the extent and severity of PTSD, depression and other psychiatric problems found in those returning from the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. If you wanted a longer historical perspective you might read Ben Shephard's excellent 2002 book, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914–1994*. If you wanted something more direct and personal, you could read Captain Kevin Ivison's 2010 account of being a bomb disposal expert in Iraq. Or perhaps you might read the recent, highly acclaimed novel, *The Yellow Birds* (Sceptre, 2012), in which Kevin Powers, a combat veteran turned novelist, portrays the psychological breakdown of three young American soldiers deployed to Iraq. Hold on though. A novel? Surely, you may ask, no one wanting seriously to study the psychological problems of soldiers should read a novel? I think they should, and I will explain why.

It is true that within academic psychology, literature (novels, poetry, drama) features little or not at all. Psychological science is defined, like any other science, by facts, not fiction, and by the scientific method. Consider people like me, clinical and other applied psychologists whose professional work brings them into contact with the messy

and challenging lives of ordinary people. Many believe that this sort of work is the science of psychology applied to practical problems, the old scientist-practitioner model that held sway for so many years. Anyone who has worked directly with people will recognise this as balderdash. While we can cover the work we do with the thin gauze of science, partly to justify what we do and partly to claim privileges that other professionals do not have, the reality is that working directly with people challenges us in a way that science has no answers for. This does not mean academic psychology is irrelevant; only that its influence is modest at best, and that we should recognise this, and look to other sources of knowledge for help. Literature, for example.

In a previous article, I listed four ways that reading novels could be valuable in clinical practice (Marzillier, 2007). These were through exploring the meaning of psychological theories (primarily the domain of psychoanalysts up to now but need not be restricted to that branch of psychology); for the way good writers vividly describe recognised states of mind like depression and psychosis; for the way we professionals are portrayed by writers; and, finally, to tap into empathetic understanding and learn something new and fresh from the insights that really good writers provide. Here I will focus on

one novel, *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, to show how it can reveal truths about war in a way no academic book or article can.

Reviewers have extolled this book, even comparing it to classic novels like Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It is an extraordinary story, unflinching in the portrayal of the terror, boredom and corruption of three young men in war, and written in lyrical prose that mesmerises the reader like a muezzin's call to prayer. The narrator is Private John Bartle, 21 years old, who, like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, is telling us a story of horror – in this case what happened to him, his friend, Murph, and their sergeant, Sterling, in Al Tafari, Nineveh Province, Iraq in September 2004. We learn early on that Murph is dead, though it takes the whole book to find out what happened and the parts played in it by Bartle and Sterling.

What does the novel tell us about the trauma of war? What do we gain by reading it that we would not gain from reading psychology articles and books? Academic articles can provide statistics derived from research studies. It can be helpful to know about the comorbidity of PTSD in soldiers; for example that, in a sample of 84,792 US veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom who attended a mental health clinic, the majority (58.2 per cent) received a diagnosis of PTSD, of which 76.2 per cent also received other psychiatric diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety and alcohol misuse (Seal et al., 2010). Or that in US studies, PTSD is clearly correlated with the experience of combat whereas in UK studies that relationship is not so clear-cut (King's Centre, 2010). But the statistics tell one nothing about the individual soldiers. Even the diagnosis of PTSD tells one less than it might, as psychiatric diagnoses are now arrived at by symptom checklists rather than observing particular phenomena in

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people as they used to be (see Leader, 2011, for a detailed critique).

Psychological theories of trauma are derived from studies of individuals but these are aggregated and they are often experimental studies on students rather than clinical samples. Theories, by their nature, take us away from the individual to the general.

All of this information is valuable; yet it is also distancing. What does it *feel* like to be under fire or to return home from combat unable to talk to your family or friends? What does a flashback actually feel like? One way to answer this is to ask people, which is what I did for my recent trauma book (Marzillier, 2012). But even then people may find it hard to put their experiences into words. Good novelists have no such difficulty. Take this example where Bartle, having been flown to Germany after his tour in Iraq has ended, has gone AWOL and is in a cab going into town.

As I looked out onto the trees that edged the road, my muscles tensed and I began to sweat. I knew where I was: a road in Germany, AWOL, waiting for the flight back to the States. But my body did not: a road, the edge of it, and another day. My fingers closed round the 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 round the space where my rifle was supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much faster than reasonable. (p.53, Kindle edition)

What a compelling description of an intrusive body memory. On the subject of asking how people felt, consider the response of Murph to a journalist asking about 'the rush' of being in combat:

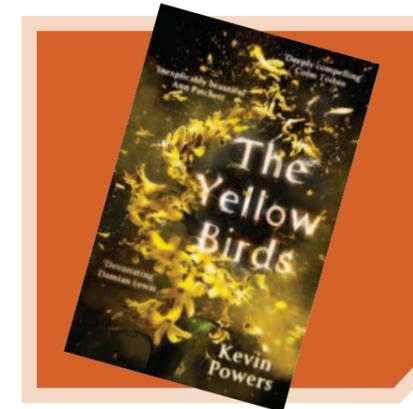
'It's like a car accident. You know? That instant between knowing that it's gonna happen and actually slamming into the other car. Feels pretty helpless actually, like you've been riding along same as always, then it's there staring you in the face and you don't have the power to do shit about it. And know it. Death, or whatever, it's either coming or it's not... like that split second in the car wreck, except for here it can last for goddamn days.' (pp.92–3)

Helplessness in the face of imminent death is captured through Powers' capacity to channel the usually inarticulate Murph.

But novels are more than good writing. They also state truths. There is

a great deal of interest in psychology in the nature of trauma memories, particularly what might explain their vivid, intrusive quality. One theory, the dual-processing theory, suggests that certain trauma memories remain in their raw, sensory form, failing to get processed into autobiographical memory, and this causes distress to the sufferer (Brewin, 2011). We see something like this happening in the novel when Bartle has returned to his mother's house after his tour is over, where he takes long, aimless walks and is plagued by suicidal thoughts:

I was tired of my mind running all night through the things I remembered, then through things I did not remember but for which I blamed myself on account of the



sheer vividness of scenes that looped on the red-green linings of my closed eyelids. I could not tell what was true and what I invented but I wanted it to stop, to leave it and have my perception drift away like a burned-up fog. (pp.134)

It is not just that the scenes of horror are replayed – 'looped on the red-green linings of my closed eyelids' – but that Bartle does not know what is true and what is invented. The idea that flashbacks and nightmares are purely repetitions of horrific scenes bears re-examination (see Leys, 2000, for a discussion). A major trauma can also destroy the mind's capacity to think, undermining the old certainties. The overwhelming stimulation that Freud identified as a characteristic of major traumas infiltrates the normal mental processes, breaching defences, and sowing doubt and confusion (Garland, 1998).

In Germany, Bartle goes into a cathedral where he picks up a leaflet about its thousand-year history. It makes him think of his own history.

I had less and less control over my own history each day. I suppose I could have made some kind of effort. It should have been easy to trace: this happened, I was here, that happened next, all of which led inevitably to the present moment. I could have picked up a handful of dirt from the street outside, some wax from a candle on the altarpiece, ash from incense as it swung past. I could have wrung it out, hoping I might find an essential thing that would give meaning to this place or that time. I did not. Certainty had surrendered all its territory in my mind. I'd have just been left with a mess in my hands anyway, no more. I realized, as I stood there in the church, that there was a sharp distinction between what was remembered, what was told, and what was true. And I didn't think I'd ever figure out which was which. (pp.59–60)

Bartle's life slowly disintegrates after he returns. This short passage shows us why: if you cannot (or, possibly, will not) distinguish between 'what was remembered, what was told, and what was true', how can you live your life? The paradox is that people do remember: they have images or dreams in which vivid memories return. But they do not remember in the ordered way of autobiographical memory. And they no longer are the people they were. Their identity is continually dissolving like repeated ripples on a pond. 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,' as W. B. Yeats memorably put it in his poem 'The Second Coming' (1920). It is not just that some dearly held beliefs are shattered (Janoff-Bulman, 1997) but that the felt sense of who we are has been destroyed. To some, suicide may seem the logical option.

A novel is not a work of science. But science is not everything. Good novels carry us along with them, giving us empathy with the dilemmas the characters face and thereby a felt understanding that is so important for working with people. Paradoxically, it is because novels are fiction that we can afford to believe them to be real. Those who read *The Yellow Birds* will get a vivid sense of what the trauma of war is like for the young men who are drawn into it. More than that, the book will bring them face to face with uncomfortable truths about the damage trauma does in a way that no statistic or theory can.

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