

College of Southern Maryland

Connections Literary Series

Study Guide for Poet Brian Turner

Reading: November 14, 2008

7:30 pm

La Plata Campus

BI Building, Room 113

A harrowing, beautiful, first-person account of the Iraq War by a soldier-poet. Adding his voice to the current debate about the US occupation of Iraq, in poems written in the tradition of such poets as Wilfred Owen and Yusef Komunyakaa, Iraq war veteran Brian Turner writes powerfully affecting poetry of witness, exceptional for its beauty, honesty and skill. Based upon Turner's year-long tour in Iraq as an infantry team leader, the poems offer gracefully-rendered, unflinching description but, remarkably, leave the reader to draw conclusions or moral lessons.

Here, Bullet

If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta's opened valves, the leap
thought makes at the synaptic gap.
Here is the adrenaline rush you crave,
that inexorable flight, that insane puncture
into heat and blood. And I dare you to finish
what you've started. Because here, Bullet,
here is where I complete the word you bring
hissing through the air, here is where I moan
the barrel's cold esophagus, triggering
my tongue's explosives for the rifling I have
inside of me, each twist of the round
spun deeper, because here, Bullet,
here is where the world ends, every time.

Activity 1

Go to this website and listen to the interview with Brian Turner. Then, answer the questions that follow.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5126583>

Questions

1. What do you think about Turner's reasons for becoming a soldier?
2. On the poem, "Ashbah": Some cultures believe a soul wanders after death until it finds peace. Why do you think Turner uses this motif in the poem? What implications does he make about Iraqi dead?
3. On the poem, "Najaf, 1820": How does this poem "look back, but at the same time actually speak about the present," as Turner suggests in the interview? What does the poem suggest about historical cycles of violence?
4. Comment on Turner's answer to the question: "Did you feel that you made a difference in Iraq?"
5. On the poem, "Eulogy": Why did the colonel choose to omit Private Miller's name from his list of "those we left behind"? What do you think Turner's poem does to address this omission? In a larger sense, what do Americans need to know about the war in Iraq? Who decides what information we get? How do we know if we're getting the whole story or partial truth? See also the poem, "What Every Soldier Should Know."
6. How does "What Every Soldier Should Know" comment on the nature of the war in Iraq?

Activity 2

Go to this website and read the interview with Brian Turner. Then, answer the questions that follow.

http://www.alicejamesbooks.org/turner_interview.html

Questions

1. Read the poem "Milh." How does this poem reflect "the struggle to preserve something of value from what seems to be the inexorable pull of loss"? How does Turner's work as a writer reflect this same struggle?
2. Read the poem "AB Negative (The Surgeon's Poem)" and speak about the extent to which it "rings true." What details draw you into the experience? What offense could a friend or family member take to Turner's account of "Thalia Fields'" death?
3. How do poems like "Into the Elephant Grass," "Trowel" and "Kirkuk Oilfield, 1927" embody Turner's statement: "I did not want to give in to the process of de-humanizing the Iraqi people so that I could get on with the job at hand"?

4. Read “2000 lbs” and explain how the poem captures Turner’s statement: “It’s one thing to be a soldier among soldiers and to try to live in a combat zone knowing that there are people who are actively out trying to kill you. It’s an altogether different thing to be a mother or a father simply trying to raise their children and put food on the table in that very same war zone.”
5. Read “Night in Blue” and comment on what Turner has learned from his experience at war. What have you, as his reader, learned about this war? How will this knowledge help us in the future?
6. Read “Last Night’s Dream.” How do the images of war and sexual imagery and the description of the woman’s body merge? What does Turner achieve by this comparison?
7. Read “Cole’s Guitar.” What images that evoke America does the music evoke in the speaker’s mind? What does the last stanza of the poem say about the way he sees himself in relationship to these images of home?
8. Read “9-Line Medevac.” What is gained by the form of this poem? What pattern does the poem create? What comment does the poem make on the difference of language between the “9 lines” of the medevac call-in and the language the speaker uses to describe what each of those lines evokes for him?

Activity 3

Go to this website and listen to Brian Turner read his poems at Bowdoin College. Be sure to listen to the “Question/Answer” part of the program.

http://fishhousepoems.org/archives/brian_turner/brian_turner_full_bowdoin_reading.shtml

Choose one or more of the poems from the reading to discuss one of the following themes:

1. The Psychological Effects of War on Soldiers
2. Read works by Wilfred Owen, Tim O’Brien, Yusef Komunyakaa, Walt Whitman, Bruce Weigl, George Evans, and others. How does Turner fit into this tradition of soldier-poets? How do his poems resemble those that have come before? How is Turner’s work unique?
3. How Americans get Information about the War in Iraq
4. The De-Humanizing Effects of War
5. The Role of the Soldier-Poet at War and Back Home