

(6) Modern American War Novel

Norman Mailer, James Jones, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Tim O'Brien, Michael Herr

Wartime Presidents

1930s
to 1970s
Presidents

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945): in office 1933–1945, 32nd President
- Harry S. Truman (1884–1972): in office 1945–1953, 33rd President
- Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969): in office 1953–1961, 34th President
- John F. Kennedy (1917–1963): in office 1961–1963, 35th President
- Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973): in office 1963–1969, 36th President
- Richard Nixon (1913–1994): in office 1969–1974, 37th President
- Gerald Ford (1913–2006): in office 1974–1977, 38th President

Second World War (1st Sept 1939–2nd Sept 1945)

Outbreak

- the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invade Poland and split the conquered territory between themselves
- the United States prepare for a war of defence and do not intend to enter the war and interfere in foreign affairs
- Japan experiences a depression and attempts to rebuild the nation by attacking European colonies in the Pacific

US Entry

- the US send a fleet to the Pacific to protect Hawaii, Japan attacks surprisingly at **Pearl Harbor** (7th Dec 1941)
- the US declare war on Japan (8th Dec 1941), on which Germany and Italy declare war on the US and vice versa
- Europe battles were commanded by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Pacific battles by Gen. Douglas MacArthur

Allied
Victory

- the Allies liberated French towns in the **Invasion of Normandy**, Operation Overlord on D-Day (6th June 1944)
- Germany surrendered on V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day, 8th May 1945), Japan failed to follow its example
- the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima (6th Aug 1945) and Nagasaki (9th Aug 1945), Japan surrendered on V-J Day (Victory over Japan Day, 15th Aug 1945)

Peace
Talks

- the heads of the United States (Franklin Delano Roosevelt), Great Britain (Winston Churchill) and the USSR (Joseph Stalin) met at the **Yalta Conference** (4th to 11th Feb 1945) where they negotiated the sphere of influence
- the United Nations were founded to replace the original League of Nations set up after the First World War
- the US and USSR differences over the post-war shape of Europe and regimes led to the Cold War (1947–1991)

Korean War (1950–1953)

Korean
Civil War

- Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, the North being supervised by the USSR and the South by the US
- the North attacked the South in an attempt to reunite the region and managed to gain much of the southern area

US Inter-
vention

- President Harry S. Truman decided to intervene into the Korean Civil War as a member of the United Nations
- Gen. Douglas MacArthur won most of the northern area, but China intervened and pushed the US to the South
- the field war operations did not last more than several months, it was the negotiations that took several years

Vietnam War (1959–1975)

Vietnam
Civil War

- Vietnam was a part of French Indochina, but the French were defeated by the communist China (1954) and the country was divided into the communist North and the democratic South, where the US were military advisers
- the North attacked the South (1959), and in the ensuing civil war the South joined the communist Viet Cong

US Inter-
vention

- in the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964)** President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that the US would undertake necessary measures as a reaction against the alleged attack of North Vietnam on US ships at Tonkin
- the Viet Cong action known as **Tet Offensive (1968)** resulted in the strategic and psychological victory of the North, after which the US recognized that the war could not be won, but the negotiations took five more years
- the peace agreement was closed (1973), the war ended in the victory of the North which won the South (1975)

American War Novel

WWI/WWII
Home Front

- the American participation in the WWI was brief and casualties relatively light, the WWII was a turning point
- the WWI left the nation largely unaffected, stubbornly sticking to small-town values and middle-class morality
- the WWII home front saw mobility of women¹ into the factories and blacks from the South to the war plants, Japanese Americans were removed from the West Coast to Relocation Camps and had their property confiscated
- the aftermath of the WWII brought back a more conservative view of gender roles, gender stereotypes returned
- the WWII contributed to the **masculinization** of American writing, with emphasis on courage tested in crisis

¹ Before the WWII married women did not have jobs; due to the absence of men during the war women were hired for hard labour, including black women. A woman working to support the war economy was dubbed Rosie the Riveter.

Mailer
and Jones:
Histories

- the WWII novels followed the examples of war novels like Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) or Cummings's *The Enormous Room* (1922) or 1930s novels like Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (1936) or Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (1935)
- most serious novels dealt but with a handful of incidents, a small conflict, usually one the writer witnessed, both Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Jones's *The Thin Red Line* (1962) with a single island capture
- both Mailer and Jones use flashbacks to fill in the civilian lives of soldiers so that the novels, circumscribed by the three classical unities, become **microcosms** not only of the war but a larger American **society** in transition
- most novels were written after the war, so writers projected their sense of the postwar world back onto the war
- the WWII novel looks both backward to the social fiction of the Depression, as Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951), and forward to the postwar black humour and anguished sense of alienation, as Heller's *Catch-22* (1961)

Heller and
Vonnegut:
Anti-
histories

- later war novels are marked by the fading of the immediate feeling of joy and relief and the onset of the horror of the aftermath, as the Holocaust news, the new technology of mass destruction, the Cold War or the arms race
- earlier novels, as by Mailer or Jones, are historical novels in that they present campaigns with their beginnings, middles and ends, they represent microcosms of the war as a whole and sometimes of the whole society in war
- later novels, like those by Heller, Vonnegut or Pynchon, present a static war in which nothing happens, they are **antihistorical** novels with no sense of unfolding history, their pattern is **circular** rather than developmental
- the 1960s war novels deal less with the war and more with the Holocaust, Cold War, atomic war and Vietnam
- the Holocaust narrative eventually displaces the combat narrative as the writers' principal vision of the WWII
- the post-1960s novels share a comic-book mood of sheer lunacy and the reduction of individuals to nonentities

WWII
Fiction

- the **WWII** novels stress the shock of the **new experience**, social and personal dislocation and shock of carnage
- show the recruits being forced to adjust to the army hierarchy and discipline cutting against the American grain
- demonstrate how the young men were influenced morally by being exposed to killing and dying at an early age
- suggest that the survivors come out not as heroes, their heroism is often accidental, but simply as changed men

Vietnam
Novels

- the **Vietnam** novels draw on Heller's **absurdism** and the magic realism popularized by Latin American writers
- convey the lack of sense of a front, an enemy or a purpose, little prospect of victory and little sense of honour
- mediate the nightmarish qualities, the hellish sense of unreality of fighting in monsoon rains and jungle heat
- seem to take place in a vacuum, the sense of the world back home is dissipated and unlearned by the soldiers
- capture the sense of entrapment, horror, moral ambiguity, disillusionment, loss of faith and a grim awakening
- the Vietnam War inspired many films by different directors with different approaches, as Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)

Norman Mailer (1923–2007)

Back-
ground

- helped to create **New Journalism**, a form taking actual events to submit them to imaginative transformation
- preoccupied with the exploration of power, its different manifestations, its expressions and modes of operation
- served in the **WWII** with a cavalry battalion in the Philippines, though he was not involved in much fighting

The Naked and the Dead (1948)

WWII
Master-
piece

- a WWII novel written in the tradition of American **naturalism**, dealing with the Pacific Theatre of Operation
- described by the author as 'a parable about the movement of man through history' that shows 'man corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness' but also finds out that there are 'limits beyond which he cannot be pushed'
- also shows that 'even in this corruption and sickness' of society man holds on to 'yearnings for a better world'
- the parable is executed in terms of flesh and blood, depicting the capture of a **Pacific island** from the Japanese

Characters

- a view on the ground of the combatant soldier is provided through the reconnaissance platoon under Sgt. Croft
- the strategic view of the operation is presented in conceptions of Gen. Cummings, a person with fascist beliefs
- these two views and levels to the action are connected by the character of Lieut. Hearn, a middle-class liberal
- Sgt. Croft is represented as the natural fascist, a sadist who kills for the thrill of killing, while Gen. Cummings as the intellectual fascist, who not only enacts but also expresses his beliefs in the future of the power morality
- the eight men of the reconnaissance platoon are a representative cross-section of multi-ethnic American society
- **character stereotypes** include the pompous general, the vicious sergeant, the college-educated lieutenant, the cringing Jews, the lascivious Southern redneck, the guilt-ridden Irishman, the frightened Mexican and so forth
- flashbacks of the 'Time Machine', inspired by Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, present the pre-war lives of the characters

Strategies

- presents the ineffectiveness of Cummings's chessboard strategy as well as Croft's superhuman Ahab-like drive
- bleak **irony** underlies the narrative, for instance the island is captured thanks not to the strategies of a general but to the actions of an incompetent major, and the capturing of the island eventually serves no useful purpose
- shows the physical and mental testing of men driven beyond the limits of exhaustion by the obsessive Crofts
- at the end the platoon men reach the point where they can be oppressed no further, as manifested in their return

- the men stumble into a nest of hornets, from which they flee in terror down a slope, discarding their weapons and understanding that ‘if they threw away enough possessions, they would not be able to continue their patrol’

***Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967)**

Hunting
Novel

- circulates around an imaginative investigation of power on a national level as well as on the international one
- concerned with the national fantasies of power that prompted America into its imperialist venture in Vietnam
- narrated by a character called D. J., written in a wild surreal idiom that replicates the patter of disc jockeys
- follows a larger-than-life hunting trip, reminiscent of hunting in the fiction of Cooper, Hemingway or Faulkner
- shows the young protagonist-narrator brought by his wealthy father on a hunting trip in an obsessive pursuit of a grizzly bear and his increasing disillusion with his father’s hunting tactics that seem dishonest and cowardly
- may be read as a growing-up novel, ends with the protagonist’s announcement that he is to serve in Vietnam

James Jones (1921–1977)

Service

- joined the army before the **WWII** as a way of escaping the Depression and the responsibilities of civilian life

***From Here to Eternity* (1951)**

Pre-war
Novel

- a grimly realistic story set within the regular army in **Hawaii** in the months leading to the Pearl Harbor attack
- set specifically in and around the Schofield Barracks located near Honolulu, where the author himself served
- the common soldiers are refugees from an economically depressed and socially constricted small-town life
- the officers are nearly always petty, selfish, ambitious, time-serving careerists who exercise power arbitrarily
- the protagonist is an aching proud hero, a coal miner’s son, resembling a figure out of the proletarian novel
- Robert Prewitt, as his name indicates, is much of a **romantic rebel**, doomed, self-destructive, with his own code of honour, caught between his love of the army and inability to accept its harsh and often unfair discipline
- his unbending code of morality leads to catastrophe in his and other people’s lives, eventually to his own death

***The Pistol* (1959)**

Pre-combat
Novella

- set immediately after the shocking Pearl Harbor attack, centres at the college educated Private Richard Mast
- evolves around the pistol that Mast receives when he is called to duty and the hope that it represents for him in face of the **expected attack** of the Japanese samurai, against whom the long rifles of his fellows are ineffective
- the novella describes the attempts of Mast’s fellow soldiers to retrieve the pistol from him, Mast’s desperate clinging to the pistol as a symbol of hope and his eventual relief when an officer takes the pistol back from him

***The Thin Red Line* (1962)**

WWII
Master-
piece

- focuses on the first offensive action after Pearl Harbor and the first American victory in the **Pacific Theatre**, that is the invasion and conquest of Guadalcanal in 1942, the turning point in the morale of American soldiers
- begins with the landing of men, some of them longtime regular soldiers who have never been in combat, and goes on with stages of fear, disbelief, exhaustion, camaraderie, numbness, injury, unheroic victory and removal
- mobilizes a huge cast of characters, also many of *From Here to Eternity*, and gives them monosyllabic names, newly introduces a largely autobiographical character, Fife, whose experiences closely follow the author’s own
- emphasizes the aspects of **courage** and fear of men new to combat and most of all the utter **cowardice** of Fife
- presents an unheroic and often comic view of war, partly reflecting the mood of the late 1950s and early 1960s
- may be finally read as a growing-up novel, telling the tale of how a raw youth all too quickly becomes a man

***Whistle* (1978)**

Post-war
Novel

- written when the author was already seriously ill and published posthumously, reflects the post-Vietnam mood
- deals with the **post-combat** fate of wounded men in a military hospital back home while the war still continues
- presents the war as remote and distant, but also as an ever-present physical intrusion in the injuries of the men

Joseph Heller (1923–1999)

Service

- served in the **WWII** with a bomb squadron in Italy and flew sixty combat missions as an airplane bombardier

***Catch-22* (1961)**

WWII
Master-
piece

- employs disjointed narrative technique, nightmare sequences and bleak **humour** to depict a world gone crazy
- the narrative does not unfold chronologically, there is no real sequence to the men’s experience, it is anchored by rather arbitrary points of reference, as Yossarian’s hospital stays or the number of required bombing missions
- the intricate narrative pattern enables characters who are already dead in one chapter to be still alive in a later chapter, pinned all the more ineluctably to their determined fate, everything seems to be happening continuously
- shows the protagonist Yossarian as the victim of a mad conspiratorial military and political complex, caught in a **closed system** from which his simple desire to escape proves his sanity and so his fitness to go on serving it
- burlesques a realistic view of the war, shows the war with a pervasive sense of unreality, an element of insanity

- discards psychological portrayals of characters with naturalistic details, rather exaggerates them into **cartoons**
- shows his affinity with shlemiel humour, the serious comedy of victimization, based on his Jewish background
- **satirizes** bureaucracy and the insanity of the organizational mind in making the real life of the characters differ from their official life; the dead man in Yossarian's tent never arrived and the living Doc Daneeka officially died

Non-war
Novels

***Something Happened* (1974)**

- uses the same comic strategies and verbal riffs as *Catch-22*, but is full of desperation, cruelty and self-loathing
- presents a nearly anonymous character who hates his family and job yet is powerless to get away from them

***Good as Gold* (1979)**

- satirizes his Jewish outlook and upbringing which provided for his savagely funny sense of the ironies of life

***Closing Time* (1994)**

- revisits some of the characters of *Catch-22*, including the protagonist, to show the later lives of WWII veterans

Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007)

Service

- served in the **WWII** as a private, along with few other scouts wandered behind enemy lines, was captured and imprisoned in Dresden where he survived the bombing in underground slaughterhouse meat locker number five

American
Nazi Thug

***Mother Night* (1961)**

- employs cartoonish elements and ingenious reversals and doublings to tell the story of a misplaced American
- the protagonist-narrator moved to Germany after the WWI, where he became alternately both a well-known playwright in the German language and a **Nazi propagandist**, who awaits his trial for war crimes in a prison

Atom Bomb
Inventor

***Cat's Cradle* (1963)**

- explores issues of science, technology and religion, satirizing the **arms race** as well as other ills of society
- derives its title from the string game that the fictional inventor of the atom bomb played when it was dropped

WWII
Master-
piece

***Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (1969)**

- circulates around the punitive bombing of **Dresden**, which the author himself witnessed as a prisoner of war
- tries to make sense of the author's haunting experience by making the protagonist a **shell-shocked** simpleton
- shows a protagonist who 'comes unstuck in time', whose experiences seem to be happening all at once, whose memories cannot be sorted out or exorcised, which seems to be the only way of writing about the unthinkable
- suggests that one of the main effects of war is that people are discouraged from being characters, the shock of history nullifies individual agency, the veterans lack the courage to become a character and lead a coherent life

Billy
Pilgrim's
Progress

- presents a character who suffers mental breakdowns, marked by a failure to feel combined with an inability to forget, and whose anaesthetized, mechanical behaviour is reflected in the nerveless, repetitive narrative style
- repeats its benumbing fatalistic refrain 'so it goes' always when anyone dies or when anything awful happens
- interweaves **science fiction** and **satire**, comedy and a bleak determinism, black humour and surreal fantasy
- employs the time-warp technique to present the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, plodding through his dull middle age life in suburban America while simultaneously alive and comfortable on the distant planet of Tralfamadore
- provides at the same time ironic commentary on our inhumanity and the opportunity for destruction by new technology, satire on the bourgeois suburbia standards and exploration of human inconsequence and impotence

Tim O'Brien (b. 1946)

Back-
ground

- born and brought up in Austin, Minnesota, a setting which figures prominently in much of his fictional writing
- served two years in the **Vietnam** War as an infantry foot soldier, was wounded and subsequently discharged

Writing

- writes from the perspective of an ordinary foot soldier, boldly confronts some of the worst aspects of Vietnam
- writes as an eyewitness, a fortunate but troubled survivor, who seeks to make his fiction a form of testimony
- focuses on the impossibility of seeing anything clearly in a war zone and the difficulty of conveying **the truth**
- moves freely between the lines of fiction and nonfiction, in some stories uses a character named Tim O'Brien

Vietnam
Journalism

***If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)**

- a series of linked sketches, originally journalistic pieces produced during his reporting for the *Washington Post*

Post-
Vietnam
Novel

***Northern Lights* (1975)**

- explores the complex relationship of two brothers, one a veteran of Vietnam, set in a hostile town in Minnesota

Vietnam
Master-
piece

***Going After Cacciato* (1978)**

- ranks as one of the most outstanding fictional narratives on Vietnam, won the author the National Book Award
- splinters the relationship between past and present so as to be able to do justice to the **surreal** sense of the war
- mixes realistic chapters set in the war with whimsical, picaresque chapters on the tracking of a missing soldier

- punctuates the chapters by short observations set in the mind of the protagonist during his tour of guard duty
- employs a circular structure, begins and ends with chapters including a handful of facts about the soldier's disappearance and weaves backwards and forwards from memories of the war to the possibilities of life out of it
- combines the retrospective and the prospective and explores not so much the war itself as the mind of the war
- uses the perspective of a foot soldier named Paul Berlin, interweaves his horrific memories over the preceding five months with the imaginary adventures of a group of soldiers marching across Asia to the Paris Peace Talks
- stretches to **magic realism** as it traces the epic journey of the breakaway group pursuing the deserter Cacciato

Cold War
Novel***The Nuclear Age*** (1981)

- a minor novel concerning a middle-aged man's paranoid obsession with and preparations for the nuclear war

Vietnam
Stories***The Things They Carried*** (1990)

- a collection of stories presenting Vietnam as a postmodern realm of the indefinite, ambiguous and open-ended
- fuses reality and fantasy as it explores the futility of searching for the truth about what happens, or why, in war

Post-
Vietnam
Novel***In the Lake of the Woods*** (1994)

- a relatively more conventional novel about the legacy of the Vietnam past as it haunts the American present

Michael Herr (b. 1940)

Service

- served not as a soldier but spent over a year moving around in **Vietnam** as a war correspondent for the *Esquire*
- later collaborated on screenplays for the Vietnam films *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)

Vietnam
Master-
piece***Dispatches*** (1977)

- written in the vein of **New Journalism**, regarded one of the pioneering works in the genre of nonfiction novel
- captures the brutally material yet also dreamlike or hallucinatory quality of combat, its strangely unreal reality
- lets the erratic rhythms of war dictate the rhythm of the narrative, switching from standstill to hysterical action
- develops a nervous, explosive, rifflike style, suffused with dread, to give a sense of being there on the ground
- works the feeling of the war into the texture of the prose, charged with arresting images and cutting metaphors
- deploys direct address, pacy language, the syncopations of jazz, rock and pop to register the **sixties spectacle**, which is in part John Wayne movie, in part rock-and-roll concert, redneck riot, media event and a bad drug trip
- focuses on 'grunts', the ordinary infantrymen who try to make their way through the war with the help of black humour, bleak cynicism and the belief that the only logical thing in an illogical world is just to go with the flow