

## Discussion Guide for *Sunrise Over Fallujah*

### **Fallen Angels and Sunrise over Fallujah** by Walter Dean Myers

Two wars. Two generations. A story that links them together.

Walter Dean Myers's stunning Coretta Scott King Award-winning novel, *Fallen Angels*, about the Vietnam War, was published in 1988. Twenty years later, Walter has written a riveting contemporary companion, *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, that again shows the devastating personal realities of war.

In *Fallen Angels* we met 17-year-old Richie Perry, a soldier in the Vietnam War. Now, in *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, set in 2003, Walter introduces us to Robin "Birdy" Perry, Richie's nephew, a kid from Harlem, who comes face to face with war's ugliest sides - and recounts this in letters to his Uncle Richie. Through Robin's account, we begin to understand the realities behind the headlines - about the horror of war, and what war means to young people and their families.

*Sunrise Over Fallujah* is a novel that is deeply personal to Walter. He's served in the army himself. His brother was killed in Vietnam, and his oldest son is a career officer. And in the twenty years since *Fallen Angels* was published, Walter has received hundreds of letters from kids and families touched by war - and this is one of the things that inspired him to write a companion novel about the new war of our times.

"My thinking about war has changed over the years," says Walter. "As a seventeen-year-old, having seen all of the John Wayne movies, I eagerly joined the army. When my brother, who followed me into the army, was killed in Vietnam, it was a rude awakening. War has suddenly become personal. I needed to write about it in a way that countered the romantic ideas. *Fallen Angels* was the result.

"I saw the first Gulf War on television being depicted as a kind of sterile video game with targets being hit by 'smart' weapons. But my oldest son, a career officer, was in that war and there was nothing sterile or gamelike in it for me. I saw the American sweep into Baghdad in Operation Iraqi Freedom being hailed as an easy victory. But I knew that there were men and women being killed, that behind the easy headlines there were tragedies being played out. Tragedies that will be with us for decades as our young warriors recover from terrible wounds and the emotional trauma of their experiences.

"Writing about war is a daunting task. There is the need to honor the brave men and women who have stepped up to defend our country. There is also the grim reality of what they will face. War is a difficult thing to talk about for those who are involved in it, and for them to explain to others. In the twenty years since *Fallen Angels* was published, many women have thanked me for helping them understand why their husbands were so reticent to speak about their wartime experiences, and I have had hundreds of letters from young people who, for the first, time, had some idea of what their fathers had gone through. These letters, and the quiet conversations in bookstores with people who had read the book a decade earlier, made me want to shoulder the responsibility of again writing about America at war.

"Today's teenagers, boys and girls, will be the ones asked to fight this nation's wars. Eventually they will also be the ones who decide whether a war is necessary or can be avoided. They need to do a lot

of thinking before either picking up a weapon or casting a vote to go to war. It's my hope that *Sunrise Over Fallujah* will be the start of that thinking process."

## **Fallen Angels**

### **About the Book**

Richie Perry joins the army out of high school and is soon shipped to Vietnam. As he is immersed in the jungle war, with alternating stretches of boredom and terror, he is forced to face his fears, test his courage, and question his role in the difficult situations he must face along with his squad. Told from Richie's perspective, as a teenager forced to grow up too fast, *Fallen Angels* is a fast-paced war story that challenges the reader to ponder the toll that war takes on the human spirit.

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Characters:**

1. What do you think Richie Perry was like in high school? Why doesn't he try to go to college? How does he feel about his family? How does this affect his friendships in the army?
2. Discuss the differences between Peewee and Jenkins when Richie first meets them. How did each get in the army? Why do they react so differently to being 'in country'?
3. Discuss the character of Johnson. What is his importance to the squad? What makes him different from the others?
4. Which of the squad members would you want for your friend? How does the experience of being in Vietnam affect the way the different squad members react to each other?
5. Describe the effect of Jenkins's death on Richie and the other squad members. Describe their reaction to Lt. Carroll's death. How were these experiences different for each of them?
6. Why does Richie find it so hard to write to his mother and Kenny? Why does his mother write to Peewee? Why does Peewee want Richie to write the letter to his girlfriend?

#### **Setting:**

1. Were Richie and the others prepared for the experience of being in Vietnam? Describe the climate and terrain of the country and how it affects them.
2. What is their life like in the camp? How is it like home and how is it different?
3. Describe the villages that the squad visits. What plans do they have to make friends with the Vietnamese? How does this work? How does it fail?

#### **Theme:**

1. It has been said that war is "long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror." How does this phrase capture the experience of the soldiers in Vietnam?
2. Discuss the theme of "family" in this novel. What does Richie's family mean to him - before he leaves and after he has spent time in Vietnam? How does the squad function as a 'family'?
3. Discuss the theme of friendship in this book. Describe how friendships develop and enmities arise within the squad members. Would Richie and Peewee have been close friends if they had met back home? Why does Peewee pick fights with guys bigger than he is?
4. How does rank affect the way the men interact in the war? Are Captain Stewart's decisions based

on him wanting to become a major, as some soldiers suggest?

5. Discuss the concept of “heroism.” Richie’s English teacher had told him that what separated heroes from humans was the act of “not giving in,” an idea he did not understand at the time. Does he understand at the end of the book? Who were the true “heroes” in this story? What acts or words separate them from the others?

6. Discuss the title of the book and Lt. Carroll’s prayer for “all the angel warriors who fall.” Why did he use that term, and why did the author choose it as the title for this story?

### **Further Reading about the Vietnam War**

Caputo, Philip. *10,000 Days of Thunder: A History of the Vietnam War*. Atheneum. 2005.

With full-page photographs and tight prose, this soldier/correspondent recreates the reality of war as he lived it.

Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. With a 20th Anniversary Postscript by the Author. Holt. 1996.

Caputo’s experience as a marine in Vietnam recounts the horror of any war for the ones who must fight it.

Edelman, Bernard, editor. *Letters Home from Vietnam*. The New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission. 1985.

An eloquent record of one soldier-writer’s eyewitness accounts of the war, profusely illustrated with stunning full-page photographs

Hobbs, Valerie. *Sonny’s War*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2002.

Corin’s brother Sonny is drafted and she experiences all the conflicting feelings of those who wait at home.

Isserman, Maurice. *The Vietnam War (America at War)*. Facts on File, 2003.

A balanced account of the historical background and conduct of the war through the administration of four presidents.

Kadohata, Cynthia. *Cracker! The Best Dog in Vietnam*. Atheneum. 2007.

Highlights the military canine program in which dogs are used to sniff out mines, search for enemy booby traps, and rescue wounded soldiers.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Patrol : An American Soldier in Vietnam*. illus. by Ann Grifalconi. HarperCollins, 2001.

An intense pictorial story replicates the fear and anguish of a foot soldier in the Vietnamese jungle, depicted in realistic collage art.

O’Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Looking at the war from a myriad of perspectives, O’Brien has written a powerful compilation of experience and reflection. The National Council of Teachers of English has published a teaching guide to this book for use in high school classrooms: *Tim O’Brien in the Classroom: “This too is true: Stories can save us,”* by Barry Gilmore and Alexander Kaplan (2007).

Schynert, Mark. *Women in History: Women of the Vietnam War*. Lucent Books. 2005.

The roles of women, both native to Vietnam and the women who came with the American army, were changed immeasurably by the war in many ways.

White, Ellen Emerson. *The Journal of Patrick Seamus Flaherty*. Scholastic. 2002.

Through this fictional diary, Patrick recounts his feelings and terror as he is thrust deeper into the war.

White, Ellen Emerson. *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?: The Diary of Molly MacKenzie Flaherty*. Scholastic. 2002.

Back home in Boston, Patrick Flaherty's sister Molly confronts her concerns about the war and conflicting feelings about peace demonstrations.

Yancey, Diane. *American War Library - The Vietnam War: Life of an American Soldier*. Lucent Books. 2001.

The triumphs and tragedies of the war in Vietnam are highlighted by photographs and quotes from actual soldiers.

## **Sunrise over Fallujah**

### **About the Book**

Robin Perry, the nephew of Richie Perry, joins the army in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and is subsequently sent to Iraq, where his comrades nickname him "Birdy." Robin's war experience is very different from his uncle Richie's in Vietnam thirty years earlier. The climate, the causes of the war, the inclusion of women in the combat forces - all create a contrast to that other war. But the experience of war itself is chillingly similar. Robin and his squad are assigned to work in "Civil Affairs," trying to help the Iraqi people in villages and in the countryside. Confusion over their duties and changing situations make their job hard to understand, but they do their best until they are sent on one mission that strikes sheer terror into their hearts and tests the courage of everyone involved.

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Characters**

1. Describe Robin's personality. Why did he decide to join the army? Why does he write his most honest letters to his Uncle Richie?
2. Describe Jonesy and Marla Kennedy. How does each of them relate to Robin? Would they have become friends if they were not in Iraq facing the difficulties of life there?
3. When Robin sees his first death, how does it affect him? Another soldier says to him, "You get used to the killing." Does Robin ever get used to it?
4. How does the roadside attack affect Robin? How does it affect Jonesy and Marla? How does it change their perception of the war?
5. Describe Captain Miller. How does her mission differ from that of the infantry and the 'civil affairs' group? What is her response to the attack on her in Fallujah?

6. Compare the Special Ops troops that Robin's group works with on their last mission with the other soldiers. Why are they so different? Why are their living arrangements so different? What happens when the mission goes wrong?

### Setting

1. Describe the climate and terrain of Iraq from what you have read in this story. How is it different from the places the soldiers came from back home? Are there any similarities?
2. How safe is the "green zone" in Baghdad? How does it compare with the villages that Robin's squad visits outside Baghdad?
3. How does the climate affect the characters in the story? Do they get used to the experience of living in Iraq?

### Themes

1. Myers often makes comparisons between the army life and a sports game. Discuss these comparisons. How is war the same as a sporting competition; how is it different?
2. Robin says, "There was a whole battle going on around us that we didn't have any grip on . . ." What does he mean? Is there always more than one "battle" going on in a war?
3. As the war progresses, Robin says, "The thing was that killing was taking on a different meaning to me . . . now I was willing to kill because I was afraid of being killed . . ." Is killing justified when it is in self-defense?
4. What is the significance of the title? Why does Myers choose the incident in Fallujah to highlight in the name of the book?
5. Robin tells his uncle in a letter, "Maybe you have to be a hero type to deal with the bigger things that happen to you." What does he mean by a "hero type" and the "bigger things"? How does heroism manifest itself in this story? Which of the characters do you think is a hero?
6. Can wars be "won" or "lost"? In his last letter to Richie, Robin says he would doubt the truth of anyone saying in the future that we had "won" the war in Iraq, and also doubt it if they said we had "lost." What does he mean?

### Further Reading about the Iraq War

Carroll, Andrew. *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*. Random House, 2006.

Eyewitness accounts through letters, emails, and journal entries, tell the story of actual experiences of the American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Falk, Richard, et. al. *Crimes of War: Iraq*. Nation Books. 2006.

Three scholars examine the Iraq War from a legal, historical, and psychological perspective.

Hamill, Sam, ed. *Poets Against the War*. Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books. 2003.

Major American poets respond to a call for a statement of conscience in the aftermath of the U.S. initial bombing of Iraq.

Holmstedt, Kirsten. *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*. Stackpole, 2007.

Miller, Debra A. *The Iraq War: Weapons of War*. (American War Library) Lucent Books. 2004.

New York Times. *A Nation Challenged: A Visual History of 9/11 and Its Aftermath*. Young Reader's Edition. Callaway/Scholastic. 2002.

A pictorial remembrance of the events that led eventually to the United States invasion of Iraq.

Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. Penguin Press. 2006.

A Washington Post Pentagon reporter who has spent five tours in Iraq examines the war from all sides in this hard-hitting analysis.

Shadid, Anthony. *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*. Holt. 2005.

A Lebanese-American and award-winning journalist, Shadid focuses on a selection of ordinary people in Iraq and their struggles before and during the war.

Uschan, Michael V. *The Iraq War: Life of an American Soldier*. (American War Library) Lucent Books. 2004.

Hardships of this particular war are presented clearly with direct quotes from soldiers' letters and diaries.

## Comparing the Novels

1. Walter Dean Myers wrote *Sunrise Over Fallujah* twenty years after he wrote *Fallen Angels*. Both take a close and honest look at war, but in different eras. Other than the war theme, in what ways are the novels similar? In what ways are they different?
2. Compare the character of Richie and the character of Robin. How are they similar? How are they different? How does the experience of war change each of them?
3. Compare the experience of women in these two novels. Why do you think there are so many more female characters actively involved in the Iraq War than there were in the Vietnam War?
4. Compare the setting in each of these novels. Which country presents the most difficult challenges for the American soldiers, both physically and mentally?
5. Does it appear that Mr. Myers has gained a different perspective on war from twenty years ago? If so, what does the difference appear to be?
6. How does it feel different for you, the reader, to be reading about a contemporary war versus one that took place a generation ago? How is it similar?

## Further Reading about America at War

Carroll, Andrew. *Behind the Lines: Powerful and Revealing American and Foreign War Letters - and One Man's Search to Find Them*. Scribner, 2006.

From hand-written letters from the American Revolution to email messages sent by soldiers stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq, these communications back home are poignant and revealing.

Carroll, Andrew. *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*. Scribner, 2001. This collection of war letters covers the Civil War through the first Persian Gulf War, reflecting on soldier's thoughts and fears.

Filipovic, Zlata and Melanie Challenger, editors. *Stolen Voices: Young People's War Diaries, from World War I to Iraq*. Penguin, 2006.

With Anne Frank as inspiration, these youthful diaries express the disrupted lives and heartache of soldiers and civilians alike.

Hoffman, Mary and Rhiannon Lassiter, editors. *Lines in the Sand: New Writings on War and Peace*. Disinformation Company. 2003.

150 writers and artists of children's books contribute poems, essays, stories, and art to this compilation of creative work with the theme of peace.

Philip, Neil, editor. *War and the Pity of War*. Illus. by Michael McCurdy. Clarion. 1998.

A collection of poems from many ages that express the horror and futility of war as well as the courage and honor of individuals.

## **A biography of Walter Dean Myers**

New York Times bestseller Walter Dean Myers is the critically acclaimed author of more than 85 books for children and young adults. His award-winning body of work includes *Fallen Angels*, *Monster*, *Somewhere in the Darkness*, *Slam!*, *Jazz*, and *Harlem*, amongst many more. He has received two Newbery Honors and five Coretta Scott King Awards. He is the winner of the first Michael L. Printz Award as well as the first recipient of Kent State University's Virginia Hamilton Literary Award.

Walter began writing at an early age. "I was a good student, but a speech impediment was causing problems. "One of my teachers decided that I couldn't pronounce certain words at all. She thought that if I wrote something, I would use words I could pronounce. I began writing little poems. I began to write short stories, too."

Realizing that his family would not be able to afford college, Walter joined the Army on his seventeenth birthday. When he got out three years later, he worked various jobs and he wrote at night. "I wrote for magazines," say Walter. "I wrote adventure stuff, I wrote for the National Enquirer, I wrote advertising copy for cemeteries." A winning contest entry with the Council on Interracial Books for Children became his first book, *Where Does the Day Go?* Later, he wrote his first young adult novel, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*.

"I so love writing," says Walter. It is not something that I am doing just for a living, this is something that I love to do. When I work, what I'll do is outline the story first. That forces me to do the thinking. I cut out pictures of all my characters and my wife puts them into a collage, which goes on the wall above the computer. When I walk into that room, I see the characters, and I just get very close to them. I rush through a first draft, and then I go back and rewrite, because I can usually see what the problems are going to be ahead of me. Rewriting is a lot more fun for me than the writing is."

Walter Dean Myers lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.

The following editions are available from Scholastic

*Fallen Angels*

Point Paperback

Ages 12-up xxx pages

Paperback: 0-590-40943-3 \$5.99

*Sunrise Over Fallujah*

Scholastic Press

Ages 12-up 256 pages

Hardcover: 0-439-91624-0 \$17.99

Available wherever books are sold, or from:

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