

Wayne Karlin

Syllabus – Reading List

Veterans' Reading Group MHC-SMRLA Spring-Winter 2022

Book descriptions are from Amazon

Wayne's comments: This session we will read and discuss four non-fiction books, each written in a very different style, but connected by themes of war, trauma, courage, honor, and trauma: an ex-infantryman exploring how to be a parent, an ex-Navy flier struggling with the tug between pride and guilt about his service, a journalist discussing in depth and detail the erosion of honor in an elite force, and a former nurse in a very personal memoir of loss and trauma from World War I.

February 5th: *Dad's Maybe Book* by Tim O'Brien

"We are all writing our maybe books full of maybe tomorrows, and each maybe tomorrow brings another maybe tomorrow, and then another, until the last line of the last page receives its period."

In 2003, already an older father, National Book Award–winning novelist Tim O'Brien resolved to give his young sons what he wished his own father had given to him—a few scraps of paper signed "Love, Dad." Maybe a word of advice. Maybe a sentence or two about some long-ago Christmas Eve. Maybe some scattered glimpses of their rapidly aging father, a man they might never really know. For the next fifteen years, the author talked to his sons on paper, as if they were adults, imagining what they might want to hear from a father who was no longer among the living.

O'Brien traverses the great variety of human experience and emotion, moving from soccer games to warfare to risqué lullabies, from alcoholism to magic shows to history lessons to bittersweet bedtime stories, but always returning to a father's soul-saving love for his sons.

The result is *Dad's Maybe Book*, a funny, tender, wise, and enduring literary achievement that will squeeze the reader's heart with joy and recognition.

Tim O'Brien and the writing of *Dad's Maybe Book* are now the subject of the documentary film *The War and Peace of Tim O'Brien* available to watch at timobrienfilm.com

March 5th and April 2ND:

War and the Arc of Human Experience by Glenn Peterson (Part One – beginnings: pre-war and combat experiences)

Wayne's comments: This book is connected to the first in the way the author explores many of the issues O'Brien touches upon, including the aftereffects of war, courage and atonement, responses to trauma and domestic issues, such as divorce and parenting, but does it in a very different analytical style. Because of the way the book is divided, and the depth in which Petersen examines them, we will consider the book over two sessions.

Book description:

Glenn Petersen flew seventy combat missions in Vietnam when he was nineteen, launching from an aircraft carrier in the Tonkin Gulf. He'd sought out the weighty responsibilities and hazardous work. But why? What did the cultural architecture of the society he grew up in have to do with the way he went to war? In this book he looks at the war from an anthropological perspective because that's how he's made his living in all the subsequent years: it's how he sees the world. While anthropologists write about the military and war these days, they do so from the perspective of researchers. What makes this a fully original contribution is that Petersen brings to the page the classic methodology of ethnographers, participant observation—a kind of total immersion. He writes from the dual perspectives of an insider and a researcher and seeks in the specifics of lived experience some larger conclusions about humans' social lives in general. Petersen was long oblivious to what had happened to him in Vietnam and he fears that young men and women who've been fighting the US military's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might be similarly unaware of what's happened to them. Skills that allowed him to survive in combat, in particular his ability to focus tightly on the challenges directly in front of him, seemed to transfer well to life after war. The same intensity led him to a successful academic career, including the time he represented the Micronesian islands at the United Nations; how could anything be wrong? Then surreptitiously, the danger, the stress, and the trauma he'd hidden away broke through a brittle shell and the war came spilling out. As an anthropologist he sees in this a classic pattern: an adaptation to one set of conditions is put to a new and practical use when conditions change, but in time what had once been beneficial turns into maladaptive behavior. In writing about *why* we fight, he sheds lights on what the fighting does to us

April 2nd: *War and the Arc of Human Experience* by Glenn Peterson (Part Two—our discussion continues: post-war experiences, PTSD, and Peterson's struggle with PTSD as it affected him in his studies, work, and marriage, and his need to balance and make sense of his mixed feelings of pride and guilt about his service.

May 7th: *Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs* by David Philipps

Wayne's comments: The agonies of conscience and justice and injustice with which Peterson struggles seem absent in the nature of the Navy SEAL at the center of this work. By answering the five main journalistic questions: who, what, when, where, and why, in depth, the author explores the subject—Eddie Gallagher—but also the moral climate that allows Gallagher to be considered a hero.

Book description:

By official accounts, the Navy SEALs of Alpha platoon returned as heroes after their 2017 deployment to Mosul, following a vicious, bloody, and successful campaign to drive ISIS from the city. But within the platoon a different war raged. Even as Alpha's chief, Eddie Gallagher, was being honored by the Navy for his leadership, several of his men were preparing to report him for war crimes, alleging that he'd stabbed a prisoner in cold blood and taken lethal sniper shots at unarmed civilians.

Many young SEALs regarded Gallagher as the ideal special operations commando. Trained as a sniper, a medic, and an explosives expert, he was considered a battle-tested leader. But in the heat of combat, some in his platoon saw a darker figure—a man who appeared to be coming unhinged after multiple deployments in America’s forever wars. Their excitement to work with a tough, experienced chief soon gave way to a grim suspicion that his thirst for blood seemed to know no bounds and a belief that his unpredictability was as dangerous as the enemy.

In riveting detail, Pulitzer Prize–winning *New York Times* correspondent David Philipps reveals the story of a group of special operators caught in a moral crucible—should they uphold their oath and turn in their chief, or honor the SEALs’ unwritten code of silence? It is also a larger story of how the SEAL Teams drifted off course after 9/11, and of the “pirate” subculture that festered within their ranks—a secret brotherhood that, in a time of endless war with few clear victories, made the act of killing itself the paramount goal. The investigation and trial following Alpha’s deployment—and Gallagher’s ultimate acquittal on the most serious charges—would pit SEAL against SEAL, set the Navy brass on a collision course with President Donald Trump, and turn Gallagher into a political litmus test in a hotly polarized America.

A page-turning tale of battle, honor, and betrayal, *Alpha* is a remarkable exposé of the fault lines fracturing a country that has been at war for a generation and counting.

June 4th: *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain

Wayne’s comments: One of the most devastating accounts of World War One, told not by a soldier but by a woman from a sheltered background who volunteered as a nurse and suffered the severe losses that marked her generation:

In 1914 Vera Brittain was 20, and as war was declared she was preparing to study at Oxford. Four years later her life - and the life of her whole generation - had changed in a way that would have been unimaginable in the tranquil pre-war era.

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH, one of the most famous autobiographies of the First World War, is Brittain's account of how she survived those agonizing years; how she lost the man she loved; how she nursed the wounded and how she emerged into an altered world. A passionate record of a lost generation, it made Vera Brittain one of the best-loved writers of her time, and has lost none of its power to shock, move and enthrall readers since its first publication in 1933.

