

Veterans Book Group Syllabus
Lexington Park Branch
St. Mary's County Public Library
Facilitator: Wayne Karlin
February – May 2017

Schedule: First Friday of each month, February to June 2017, 11:30 a.m.—1:30 p.m.

Goal: In our reading for these six months we will look at several Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Wars by reading and discussing works of literature about those conflicts written by Americans and writers of other nationalities, and for two of our sessions, comparing and contrasting books (and some poems) that are connected by similar themes and context, and the way they use different methods—fiction or non-fiction or poetry—to explore those themes and contexts and reinforce some of the universal situations, reflections and meanings that come from all wars and their aftermaths.

MEETING DATE	BOOKS/AUTHORS	AUTHORS' COUNTRIES	CONFLICTS
February 3	<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> by Erich Maria Remarque <u>Poems:</u> "Dulce et Decorum Est" "Exposure" "Disabled" by Wilfred Owen "Suicide in the Trenches" "Survivor" by Siegfried Sassoon "Break of Day in the Trenches" by Isaac Rosenberg	Germany United Kingdom United Kingdom United Kingdom	World War I
March 3	<i>A Pledge of Silence</i> by Flora J. Solomon <i>Home Before Morning</i> by Lynda Vandevanter	United States United States	World War II Vietnam War
April 7	<i>We Were Soldiers Once and Young</i> , by Harold Moore and Joseph Galloway <i>Chickenhawk</i> by Robert Mason	United States United States	Vietnam War Vietnam War
May 5	<i>Pumpkinflowers</i> by Matti Friedman	Israel	Israel-Hezbollah in Lebanon
June 2	<i>The Yellow Birds</i> by Kevin Powers <i>Stateside</i> by Jehanne Dubrow	United States United States	Iraq Homefront

Descriptions and Themes Explored:

Our first book, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, written by Erich Maria Remarque, a German veteran, is one of the classics of war-time literature, and one of the first to try to realistically portray what the British WWI poet Wilfred Owen described as “the Old Lie”: the idea that war, and in particular the mass slaughter of the first modern war of the twentieth century could be “glorious.” Owen is also one of what are considered three of the best poets of that war: the other two are Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg. All of them were British soldiers who fought in France; we will see how their poetry reinforces the descriptions, concepts and vivid imagery seen in Eric Remarque’s novel.

The two books for March are both about the experience of being a nurse in a war zone, and the kind of toll that can take on women in that profession who go through war yet whose experience as veterans is often not recognized. In one way the central theme of both books, one fiction, the other memoir, is silence. The character in Flora Solomon’s novel is a nurse who becomes a prisoner-of-war in the Philippines during World War II, and who literally has to take a “pledge of silence”, agreeing under penalty of law not to speak of what she went through, while Lynda Vandevanter, who recounts her own experience during the Vietnam war, while never forced to take such a pledge, describes not only what she experienced during the war, but the intense alienation she felt at home, a displacement which in some ways followed the same patterns undergone by male veterans: abused by those against the war, ignored by those who fought in it, and treated with indifference by the rest of her countrymen,. Unlike the male veterans, though, their trauma was reinforced by the ways in which nurses were not even considered veterans by many people.

April brings us two classic non-fiction works from that same war, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*, by Lt. General (Ret’d) Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway, a sweeping account of the first large battle between the American Army and the People’s Army of Vietnam, and *Chickenhawk*, Robert Mason’s experience as a helicopter pilot who participated in the same Ia Drang battle and many others. Looking at both these works, we will see how even in non-fiction, war can be recounted in a way we get the “big-picture” of a battle, as in *We Were Soldiers*, while *Chickenhawk* focuses more on the personalized experience of an individual.

In May we discuss Matti Friedman’s non-fiction book *Pumpkinflowers*, which is part history and part personal experience about his time in a besieged outpost in Lebanon when Israel battled not another country or countries but a terror organization that held geographic territory. Friedman describes how that war, which took place in the late nineties and its complexities, was the precursor of the War on Terror in which the rest of the world is now embroiled.

The beginnings of the American experience in that war is at the center of *The Yellow Birds*, our first June selection, a novel written by an Iraq veteran, one of the new generation of war veteran writers. In discussing this last selection, which has been described as “a powerful account of friendship and loss,” we explore the reality of our most recent conflict, and are able to also discuss it in the context of all the other war literature we’ve read up to this point. *Stateside*, which is a collection of poems, acts as a companion piece to the novel, not because Dubrow’s poems deal with the experience of combat: rather she is a Navy wife whose husband deployed, and who writes from the point of view of those who most wait at home while their loved ones move in harm’s way.