Born on the Fourth of July Study Guide

Born on the Fourth of July by Ron Kovic

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Born on the Fourth of July is a candid memoir by Ron Kovic published in 1976, the year after the United States pulled out of Vietnam and ended the war. It details Kovic's journey from a stereotypical all-American boy during the 1950s to an eager soldier in Vietnam in the mid-1960s. It also explores his paralysis from the chest down as a result of combat in Vietnam, his later disillusionment with American policy towards Vietnam and the war, and his involvement in the anti-war movement.

Kovic's memoir begins with his birth on the most patriotic of dates, July 4, 1946, and his childhood in the years after World War II, inspired by stories of heroism and bravery from the war. The novel ends with the reclamation of personal power through Kovic's activism and desire for peace and for accountability from the American government. This trend of protest, anti-war sentiment, and the demand for civil rights and human equality, all of which question the authority of American institutions, was a significant one during the 1960s and 1970s. It changed the landscape of American public discussion and its international image.

The violence of Vietnam and the violence associated with repression of widespread student protests was plastered all over American and international television screens. The seeming security and social stability of the 1950s had been replaced by this clamor, and Kovic's memoir contributes to the era in a way that acknowledges that America was looking at itself and questioning its identity. Was America's image that of John Wayne, swaggering and always victorious? Or was America's image that of confusion and violence, full of broken men coming home from a questionable war?

Born on the Fourth of July became the prototypical Vietnam War memoir not from a news correspondent but from a man who had actually been deep in the battle. This memoir moved control of the portrayal of the war away from the political and military administration and placed it in the hands of those who had actually lost life and limb for God and country. In much the same way, the book also represents the tumultuous times of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 2005, *Born on the Fourth of July* was republished with a new introduction by the author. In the introduction, Kovic takes stock of the forty years that have passed since he left his parents' house to join the Marines. He laments the war in Iraq and considers it a repetition of the same mistakes of the Vietnam Era: "So many similarities, so many things said that remind me of that war thirty years ago which left me paralyzed for the rest of my life." He also calls for a return of the spirit of protest and caring, a spirit he credits for his sense of the world's beauty and life's preciousness. For readers interested in first-hand accounts of the Vietnam War, the protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and even the conditions to which Vietnam veterans returned after the war, Kovic's memoir proves a valuable resource.

Author Biography

Ron Kovic was born July 4, 1946. As a young man raised in suburban Massapequa, Long Island, Kovic grew up hearing stories of bravery and valor from World War II veterans. A combination of cold war fervor, Hollywood images of military personnel, and a desire to achieve more than his working-class father led Kovic to join the U.S. Marines in September 1964. He was twenty-one years old when he was shot and paralyzed during combat in January 1968.

His youthful patriotism and allegiance to God and country made him a perfect candidate for life as a soldier. Kovic took great pride in the link between his birthday and that of the nation: "I'd open up all the presents and blow out the candles on the big red, white, and blue birthday cake and then we'd all sing 'Happy Birthday' and 'I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy'." Kovic's birthday came to represent a large part of his identity and assisted his decision to become a Marine.

In the years since the Vietnam War, Kovic has remained in the vanguard of anti-war movements in the United States and abroad. His memoir was adapted to the screen by Oliver Stone, and Kovic has used the publicity garnered by the movie and his book to continue his activism, most recently speaking out at large rallies against the Iraq War that began in 2003.

Plot Summary

Born on the Fourth of July is widely regarded as one of the most important works of antiwar literature to come out of the Vietnam era. The author, Ron Kovic, was a US Marine in Vietnam who was shot and paralyzed from the chest down. He dreamed of becoming a marine as a boy during his storybook adolescence and was proud to fight in the war when he joined the Marine Corps after graduating high school. He served two tours in Vietnam, but his experiences there were not what he believed they would be. The carnage was horrifying and seemingly meaningless. The choices he made in Vietnam, as the reader will see late in the book, only filled him with a deeper sense of grief, rage and pain. After being shot and paralyzed, Kovic spends months in various hospitals, first in a hospital in Vietnam where he sees fellow soldiers screaming and dying, lying in dismembered hunks, some barely recognizably human. When he reaches the VA hospital system in the United States, he is disgusted at the conditions he experiences. He is poorly attended to, his help is often rude, and generally Vietnam veterans were not treated with proper respect. When Kovic leaves the VA health system, he tries to regain a sense of life, but feels deeply alienated from his fellow Americans, including his friends and family. He suffers deeply over his inability to have sex and to find a woman he can love. He struggles to learn to take care of himself and moves from time to time to find a community that will accept him.

Some befriend Kovic, including his cousin's husband, Skip. Kovic always supported the war, although substantially less after he returned, whereas Skip had always opposed it. He was a member of the anti-war movement and provided Kovic with literature about social justice, racism, poverty and imperialism. Ron was convinced by these books to become an antiwar activist and quickly became a well-known figure in the anti-war movement, part of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He had found in the anti-war community loving acceptance, veterans who understood his rage and people that were kind and passionate. As time progressed, the fact that he was a paralyzed veteran against the war led his name and message to spread across the country; activism and giving speeches became a regular part of his life. Antiwar activism eased his pain, but as the war ended and American life returned to normal, Kovic returned to a state of alienation until he became a writer.

Towards the end of the book, Kovic confesses his deepest horror in the war - he had killed one of his fellow soldiers by accident, and never killed an enemy soldier. All he accomplished in Vietnam was killing a corporal from Georgia. Next he heads a scout team, which is eventually part of an assault on what they believed to be a North Vietnamese encampment but was in fact a village of children that they had accidentally slaughtered en masse. Convinced to get himself wounded or killed, Kovic gets shot by placing himself in the line of fire.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The story opens in the field of battle. Kovic has blood on his jacket, a bullet in his shoulder, and cannot feel his legs. He is terrified and he and his fellow soldiers are being killed or injured. His troop falls back and Kovic passes out.

When he awakes, he realizes his life has been saved; his rifle is gone, but rounds are shot everywhere. The attack has lifted somewhat, and four men are carrying Kovic on a stretcher. Men scream around him. Bravery and valor mean nothing now, with the death that surrounds him. Kovic fades in and out of consciousness and notices when he reaches the hospital, with the doctors 'shoving tubes and needles in my arms.' He is happy to have survived. A voice asks him his name; he is Sergeant Kovic, born on the Fourth of July, 1946 and a Catholic. After a few minutes, a priest visits him to give him Last Rites, as he might die during his operation. Kovic goes under and survives his surgery. He wonders if his injury isn't punishment for killing 'the corporal and the children' but now 'the score is evened up' so he can relax; he continues to observe the hunks of flesh still living that surround him. A general awards many of the men purple hearts, including Kovic. However, he says the same thing to every soldier, apparently indifferent to the carnage.

Kovic stays in the hospital for a week, trying to survive. He is eventually sent home, leaving Vietnam forever.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Kovic found himself on a bus in Queens on the way to the St. Albans Naval Hospital. The wounded on the bus are happy they survived. Kovic is carried off the bus; he is placed in the neuro ward with the 'vegetables'. He had the nurses remove his frame, and watched people around him. He was sometimes visited by the American Legion; they told him he was a hero. And he receives a medal for 'Conspicuous Service to the State of New York' with a citation signed by Governor Rockefeller.

At six the next morning, Kovic wakes up. Those who can stand for roll call do; but no one bothered him and he slept through it. Kovic received medication and a shower; day after day he watched his twenty-one year old legs atrophy. He remembered the priest's words of comfort.

Kovic finds himself in a new hospital, and it is non-military. He has a large black nurse as his aide. Kovic tries not to wake up, returning to an erotic dream, but Tommy, the enema man, comes to visit him. His dream is interrupted. Tommy must give all the paralyzed men enemas. Kovic suddenly realizes that he is depressed and desperately wants to leave; he is only twenty-one and wants to live a full life. But he is next forcibly given a shower by the black woman, feeling like a car getting washed.

When Kovic's family visits, he never tells them about the enemas, about the disgusting horror of it, about the tube in his penis and the fact that he will never again have an erection. His family comforts him, but he feels little comfort. Kovic continues to be depressed by his inability to have sex. He is furious; he's twenty-one and can't have sex. The wound is not only physical but psychological.

The wards in the hospital are unsanitary; rats infest them and often chew on the wounded men's numb legs. The reader is introduced to Briggs, a wounded man throwing bread into the radiator for the rats; Garcia points out the rat that has been there for months. Another wounded soldier, Willey, can no long talk; he is 'just a head', having lost more than Kovic. Kovic is desperate to understand the meaning of his wounds; he sees old wounded men from World War I. The paper always says that the president is sending more troops; he tells people he still believes in the Vietnam War - he went back there twice, after all. He finds himself lying, wanting to stop talking about the war. A new wounded man, Pat, is puking and cursing at everyone. The hospital is a 'madhouse'.

The men have physical therapists, Jimmy and Dick; Kovic lifts his weights to strengthen his upper body. The therapists tell the wounded men that the government will give them machines to help them walk again. Kovic makes some progress; he eventually develops the upper body strength to use braces. His family visits him, afraid to see him try to stand. Jimmy helps Kovic to stand, and Kovic's mother sees, but he starts throwing up.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 rewinds to July 4th, 1946, Ron Kovic's birthday. His birthday was celebrated by the country. He started playing baseball as a kid and became good at it, playing as much as he could, and shared his excitement over baseball games with his friend Richie. Ron and his friend Kenny Goodman would often play baseball at Parkside stadium, pretending they were their baseball heroes. They played baseball whenever possible. Every Fourth of July brought Kovic much pride to have been born on the day.

Ron and his neighborhood friends were raised watching television together. Kovic reviews the shows they watched. He was devoutly religious, praying to Jesus, Mary and the saints every night, often praying to make the major leagues. On Saturday night, he would go to confession and leave feeling refreshed. His father would cook breakfast after Church.

Kovic's father was a 'checker' at the A&P, and worked hard. He was a strong man, and kept the family constantly busy. Kovic spent many summers with his friend Bobby Zimmer; they would play red-light-green-light on summer nights, and would catch fireflies with Ron's sister Sue. The summers were a time of bliss, but when school returned, Kovic was afraid. Winter was some consolation. Ron and Bobby loved the snow. They would also watch lots of movies together, sometimes with their friend Castiglia. They'd often play war in the woods. Castiglia and Ron in particular enjoyed playing war games; they pretended to kill Nazis and even studied the Marine Corps Guidebook. They grew up dreaming of becoming not only New York Yankees, but United States Marines as well, deciding to join up at age seventeen. They joined the cub scouts, and marched in parades. Ron and his friends would often make 'contingency plans' for the Cold War. Kovic also discusses his and his friends' fascination with the space race and disappointment with the Russians launching Sputnik.

Kovic discusses his youthful perception of the communists. They were always worried about communists taking over the government, and beating them in the space race. Castiglia and Ron worried that communists were taking over their schools and teachers. They even believed one of their teachers was a communist. Ron started to work out in his room, and becomes strong. When he started high school, the coaches taught him more about how to build a good body. Kovic joined the high-school wrestling team, working out each day in Massapequa High. The coaches pushed him and his teammates to work harder. Kovic won a Christmas wrestling tournament and hated to lose. He was shy and small in those days, and wanted a girlfriend; he dreamed of being a hero. And his reputation grew as he won more awards. Ron also discusses his frustrations with acne, hair growth and increased sexual urges - the difficulties of puberty. He became a serial masturbator, and wondered why God would make masturbating feel so good if it was wrong.

Ron and his mother rarely got along. His mother often ordered him around and he resisted her. She pushed him to do his best, but was controlling at the same time. Ron preferred sports and joined the track team to pole vault. His father encouraged him, and he would often practice with his brother Tommy. Ron could engage in nearly any athletic activity and excel. He always thought about women, but was ashamed to ask out Joan Marfe, the girl he had a crush on. His religiosity often conflicted with his sexual urges. During this time, Kovic wrote a letter to the Yankees, asking to try out. Castiglia's sister helped him write it. He received a letter in response, but he was too afraid to go to the tryouts. In the fall of his senior year, most of his buddies seemed grown up. His friends were going their own separate ways, with many of his friends growing long hair, and Castiglia considering the priesthood. His senior year, Kovic grew to be taller than his close friends Catiglia and brothers Mike and Bobby Zimmer. Eventually he and his friends graduate, swearing to remain friends forever. The year of his graduation, Kennedy was killed. He and his friends played football in silence that day. Kovic felt ashamed even to be playing. He remembers Johnson being sworn in.

The spring of Ron's senior year, his father made him get a job stacking shelves in a supermarket. He worked with his friend Kenny and dreamed of joining the Marines. He didn't want to spend his life working a menial job at the A&P which exhausted his father. He wanted to 'make something out of my life.' He found himself strong and full of energy. When the Marine recruiters came to his high school, he was deeply impressed and admired their ability to be the best of the best. In September 1964, Ron Kovic decided to become a Marine.

Kovic is now in boot camp, and meets his Staff Sergeant Joseph and Sergeant Mullins, the new recruits' senior and junior drill instructors. Kovic's experience in boot camp largely fit the stereotype. They were worked to the bone, filled with patriotism and browbeaten until they gave all they had. The new recruits were sloppy and his troop looked nothing like Marines. At one point, the senior drill instructor demands that the men strip out of all their clothes and belongings and put them into a box. They oblige but Kovic requests to keep a medal his mother gave him; the sergeant ripped it from him and threw it in the box. Their hair was shaved, washing off their 'civilian scum.' They shower and are issued new clothing. Kovic watches the drill sergeants beat a young fat recruit because he couldn't get his pants on. He breaks down and wants to go home; the drill sergeants savagely mock him. At the end of the day, Ron is exhausted but excited to be a marine. His entire body ached. The drill sergeant makes the men stand at attention the whole night. The remaining pages are full of a string of yelled phrases from the sergeants, strung together in Kovic's dream.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 returns to Ron Kovic, the paralyzed Marine, home from Vietnam. His mother and father wanted to push him in the Memorial Day Parade. Kovic partly dressed himself, and had been getting better at it. But his father helped him with the rest. Some American Legionaries helped push his wheelchair. They express pride in Kovic's sacrifices and promise him his sacrifice was not in vain. The men discuss other town veterans, some who had been wounded, others killed. Eddie Dugan had two plastic legs; Clasternack and Johnny Heanon died. And both Peters brothers died, among others.

The men stop the drive at Eddie Dugan's house; Eddie gets in the car next to Kovic. They shared their injuries with one another. When they arrive at the parade, the whole town has come out to praise them. But as soon as they saw Eddie and Ron's injuries, they seemed to stop clapping and stare like Eddie and Ron weren't there. Ron tells himself that this is because the signs and banners aren't up, but he knows that isn't the reason. After the parade, Ron felt alone and 'gawked at'. The American Legionaries move Eddie and Ron up on the stage; the mayor and town dignitaries praise them, speaking of sacrifice and patriotism and God. Ron and Eddie were uncomfortable, oscillating between feeling confused and proud. The two men were not asked to speak; those speaking had never even seen their war; they knew nothing about it. After the speeches, when everyone clapped, Ron felt more embarrassed. He didn't want the attention. However, Ron's childhood friend Tommy Law finds him, and they cry at seeing one another. Tommy pushed Ron's wheelchair home.

Ron watches a young couple walk down the beach. The woman seems happy and Ron wants to be that man with her. He wants to be 'inside a woman again'. He starts to look at the women around him, fantasizing about them, and then realizes that nothing can happen. He tries to comfort himself with the thought that he gave his sexuality for his country.

Ron goes regularly to Arthur's bar, drinking with friends; he'd sometimes curse and carouse. He'd often stop near the crucifix in the morning and put his fingers in holy water. He prays for a woman and for help from God. He'd then stay up at night typing. One night he got so drunk, friends had to carry him out of the bar. He asked a woman to come home with him in an inappropriate way. He had also urinated all over his seat without realizing it. He soaked the car seat and the girl with him seemed panicked. His parents were horrified at his drunkenness when he came in. His mother was hysterical but his father began to clean him up. Kovic feels depressed, wanting to become lost in sleep. No one, he thought, wanted to deal with him because he was half-dead. People could at least forget about the fully dead.

Kovic watches the island disappear as he flies from the Kennedy airport. He hadn't gone away from home by himself since returning from Vietnam. He liked sitting in the airplane seats without his chair. Kovic had decided to travel to Mexico, to a place where people like him were cared for called 'the Village of the Sun'. Kovic had heard about a whorehouse there where paralyzed men could have sex. By night, his plane landed in Guadalajara, and Rahilio picks him up. The next morning, Ron was excited to see all the men in wheelchairs around him; all the men there were veterans from 'all the wars'. Kovic felt accepted, and it was the Fourth of July; the people there knew it was his birthday.

Ron feels happy at the Village, but has Rahilio take him to mass and into the city. He wanted to find a prostitute that would have sex with him and that didn't care about his paralyzed body. Ron takes a cab to the Hilton Hotel, hoping to hear about the whorehouse; he goes back regularly until he asks the man behind the desk where the largest whorehouse was.

He finds a beautiful girl; she takes off her clothes and helps him take off his. She is upset by his body; Ron tells her that "we can still love." She begins to cry and starts putting her clothes on, then leaves. The madam asks him to leave a short time later. Kovic spends the rest of the night outside of the whorehouse crying. However, a cab driver saves him, taking him to a place where they will service him. The cabbie finds Kovic a young girl named Maria; she introduces herself to Ron and seems excited. Maria had no compunction about being sexual with him, ignoring his catheter, urine bag, and so on. They fooled around and talked with one another. She asked him whether she wanted to get married, and left her information with him. She wanted him to come back and told him that he could live with her. Ron left and started to dream about her, but realized that she wasn't serious and saw a different girl on another day. And then he began to make regular visits to see prostitutes. He slept with as many as he could.

One night, Kovic meets a Vietnam vet named Charlie who happened to have some good weed. The two got drunk and stoned; they got to a whorehouse, but Charlie fought with one of the whores, punching her in the face when she laughed at his penis that he could no longer move. He starts screaming: "Fuck all you goddamn motherfuckers! They made me kill babies! They made me kill babies!" The owner is furious, kicking them both out. Kovic was afraid someone would kill them, but he did nothing to help. Charlie needed to let out his pain. The owner got some bouncers to throw them out. Charlie fought with the cab driver and he kicked them out; they then hitched a ride with a Mexican truck driver. Kovic decided not to go back to the city that night; after another day in the village, Kovic decided to go home to New York.

Ron returns to New York by the end of the summer; the days are hot and he is restless, deciding that he'd like to find an apartment. A few weeks later he finds an apartment in Hempstead, near the university. The rent is a bit high but his checks from the government cover it. He buys a bunch of appliances, writing equipment, paintings, indifferent to the cost. Each morning he throws up because of how afraid he is to live alone. Sometimes Ron drives around alone for hours.

He decided to take classes, and likes spending time with people. He was happy to be away from the war and is determined to walk on braces, exercising hours a day. One evening during the second week of school, Ron feels something snap, calls his father to take him to the hospital and spends the next six months at the VA hospital in the Bronx.

After a month in Room 17, he is alone and isolated. He makes trouble, fighting with the head nurse for asking "to be treated like a human being." His thigh bone was shattered, sticking out of his skin and the cast won't help it heal. The doctor is never around and doesn't seem to care; Ron feels like he's in a prison and finds himself on the verge of going crazy. One day the doctor suggests amputation since his leg won't heal. He feels like an object, like he's on a factory line. Anger builds within him; he is lying in his excrement and no one will help him. A man sticks his head in the door and mocks him for being a Vietnam vet.

Ron finds himself in intensive-care. There are stitches on his leg and tubes in his body. He survived the operation without losing his leg; he will finally escape. A young doctor performed the operation and is kind to him. Later he finds that his leg is slowly healing but he has to watch his pump to keep his circulation going. He starts questioning the meaning of his participation in the war.

The story flashes back to Vietnam. Ron first heard about anti-war protestors while he was there. He couldn't believe it and was deeply insulted, unable to believe that the protestors would do that to them. They swore that the hippies would pay when they saw them again, but the hospital changed his attitude, causing him to lose his belief in the Vietnam War, but he couldn't imagine joining the protestors he once thought of as traitors. In 1970, he goes back to class, looking like a Marine, with a tie, sweater and short hair. He focused on his studies and ignored the radicals.

One day, Ron is alone in his apartment when he hears about the Kent State massacre on TV. He wanted to cry, feeling like he did when Kennedy was killed. The campus was up in arms and Ron decided to participate, but felt hesitant. He sat in his car, listening to the speeches. That night, Ron calls his cousin Ginny's husband Skip who had become his good friend. Skip opposed the war and gave him books about blacks and poor people in the country. Ron was initially skeptical but kept reading. When he heard about the Washington rally, he asked Skip to take him. The protests were enormous and the protests felt warm and loving like a festival. Speakers denounced Cambodia and the Kent State slayings; they wanted to protest Nixon. People were naked, playing bongos. He had no idea what this had to do with the war, but saw it as 'total freedom'. The police came in, furious. The naked people put their clothes own and the blue legion of policemen decided to attack, smashing skulls and throwing gas. Kovic couldn't understand it. He was radicalized and decided to join the protests, disgusted by the police. He tells Skip he will never be the same.

In a brief flash-forward, the reader sees Ron's stage-fright at coming to speak in an auditorium at the high school. He and his friend Bobby from the VA hospital are to speak about the war firsthand. Ron starts to tell the students about his time at the hospital.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

After Ron gave his speech in high school, he cared increasingly less about his classes. He wanted to speak out, and makes several more speeches, even during the winter when it was difficult for him to travel. Ron decides to take up an offer from his friend Kenny to move to California with him. They drove to LA in five days, loving the trip. They rent a large apartment, and Kenny quits school. They spend time together; happy to be with someone who'd they spent their whole lives with. Ron and Kenny are immediately hooked into the anti-war scene; Ron was no longer lonely, surrounded by friends, particularly vets who were now against the war. Ron had joined the VVAW, the Vietnam Veterans against the War. After a few speeches, he was on television often. At a rally, Donald Sutherland read from Johnny Got His Gun and Kovic deeply identified with it, particularly with the feeling of being a mangled hunk of flesh. Ron decides at that moment to read a poem he wrote to the audience; the crowd cheered and later the phone rang off the hook; everyone wanted to hear him speak, and he went into speaking head on, just like everything else in his life. He knew people would listen because he was a wounded veteran. Many refused to believe the conditions of the VA hospitals, and a TV cameraman called him a commie traitor off the air. He was sent endless hate mail. Kenny became disgusted with Ron and left for New York; his other friends thought he sounded like a 'broken record.' Kovic felt crazy alone but wouldn't stop speaking because he didn't want to feel alone. He tells people about his pain, but always held one story back about 'the corporal from Georgia and the ambush in the village and the dead children lying on the ground.'

Kovic flashed ahead to protestors picketing Nixon's campaign headquarters; they had been there for days and the Nixon volunteers ignored them. Ron would race his wheelchair in front of trucks and point at himself, drawing attention to his disfigurement. The police are disgusted with him but also seem to want to join him. They arrest him anyway, and kick the dead part of his body. They tear his war medals from his chest. Kovic is thrown into the police car and cannot breathe, terrified that his bones are broken and that he will have to go to the emergency room. When the cops see his catheter they change their attitude, telling him they don't want the war either. However, when he tells them he's a vet against the war, one cop tells him that he should have died in Vietnam. Kovic is so upset by his imprisonment that he is not sure whether he will be able to trust anyone again.

Ron gives a speech in Compton and meets a woman afterward. They talk late until the night and she asks him to drop by her house later. The woman, Helen, has two children and works as a school teacher. Ron and Helen were falling in love. Over time, they start staying at her house together but her constant calling starts to bother him. When he returns to New York he cried in front of his mother about the babies he killed; his secret memory was eating at him, one night causing him to break down. He calls Helen and tells her he wants to marry her. She flies to New York to meet his family with her kids.

He introduced her to his friends and she wants him to go back to church and build a family. When they get to California, they try living together and Ron forgets why he wanted to marry her, perhaps just to have someone around. He saw a marriage counselor for paralyzed men at the VA hospital and decided he needed to be alone. So he moved out of his place with Helen and into a place of his own.

His apartment and street was quiet. He wanted to forget the war and write a book. The apartment was beautiful and he loved being close to the water. Ron mostly stayed away from his neighbors and had nightmares from time to time; he was often lonely.

The time since the war was increasing, and Ron wasn't in the hospital anymore. He is no longer protesting the war; no one is cheering him and putting handcuffs on him. No one is around; he is lonelier than he has ever been and incredibly depressed. Ron's friends didn't want to be around him and he resented them for their easy lives. He felt abandoned by the country he had given three-quarters of his life to. Ron forgot how to be nice to people but still wanted to be. He saw them as wanting to forget him because he reminded them of a worse time. Ron decided he had to come back to life, to get out of his depression, to find meaning in his life again and fight for recognition.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

In August 1972, Ron is driving at the front of a caravan. It is one of his last patrols, going to the Republican National Convention to 'reclaim America and a bit of ourselves.' The vets are soldiers again. Kovic describes his journey across the country. Ron thinks about the presence of the KKK in Louisiana, and starts wondering about the corporal from Georgie, the one who 'probably hated niggers'. He's dead, apparently because of Kovic, who wants him to be alive again. When the caravan arrives at the campsite, Kovic starts to wonder what gave anyone the right to beat him, to start the war.

The caravan moves over the bridge to Miami 'like a returning army.' They proceed through the city, flying flags and yelling. Everyone is happy, and other vets are happy to see him. Ron talks to a reporter for two hours.

The night of Nixon's acceptance speech, Ron was alone, his eyes aching from tear gas. His friends were being arrested. Ron tries to enter the convention hall but isn't allowed in; he shouts to see if he can get Walter Cronkite and CBS news' attention. Ron was shouting at all of the delegates by this time. Eventually he made it in and was shocked to see all the young Nixon supporters there. He tells everyone who will listen about his experiences in Vietnam and complains about hospital conditions, calling Nixon a liar. Ron draws the attention of Roger Mudd, a CBS news reporter, who wants to interview him; he would be on live television. Ron tells the camera that he's a Vietnam vet, who gave America his life, and was left to rot in a VA hospital, that the war in Vietnam is a crime against humanity and that he wants the American people to see those who have come to oppose the war. The security agents were trying to prevent the interview, but Ron was on the air for two minutes. Spiro Agnew appears on stage to thunderous applause and a man shreds Ron's sign. Security agents move in around them. The people went crazy when Nixon appeared, and gave him an incredible standing ovation. Ron and his friends scream "Stop the bombing, stop the war." The news cameras ignore them and the security agents hide them from the cameras. A man runs up to Ron and spits in his face, calling him a traitor. Some security guards wheel him out and push his group outside, locking the doors with chains so reporters can't follow them. He and his two friends, however, were proud for shouting down the president of the United States.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Ron always wanted to be a winner, for his entire life - in wrestling, baseball, the marines and his protesting; but things were different now; his hopes were crushed. The man he killed with one shot haunted him. His troop knew what happened, that he had shot a corporal from Georgia. The story flashes back to Vietnam.

When Ron returns to the battalion, he reported to his lieutenant that they retreated and the corporal was shot. Ron panics, knowing that he killed the corporal and now sees him in his mind. He wanted to commit suicide due to his guilt and knew he would always feel that way to some degree. He never killed a communist, only a fellow American soldier. He tries to convince himself it was an accident.

Kovic next reported to the major and the major asks him what happened. They had captured a Vietnamese woman and her child and brought them up a hill and tied them up while they kept watch. North Vietnamese soldiers came at them and the troops jumped in the trench, all save the corporal, the last to come back. He said the corporal got shot and told the major that he might have killed him. The major immediately said he didn't think so. Ron felt better once he confessed.

The chaplain ran a service for the corporal; he had a wife and child. Kovic knew nothing about the nineteen year old man that he had killed. The weeks that followed passed slowly, and he tried to forget what he did. Ron prayed for understanding of why this happen. He wondered how God could have put him in that situation. From time to time, Ron read the bible and decided he wanted to become a priest. He confessed in a letter to his parents and felt better again. His fellow soldiers often stared at him, apparently wondering whether he had done the deed.

Some weeks after he killed the corporal, Ron was walking around in the dark and walked in on the battalion commander, but then quickly left. Apparently he wanted to confess to him as well. The major gave him another chance by making him the commander of a scout team; he could redeem himself. He was proud to fight for democracy and his country.

Kovic was on patrol the night of the ambush. He put his men in camouflage and they moved north as planned. They walked through a rice paddy. The villagers noticed and began talking. Something seemed wrong, though. One of the men, Molina, was trying to signal to them. Molina walked back to the lieutenant, and they both went to look ahead. The rest of the team waited. They had found the 'sappers.' Kovic sees a light in the distance and then lieutenant is excited that he has found them. His men shot a flare and they started firing until the flare went out. The lieutenant had not ordered fire. Molina went up ahead and found that they had actually killed and maimed a bunch of Vietnamese children, who were shot in the face, chest, and legs, moaning and crying.

The sight was horrifying; the men were awash in terrible guilt and tried to help them. The lieutenant ordered them to help but the men wouldn't move. The soldiers wept and Molina cried out for forgiveness. The lieutenant had them call for a chopper but the men still wouldn't move; the lieutenant told them to grow up, that the kids had 'gotten in the way.' The chopper comes to take away the wounded. Kovic picks up a shot child and his foot falls off. When the wounded are gone, Kovic is overcome with numbness and feels sick.

Still in Vietnam, Kovic looks for a booby trap and taking unwise chances, hoping to get shot and wounded enough to be sent home, but not to be killed. One day, his battalion was almost blown to pieces by artillery; they were attacked while they slept. Bombs exploded above their tents, killing many of them. The barrage lifted and people began to move. The men were in a daze, and MacCarthy was dead. Kovic thought MacCarthy looked ridiculous, not like one expected; he wanted to laugh and the other men quickly recover and become indifferent to MacCarthy's mangled, severed flesh. Three more men were thrown together in a mangled, dead heap; one of them was Kovic's friend, Sergeant Bo. Eleven men had been killed and many were wounded. Kovic hoped that now the men wouldn't care about him shooting the corporal. Crazily, he felt better, but he couldn't cry for his friend.

At the beginning of the year, his troop stopped going on patrols. Life achieved some normalcy in comparison to what came before. A firefight had killed a lieutenant not far from them. The major called them all to move out. Kovic's friend Michaelson told him that he (Michaelson) was going to die that day, and he did. Everyone knew something serious was about to happen. The South Vietnamese forces were in trouble, and the battalion was to back them up. The major wanted to send the scouts up front and Kovic thought he had found his chance to make up for what happened. As his scout team moved forward, they found the popular forces. The Viet officer there said they weren't going to assault the village; they were going to sit in the trench and wait things out. Fire came at his scout team, and they fired back. When Kovic ordered his men to stand their ground, he discovered that they had all fled. When he walked toward the village, he got hit by a bullet in his leg below the knee. He was happy to have been shot. He wanted to run away with his 'million-dollar' wound, but also wanted to keep fighting. So he limped forward, firing into the village. Kovic waited for the next bullet to hit him and eventually it did. He was then paralyzed, but was still alive, wondering if he would die.

The book ends with a brief flashback to Kovic's childhood, enjoying his easy life. Kovic felt like he would live forever then. The next page contains the letter his Lieutenant General wrote to his mother and father, informing them of his wound. He expressed pride at Kovic's character and sacrifice, ending with the following: "He is the type of young man of which Americans and free men everywhere can be proud."

Characters

Ron Kovic

Ron Kovic is both the author and the main character of Born on the Fourth of July. Kovic was born July 4th, 1946. He grew up in Massapequa, New York with loving parents, a Catholic faith and a neighborhood full of kids Ron's age that he grew up with. Kovic had a storybook childhood, hating school, playing baseball, discovering girls, high school sports. After high school he joins the Marine Corps and is sent off to Vietnam. In Vietnam, Kovic experiences the horrors of war, seeing his fellow soldiers killed, shooting one of his fellow soldiers and participating in an unintentional massacre of a village full of Vietnamese children. Kovic gets himself shot in order to come home and winds up paralyzed from the chest down. He is poorly cared for in the Veterans Administration Hospitals and feels alienated from American society. Depressed, alone, and partly unable to care for himself, Kovic discovers the anti-war movement and gets involved, making headlines because he was a severely injured veteran. Kovic is a man who always strived to be the best at what he did, baseball as a child, wrestling in high school, the marines once he graduated. He was energetic and fairly happy. He is also rather forthright about his sexual frustrations before and after he left Vietnam. His experiences in Vietnam and his injuries left him awash in guilt, alienated from American society and severely depressed. Born on the Fourth of July is the story of Kovic recovering purpose in his suffering.

The Corporal from Georgia

The Corporal from Georgia is in one way not a major character in the book. He has no lines and we never even learn his name. But the corporal is deeply important to the main theme of the book. When Ron Kovic was in Vietnam, he was eager to kill the enemy. But during a firefight, his troop retreated and in his haste, he shoots and killed the corporal from Georgia, a man he never knew. Kovic confesses what he did to his lieutenant and major, who look the other way; he also tells his parents. But the pain is only somewhat lessened. Kovic never killed a communist enemy in Vietnam; all he did was kill his own. For this reason, he was filled with guilt and felt like a failure in a life that was meaningless anyway. The corporal from Georgia symbolized Kovic's guilt and depression from Vietnam because he not only failed to be a good soldier but was more or less a murderer of one of his comrades. The corporal from Georgia, however, also symbolizes the meaningless of the war in Vietnam. The war accomplished nothing, only leading to a massive number of deaths on both sides of the conflict. The corporal from Georgia also symbolizes the loss of Kovic's innocence. His childhood was protected, normal, and storybook. His early life in the Marine Corps was just as he suspected; he went to Vietnam eager to serve his country. However, once he began to experience the carnage of war, that innocence was lost, even more so when he killed the Corporal from Georgia. Finally, Kovic lost his innocence once more when he returned to the United

States and joined the antiwar movement; the corporal from Georgia symbolizes this as well.

Kovic's Parents

Kovic's parents were the picturesque blue collar New York family of the 1950s: hardworking, Catholic, value-focused and devoted to their children. They were very supportive of Ron when he returned from Vietnam, but Ron still felt distant.

Castiglia

One of Kovic's best childhood friends.

Bobby Zimmer

Kovic's other best childhood friend.

Jimmy

Kovic's physical therapist.

Tommy Law

One of Kovic's childhood friends who he runs into again after being in the Memorial Day parade when he returned from Vietnam.

Helen

A brief romantic interest of Kovic's.

Skip

Kovic's cousin's husband who got Kovic into the antiwar movement by giving him books to read.

Kenny

One of Kovic's childhood friends who eventually takes him to live in L.A. where Kovic becomes involved in the antiwar movement.

Charlie

One of Kovic's veteran friends in Mexico who breaks down drunk in a Mexican whorehouse screaming about being forced to kill babies. This experience leads Kovic to stop visiting whorehouses and leave Mexico.

The Anti-War Movement

The 1960s and '70s movement against the Vietnam War. Kovic once believed the anti-war protesters to be traitors, but later finds the movement a loving and welcoming community.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

The controversial group of Vietnam veterans who opposed the war. Some of them are able to shout down Nixon during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention.

Kovic's Battalion

Kovic's fellow soldiers who end up slaughtering numerous Vietnamese children unintentionally.

Objects/Places

Vietnam

The Southeast Asian country where the Vietnam War was fought and Kovic was injured.

The Fourth of July

The day on which Kovic was born, which regularly symbolized his shattered pride in his country.

The VA Hospitals

The Veterans Administration of the United States is responsible for taking care of veterans from American wars, but their hospitals were in a disgraceful state in Kovic's opinion.

Dead Body Parts

Kovic often saw himself as partly dead because he was paralyzed, unable to have sex and control his bladder. He also often discusses dismembered and the common experience of injured soldiers who lose use of their body parts or their body parts themselves.

Kovic's Catheter

The device that ran Kovic's urine to his urine bag. Sometimes it would malfunction and Kovic's urine would spread everywhere. It also symbolized the sexual frustration that Kovic endured.

Kovic's Urine Bag

The bag that held Kovic's urine.

Kovic's Wheelchair

Because Kovic was paralyzed, he had to use a wheelchair, which he often hated.

The Village of the Sun

The Veterans resort in Mexico where many US Veterans lived and visited. Kovic spent some time there and was mostly happy.

Baseball

The great American pastime that Kovic grew up loving with his whole heart.

War Games

In Kovic's youth, he grew up proud of the American Armed Services. He and his childhood friends would play war games as a result. Later, Kovic looks back on these war games as representing understandable naivety.

Massapequa, New York

Ron Kovic's hometown.

Hempstead, New York

The New York town where Kovic got an apartment of his own after returning from Vietnam.

Los Angeles

The California metropolis where Kovic moved with his friend Kenny after returning from Vietnam. In Los Angeles, Kovic joined the antiwar movement.

Republican National Convention

In 1972, Kovic and some fellow veterans crashed the Republican Convention to demonstrate against the war and shout down Nixon.

Themes

Alienation

Ron Kovic grows up in a community where he feels wholly integrated.His family is good to him, as are his siblings. He has many friends and a few very close friends. While he is shy and small when he is young, he remedies this as he matures. In high school, he is athletic and popular. Despite having few successes with women, he excels in many other areas. He also has a fairly deep Catholic faith, which integrates him in the life of his church community. When he joins the Marines, he acquires yet another community, this time a brotherhood prepared to go to their deaths together, and Kovic also experiences a great sense of patriotism and love of his country. This is all destroyed when he goes to Vietnam. When he kills the corporal from Georgia, he is alienated from his fellow soldiers. When he participates in the slaughter of Vietnamese children, he is practically alienated from humanity. When he is wounded, he is alienated from God and from most people who cannot handle interacting with him and cannot understand him. Further, when Kovic returns home, he feels alienated from a society that he gave 'three-quarters' of his body to. Few thank him for his service and when they do they have no understanding of what really happened there. The VA hospitals take poor care of him, and while interacting with veterans gives Kovic a sense of community, he finds it little elsewhere, less in his family but some in his friends. Kovic spends much time alone and has little connection with women; he is often depressed and feels trapped in his body. It is not until he joins the antiwar movement that he feels warmly accepted again, but when the movement dies down, he is again alone.

Guilt

In Kovic's early life, his main sense of guilt comes from his serial masturbation and lust for girls. By and large, however, Kovic is a happy, accomplished, upright and energetic person. Vietnam, however, feels his life with guilt for the entire book and probably a long time afterward. When Kovic joins the Marines he is eager to fight for his country and proud to do so. He and his Marine buddies hate the anti-war protestors and do not understand them. This all changes, though, when Kovic shoots one of his fellow soldiers, the corporal from Georgia. His major and lieutenant try to get him to look past it, and deny that it happened, but Kovic cannot handle the pain and guilt until he confesses not only to the major and the lieutenant but to his family. Yet even this does not alleviate his pain enough. His guilt is compounded when he participates in the slaughter of a village full of Vietnamese schoolchildren. He went to war to fight for his country and for liberty for the Vietnamese, but all he did was kill the innocent. One result of his guilt is that he takes excessive risks in Vietnam, trying to get wounded or shot to somehow make up for what he took from those he killed. He cannot escape his guilt, even long after he returns to the United States. Still, in many ways, the anti-war movement gave him an opportunity to make amends for what he did, to stop the killing

from continuing. His speeches were a form of penance that allowed him to feel that finally he was in the right; but the guilt continued to fester within him.

Disfigurement

Ron Kovic grew up a small and shy boy, but he spent a great deal of time in the gym, working out and competing as a high school wrestler. His body became strong and fit; he was proud of it, and believed he could do anything. When he became a Marine, his fitness was taken to an entirely new level. He was an athlete and a soldier in one of the most highly trained branch of the armed services. Yet Kovic is surrounded by the destruction of the body when he reaches Vietnam. He often speaks of broken and blown-off body parts in the book, the tearing apart of men's bodies from being shot, the horrible ripping and dismemberment of the body they endured, often leading to death but otherwise leading to disfigurement. Kovic often describes scenes of dead or dying soldiers, in all of its gruesome detail. The most significant disfigurement in the book, however, is that of Kovic. He is shot and paralyzed from the chest down. He feels as if three-quarters of his body died. He was particularly depressed by the fact that he could not control his bladder and had to use a catheter and urine bag so as not to urinate all over himself at any moment. What was worse, he could not use his penis at all for sexual purposes. This kept him from connecting to women in even the most basic physical manner. Disfigurement is not only a feature of Kovic's body however, it is also one of the soul throughout the book. Kovic's heart is disfigured by his experiences, by the carnage he saw and about the lives he destroyed.

Style

Perspective

The book is written by its main character, Ron Kovic. Kovic is a man of the baby boom generation. He was born on July 4th, 1946, grew up during the height of the Cold War in New York, and as a adolescent believed in his country as nearly everyone did. After high school when he joined the marines, the United States social order began to break down, and Kovic eventually sided with those on the left who opposed the Vietnam War. The reader might therefore expect to find strong biases in favor of a variety of left-wing positions on economic, religious and social topics. However, this is not so. His overwhelming focus is on the war and stopping it. One might see Kovic as a man constantly trying to atone. His getting wounded was an attempt at atonement, his becoming part of the antiwar movement was an attempt at a atonement. It is not inappropriate to speculate that his writing a book that over one million people bought was partly written to confess his sins as widely as he could. Kovic, despite being a member of the antiwar movement, does not seem particularly hostile to traditional religious faith, the United States of his childhood or the Cold War in general. Instead, his only solid position expressed seems to be his opposition to the horrors of the Vietnam War. The reader will find the author an impassioned, energetic, guilty man who is searching for redemption.

Tone

The tone of Born on the Fourth of July shares much with the character of its author. It is impassioned, matter-of-fact, romantic, graphic, existential and religious. It is impassioned because the author is a naturally passionate man, focused on great achievements. Throughout the book, we find a man with deep emotional struggles and attachments. He combines this passion with a commitment to describing the brutality of the Vietnam War and his life in a straightforward fashion. He discusses his genitals, experiences with prostitutes, lusts, urine, spilling his urine, his feelings of alienation, his indifference seeing death, and so on. He is romantic, however, because he describes his childhood as his halcyon days, full of happiness and classic experiences. Those were times of purity and the love of life; he spends his life after Vietnam trying to recapture it, particularly during his struggles in the Vietnam War. Kovic is often graphic, however, describing his body and carnage in great detail; we face descriptions of soldiers dismembered, bodies describes as hunks of flesh, the horrific site of murdered and dying children, descriptions of the shock at seeing wounded veterans and so on. The book's tone is existential because it describes Kovic's alienation from all the forms of life he once felt to be a part of. We are confronted with his emotional struggles, loneliness, his cries to God and his search for meaning in his suffering. Finally, the book has a deeply religious vein within it. Kovic is a Catholic through much of the book and perhaps to some degree through all of it. He struggles with his relationship with God

throughout, often feeling alienated from God because he cannot make sense of his pain.

Structure

Born on the Fourth of July is written from two perspectives. Kovic writes about himself in both the first and the third person, sometimes even within the same chapter, which the reader may find jarring. When he writes in the first person or the third person, we not only read about how he acts, what he observes, or what he communicates, we also catch a glimpse into his thought life. From time to time, Kovic will describe dreams, memories, and reflections on poems, and so on. The third-person passages have a more impersonal feel. In one way, this makes the book stronger because it takes the reader away from an intensely emotional and passionate first-person perspective and presents to him/her the impersonality of his experience. The book contains seven chapters, not in chronological order. The beginning and ending chapters mostly describe his time in Vietnam, whereas the chapters in the middle focus on his life before and after Vietnam. Thus, the book is structured around his Vietnam experience, beginning with his injury and recovery and ending with the events that led to his injury in the first place. The chapters vary in length and often contain mini-chapters that jump around in time and location within Kovic's life. Thus, individual chapters may not appear to be wholly structured around a single theme or event.

Historical Context

The Vietnam War

The French, who had a long history of involvement and colonization in Indochina, were defeated by the Vietnamese at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This victory ended French occupation, and divided the country of Vietnam in two—the communist North and the anti-communist South—sparking a civil war. As part of the United States's cold war policy of containment, which aimed to prevent the spread of communism, the United States supported South Vietnam. The North was supported by China and East Germany, and led by Ho Chi Minh.

President Kennedy began the U.S. involvement in Vietnam with a small number of troops. However, after the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident on July 27, 1964, in which U.S. airmen mistakenly thought they were under attack from North Vietnamese forces, President Johnson signed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which elevated the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam and essentially started the war. With over half a million troops committed at the height of U.S. involvement, generals and government officially repeatedly emphasized American dominance over the North. However, the Tet Offensive of January 30, 1968, illustrated otherwise, as the North Vietnamese army attacked nearly every city in South Vietnam to the surprise of U.S. forces. The war continued to escalate; many soldiers were required to serve involuntary second tours; and opposition to the war gathered public support.

Over the next decade, thousands of American troops were killed or injured, and little progress appeared to be made against the North. Under President Nixon in 1970–71, the United States extended the war to neighboring Cambodia and Laos. In the face of rising anti-war sentiment at home, Nixon steadily reduced the number of troops in Vietnam, and in 1973, signed the Paris Peace Accords, which ended the war and called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. In 1974, Congress cut all funding to the South Vietnamese government in Saigon, leaving them without an ally against the North. The North marched into South Vietnam, taking all major cities. The U.S. embassy evacuated its staff on April 30, 1975, and Saigon fell to the North that day.

Vietnam was reunified into one communist country under the name Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with Hanoi, the former capital of North Vietnam, as its capital city. The Vietnam War is the longest war in U.S. history, lasting eleven years.

The Anti-war Movement

Opposition to the war began early on college campuses, as many of the men drafted to fight in Vietnam were college aged. In 1965, the first organized burning of draft cards was held. The burning of draft cards, along with draft dodging and conscientious

objection, became symbols of the opposition, as individuals refused to participate in what they considered an unjust war.

As troop involvement increased, the anti-war movement did as well. President Johnson increased the number of troops and bombings in Vietnam in 1966 and 1967, and protesters became more vocal in their opposition. In October 1967, protesters led the March on the Pentagon, hoping to besiege the national symbol of military might, a move that strengthened the national anti-war movement and ultimately weakened Johnson's presidency. By 1968, less than a quarter of American citizens supported Johnson's war decisions. Demonstrations were held across the country, and were often televised, which allowed protesters to get their message out to a large audience. The hand gesture that had meant victory in World War II—holding up two fingers in a V shape—was repurposed by protesters as a peace sign.

On October 15, 1969, a National Moratorium was held in Washington, D.C., and across the country in which hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took part in local and national demonstrations against the war. A second moratorium was held on November 15. Anti-war sentiment began to build amongst the troops as well, with many soldiers wearing peace signs on their uniforms. Veterans returning from the war, such as Ron Kovic, were vocal in their opposition, and formed a group known as VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War).

The United States invaded Cambodia in 1970, sparking protests across the nation. At a protest at Kent State University in Ohio, four students were killed by the National Guard. The nation was outraged, and over one hundred colleges went on strike in response. Nixon, overwhelmed by the national anti-war sentiment, agreed to withdraw fifty thousand troops. By the end of 1970, U.S. involvement in Vietnam began to dwindle, but the war would not end for another five years.

Many historians and scholars believe that the anti-war movement had a direct effect on the outcome of the Vietnam War, ultimately turning public opinion against it. Additionally, it is suggested that the anti-war movement had detrimental effects on both Johnson's and Nixon's presidencies. The movement is often cited as an example of how the American people can have an effect on government policy and proceedings. Though there was occasional violence, the anti-war movement was overall a peaceful one.

Critical Overview

The standards by which critics approached *Born on the Fourth of July* upon its publication seem different from the usual reviews given to memoirs or first-person accounts. Most critics took into consideration that the book was not the product of a trained writer with literary aspirations or pretensions. That said, the consensus was clear that Ron Kovic had produced a powerful and, in many regards, timeless war classic. Published as it was just a year after the end of the war, the book was lauded for its honesty and forthright portrayal of a young man and his country caught up in uncontrollable situations. Donald C. Galbasini's review in the October 1977 issue of the *American Bar Association Journal*, calls *Born on the Fourth of July* "a very readable story of what war does to human beings." Galbasini also cites Kovic as a "one-time hawk [turned] antiwar dove," thereby reflecting the thematic tension of the memoir.

It should be noted however, that there is still not much significant critical work on the memoir, especially when compared with the criticism on the Oliver Stone film adaptation of the book. Although the regular questions of adaptation were raised, and the film did have some differences from the book, it still remained true to the text—especially since Kovic co-wrote the script and worked closely with Stone. In an interview with *Accent on Living*, Kovic recalls that there was interest in adapting his memoir to film very soon after it was published in 1976. Of the film, Stuart Klawans in the *Nation* says that it, like the book, "has the urgency of truth told—or screamed—against a deafening Muzak of lies." Klawans adds, "the film wants to shout down the sentimentalization of the Vietnam War, the sweet-talk about national healing, [and] most of all the current pieties of the war's veterans." Like Klawans, most critics praised the gritty reality of the film and its depiction of the courageous Kovic. The memoir's triumph was indisputable in 1989, when Oliver Stone turned it into a major motion picture starring Tom Cruise.

Alan Murdock's review of the Akashic Books reprint of *Born on the Fourth of July* (2005) on the anti-war website, Invisible Insurrection.com, brings up some interesting issues. In his ability to move beyond the initial parameters of criticism on the book, Murdock is able to ask important questions of Kovic in hindsight:

Does [Kovic] consider there to be a just conflict, or do all wars fall within this model of harm? If his idealism had been rewarded with a clear enemy, a clear objective, and a clear victory, would the reality of war be different?

These questions are not necessarily a pointed criticism or attack on Kovic's integrity, but they serve to put the book and its author under the critical eye of a twenty-first-century perspective. In a post-September 11 world, can there still be justifiable reasoning to fervently anti-war sentiments? Does the government have to be more careful about the way it deploys the military in a world that knows of the mistakes of Vietnam? It remains dangerous to affix contemporary sentiments and perspectives on any book that is so clearly of its time and place, but Murdock's review deserves consideration when absorbing the impact *Born on the Fourth of July* has had, and continues to have, on the reading public.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Shor explores how the myths of patriotism and masculinity led thousands of Cold-War era young men, including Kovic, into the Vietnam War and how they managed to break free of those myths through antiwar activitism.

Born on the Fourth of July was released in an abridged audio version on cassette. It was published by Caedmon and is narrated by Ron Kovic. It is available from Audiobooks.com.

The film adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), was directed by Oliver Stone, and the screenplay was co-written by Kovic. Tom Cruise plays Kovic, and the film garnered critical acclaim and numerous awards, including two Academy Awards and four Golden Globes. The movie is available on VHS and DVD from Universal Studios Home Video.

"Myths," contends cultural historian Richard Slotkin, "are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain." In Ron Kovic's searing autobiography, *Born on the Fourth of July*, he confronts those myths that structured his life growing up in a working-class suburb of Cold War America and led him to the war in Vietnam as a gung-ho Marine. Revealing the symbolizing power of the patriotic ideology of the period, Kovic's narrative embodies both a personal and collective story of the conscious and unconscious authority of a variety of myths. In coming to terms with how those myths created an illusory and innocent persona, *Born on the Fourth of July* traces in non-linear fashion the disillusionment of a starry-eye young man. Resonant of testimonies from other Vietnam veterans, Kovic's journey traverses a "landscape" that, from the perspective of John Hellman's study of the myths of the Vietnam legacy, "is an awful inversion of American assumptions and values—a nightmare version of the landscapes of previous American myth."

In following Ron Kovic's flight to escape the nightmare of myths that haunted his passage into the history of the Vietnam War era, this paper will underscore the development and transcendence of those myths. In particular, by highlighting those moments in *Born on the Fourth of July* where patriotic and military myths created compelling and contradictory consciousness that armored and eventually wounded Ron Kovic, one can better understand how, in Slotkin's terms, "myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living." While crippled by those patriotic arid military myths, Kovic's transfiguration by the end of his narrative suggests an alternative consciousness to patriotic militarized masculinity. Kovic's autobiographical voyage thus becomes an example of Sam Keen's understanding of how individuals achieve freedom and authenticity by demythologizing and demystifying "the authority or myth that has unconsciously informed … (one's) life."

Kovic's consciousness of his patriotic heritage was rooted in being born on the fourth of July. "Being born on the exact same day as my country I thought was really great. I was so proud." The military and mythological components of that patriotic pride were part of a Saturday ritual that included watching war movies with John Wayne and Audie Murphy and then attempting to re-enact the adventures of their all-American heroes. "We turned the woods into a battlefield. We set ambushes, then led gallant attacks, storming over the top, bayoneting and shooting anyone who got in our way. Then we'd walk out of the woods like the heroes we knew we would become when we were men." As noted by Christian Appy, the "celebration of military culture so central to many WWII movies and enacted in childhood games undoubtedly played an important role in shaping a glorified view of war among many young boys of the Vietnam generation."

Kovic's march to militarized masculinity was also inevitably connected to the celebratory myths of Cold War America in its struggles to defeat communism around the globe. Watching "I Led Three Lives" on television in the 1950s led Kovic to recall "how brave he was, putting his life on the line for his country, making believe he was a Communist, and all the time being on our side, getting information from them so we could keep the Russians from taking over our government." Bombarded by media images that reinforced an anti-Communist ideology and perpetuated the myth of a noble and generous America, both Kovic and the country would go to Vietnam "believing it was a replay on a smaller scale of World War II: a struggle to defend democracy against aggression, which we surely would win, not only because we were more powerful but because the right was clearly on our side."

Kovic's desire to join the Marines was not only an obsession of the pumped-up young warrior-in-training, but also an aspect of the mythologizing that Marine recruiters conveyed to the impressionable Kovic in high school. "The Marines," exclaimed a Marine recruiter, "have been first in everything, first to fight and first to uphold the honor of our country … There is nothing finer, nothing prouder, than a United States Marine." Relying once again on a mechanistic approach to body and mind, the recruiters asserted that "the Marine Corps built men." Responding viscerally to the call. Kovic's enlistment reflected the patriotic and militarized conditioning of body and mind reflected in Sam Keen's observation that "(e)very man is 'the Manchurian candidate,' a hypnotized agent of the state waiting to be called into active service by the bugle call of 'Duty,' 'Honor,' 'Patriotism.'"

The section in *Born on the Fourth of July* on Kovic's basic training in the Marines brings into sharp focus the ideological and mythological components of a patriotic militarized masculinity. Utilizing the passive voice to accentuate how he was being shaped into an instrument of punitive agency, Kovic comments: "They were driving him and pushing him and shoving him, screaming and bullying him through this whole crazy thing." Calling recruits "babies," "ladies," and "maggots," Kovic refers to the constant "cursing" that followed the recruits throughout basic training and underscored the misogynist and homophobic derision with which the drill instructors bombarded the recruits. As Appy notes in his study of basic training experiences for working-class recruits, "(w)omen and gays were referred to interchangeably as the epitome of all that is cowardly, passive, untrustworthy, unclean, and undisciplined."

Going into the Vietnam War, soldiers like Kovic were indoctrinated with the belief that they were on a noble mission. Yet that mission from its outset was steeped in the ideology of anti-Communist interventionism and the mythologies of American military an technocratic triumphalism. Playing out the frontier myths of "cowboys and Indians," U.S. ground troops found it difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate the "good guys" from the "bad." For Kovic, such difficulties in the mission were reflected in the following:

He remembered how difficult it had been when he had first come to the war to tell the villagers from the enemy and sometimes it had seemed easier to hate all of them, but he had always tried very hard not to. He wished he could be sure they understood that he and the men were there because they were trying to help all of them save their country from the Communists.

Kovic's ultimate sacrifice, nonetheless, was undertaken with both bravado and guilt. When he is hit by a bullet, his initial thoughts are that "I was getting out of the war and I was going to be a hero." However, when the next bullet smashes into his body, severing his spinal cord, he loses all feeling in his body. Reflecting afterwards that "the wound is my punishment for killing the corporal and the children," Kovic only slowly begins to realize that all the armoring and mythologizing that constituted his patriotic militarized masculinity had been fatally pierced. Transcending both the wound and the myths of patriotic militarized masculinity would require additional trauma and eventual transfiguration.

The wound that left Ron Kovic a cripple was intimately bound up with those myths that "reach out of the past to cripple." Yet, those myths of patriotic militarized masculinity would not be confronted until his paralysis of body and mind were further subjected to the crises surrounding the continuing Vietnam War. Among those crises were his own personal struggle over the loss of masculinist sexuality and mobility and the political battle that was part of what one historian of the domestic impact of the Vietnam War has called "The War Within." From the harsh and harrowing portrayal of hospital conditions for Vietnam veterans to his activism as a member of *Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, Kovic fought that war within as a transfigured warrior.

In a torrent of self-loathing and self-pity, Kovic acknowledges the trauma caused by his condition:

I am twenty-one and the whole thing is shot, done forever … and now I am left with the corpse, the living dead man, the man with the numb legs, the man in the wheelchair, the Easter Seal boy, the cripple, the sexlessman, the sexlessman, the man with the numb dick, the man who can't make children, the man who can't stand, the man who can't walk, the angry lonely man, the bitter man with the nightmares, the murder man, the man who cries in the shower.

Beyond the broken-down body, Kovic's spirit was sorely tested by the dehumanizing conditions in the VA hospitals. The harrowing description of the filth and neglect in these hospitals is a key to the indictment against the government. At one point Kovic comments: "It never makes any sense to us how the government can keep asking for

money for weapons and leave us lying in our own filth." The transformation that he undergoes from "love or leave it" patriotic to critic of the government is directly related to the dehumanization and abandonment he experiences in these hospitals. "I feel myself changing, the anger is building up in me. It has become a force I cannot control … I am lying in my own excrement and no one comes." Even his cry of "I fought in Vietnam and I've got a right to be treated decently" is contested when one hospital aide retorts: "Vietnam don't mean nothin' to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass." Being made to feel like shit is part of the transformation that Kovic and other veterans make in seeing the whole war in Vietnam as a waste and beginning to protest both the conditions in the hospitals and the never-ending war.

Acknowledging that his experiences in the hospital had changed him, marking "the end or whatever belief I'd still had in what I'd done in Vietnam," his anti-war sentiments are galvanized by the news of the murder of four students at Kent State. Vowing to go to Washington to demonstrate, Kovic recounts his amazement at the sense of solidarity and carnival-like atmosphere that he observes in the capitol. But his transformation from mere observer to full participant is inflamed by an attack on the demonstrators by the police. Kovic concludes his account of the demonstration with a poignant and revealing juxtaposition: "There was a togetherness, just as there had been in Vietnam, but it was a togetherness of a different kind of people and for a much different reason. In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon we were trying to heal them and set them free."

Kovic's own healing process and his transfiguration from "a thing to put on a uniform and train to kill" into a human being who cares for others and respects himself required encountering those myths underlying patriotic militarized masculinity and engaging in a political activism aimed at healing and self-healing. As psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton noted in his case study of Vietnam Veterans, "political activism helped anti-war veterans recover from much of the emotional and psychological trauma of their wartime experience." Moreover, breaking through the myths of patriotic militarized masculinity also resulted in a form of post-traumatic stress where Kovic was forced to recognize the pain he caused others and himself in killing. Overcoming a form of "toxic masculinity," Kovic found that manhood could be measured by your care for others and respect for yourself.

Source: Fran Shor, "Transcending the Myths of Patriotic Militarized Masculinity: Armoring, Wounding, and Transfiguration in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*," in *Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 2000, p. 375.

Quotes

"The blood is still rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and there are bullets cracking into the sand all around me." (29)

"July fourth, nineteen forty-six. I was born on the Fourth of July. I can't feel ..." (33)

"But it is the living deaths I am smelling now, the living deaths, the bodies broken in the same war that I have come from." (48)

"Somebody, give us back our bodies!" (54)

"I wanted to be a hero." (72)

"If those bastards in Washington would stop fiddlefucking around and drop a couple of big ones in the right places, we could get that whole thing over with next week. We could win that goddamn thing and get all our kids out of there." (105)

"I have given my dead swinging dick for America." (116)

"Fuck all you goddamn motherfuckers! They made me kill babies! They made me kill babies!" (129)

"'Vietnam,' the aide says loudly. "Vietnam don't mean nothin' to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass." (133)

"I didn't know what all of this had to do with the invasion of Cambodia or the students slain at Kent State, but it was total freedom." (140)

"I'm the example of the war. Look at me. Do you want your sons to look like this? Do you want to put on the uniform and come home like me?" (150)

"He had to rise up out of this deep dark prison. He had to come back. He knew the power he had." (167)

"I served two tours of duty in Vietnam! ... I gave three-quarters of my body for America. And what do I get? Spit in the face!" (181)

"I killed him, he kept repeating over and over to himself." (185)

"Oh God, Oh Jesus Christ. We just shot up a bunch of kids!" (200)

"All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing." (214)

"It was all sort of easy. It had all come and gone." (216)

Topics for Discussion

What do you think is significant about the fact that Kovic switches between the first and third-person perspectives in the book?

Why is Kovic so focused on his childhood? What does it represent to him throughout his Vietnam experience?

How do Kovic's experiences killing the innocent affect him? What are some ways he tries to atone for the deaths he caused?

Community and alienation from community is a theme that runs throughout Born on the Fourth of July. Please name some communities that Kovic was once in and later felt alienated from. Describe the reasons for the alienation and how Kovic experienced it.

Describe in detail three senses in which Kovic feels disfigured.

What do you think Kovic intends when he describes the carnage of the war and the details of his physical disfigurement so graphically? Explain your view in detail.

Why do you think that Kovic got involved in the antiwar movement? What did the movement do for him emotionally? Please give two examples.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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