Theatre Survey 50:1 (May 2009)
© 2009 American Society for Theatre Research
doi:10.1017/S0040557409000118

WHAT ARE YOU READING?
EDITED BY KATHERINE SCHEIL

Charlotte M. Canning

All I seem to be able to read about recently is war. Some of that reading is predictable—I read the *New York Times* and the local paper every day—but lately it has seemed to me that in each book I pick up, no matter what the subject or purpose, passages about war leap out at me. Until I realized this, I made no conscious attempt to select books about war, but over this past spring and into the summer, I have been choosing to read about war.

I was born the year of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. While the Vietnam War was never formally declared, this resolution served as the justification for the commitment of thousands of troops over the next nine years. The Vietnam War is my first political memory. I went to a progressive private school with deep antiwar politics. We were taught that the Vietnam War was so wrong—morally, legally, spiritually, and politically—that it was teaching the world how wrong war was. Over the years we were assigned *All Quiet on the Western Front, Brave New World, 1984, Animal Farm, Catch-22, Dispatches*, and other books that lead us to believe there could be no more war now that its horrors were fully understood. The U.S. engagement in Iraq, however, has forced me to reexamine what the Vietnam War taught me. I decided to return to some of the books that had earlier shaped my understanding of war. I will discuss two of them, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), as well as Paula Fox's memoir of reporting from postwar Europe, *The Coldest Winter: A Stringer in Liberated Europe* (2005).

Charlotte M. Canning is a past president of ASTR. She is also the author of Feminist Theatres in the U.S.A. *(1996) and* The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Experience *(2005), recipient of the Barnard Hewitt Award for Excellence in Theatre History. She is Professor and Head of the Performance as Public Practice M.A./Ph.D. program at the Department of Theatre and Dance, University of Texas at Austin.*

I would like to thank Kirk Lynn, Deborah Paredez, and Paul Bonin-Rodriguez for their comments on an earlier draft of this work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What I thought I would connect with when I reread Heller's novel was the circular and repetitive structure of the book. Events in the book occur more than once, and each iteration adds detail, but without anything ever making conventional realist sense. Given the typical news from Iraq, I assumed the illogic and irrationality would resonate strongly. They did; however, it was a detail from early in the book that elicited a visceral response from me, just as it had when I read it in high school.

Heller pauses in the opening pages to consider an anonymous soldier, newly admitted to the hospital ward, "encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze."[1] The only signs of life are two jars—one with a tube going into his arm, the other attached to a tube from his groin. "When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could drip back into him."[2] I remember angrily challenging my English teacher—how could this be? Wouldn't such a switch kill him? My teacher tried in vain to explain how this functioned narratively, crystallizing the absurdity that the book so expertly foregrounds. But for me the image was, and remains, one of absolute horror. In it I see the callousness, indifference to pain and suffering, and the cynical illusion of caring and respect that must be manufactured to make war seem reasonable. I read everything that I had been taught about war in the soldier who has a mere paragraph in the 440-page novel.

My return to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* was prompted by his death. I was pretty sure my reaction to the book would be different this time around, and it was. Vonnegut, unlike Heller, gives a "logical" explanation for his illogic: "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time," which allows him to play with linear time and minimize reader confusion.[3] I felt spoon-fed. But it resonated more fully when read alongside Vonnegut's *Armageddon in Retrospect* (2008), a posthumously published collection. Two pieces in that book focus on the same event as *Slaughterhouse-Five*—the 1945 firebombing of undefended Dresden that killed tens of thousands of people in twenty-four hours. Vonnegut's first letter home after having been a prisoner of war opens *Armageddon in Retrospect*. Each assault—starvation, exposure, dehydration, beating, torture, and the eventual bombing—is described in a discrete paragraph starkly detailed with the specific number of those who died. Each unadorned description ends with "but I didn't."[4] The uninflected and declarative prose makes it chillingly clear that survival is random and inexplicable. This conclusion is as viscerally reached in the short story "Wailing Shall Be in All Streets," which covers the same territory as the novel and the letter.[5] But, because this story avoids the easy humor of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the trauma and madness of experiencing and surviving such devastation are much more painful. The conclusion of "Wailing," that Vonnegut would have given his life to save the city, does not come off as glib or grandiose, because as these three pieces made clear, he spent his entire life living with the fact that in one day the Allies "killed 250,000 people.... But not me."[6]

Unlike Heller and Vonnegut, Paula Fox had not been a combatant; instead she witnessed the confusing and disorienting aftermath of war. She recounts harrowing stories told to her by survivors in the unremarkable ways she heard

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them. She eschews sentimentality and ceremony because she witnessed none. What she saw was devastation, and not the uncomplicated triumph being celebrated in the United States. Typical is her encounter with a Czech journalist. As he drives her to the train station he describes the horrors of Nazi occupation—including Joseph Mengele experimenting on his twin daughters and a friend torturing a German soldier—and without a change in tone he wishes her a safe journey. He speaks of the unimaginable and it surpasses Fox's understanding. "I was unable to take in the meaning of his story, except suddenly, and then only for a few seconds at a time. When I did, it was as though I grasped broken glass in my hand."[7] Her spare style mimics the bleak geographical and physical landscape she encountered. Her writing is terse, and there is little attempt to create a narrative that will link her experiences cohesively. The refusal to explain or contextualize denies readers the comfort that would insulate them from quotidian horrors. Fox's memoir makes clear, as did Vonnegut's and Heller's novels, that war defies explanation.

On 17 July 2008 I went to the last place where the cold war still rages, a place that has been at war since 1950. A friend and I went to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the four kilometer-wide strip that separates North and South Korea. The Korean War has been suspended with a cease-fire since 1953, but no formal peace treaty exists; thus, officially the war continues. The day's visit saturated us in the contradictions and double-speak of the cold war. The DMZ itself is an incredibly beautiful and verdant wildlife refuge, but both edges are the least demilitarized places on the planet. We were encouraged to take pictures and buy souvenirs, but we also had to sign a waiver that read: "The visit . . . will entail entry into a hostile area and possibility of injury or death as a direct result of enemy action." Our U.S. Army guide often joked with us, but when asked when the most recent incident was, we were told casually, "last week." At a tourist resort in North Korea, a South Korean woman had been shot on 12 July by a North Korean guard for venturing too close to the border. "Things are tense at the moment," our guide concluded.

What was all this, we wondered? How were we to know which claims were accurate, which protestations of peaceful intentions and hopes for reunification were genuine? What I realized was that we were spectators at a performance, one that was more revealing than the performers might have liked. I was to witness the perfidy of North Korea and the freedom of the South. What I saw instead was how sovereign powers mobilize their fictions, how geopolitics can look for ways to continue wars by other means. That is why I can read only about war right now. I am a performance historian. What better profession to read the horrors of war so determinedly elided or erased by those in power?

Fox ultimately found her experiences in devastated Europe liberating. In the aftermath of slaughter, she saw "something beyond my own life, freeing me from chains I hadn't known were holding me, showing me something other than myself."[8] Confronted with the trauma and grimness of war beyond anything she could have imagined, she is released from the illusions that govern most lives, illusions that position war as a noble, glorious, and honorable struggle for what is right. War is not any of that, all of these authors demonstrate; it is unceasing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

devastation and continuing trauma. All I seem to read about is war because I can read what those who make war want to remain unread, but is nonetheless revealed through their performances. I choose to read about war in order to protest it.

ENDNOTES

1. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004 [1961]), 9–10. The opening chapter appeared in *New World Writing* in 1955.
2. Ibid., 10.
3. Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Dell, 1969), 23.
4. Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Letter from PFC Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., to his family, May 29, 1945," in *Armageddon in Retrospect* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2008), 11–13.
5. Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Wailing Shall Be in All Streets," in *Armageddon in Retrospect*, 33–48.
6. Vonnegut, "Letter," 12.
7. Paula Fox, *The Coldest Winter: A Stringer in Liberated Europe* (New York: Picador, 2006 [2005]), 54–5.
8. Ibid., 133.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000118 Published online by Cambridge University Press