

Redeployment by Phil Klay

Reading Guide

Discussion Questions

(Questions by Penguin, LitLovers, Slate, and Reina Shay Broussard.)

Overview

1. Do you think this book works as a collection of short stories, or should it have been worked as a novel? What do you think Klay achieved by writing short stories instead of a novel?
2. In what ways does knowing Klay is a former marine who served in Iraq inform your understanding of, and emotional connection to, these stories? How might your reading experience have been different if he had not served?
3. Brian Castner of *The Daily Beast* noted, "The following words appear on nearly every one of the first fifty pages: blood, fuck, hajji, dead, love, scream, rifle, kill, balls." Do you think it was necessary for Klay to use these words? Why? How do they affect the tone and impact of the collection?

Narrators/Voices

4. How did Klay's choice of first person narration affect your reading experience?
5. What did you think of his use of various, and quite different, narrators?
6. How did the lack of Iraqi voices in these stories add to or detract from your reading experience?

The Stories

7. Which of the 12 stories strikes you most...and why? Which story do you find most poignant or heart-wrenching? Most brutal or gruesome? Funny or sardonic?
8. Does the title story "Redeployment" reflect soldiers' real-world attempts to return to normalcy in civilian life? Is normalcy even possible, given what they have witnessed and/or participated in? What is your experience—either as a returning soldier or as someone who has known, or perhaps read about, a returning soldier?
9. What does the story "In Money as a Weapons System" suggest about bureaucratic bumbling with regards to the government's war efforts?
10. Discuss the story "OIF" and the military's list of alphabet-soup acronyms. Why are such non-descriptive and impersonal terms used? How would you describe the narrative tone of the story?
11. In "Praying in the Furnace," how has the chaplain's faith been challenged by his experiences of the war?

On the Theme of War

Redeployment Reading Guide

12. If you've read other modern war novels or stories (*The Naked and the Dead*, *Catch 22*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *The Things They Carried*, *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*, *Yellow Birds*, or others), how does *Redeployment* compare?

13. What is the overall sense of the war in Iraq that you (personally) take away from these stories?

14. In a *Short Form* interview, Klay said that there are books in which . . . war is where men will glory, or a tragi-comic farce, or a quasi-mystical experience, or a product of corporate interests, or a noble sacrifice for freedom, or meaningless suffering, or mundane and kind of boring, or the place where boys become men, or where men become traumatized victims, or where green soldiers become fearsome killers. I could go on.
How is war portrayed in these stories? Does the depiction of war differ from story to story?

15. Is the war in Iraq different from other wars the U.S. has fought?

16. How do Klay's stories fit into the long tradition of American war writing?

17. What can Klay's characters tell us about the modern professional armed forces?

18. Why do we read war stories, anyway?

19. John Powers, pop culture critic of NPR's *Fresh Air* observed, "Some of *Redeployment's* keenest moments show us returning soldiers' frustrations in trying to communicate their disturbing, often ineffable experience to people who greet them with clichés, however well-meaning."
How has Klay's book affected how you might approach veterans in the future?

20. *New York Times* journalist Dexter Filkins called *Redeployment* "the best thing written so far on what the war did to people's souls."
How has Klay's collection informed your understanding of the effects of the war?

An Excerpt from "Redeployment" (the title story)

We shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose and we called it Operation Scooby. I'm a dog person, so I thought about that a lot.

First time was instinct. I hear O'Leary go, "Jesus," and there's a skinny brown dog lapping up blood the same way he'd lap up water from a bowl. It wasn't American blood, but still, there's that dog, lapping it up. And that's the last straw, I guess, and then it's open season on dogs.

At the time you don't think about it. You're thinking about who's in that house, what's he armed with, how's he gonna kill you, your buddies. You're going block by block, fighting with rifles good to 550 meters and you're killing people at five in a concrete box.

The thinking comes later, when they give you the time. See, it's not a straight shot back, from war to the Jacksonville mall. When our deployment was up, they put us on TQ, this logistics base out in the desert, let us decompress a bit. I'm not sure what they meant by that. Decompress. We took it to mean jerk off a lot in the showers. Smoke a lot of cigarettes and play a lot of cards. And then they took us to Kuwait and put us on a commercial airliner to go home.

So there you are. You've been in a no-shit war zone and then you're sitting in a plush chair looking up at a little nozzle shooting air conditioning, thinking, what the fuck? You've got a rifle between your knees, and so does everyone else. Some Marines got M9 pistols, but they take away your bayonets because you aren't allowed to have knives on an airplane. Even though you've showered, you

Redeployment Reading Guide

all look grimy and lean. Everybody's hollow eyed and their cammies are beat to shit. And you sit there, and close your eyes, and think.

The problem is, your thoughts don't come out in any kind of straight order. You don't think, oh, I did A, then B, then C, then D. You try to think about home, then you're in the torture house. You see the body parts in the locker and the retarded guy in the cage. He squawked like a chicken. His head was shrunk down to a coconut. It takes you awhile to remember Doc saying they'd shot mercury into his skull, and then it still doesn't make any sense.

About the Author

Phil Klay is a graduate of Dartmouth College and a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. While in college he went to OCS (officer candidate school). He served in Iraq's Anbar Province during the surge from January 2007 to February 2008 as a Public Affairs Officer. After being discharged he went to Hunter College and received an MFA. His story "Redeployment" was originally published in *Granta* and is included in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. His writing has also appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Daily Beast*, *New York Daily News*, *Tin House*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012*. Klay is a 2014 National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 Honoree.

Synopsis (from Penguin)

Redeployment takes readers to the front lines of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, asking us to understand what happened there and what happened to the soldiers who returned. Interwoven with themes of brutality and faith, guilt and fear, helplessness and survival, the characters in these stories struggle to make meaning out of chaos.

In "Redeployment", a soldier who has had to shoot dogs because they were eating human corpses must learn what it is like to return to domestic life in suburbia, surrounded by people "who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died." In "After Action Report", a Lance Corporal seeks expiation for a killing he didn't commit, in order that his best friend will be unburdened. A Mortuary Affairs Marine tells about his experiences collecting remains—of U.S. and Iraqi soldiers both. A chaplain sees his understanding of Christianity, and his ability to provide solace through religion, tested by the actions of a ferocious Colonel. And in the darkly comic "Money as a Weapons System", a young Foreign Service Officer is given the absurd task of helping Iraqis improve their lives by teaching them to play baseball. These stories reveal the intricate combination of monotony, bureaucracy, comradeship, and violence that make up a soldier's daily life at war, and the isolation, remorse, and despair that can accompany a soldier's homecoming.

Redeployment is poised to become a classic in the tradition of war writing. Across nations and continents, Klay sets in devastating relief the two worlds a soldier inhabits: one of extremes and one of loss. Written with a hard-eyed realism and stunning emotional depth, this work marks Phil Klay as one of the most talented new voices of his generation.

Redeployment Contents

The stories in *Redeployment* appear in this sequence:

- Redeployment
- FRAGO
- After Action Report
- Bodies
- OIF
- Money as a Weapons System
- In Vietnam They Had Whores
- Prayer in the Furnace

Redeployment Reading Guide
 Psychological Operations
 War Stories
 Unless It's a Sucking Chest Wound
 Ten Kliks South

An Interview with Phil Klay (from philklay.com)

As you were writing these stories did you always see yourself heading toward an entire collection of war stories, as this is, or did that happen later?

The first sentence I wrote was the first sentence of the book: "We shot dogs." I didn't know where I was heading, exactly, but I had a voice and a set of experiences I wanted to write about. Not personal experiences—just things people I had known had gone through that stayed in my mind. And not all of those fit into one story, or one perspective. I found that, to get at the different aspects of Iraq I wanted to explore, I had to approach from all these different angles.

One of the book's strengths is the many different kinds of soldiers you write about, from lance corporals to officers, from Foreign Service officers to chaplains, from young to old.

That was very intentional. There's a long tradition in war literature of veterans coming back and telling it like it is, like Paul Baumer in *All Quiet on the Western Front* going to his former classroom and telling the students that there's nothing good about dying for your country. Then there's a tradition in war literature of vets that goes even further, like Tim O'Brien in *The Things They've Carried*, explaining that sometimes a true war story can't be believed by those who didn't experience it because "sometimes it's just beyond telling." In both of these cases, the vet writer has the authority of experience, so there's this divide set up between the veteran understanding of war reality and the civilian ignorance. I think of Robert Graves and Alan Hodge asserting that "by the end of 1918 there were two distinct Britains...the Fighting Forces...and the Rest," or Siegfried Sassoon telling us that "The man who really endured the war at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers."

The problem is that within that group of people who have been to war there's as much variation of experience as there is within any other type of human activity. And I wanted to tease out some of those differences. The narrators of my stories interpret what they've been through in different ways. They go through radically different experiences and make very different choices. I wanted them to argue against each other and so open a place for the reader to enter in and engage. I don't necessarily think that the person who has been through an experience gets to be the ultimate arbiter of what that experience means.

Is this why all of your stories are first-person narration?

Yes. I wanted to try to drill down into these heads and try to figure out how they'd been shaped by what they'd done. Besides, I found it fascinating. There are all these jobs and all these things people did that are incredible and strange. What is it like to be a Chaplain in a dysfunctional unit? What is it like to be an artilleryman who never comes into contact with his targets? Exploring that raised all these questions for me. Questions about war and patriotism and masculinity and the relationship between the soldier and the citizen and the nation at war.

But none of the stories are from an Iraqi perspective. Why not?

There are Iraqi characters in the book, and the relation of the various characters to the Iraqi people comes up in many of the stories, but I had a fairly specific intent with the collection and so a

Redeployment Reading Guide

specific frame I was working within. I also wasn't sure how I could have a lone Iraqi voice without having that seem to try to represent some unified Iraqi perspective, which was exactly the thing I was trying to avoid when talking about Marines.

There are many scenes and episodes in the stories that are hard to take emotionally, so brutal and horrific are they, like the Mortuary Affairs soldier collecting the remains or descriptions of soldiers being wounded or killed. How hard was it to write these passages?

I feel like it's the things that you don't want to think about that are often the things worth writing about. It's very strange getting out of the Corps and then moving to New York, because there's so little sense here that we're a nation at war. And yet, people I knew were going overseas time and again. A few of them were injured. One Marine I had very briefly known died in an IED blast not long after I got out. It's hard to wrap your head around. And then there's the continuing violence in Iraq and its toll on the Iraqi population, which now you're learning about through the news, the same as everyone else, but which you're able to think about it in a way you couldn't while you were overseas because it was just too much.

You have a few stories that deal with soldiers who are now back and adjusting.

It's a radical transition for a variety of reasons. Even soldiers and Marines who haven't been to war can find going from the military to the civilian world to be a surreal experience. And that is amplified considerably if you've been overseas. I think the contrast of the two cultures, civilian and military, can be revealing of both.

Why did you decide to join the Marines?

Because I was in my early twenties and I cared about public service and my nation was going to war. I knew our conduct overseas would impact millions of lives, primarily Iraqi and Afghan lives, and I wanted to do my part.

After your first round of service had you considered staying in longer?

I extended a little bit beyond my initial obligation but I always figured I'd get out and go back to civilian life. I didn't do that without any regrets. There's a certain amount of guilt I felt, knowing that people with much harder jobs than mine were going on their fourth or fifth deployments.

Can you tell us something about your participation in NYU's Veterans Writing Workshop?

That's where I found a group of really smart and talented veteran writers, like Roy Scranton and Perry O'Brien and Jake Siegel and Matt Gallagher, to share work and ideas with. It was a group of people who cared about the issues I did, and who'd argue them with me or recommend what to read or read my writing and tear it up with really smart, important edits. I couldn't get away with certain types of BS that civilian readers would let me slide on. That said, I had civilian readers from Hunter who would pick up on different types of BS that the vets wouldn't catch. Writing this book required a lot of conversations with a lot of people. I had to slowly learn how to write this book in order to write it.

Is there something(s) you think people don't understand or grasp or appreciate as much as they should?

It's not that there's one thing I want people to understand about this war so much as I want people engaged with it. If you're an American citizen, it's your war. It's not the soldier's war, or the Marine's war. The soldier and the Marine do not issue themselves orders.

Redeployment Reading Guide

War literature has been its own special genre for some time now. What are some novels or stories you feel are authentic and valuable and worth recommending to readers?

I don't know if authenticity is always the first thing I'm looking for in literature, war related or otherwise. I wouldn't call *The Iliad* an authentic portrait of the Trojan War any more than I'd call *Richard III* an authentic portrait of late 15th century English politics. Hasek's WWI novel *The Good Soldier Svejk* isn't particularly interested in being realistic, so I don't know how it fares on the question of authenticity, but it does have the virtue of being incredibly good. I'd like to think my book is authentic. I did a lot of research and talked to a lot of vets in order to get things as right as I could, but my ultimate aim was to do more than just achieve some kind of verisimilitude.

I'll say this. Reading Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* was important to me and it informed my thinking while writing this book. That's not really a war book, though. Then there's Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*. Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Seamus Heaney's *North* and *Station Island*. Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* is less about war than about the work of crafting peace, but it's a book I've thought about a lot since I finished reading it. *Beer in the Snooker Club*, by Waguih Ghali, is not really a war book either, but there's a long scene where two Egyptian characters go drinking with a British soldier that is also important to me. What else? Grant's *Memoirs*. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The war poetry of Kenneth Koch and James Dickey. Nathan Englander's short stories. There's plenty of great war or war-related writing.

So what's next for Phil Klay, some more short stories or a novel, or perhaps non-fiction?

I'm working on a novel. We'll see how it goes.