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ABSTRACT

Suggesting that literature dealing with the Vietnam War can have a dramatic impact on students, this paper assists teachers in selecting young adult literature on the war, discusses a variety of assignments, and presents student responses to the literature. The paper begins with a discussion of the three main types of young adult literature: combat narratives; the war at home; and the legacies of the war--the refugee experience, and the impact of the war on the children of the generation that came of age during the war. The paper then discusses designing instruction that engages students, including key questions for discussion and study, writing assignments, discussion questions for a particular work (an oral history of the war), and follow-up writing assignments. The paper next considers an approach to use with Mary Downing Hahn's "December Stillness"--having students complete and discuss the results of an "opinionnaire" about homelessness which can then be used as a framework for studying some key aspects of the novel. The paper also discusses five writing assignments based on the novel. Examples of how some students have responded to literature of the Vietnam War are also provided. Thirty-five references, a 21-item annotated bibliography, two lists of discussion questions, writing assignments, a small group assignment, and the opinionnaire form on homelessness are attached. (RS)

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The Vietnam War in Young Adult Literature: Practical Approaches that Foster Response

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A few days after the end of the Persian Gulf War, former president Bush proclaimed, "We've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." Since making this proclamation, the war that won't go away has returned again and again. For example, the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue has resurfaced several times since the end of the Persian Gulf War and seems to be as powerful as ever. In contrast to the former president's view, others hold very different opinions. For example, John Stephen Knight, Jr., a high school teacher from Fairfield, Maine, writes in Bill McCloud's, *What Should We Tell Our Children about Vietnam?* one of the books I will be recommending to you here today, that:

Teaching about the Vietnam War to the children of those Americans who fought there, or who lived through the painful Vietnam era, is one of the most important, and difficult, jobs that an American teacher faces. The fathers and

uncles of many of my students did their tour of duty there, and for many of them the war is not entirely over. Their children recognize that something important happened to their parents, but they are not sure what it is. They often sense that somehow this distant war has contributed to problems in their families, and for many it is a subject they had best not bring up at the dinner table, even though they don't know *why* they shouldn't. (1989, 69).

Letters like this one suggest that the legacies of the Vietnam War are still with us. In fact, the troubling circumstances that these young people find themselves in serve as a poignant reminder that, despite what the president or others might say about having buried the ghosts of Vietnam, the legacies of the war continue to haunt the nation. Further, the fact that these young people sense that the war has somehow contributed to problems in their families reminds us that the war and its aftermath continue to shape society and the lives of the children of those who came of age during the Vietnam War.

As N. Bradley Christie (1989) points out, our students come to us with very little real knowledge of the war, but a strong desire learn more (35). Unfortunately, their knowledge of the war does not go much beyond Hollywood's *Rambo* series, or the various adventure novels, such as the Saigon Commando or Night Fighters series, in which Vietnam is merely a backdrop, or the romantic novels, such as those by Ellen Elliot, Della Field, and Evelyn Hawkins--all called *Vietnam Nurse*--that Kathleen M. Puhr says are "little more than Harlequin romances set in Vietnam" (1988, 174). Ironically, most of our students know more about the Civil War than they do

about the war that was the defining experience for their parents and continues to shape society and their lives.

Fortunately, our students' desire to learn more about the Vietnam War is matched by a diversity of fine adolescent literature that deals with the war and its aftermath. In fact, with our national amnesia about the war finally over, a number of these works, such as Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1989) and Walter Dean Myers *Fallen Angels* (1988), have received considerable critical attention. Having our students study some of these works can help them better understand the war, their parents, and how the legacies of the war continue to have an impact on their lives. Ultimately, studying these works may help students to deal with the world they will encounter outside of school and, as Fred A. Wilcox argues, "empower [them] to take responsibility for issues that affect their lives and the future of our planet" (1988, 40).

What I am going to try to accomplish here today is to help you see how to go about selecting Young Adult Literature that deals with the Vietnam War that will capture students' interest and imagination and how to design instruction that engages them. I'll conclude by showing you student responses that illustrate the dramatic impact that this literature has on them.

SELECTING LITERATURE

There are three main types of Young Adult Literature that have emerged in response to the Vietnam War: works that deal with the experience of Vietnam, or the combat narrative; literature that focuses on the war at home; novels that deal with the refugee experience; and works

that focus on the legacies of the Vietnam War, particularly the impact of war on the children of the generation that came of age during the Vietnam War (Johannessen 1993).

The first three pages of your handout (Appendix A, pp. 37-39) contain an annotated bibliography of this literature, which I have divided up by these three main types of literature. Each entry contains full bibliographic information, a brief summary of the plot or contents, and sometimes key themes, any other information that may be important, and a recommended teaching level for the work.

The Vietnam Experience

The combat narrative is perhaps the best known type of war literature. A number of authors have written works that attempt to portray the experience of fighting in Vietnam. Like some of the texts we already teach (*The Red Badge of Courage*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Catch-22* among them), these works demand that students think about what it really meant to live and fight in this war. For example, Walter Dean Myers's novel *Fallen Angels* (1988) focuses on seventeen-year-old Richard Perry's tour of duty in Vietnam in 1967. Looking for a better life than he had in Harlem, Perry joins the Army and is sent to the war zone. Despite his loneliness, confusion, fear, and at times, his guilt for having lived when his fellow soldiers have not, Perry survives and comes to trust and care deeply for several of his companions. They give him courage and a reason to live. Myers skillfully integrates the themes of innocence, courage, initiation, and mortality in this compelling novel. Readers will emerge feeling that they have experienced 'Nam.

Another combat narrative that has a great deal to offer young readers is Tim O'Brien's memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1989). First published in 1973, this new-journalism style narrative is now regarded by some as one of the classics of the war. This is the story of one foot soldier's journey from safe, middle class America to the center of the nightmare of the Vietnam War. O'Brien emphasizes the fear and hardships faced by soldier's fighting the war. Readers are pulled along as O'Brien wrestles with the moral issues he faces. For example, O'Brien comes to Vietnam regarding Frederic Henry, the hero of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, as one of his heroes. However, when O'Brien tries to apply Hemingway's definition of courage to his own situation, he has trouble making it work. In the end, he rejects Hemingway's definition and decides that true brave men are those who do well on the average and have perhaps a moment of glory. Readers learn what it was like to fight in Vietnam and, if taught in conjunction with other war literature, they clearly see how this literature is part of a literary heritage.

Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam (1986) edited by Bernard Edelman and *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (1988) by Kathryn Marshall are two other adult books of interest to young adult readers. Edelman's book is a collection of letters home from those serving and working in Vietnam during the war. From soldiers to donut dollies (Red Cross workers), readers gain a clear sense of what the war was like for those who lived it. Their letters show readers what the war was like for "cherries" (new soldiers in country), as well as what it was like on patrols in the "bush." There are letters from wounded soldiers and those who cared for them that explore the physical, mental, and spiritual wounds of the war. Finally, readers find themselves rejoicing with

those who made it home, agonizing with those who were prisoners of war in North Vietnam, and weeping for those who never made it.

In recent years more and more women are telling what the war was like for them, and Marshall's oral history is certainly one of the best and most accessible for teenage readers. Based on Marshall's interviews with twenty women who served in Vietnam, the work delves into their motives for going to Vietnam, their experiences, and the impact that the war has had on their lives. These women include army nurses, Red Cross workers, and civilians living in Saigon. Readers are struck by the idealism that led many of these women to go to Vietnam and the dramatic impact that the war has had on their lives.

Having our students study one of these combat narratives that portray the war as it really was may go far toward helping them to evaluate the romanticized views that they have acquired from the media and elsewhere.

The War at Home

As the war in Vietnam escalated, so did the fragmentations and polarization of people at home. Unfortunately, our students have very little knowledge of the events that took place at home during the Vietnam era. Adolescent fiction writers have responded to this need with some excellent offerings that examine the effects of the war on the homefront. Meg Wolitzer's novel *Caribou* (1986) takes place in 1970 and focuses on eleven-year-old Becca Silverman. The family, including her nineteen-year-old brother, Stevie, gather around the television set to watch the draft lottery. When Steve's birthdate is drawn first, the family's orderly life is plunged into tension and disorder. Eventually, Steve flees to Canada to avoid the

draft, and Becca's father can't forgive him. Becca also speaks out against the war as she comes to understand herself and others as well.

In Cynthia Rylant's *A Blue-Eyed Daisy* (1987), the war comes home to eleven-year-old Ellie Farley and her family in a very different manner: Ellie's uncle Joe visits the family right after he comes home from Vietnam. Young Ellie is confused about wars and killing and is surprised when Joe and her family are all silent about the subject. While war is only one of the themes in this novel, it does examine how the main characters must confront the meaning of war.

Bob Greene's oral history *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam* (1990) is an adult book that is very appropriate for young adult readers. This book is a collection of letters by Vietnam veterans who wrote to author and syndicated columnist Greene in response to a question he asked his readers in his column. Greene had heard stories that Vietnam veterans claimed that when they came home from the war they were spat upon by people at home. He asked veterans to write him and tell him if the stories he had heard are true. Greene received hundreds of letters from veterans in response to his query which he collected in his book. The result is a work that examines the collision between the war in Asia and the war the veterans faced on American soil when they came home.

Far too many of our students seem willing to believe the myth that because the Vietnam War was fought far away from the shores of America, it had little or no impact at home. Having our students study one of these works may help them understand some of the ways that the Vietnam War has touched everyone.

Legacies I: The Refugee Experience

Since the fall of the Saigon government to the Communists in April 1975, more than two million Vietnamese people have fled Vietnam. More a million of these "boat people" have immigrated to the United States. Our increasingly multi-cultural classrooms are filled with Southeast Asian students who are part of this still continuing refugee experience. A number of adolescent fiction writers have written about this experience. In *A Boat to Nowhere* (1981), Maureen Crane Wartski does an admirable job of describing some of the many hardships and dangers some of the first "boat people" confronted in trying to escape from Vietnam. This novel details the adventures of Thay Van Chi, his family, and an orphan boy, Kien, during their escape from Vietnam. Kien suddenly appears in a tiny fishing village. Thay protects the orphan whose parents were killed in the war. When the Vietcong arrive in the village, Kien uses his survival skills to help the family escape in a fishing boat. Once at sea, they are attacked by Thai pirates, receive a hostile reception in a coastal village in Thailand, are betrayed by other refugees at Outcast Island, and are rejected by the crew of an American tanker. Eventually, the family and Kien are rescued by an American freighter with sailors sympathetic to their plight.

Jack Bennett's *The Voyage of Lucky Dragon* (1985) is very similar to Wartski's novel. However, in this offering a Vietnamese family is sent to a Communist reeducation camp after the fall of Saigon. They endure many hardships in the camp and decide that their only hope is to escape from the camp and flee the country. Eventually, they end up on a fishing boat bound for Australia. They survive many hardships and dangers before finally reaching their destination.

Jamie Gilson's *Hello, My Name Is Scrambled Eggs* (1988) examines some of the difficulties refugees experience once they reach the United States. This novel centers on Tuan Nguyen who is a Vietnamese refugee who arrives in America to live with the Trumble family in a small town in the midwest. Harvey Trumble is a seventh grader who tries to mold Tuan into an "American kid." Tuan has many difficulties adjusting, and conflicts develop between Tuan and Harvey. Ultimately, the boys become friends, and they both learn and grow as a result of their experiences.

In studying one of these works, students learn important lessons about the Vietnam War and its aftermath; and, in light of our multi-cultural classrooms, students may also learn some important cultural lessons about their fellow students. In fact, Norma H. Mandel (1988) reports that when she had one of her multi-cultural high school English classes read Wartski's *A Boat to Nowhere*, she was able to foster a very positive exchange of cultural information and personal feelings among her students that until she taught the novel had been suppressed (40).

Legacies II: The Next Generation

Since the mid-1980's, the nation has at last been willing to remember the experience of Vietnam. Memorials to Vietnam veterans have been built, ticker-tape parades to honor Vietnam veterans have been held throughout the country, popular films dealing with the war have been released, and popular books about the war have been published. Despite our willingness to remember the war, we have not been so willing to consider some of the many legacies of the war. An obvious example is the fact that Vietnam veterans account for more than one-third of all homeless people in America.

This is an astonishing statistic, and what is even more astonishing is that few seem willing to address this issue. However, a number of authors of Young Adult literature have addressed this problem and other legacies of the Vietnam War. Mary Downing Hahn tackles the homeless veterans issue in her novel *December Stillness* (1990). Kelly McAllister is thirteen years old and bored with the routine of school when she encounters Mr. Weems, a traumatized, homeless Vietnam War veteran. Despite warnings from her family and friends, Kelly attempts to befriend Weems. In the process of helping him, Kelly grows emotionally and acquires social awareness and responsibility.

A number of novels attempt to deal with the impact of the war on the family, particularly on the children of those who served in Vietnam. Premier among these works is Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1989). Shortly after graduating from high school, Samatha Hughes, the protagonist of Mason's novel, at last confronts Vietnam. Her father was killed there before she was born. Sam's Uncle Emmett, with whom she lives, returned from the war, but he has never been able to hold a job, start a family or adjust to the mainstream of American life. Sam suspects that his headaches and skin rash are symptoms of Agent Orange. She queries the adults around her for answers about the war and her father. Her quest culminates in a trip from her small town in Kentucky to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. Sam is united with her father, Emmett, and herself in a moving final scene at the Memorial.

While *In Country* (1989) ends at "the Wall," *Park's Quest* (1989) by Katherine Patterson begins there. The Memorial sustains Park's search to learn about his father who was killed in Vietnam. The summer after "the Wall" is dedicated, Park travels to his grandfather's farm to learn more about

his father. What he finds is a Vietnamese-American girl named Thanh. She is a survivor of war and the refugee camps. She is tough and fears that Park may disrupt the family and the good life she and her mother have found in America. As the plot unfolds, Park learns that Thanh may be his half-sister, and they both discover that they have more in common than reasons to fear and distrust one another. The novel gives readers a second generation to help heal the wounds of the war.

Larry Bograd's *Traveler's* (1986) is another offering that focuses on children who lost a parent in the war. In this novel, a high school student is haunted by the image of a father he never knew. When the boy tries to find out more about him from adults, they avoid his questions. Ultimately, the teenager learns about his father, the war, and how much pain the war has caused his family and others in the community.

Candy Dawson Boyd's *Charlie Pippin* (1988) tackles some other legacies of the war. This novel focuses on eleven-year-old Charlie and her family. Her father came home from Vietnam a bitter, rigid man. Charlie tries to understand him by studying about the Vietnam War. In doing research on the war, she is shocked to learn that black Americans did more than their share of the fighting in the war. This helps her understand why her father is so bitter. She also discovers that her father is a decorated war hero. Charlie comes to understand her father and the war. In the end, "the Wall" is a symbol of understanding and reconciliation.

Kathryn Jensen's *Pocket Change* (1990) focuses on the devastating effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on veterans and their families. Young Josie's life begins to crumble when her father's increasingly erratic and violent behavior threatens the family. In trying to help him, Josie pieces together clues from his past and becomes convinced that his strange

behavior is the result of experiences in the Vietnam War that still haunt him. When she confronts him with her suspicions, the result is a chilling climax that leads to a satisfying ending. Readers see how this legacy of the war continues to haunt veterans and their families.

One book that deals directly with the many lessons of the Vietnam War is Bill McCloud's *What Should We Tell Our Children about Vietnam?* (1989). McCloud is a Vietnam veteran and a junior high school social studies teacher. He wondered what to tell his students about Vietnam. He wrote to the people who directed, fought, and protested the war: soldiers, anti-war protesters, politicians, writers, and journalists. McCloud asked them what he should tell his students. The book is a collection of 128 of the letters he received. They form a remarkable and very readable historical record. The book contains letters from the likes of McGeorge Bundy, Jimmy Carter, Clark Clifford, Barry Goldwater, Tom Hayden, John Hersey, Henry Kissinger, Timothy Leary, Country Joe McDonald, Dean Rusk, Oliver Stone, Kurt Vonnegut, and William Westmoreland.

Having our students read one or more of these works that deal with the aftermath of the war will help them to understand some of the legacies of the Vietnam War, and perhaps begin the process of healing the wounds of the war.

DESIGNING INSTRUCTION THAT ENGAGES STUDENTS: The Adolescent Experience in Combat Literature of the Vietnam War

If you will turn to the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 41), I'll show you one way you might think about organizing instruction to teach the combat narrative of the Vietnam War. Adolescent literature that focuses

on the Vietnam War has tremendous appeal to young people. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this conclusion is that since 1989 a number of works dealing with the war have ranked in the top selections of Young Adults' Choices list in the International Reading Association's annual national survey of middle, junior high, and senior high school students (1989, 1990, and 1991). Besides the fact that young people want to learn more about the Vietnam War, one reason for this may be that one of the most compelling ways in which this literature speaks to students is through the voice of the narrator. Another reason may be that much of this literature focuses on the adolescent experience (Johannessen 1992, 7, and 1993, 48).

Take the case of the combat narrative: at first glance this type of work might appear to be very far removed from the experience of most teenagers. However, Jacqueline E. Lawson (1988) points out that most scholars now recognize that Vietnam was "our nation's first teen-age war." The average age of the American combatant in Vietnam was nineteen years as compared with twenty-six years for the soldier in World War II (26). As a result, many of the combat narratives of the Vietnam War, unlike those from World War I and II, focus on the adolescent experience--that of naive youths who are transformed by their experiences--viewed through the eyes of someone not much older than most high school students. In other words, in many ways this literature seems to students to speak with the voice of someone much like themselves, exploring some of the same kinds of struggles they are facing. For example, the narrator and main character of Myers' *Fallen Angels* is seventeen-year-old Richard Perry. As with our own students, one of his concerns is to determine what it means to be a friend, to really care deeply about another human being. As Richie Perry confronts this issue, he and another soldier, Peewee, find themselves cut off from their

platoon and surrounded by Vietcong. It is night. They are both terrified, and as they decide what they will do and prepare for an expected attack by the enemy, Peewee reaches out and puts his hand on Richie's wrist. Richie asks Peewee what is wrong.

"Nothing," he whispered back.

He kept his hand on my wrist. I moved my hand and took his. We held hands in the darkness. (1988, 285)

This moving scene, told from the viewpoint of seventeen-year-old Richie, represents Richie's final step in understanding what it means to be someone's friend. They are caught in the absolute worst of circumstances, and in this situation they reach out to help and comfort one another. In terms of the combat narrative, this is certainly the theme of brotherhood in war, but for our teenage students this is an important lesson in friendship--a lesson that is taught to them not by a twenty-six year-old adult soldier landing on the beach at Normandy in World War II, but rather by another teenager who is fighting in a confusing jungle war, which seems to be much like their own confusing world.

Many of the combat narratives follow the contours of the narrative of education or *Bildungsroman*, at the heart of which is the one year (or thirteen months in the case of Marines) tour of duty in Vietnam (Herzog, 1992; Lawson, 1988; Johannessen, 1992).

The narrative of education, or the process of becoming what one literary scholar describes as an "old kid" (Lawson, 1988) occurs in five or six stages, which provide the infrastructure for these narratives. As the handout indicates, these stages are: (1) the mystique of pre-induction; (2)

the initiation into military culture in boot camp; (3) the dislocation of arrival in Vietnam; (4) the confrontation with mortality in the first firefight; (5) experience and consideration; and (6) the phenomenon of coming home, or as Mark Baker describes it, "nineteen-year-old bodies with thirty-five-year-old minds" (1981, 130).

This narrative structure suggests an overall approach to teaching this literature. It suggests logical ways to make reading assignments, to organize class discussions and other activities, and to explore important thematic and structural elements with students. The sheet that I am giving you (see Appendix B, p. 41) contains key questions for study and discussing each of these stages, and depending on the particular work, I have included questions that focus on structure, literary style, and literary techniques. I think you can see that this provides the basis for an overall plan for teaching literature that focuses on the adolescent experience in combat literature of the Vietnam War.

Follow-up Writing

If you will look at the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 42), you will see that I have provided you with four writing assignments that work with many of the combat narratives listed in the bibliography. Most of these assignments follow directly from the instruction, the overall approach that I have shown you.

The first assignment is analytical and asks students to interpret what the author wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War. The assignment follows directly from key questions on the previous page of your handout involving the central meaning of the work.

The second assignment focuses on character analysis and asks students to explain how the protagonist changes as a result of his or her experiences in the war. If you are interested, you might want to take a look at my book, *Illumination rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War* (Urbana: NCTE, 1992), which contains a whole series of activities designed to prepare students for this assignment.

The third assignment combines some analysis with personal responses. It asks students to think about what they have learned about the war as a result of reading a particular work.

The last assignment is also personal response. It asks students to think about some of the themes and issues in the work that are still with us today and to consider what can be done to heal the wounds of war.

Obviously, these assignments are only means as suggestions of some different ways to get students to think about and respond to these works.

Mark Baker's *NAM: The Vietnam War in the words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*

As I previously stated, young people are drawn to the combat narratives of the war because of the voice of the narrator and the nature of the experience that is the focus of many of these works. This is particularly true for many of the personal narratives, collections of letters, and oral histories of the war. In fact, one of the real strengths of this type of literature is that it is accessible to nearly all students. The speakers of these works establish a confidential, intimate relationship with the reader, and they do so in a voice that seems to be speaking directly to them. In addition,

the voice of these works is one which contains the persuasive power of truth telling that only an eyewitness can claim (Lawson, 1988).

And, again, the heart of these works is the adolescent experience. In addition, because many of the combatants in Vietnam were so young, these young people were not mentally prepared for the carnage and terror that marked the Vietnam experience. As a result, in writing about their experiences, these young people speak of the idealism, loneliness, homesickness, fear, terror, feelings of isolation and abandonment, and finally of betrayal in ways that speak directly to our students.

My own students speak of their fascination with these works and how much the speakers seem just like them. In fact, oral historian Mark Baker, author of *NAM*, probably best describes the typical student reaction to these works when he recounts his own reaction to interviewing veterans for his oral history:

There was an aura about the people who were over there. These guys were kids, but they weren't kids. There was something in their eyes that made them absolutely different. I was fascinated, mesmerized by these guys. I couldn't take my eyes off of them. There was something very old about them, but I still felt like a kid. (1981, 62)

If you'll turn to the next three pages of your handout (Appendix B, pp. 43-45), I'll show you one way you might set up instruction based on the narrative of education to teach Mark Baker's oral history, *NAM* (1981), and the approach I am going to describe works just as well with many other nonfiction narratives of the war.

I start the work by having students read the "Introduction" and the first section of the work titled, "Initiation: Ask Not." After students have read these sections, I lead a class discussion using the "Discussion Questions" in your handout as a guide (p. 43). You might also use these questions as a study guide or you might want to have students answer them in small groups before leading a whole class discussion of their responses. What is important about the questions is that they get at the specifics of the first two stages of the overall structure of the narrative of education I described to you earlier, the mystique of pre-induction and the initiation into boot camp. For example, question #5 focuses on the mystique of pre-induction. Some of the speakers in this section talk about President John F. Kennedy's famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can for your country" as the call that inspired them to go into the military.

After I take students through the first part of the work, I assign them to read the rest of it, and I give them the "Small Group Assignment" you see on the next page of your handout (p. 44). (Read Directions). As the directions indicate, I assign students to small groups to report to the class on a particular section of the book. The groups have a set of generic questions that are, in part, designed to help students understand the themes in their assigned section and help them to relate their section to the work as a whole.

I give students class time to work on their oral presentations and then they give them in the order they are listed on the sheet. As the groups take the class through their assigned sections, students begin to formulate some conclusions about the war and the nature of the Vietnam experience. For example, one issue that students always want to discuss is the cumulative effect of war on the young people who went to Vietnam. They see how

idealistic youths, perhaps motivated by Kennedy's famous call, lost their innocence and returned home as "old kids" as a result of the war.

Other questions on the assignment sheet have a very different purpose. For example, these works often have such an emotional impact on students that it is important to examine how they achieve their emotional power. Question #9, then, is designed to help students think about their initial responses. In addition, there are also questions that ask students to consider the author's arrangement of materials, and how the work may or may not contribute to the historical record.

The Writing Connection

The next page of your handout (p. 45) contains some of the follow-up writing assignments that I have used with this work. I have tried to provide you with a variety of kinds of assignments that you might want to use that are consistent with the approach to teaching the work that I used.

The first assignment is an analytical assignment in which students must write about the stages of the Vietnam experience or narrative of education. (Read assignment.) I think you can see how this assignment follows directly from the work students have done in their small groups and class discussions of their findings. Because oral histories tend to be more direct than much imaginative literature, many students do quite well with this type of analytical assignment. Often, their success with this assignment translates into more effective analytical essays about more complex literature we study later on.

The focus of the second assignment is directly related to some of the questions from their small group assignment sheet and is important for some

other reasons as well. For example, one of the questions that sometimes comes up in class, and sometimes comes from parents is, "Why are you reading oral history in English class?" (Read assignment.) As you can see, this analytical assignment asks students to consider the work as a work of literature and/or history. It allows students considerable freedom to answer the question. I have had some interesting, insightful, and unusual papers from students.

The third assignment is also analytical and follows directly from students' work in their small groups. (Read assignment.) While many students write about the aspect of the Vietnam experience that they worked on in their small groups, some end up writing about an aspect of the Vietnam experience that they were particularly interested in or were inspired to examine because of what other small groups have presented.

The fourth assignment asks students to do some original research, and, as you will see, it follows directly from the work students have previously done on *NAM*. (Read assignment.) With this assignment, students must utilize the knowledge they have gained in reading the work and apply it to the real world. This kind of assignment has tremendous appeal for students. Many teachers who have had their students do oral history projects like the assignment described here report that the results are almost always beyond what they had expected (Carter, 1989 & 1991, Oldham, 1986).

Finally, the fifth assignment involves personal response. (Read assignment.) In this instance, students are asked to write about a traumatic experience that, like the experiences described by veterans, made them old before their time. In doing this assignment, students often write about having to deal with the loss of a loved one, or, in many cases, write about having to deal with a moral issue involving right and wrong.

An important point to keep in mind about the writing assignments I have shown you. All of them have their roots in the activities, the instruction, that precedes them. These are not assignments for the sake of giving assignments. They are designed to enable students to use and extend the knowledge they have gained in studying the work. They are designed to connect reading and writing.

Besides Baker's work there are a number of other oral histories and personal narratives, you might want to try using the approach I have described. Some of the works will require some modifications, but most can be taught using the overall approach I have described. Listed in the "Annotated Bibliography" (Appendix A) are some of the nonfiction works that work well with this approach: Bernard Edelman's, *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, Ronald J. Glasser's, *365 Days*, Bob Greene's, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam*, Tim O'Brien's, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, and Kathryn Marshall's, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam*.

Legacies: The Next Generation

In recent years, more and more Young Adult Literature writers have begun to write about the many legacies of the Vietnam War. One of the most interesting and teachable of these works is Mary Downing Hahn's *December Stillness* (1990). As I previously mentioned, this novel, which was a 1990 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers, delves into the homeless veterans issue. In addition, this novel also attempts to deal with the impact of the war on the family, particularly on the children of those who served in Vietnam.

If you'll turn to the next page of your handout (Appendix B, p. 46), I'll show you one way you might approach teaching this well-written novel. As I mentioned previously, this novel focuses on thirteen year old Kelly McAllister. It is a novel about growing up. In the process of attempting to help Mr. Weems, a traumatized, homeless Vietnam Veteran, Kelly grows emotionally and acquires a social awareness and responsibility. In addition, it is a novel of reconciliation. In a moving final scene at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C., Kelly's father, who is a Vietnam Veteran, is able to come to terms with the war, and this enables him to reconcile with his daughter Kelly.

This opinionnaire activity is based on a simple idea. Students have opinions about various subjects, and it attempts to utilize students opinions to interest or engage them in a major theme of the work. The activity is also designed to help prepare students for problems they may encounter in their reading, and it helps prepare students for writing.

How Students View Homelessness

The first step in using the opinionnaire is to distribute it to the class, perhaps the day before it is going to begin the novel. After students have responded to all of the statements, I compile the results on the board. Then, beginning with the statements with which there was the most disagreement, I lead a class discussion that focuses on students' responses to each statement. I encourage students to explain the reasoning behind their responses and to debate differing opinions. For example, when a student agrees with statement 8, I encourage the student to explain why. The response is usually something like, "That is what my dad says all the time."

Often other students respond with, "Anyone who believes that believes what they write in the *National Inquirer*." I encourage other students to explain and argue their responses, but I also provide synthesis and direction as the need arises. Since the statements on the opinionnaire require students to take a stand, a lively discussion invariably ensues.

One purpose of the opinionnaire and follow-up discussion is to create interest in the characters and issues in the literature they are about to read. Many of the statements on the opinionnaire are based on ideas expressed by various characters in the novel. Statement 9, for example, is almost exactly what Kelly's grandmother says about homeless people (124). It is perhaps the most common widespread myth about the homeless in America, and it explains one reason why many people are reluctant to do anything about the problem. Then statement explains one of the main reasons why many of Kelly's family and friends do not want her to get involved with Mr. Weems.

Student responses to the statements on the opinionnaire that relate to this aspect of the issue usually indicate that many of them believe the same stereotype about homeless people that most Americans do. However, through the class discussion of the statements on the opinionnaire, students begin to question some of their initial responses and are motivated to find out how characters will deal with these issues in the novel.

The disagreement over the statements that is created in the classroom is an important factor in interesting or engaging students in the literature. At the end of the discussion, the teacher might use the disagreement with a statement like, "I see that we have considerable disagreement over statements 6 and 7 (read statements). Let's read the novel and find out which viewpoint is correct." Students are motivated to read because they want to find out if their view of the issue is correct.

More important, this activity provides a framework or context that will help students understand what the author wants readers to understand about homelessness and the other legacies of the Vietnam War. For example, just like most of the characters in the novel, our students fail to see what the war did to some of those who went to Vietnam, and they believe that problems like homelessness are somebody else's problem, not theirs. Many students assume as statement 1 states that there are plenty of private and government programs for homeless people. However, in discussing this statement, students begin to wonder what if anything is being done, and what should be done to help the homeless. This statement, and others on the opinionnaire, help students come to the literature with a framework or context that will better enable them to understand the novel they are about to read.

After discussing most or all of the statements on the opinionnaire, students are ready to begin reading the novel. An interesting modification of the procedures I have described is to have students meet in small groups and have them try to read a consensus on their answers before the whole class discussion.

A Conceptual Framework for Study of the Novel

One of the real values of the opinionnaire is that it provides an important framework for studying some key aspects of the novel. As students read the novel, you can have them fill out the opinionnaire according to how various characters would respond to the statements: Kelly, Mr. McAllister, Mrs. McAllister, Bob Weems, Aunt Eliza, Grandmother, Uncle Ralph, Cousin Allison, Julie, Courtney, Keith, Doug, Mr. Hardy, Mrs. Hunter,

and Mrs. Martin. This will enable them to better understand the characters in the novel, and ultimately, enable them to interpret what the author wants readers to understand about homelessness and other legacies of the Vietnam War. After they complete the opinionnaire for a character, I lead a class discussion of their responses. Now, however, I ask them to cite evidence from the novel to support their viewpoints.

Discussions of how various characters would respond to the statements are nearly as lively as those that deal with how students themselves respond to the statements. One reason for this is that students have thought about these issues prior to reading and have already gained confidence in discussing them in class. In addition, the statements on the opinionnaire provide students with specific and concrete ways to talk about the actions and motives of characters.

One of the interesting things about these discussions is that many students cite similarities between the opinions of their parents and those of various characters in the novel. Without prompting, students will go beyond the text. They will apply what they learn to their own lives.

Once students had finished the novel, I ask them to do two more things with the opinionnaire. First, I ask them to fill it out based on how they think the author would. Again, I lead a class discussion of their answers. This discussion will be quite lively, and students usually disagree about how the author would respond to one or two of the items. This discussion takes students back to the text to find support for how they think the author would respond. Ultimately, discussing how the author would respond to the statements on the opinionnaire leads to a consideration of what the author is trying to say about the war and the aftermath of the war.

However, because of their previous work, this discussion will be at a high level.

Finally, I ask students to fill out the opinionnaire again for themselves and I have them compare their responses to how they responded before they read the novel. Very often their opinions have changed. In looking back at how they had marked the twelve statements on the opinionnaire prior to reading the novel, nearly every student usually changes their opinion on at least one statement as a result of their study. I lead a class discussion asking them to explain how and why their opinions have changed. This discussion is important because it helps students begin to see the impact that this literature has had on them.

The Writing Connection

If you will look at the next page of your handout, "December Stillness Writing Assignments" (Appendix B, p. 47), I'll describe some of the assignments I have used with these pre-reading/reading activities I have just shown you, and how these assignments also encourage effective writing.

Keep in mind what has taken place so far: The discussion of the statements on the opinionnaire prior to reading that establishes the context, or helps to prepare students for interpreting the novel, and engages them in the characters and themes. Then, as students read the novel, they discussed how the characters would have responded to the statements on the opinionnaire. After they have finished the novel, students discussed how the author would have responded to the items on the opinionnaire. Finally, students discussed how their own responses have or have not changed as a result of having studied the novel.

The disagreement over what the authors probably would have said about the statements provides a natural follow-up writing situation, assignment 1. (Read assignment.) Students are motivated in this writing situation because it is real. They are writing to a real audience--their peers! It follows directly out of what they have done in the discussions of the opinionnaire, so they have rehearsed arguments, presented evidence and reasoning to support their interpretations, and heard refutations of their viewpoints. They are ready to write. And, they have a reason to write--to convince their peers to change their conclusions. This is literary analysis as it should be.

Another possible follow-up writing activity is to have students write an interpretive essay about the novel. (Read assignment 2.) In this assignment, students are asked to interpret what the author is trying to say about the war and the legacies of the war. Again, the opinionnaire discussion activities have helped students to make interpretations and how to turn their interpretations into written analytical essays. They gain confidence as a result of their participation in the sequence of discussion activities I have described.

The third assignment focuses on character analysis and asks students to explain how the main character changes as a result of her experiences. (Read assignment.) While the opinionnaire activities do help students with this assignment, I really think there are some other things you would probably need to do some additional things. If you are interested, you might want to take a look at my book, *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War* (Urbana: NCTE, 1992), which contains a whole series of activities designed to prepare students for this assignment.

Assignment 4 follows directly from the class discussion of how students' opinions have or have not changed as a result of reading the novel. (Read assignment.) This assignment is both a personal response and involves some literary analysis. Students have success with this assignment because they have thought about and discussed their opinions before reading and after reading the novel, and they are able to explain how their opinions have changed as a result of reading it. Without the opinionnaire activity before reading the novel that requires them to articulate and defend their opinions, their written responses to this assignment would not be very good.

Assignment 5 is a creative assignment. (Read assignment.) Students usually have little difficulty with this assignment because in essence they have discussed this pretty thoroughly when they discussed how the characters would have responded to the statements on the opinionnaire, and in their discussions of the opinionnaire after reading the novel. In other words, they usually have plenty of ideas for writing. In addition, some students are often quite anxious to show how they believe the characters would have acted based on their interpretations of the novel. You may need to spend a little time on writing dialogue to prepare them for this assignment.

The last assignment asks for a personal response to the novel. (Read assignment.) It follows directly from the discussions prior to, during, and after their reading. In these discussions students are rehearsing what they are going to be asked to do in this writing assignment.

I am not trying to argue for one assignment over another. It really depends upon your students and your situation, you might want to give just one of these assignments, or you might want to give them a choice between

two or more assignments. What I want you to see is how the activities I have described prepare students for reading and writing, engages them in the novel, helps them to interpret the work, and helps them to transform their interpretations into writing.

RESPONSES TO YA LITERATURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Many teachers who have taught the literature of the Vietnam War report that student response always goes beyond their expectations (Carter, 1989 & 1991; Endress, 1984; Johannessen, 1992; Kroll, 1992; Mandel, 1988; and Oldham, 1986). Let me give you a few examples of how some of my students have responded to this literature, and talk a little bit about what I think these responses reveal.

The first two responses are excerpts from analytical papers on Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1987).

Student Response #1: I agree with O'Brien that war doesn't leave you pure and free, innocent and fresh. You can't go home "barefooted" because part of you, for better or for worse, has changed forever. Vietnam will be forever etched upon a soldier's mind, a soldier's soul, a soldier's heart.

Student Response #2: O'Brien wants readers to understand that war does teach you something. Courage is not merely charging forward as portrayed in the John Wayne myths. War challenges each man individually and fear dominates and for a minute a soldier might be less than a man because he is so afraid.

In both cases, students were able to make insightful interpretations of what O'Brien wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War.

The next one was written in response to Mark Baker's oral History *NAM* (1981). Notice that this student had studied the history of the Vietnam War, but that reading this particular work gave him new insight into what the war was like for the soldiers who fought in Vietnam.

After reading about what these boys had to live through, I learned something that I did not learn in history class. I learned what the Vietnam War was like from the eyes of the soldiers there--not as it was for the politicians safe in Washington, D. C.

Finally, The last three excerpts are in response to Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* (1989). (Read Responses.) Notice that all three have insights into the central meaning of the novel, and also see how the novel relates to the need for national healing of the wounds of this war.

Student Response #1: In conclusion, all of the characters were impacted by the war. This book is successful in showing the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The aftermath is what our nation needs to deal with now, and books like this are imperative to the nation's healing.

Student Response #2: But there is hope at the end of the novel. This comes about by the reconciliation that comes to Sam, Emmett, and the nation. Sam comes to realize her searching is related to the fact

that part of herself died with her father, and she comes to accept that she cannot really know the whole truth about her father, what he was like and how he died. Emmett finds reconciliation when he studies his buddies' names on the wall. "He sits there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames." Like the Phoenix bird, Emmett will rise from the ashes of his dead life. The wall itself, with the millions of visitors yearly, pushes forward the nation's reconciliation. Most of the tourists are silent and reverent at our country's Wailing Wall. Through it the country is experiencing a healing catharsis.

Student Response #3: For Sam, the moment of truth is when she sees her own name engraved on the wall. This seems to affect her more than seeing her dad's name. I think she finally realizes that a part of her died with her dad and she will never get this back. She comes to terms with her dad and the war and will now be able to proceed with her own life. She also realizes that she must forgive her dad and accept that he was only doing what anyone in his shoes would have done. Who knows, she may even look some day with pride that her dad died for her and her mom.

These students clearly learned some important lessons about the war from studying this literature; yet, what each learned is as much, or perhaps more, a powerful affective response as it is intellectual. These few samples of student responses are a testament to the potential impact that the Young Adult Literature of the Vietnam War can have on our students, particularly if it is taught using some of the approaches I have described here today.

Beyond Hollywood's Romanticized Vietnam War

Despite presidential proclamations to the contrary, the nation has not buried the ghosts of Vietnam. The legacies of the war are still with us. In fact, as Bobbie Ann Mason and other writers make clear, the legacies of the war are now being felt by the children of the Vietnam generation. Yet, our students come to us knowing little about the war, and what little they do know is full of distortions and misconceptions acquired from the media and elsewhere. In fact, W. D. Ehrhart (1988) is very concerned about the possible consequences of this generation's distorted views of the Vietnam War. He argues that in the absence of teaching about Vietnam, of studying the literature of the war, students' knowledge of Vietnam, of history, and of the world they live in is largely determined by Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo and other distorted media images (26). Having our students study the Young-Adult literature of the Vietnam War may help them to move beyond their romanticized views. Once students have read one or more of these works, they may have a much more sophisticated understanding of the Vietnam War and the literature dealing with the war. War, too, will no longer be a vague abstraction, a Ramboesque, shoot-'em-up adventure, or a Harlequinesque, nurse romance, but rather a very real possibility, with consequences that they had never before imagined.

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APPENDIX A

SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Young Adult Literature and the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography

The Vietnam Experience:

Alone in the Valley Kenneth Waymon Baker Permanent Press 1992. 296 pp. \$21.95
ISBN 1-577946-17-5

This novel tells the story of thoughtful, compassionate eighteen-year-old Daniel Perdue a common infantry soldier, who learns how to survive in Vietnam and tries to comprehend the war. Daniel experiences the horrors of war and is left scarred and saddened forever. his loss of innocence is the fondest of tragedies. The plot is absorbing and unfolds with gripping realism. Senior high up

Dear America Letters Home from Vietnam Ed. Bernard Edelman Pocket 1986. 316 pp. \$6.95 ISBN 0-571-51750-5

This is a collection of letters home from those serving and working in Vietnam during the war in all areas from soldiers to donut dollies. The last chapter, "Last Letters" is powerful and heartbreaking. A 1989 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers. Senior high up

Dear America Letters Home from Vietnam. Dir. Bill Couturie. Couturie Co. and Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theater Company 1988 (54 minutes color) HBO Home Video

A powerful documentary featuring pictures and film of the war with voice-overs by dozens of Hollywood stars reading the words of American GIs. The film follows a chronology that roughly corresponds to a soldier's year in Vietnam. The readings are from the collection of letters with the same title. Senior high up

Fallen Angels Walter Dean Myers Scholastic 1988. 309 pp. \$3.50 ISBN 0-590-40943-3. Selected as a 1990 *EJ* reviewers' choice (five reviewers) and a 1990 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers. this novel tells the story of Richie Perry, 17, who enlists to fight in Vietnam as a way out of a dead-end life in Harlem. He experiences all of the horrors of war as well as the racial conflict that existed among American troops. Richie questions his religious faith and his moral values. Junior high up

If I Die in a Combat Zone Tim O'Brien Dell 1989. 205 pp. \$4.50 ISBN 0-440-34311-9. Besides being named ALA Best Book for Young Adults in 1973, this is considered by some as one of the most important works to come out of the war. It is the story of one soldier's journey from safe, middle-class America to the center of the horror of the Vietnam War. O'Brien emphasizes the fear and the moral dilemmas. Senior high up

In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975
Kathryn Marshall Viking 1988. 250 pp. \$7.95 ISBN 0-14-010829-7

The author interviewed twenty women who tell about their experiences in the war. They relate their many motives for going to Vietnam, their experiences, and the impact the war had on their lives. Marshall interviewed army nurses, Red Cross workers, and civilians. Senior high up

Nam. The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There. Mark Baker Berkley, 1981. 301 pp. \$4.50. ISBN 0-425-07168-5

One of the classics of Vietnam War literature. The author interviewed both men and women, officers, enlisted men of all kinds, prowar and antiwar veterans. He asked them, "What was Vietnam really like?" The result is a powerful, honest, and touchingly written book. The introduction is effective, and the interviews are organized around themes, which permits analysis and comparison with other war

literature Senior high up

365 Days Ronald J. Glasser, M. D. Bantam, 1971, 245 pp., \$4.50 ISBN 0-553-07372-1
An important book in Vietnam War literature. It is well-written and contains elements of memoir, oral history, and fiction. Glasser was an Army doctor who relates his experiences in Zama Hospital in Japan where he treated the wounded who were sent there from Vietnam. Senior high up

The War at Home:

A Blue-Eyed Daisy Cynthia Rylant, Dell, 1987, 181 pp., \$2.95, ISBN 0-440-40927-6
Eleven-year-old Ellie Farley's uncle Joe goes off to war. She is confused about wars and men killing one another and even more confused by her family's and uncle's silence upon his return. Middle school/junior high.

Caribou Meg Wolitzer, Bantam, 1986, 176 pp., \$2.50, ISBN 0-553-25560-6.
Becca Silverman, a twelve-year-old, is troubled by the Vietnam War. In fact, she is troubled by the idea of war in general. Her brother escapes to Canada to avoid the draft. She decides to paint a vivid antiwar picture as her entry in the school's art contest, whose theme is patriotism. Middle school/junior high.

Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam Bob Greene, Ballantine, 1990, 256 pp., \$4.95, ISBN 0-345-36408-2
This is an interesting collection of letters by Vietnam veterans who wrote to author and syndicated columnist Bob Greene after he had asked his readers whether anyone had spat upon them when they came home from the war. It reports on the collision between the war in Asia and the war the vets faced at home. Senior high up

Legacies I: The Refugee Experience:

A Boat to Nowhere Maureen Crane Wartski, NAL-Dutton, 1981, 160 pp., \$2.95, ISBN 0-553-25560-6
Villagers protest Thay Van Chi's protection of a wandering orphan. They appear to be right when the boy seems to side with the Vietcong when they arrive. What the villagers do not realize is that the boy is acting so that he will have an opportunity to save them. The villagers become boat people and must endure terrible hardships and dangers. Junior high up.

Hello, My Name Is Scrambled Eggs Jamie Gilson, Minstrel Books, 1988, 183 pp., \$3.95, ISBN 0-671-74104-7
Tuan Nguyen is a Vietnamese refugee who arrives in America to live with the Trumble family in a small town in Illinois. Their son, Harvey, is a seventh grader who tries to mold Tuan into an "American kid." Middle school/junior high.

The Voyage of Lucky Dragon Jack Bennett, Prentice-Hall, 1985, 156 pp., \$5.95, ISBN 0-13944158-1
After the fall of Saigon, a Vietnamese family flees the Communist reeducation camps in a fishing boat bound for Australia. This novel examines the plight of the boat people. Senior high

Legacies II: The Next Generation:

Charlie Pippin Candy Dawson Boyd, Puffin Books, 1987, 192 pp., \$3.95, ISBN 0-14-032587-5.
The father of eleven-year-old Charlie returns home from Vietnam a bitter, rigid man. Charlie tries to understand her father by studying about the Vietnam War. She

discovers that her father is a decorated war hero. The novel examines how too many blacks had to fight the war. Middle school/junior high.

December Stillness Mary Downing Hahn. Avon, 1990, 192 pp., \$2.95. ISBN 0-380-70764-0
This 1990 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers focuses on thirteen-year-old Kelly McAlister. Kelly gains an enriched view of life beyond the routine of school when she attempts to befriend Mr. Weems, a disturbed, homeless Vietnam veteran. In the process of helping him, Kelly grows emotionally and acquires social awareness and responsibility. Middle school up.

In Country Bobbie Ann Mason. Harper-Collins, 1989, 368 pp., \$5.95. ISBN 0-06-080959-0.
Besides being chosen as a 1990 *EJ* reviewers' choice (three reviewers) this effective novel tells the story of Samantha Hughes, a recent high school graduate who wants answers about the Vietnam War. Her father was killed in the war. Her mother can't really tell her anything about her father since they were married only a month before his death. Her uncle, Emmett, with whom she lives, could be suffering ill effects from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. She is attracted to another Vietnam vet who is emotionally scarred by the war. Senior high up.

Park's Quest Katherine Paterson. Puffin Books, 1989, 180 pp., \$3.95. ISBN 0-14-034262-1
The author describes the effects of the war on the children of those who served. The main character, Park, comes to his grandfather's farm in Virginia to learn more about his father, who died in Vietnam, and his father's family. He meets a Vietnamese-American girl named Thanh, who may be his half-sister. Junior high up.

Pocket Change Kathryn Jensen. Scholastic, 1990, 169 pp., \$2.95. ISBN 0-590-43419-5
This 1991 ALA preferred choice by Young Adult readers focuses on some of the effects of the war on the families and children of those who served in Vietnam. Josie's life falls apart when her father's increasingly erratic and violent behavior threatens their family. Determined to help him, she pieces together clues from his past and becomes convinced that his experiences in the Vietnam War are continuing to haunt him. Junior high up.

Travelers Larry Bograd. Lippincott, 1986, 192 pp., \$11.90. ISBN 0-397-32128-7
A boy is haunted by the image of the father he never knew, who died in Vietnam. He tries to find out more about him. He questions the adults around him, but they avoid his questions. As the boy uncovers the truth, he discovers the unhealed wounds that the war has left all around him. Junior high up.

What Should We Tell Our Children about Vietnam? Bill McCloud. Berkley, 1989, 155 pp., \$4.50. ISBN 0-425-13361-3
The author, a Vietnam veteran and junior high school social studies teacher, wondered what to tell his students about Vietnam. He wrote to the people who directed, fought, protested, and reported the war. These 128 letters form a remarkable cross-section of public opinion from statesmen, veterans, protestors, writers, and others. Some of the contributing writers and filmmakers include Allen Ginsberg, Larry Heinemann, John Hersey, Ken Kesey, Tim O'Brien, Oliver Stone, Kurt Vonnegut, and many others. Middle school up.

APPENDIX B

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

The Vietnam Experience: The Adolescent Experience in Combat Narratives of the Vietnam War

1. **The mystique of pre-induction:**
 - What are the main character's attitudes toward war? Patriotism?
 - What is his or her attitude toward the war in Vietnam?
 - What are major influences on the main character's attitudes?
 - Why does he or she decide to go to war?
 2. **The initiation into boot camp--the culture of the military:**
 - What difficulties does the main character have adjusting to life in the military?
 - What are significant experiences in recruit training? Why?
 - How does the main character change as a result of recruit training?
 - How does recruit training attempt to prepare young people for the war in Vietnam? Is it effective? Why or why not?
 3. **The dislocation of arrival in Vietnam--culture shock:**
 - How does the main character travel to Vietnam?
 - What are his or her initial experiences upon arrival in country?
 - How does he or she react to these experiences?
 - How are the Vietnamese portrayed?
 4. **The confrontation with mortality in the first firefight:**
 - How does the main character react the first time in combat?
 - What impact does this experience have on the main character?
 - What are the concerns of the main character and others around him or her?
 5. **Experience and Consideration:**
 - How and why do the concerns of the characters change over time?
 - What is the main character's attitude toward the war, the military, America, and the Vietnamese? How and why has his or her attitude changed?
 - What experiences have had an impact on the main characters? Why?
 - What difficult moral choices does the main character consider? How does s/he respond? Why?
 6. **The phenomenon of coming home:**
 - How does the main character leave Vietnam?
 - What is his or her reaction to leaving?
 - What is the main character's return to the United States like?
 - How has the main character changed?
 - What is his or her attitude toward the war?
 - How do people at home treat the main character?
 7. **Putting It Together: Central Meaning:**
 - What is the author telling readers about the Vietnam War?
 - What is the author saying about war?
 - What is the author saying about courage? Friendship?
- Depending on the work, some or all of the following questions may also be important.
8. **Structure:**
 - How is the novel structured?
 - How does the structure contribute to the meaning?
 9. **Style and literary technique:**
 - What is the point of view of the novel? Who is telling the story?
 - Does the point of view change? If so, how?
 - How does the point of view contribute to the meaning?
 - What are major literary techniques the author uses?
 - How do these techniques contribute to the meaning?

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana, NCTE.

YA Combat Narratives of the Vietnam War: Writing Assignments

- 1. Writing about the narrative:** Write an essay in which you interpret what the author is saying about the Vietnam War. Make sure that you use evidence from the work to support your interpretation of what the author wants readers to understand about the Vietnam War. Also, make sure that you explain how your evidence supports your interpretation of the work.
- 2. Writing about the main character:** Write an essay in which you explain how the main character changes as a result of his or her experiences. What was the character like before entering the military and going to war? What were his or her values? What was the character like at the end of the novel? How has the character changed? What are his or her values? Has the character grown or matured? What experiences caused these changes? If you do not believe the character changes, how do you account for the way he or she is at the end of the work? Make sure that you use evidence from the work to support your analysis of the character and explain how your evidence supports your analysis.
- 3. Writing about/in response to the narrative:** Write a composition in which you explain what you learned about the Vietnam War as a result of your study of the work. Make sure you explain what your opinions and views regarding the Vietnam War were before reading the work, what your opinions and views are now after reading it, and provide specific evidence from the novel to explain how and why your opinions and views have changed.
- 4. Writing in response to the narrative:** The Vietnam War has been called "the war that won't go away": a number of issues such as the POW/MIA's continue to divide the nation; the legacies of the war have a strong impact on the nation's foreign policy decisions; and now the legacies of the war are affecting and will probably continue to affect the children of the Vietnam generation. Write an essay in which you explain why you believe the Vietnam War will not go away. How are the themes, issues, and controversies that are raised in the narrative you read (or that you know about from other sources) still with us today? In your opinion, what can be done to help the nation heal the wounds of the war?

**Discussion Questions for "Introduction" and "Initiation: Ask Not":
Mark Baker's *NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men
and Women Who Fought There***

1. According to the author, what is wrong with the story of Vietnam that has been told so far?
2. How did the author come to write the book? What is most surprising about the author's past? Is it understandable that Vietnam veterans would be wary of him? Why or why not?
3. What warning does Baker give about reading the "war stories" in the book? What does he mean by "the apocryphal aspects have more to do with metaphor than with deceit"?
4. According to the author, why must readers listen to these stories? Why must we deal more honestly and thoroughly with the Vietnam war?
5. Where does the subtitle "Ask Not" come from? Why does Baker use this to introduce this section? Is it meant to be ironic? Why or why not?
6. Where do the people come from (urban cities, suburbs, rural areas) who went to Vietnam? What sorts of backgrounds do they come from? How old are most of the speakers?
7. How did they find their way into the military? What seems to have had an effect on many of them in terms of their reasons for going?
8. What was boot camp like for most of them? Do you think it is good training for Vietnam? Why or why not?
9. How are the experiences described by women in this section different from the experiences described by men? How are they alike?
10. Which of the stories in this section had the most impact on you? Why?

Adapted from Johannessen, Larry R. (1992). *Illumination Rounds: Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War*. Urbana: NCTE, pp. 69-71.

Small Group Assignment: *NAM*

Directions: As a member of the small group to which you have been assigned, prepare a twenty to twenty-five minute oral presentation that answers the following questions about the section your small group has been assigned. The group may organize answers in any manner desired; however, the questions below should be answered in some fashion. The only other requirement is that all members of the group must participate in the oral presentation. Being absent does not excuse you from your responsibilities. If you fail to show up, the group will have to do it without you. The section assignments are as follows: group #1: "Baptism of Fire," pp. 29-76; group #2: "Grunts," pp. 79-128; group #3: "Martial Arts," pp. 129-164; group #4: "Victors," pp. 167-196; group #5: "Victims," pp. 197-236; group #6: "Homecoming," pp. 239-268; group #7: "Casualties," pp. 269-296.

1. What main points (at least two) does the author make about the subject of this section?
2. What evidence from the speakers in this section support your conclusions from #1, and how does the evidence support them?
3. What else in this section did you find interesting or important? Why?
4. How does the introduction (perhaps including the title) to the section prepare readers for the stories that follow?
5. How would you characterize the experiences described by the speakers? What impact did the experiences described have on the speakers?
6. How are the experiences of women (and/or other minorities) in this section different from the experiences of men who served in Vietnam? How are they alike? What do you conclude from these?
7. What evidence from the speakers in this section support your conclusions from #6, and how does the evidence support them?
8. How does what you learn in this section relate to the book as a whole?
9. Which stories in this section (no more than three) had the most impact on you? Why? **OR**, What did you learn about the Vietnam War from this section that you did not know before reading it?
10. How does what you learn in this section contribute to the historical record of the war? Why? **OR**, How effective is this section as a part of a work of literature? Why?

***NAM*: Writing Assignments**

- 1 **Writing about *NAM*:** Baker argues that the cumulative effect of the war on the young people who went to Vietnam is that by the time they came home from the war they were "nineteen-year-old bodies with thirty-five-year-old minds." Write an essay in which you explain the most significant experiences that turn these teenagers into "old kids." Make sure that you include evidence from the book to support your points.

- 2 **Writing about *NAM* as literature and/or history:** You are a member of your school's book selection committee. The committee consists of a member of the school board, a school administrator, a teacher, a parent from the community, and a student. The committee has been asked to decide if Mark Baker's *NAM* should be added to the curriculum. Each member of the committee has been asked to read the book and write a recommendation that will be read by the committee. Write your recommendation to the committee. In writing your recommendation, consider some or all of the following questions: What value might studying this work have? Is this work good literature and/or history? Is it effective? Why or why not? What might students learn from studying this work? How important is what students might learn?

- 3 **Writing about the Vietnam experience:** Describe one or two aspects of the Vietnam experience, such as the homecoming or the arrival in Vietnam. What was this experience like? What are key features of the experience? Make sure that you include evidence from the book to support your conclusions or generalizations about the aspect(s) of the Vietnam experience that you have chosen.

- 4 **Writing from *NAM*:** Interview a Vietnam veteran about his or her experiences in the war. Use the information in *NAM* as the basis for your interview. Then, write a composition in which you compare the responses you obtained from the Vietnam veteran to the stories contained in the book. How do your interviewee's experiences compare to those in the book? In what ways are this veteran's experiences typical of those in Baker's book? What is unique about this veteran's experiences?

- 5 **Writing in response to *NAM*:** Write about a time that you or someone you know had a traumatic experience that made you or this other person old before your time. What was the experience? What thoughts and feelings did you have during and after the experience? In *NAM*, many of the men and women talk about coming face to face with their own mortality or constantly trying to deal with the horrors of the war. What was it about the experience you are writing about that made you or this person old before your time? How did you or this person change as a result of the experience?

Homelessness in America

Directions: Read each of the following statements. Write *A* if you agree with the statement or *D* if you disagree with it.

Agree or
Disagree

- _____ 1. With all of the help available from government and private programs, there is no reason for anyone to be homeless in America.
- _____ 2. Homeless people wouldn't be homeless if they would clean themselves up, get a haircut, and find a job.
- _____ 3. The Vietnam War has little, if anything, to do with the homeless problem in America.
- _____ 4. Homeless people are not much different from you and me. They have just run into some bad luck.
- _____ 5. Homeless people should not be permitted in public buildings, such as libraries or museums.
- _____ 6. Many homeless people have severe psychological problems and are dangerous.
- _____ 7. Many homeless people do have emotional or psychological problems, and what they need most is professional help.
- _____ 8. Many homeless people live better than the average American because they receive free handouts and shelter and have no responsibilities.
- _____ 9. Most homeless people are drunks or drug addicts.
- _____ 10. To be safe, the average person should avoid contact with homeless people.
- _____ 11. Homeless Vietnam veterans who blame the war for their problems are just bums using Vietnam as an excuse.
- _____ 12. Homeless people are vagrants and should be arrested and put in jail.

December Stillness Writing Assignments

- 1 **Writing about the novel:** Write a letter to someone in the class who disagrees with you about Downing Hahn's stand on two of the statements on the opinionnaire. Try to convince this person that he or she is wrong and that your interpretation is correct. Make sure that you use evidence from *December Stillness* to support your viewpoint that Downing Hahn would agree or disagree with a particular statement on the opinionnaire.

- 2 **Writing about the novel:** The novel deals with important issues regarding war and the aftermath or legacies of the Vietnam War. Write an essay in which you interpret what is the author saying about war and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. What are the effects of war on veterans, on their families, and on their children? What are the effects of the war on society? What can someone do about the wounds of this war? In presenting your viewpoint, provide specific supporting evidence from the book and careful reasoning.

- 3 **Writing about the main character:** Write an essay in which you explain how Kelly McAllister changes as a result of her experiences. What was she like before she attempts to befriend Mr. Weems? What were her values then? What is her attitude toward the war and the homeless? What did she think of her father and mother and other people in her life? What is Kelly like at the end of the novel? How has she changed? What are her values? Has she grown or matured? How? What caused these changes? Make sure that you use evidence from the novel to support your analysis of the character and explain how your evidence supports your analysis.

- 4 **Writing about/in response to the novel:** Write a composition in which you explain how your opinion has changed and why you have changed your opinion about two of the statements on the opinionnaire after reading *December Stillness*. Make sure that you explain what your opinion was before reading the novel and why, what your opinion is now after reading it, and provide specific evidence from the novel to explain how and why your opinion has changed.

- 5 **Writing from the novel:** Write a new scene for the novel. Imagine that Kelly gets one more chance to try to reach Mr. Weems. Perhaps Kelly confronts him in the little strip of woods where he sleeps on Steadman Farm Way, or she might meet him again at Lake Columbus? What does Kelly say to him this time that she hasn't already said? How does she try to reach him? Describe how Mr. Weems reacts to Kelly? What does he say? What does he do? What is the outcome of the encounter? Make sure that your scene is consistent with how the characters are portrayed in the novel and that you have some dialogue between characters.

- 6 **Writing in response to the novel:** The author argues that the legacies of the Vietnam War, such as the homeless problem, continue to have an impact on the nation. In fact, the author suggests that the legacies of the war are affecting and will probably continue to affect the children of the Vietnam generation. Write a composition in which you explain why you believe the Vietnam War continues to haunt the nation. How are the themes, issues, and controversies that are raised in the novel (or what you know about from other sources) still with us today? In the novel, Kelly at least tries to help Mr. Weems, and she tries to tell others about the plight of veterans like Mr. Weems. In your opinion, what can be done to help the nation heal the wounds of the war? Are the actions Kelly took enough? Do more people need to do things like what Kelly does? What else can be done?