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Fourth Quarter Book Review

Imagine being shot in the shoulder and having your lung torn, your spinal cord broken, and no feeling from the chest down; this is what Ron Kovic endures in his memoir, Born on the Fourth of July, 224 pages. The book begins in Vietnam, where the author is paralyzed, hospitalized, and sent home. Ron then describes his childhood and his early desire to become a marine, which he does after high school. The story then describes the author after he has returned home, where he often feels depressed and lonely, until he begins to become involved in the antiwar movement, attending protests and giving speeches about his experience. The end of the book describes Ron's experience in Vietnam, which includes killing a corporal and observing countless dead bodies, including many of his friends; Vietnam is so harrowing that Ron is relieved to be injured because it meant he would be returning home.

Though the ordering of events and descriptions in Born on the Fourth of July are sometimes confusing, this book is moving and essential for everyone to read. Its most important aspect is that it depicts in horrific detail the effects of war that are too rarely seen. While most people see only patriotic marches and heroic and glorious fighters, the soldiers forced into combat are often the only ones to visibly observe the injury, destruction, and death resulting from war. One shocking example of these often unseen impacts is the attack made by Ron and others upon a small Vietnamese village in the dark. While Ron's group skulkingly approached the area, one of the men began firing without orders, which caused the others to do the same. After the shots had ceased, Ron and a few others hurried into the village to investigate the damage and found that they had accidentally killed children, who were "screaming and thrashing their arms back and forth, lying in pools of blood, crying wildly, screaming again and again. They were shot in the face, in the chest, in the legs, moaning and crying.... There was an old man

in the corner with his head blown off from his eyes up, his brains hanging out of his head like jelly....A small boy next to the old man was still alive, although he had been shot many times. He was crying softly, lying in a large pool of blood. His small foot had been shot almost completely off and seemed to be hanging by a thread” (205-6). The descriptive words throughout this passage render it especially poignant; by depicting “pools of blood,” “screaming and thrashing,” and the atrocious injuries of the old man and boy, the author creates vivid pictures in the minds of the readers that would not be elicited simply by a statement that, for example, “the children were dead or injured.” Furthermore, by describing the wounded as “shot in the face, in the chest, in the legs” and repeating the words “in the,” the author not only emphasizes each individual area of the body that was damaged, but also gives the reader more time to comprehend the description. While certainly unpleasant, this passage provides an account of the atrocities of war to which we are rarely exposed, and that is essential for us to make an informed and circumspect decision about any future wars. Too often, people are remote and isolated from the true effects of war, and instead might view it simply as a game that is won using advanced technology to avoid any real harm. Even many leaders in our government have not seen the battlefield and therefore do not hesitate before choosing to invade Iraq; the few who have seen war, including Anthony Zinni and John Kerry, are some of the few people in government urging restraint, providence, and caution. Born on the Fourth of July allows readers to see something that is rarely shown on television or reported in the news: the true costs and violence of war.

harrowing – adj. – extremely disturbing or distressing; grievous –

skulkingly – adv – moving in a stealthy manner –

providence – n – foresight; provident care -