



CAL HUMANITIES
WAR COMES HOME

california
READS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

“A staggeringly beautiful book on combat—what it feels like,
what the consequences are, and above all, what society must do
to understand it. In my eyes Marlantes has become
the preminent literary voice on war of our generation.”

— **SEBASTIAN JUNGER**

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO GO TO WAR

Author of the
New York Times
Bestseller
Matterhorn



KARL MARLANTES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

what it is like to go to war

WELCOME! CALIFORNIA READS

Welcome to *California Reads*, a statewide program that brings Californians together to explore important topics through reading and discussion. California Reads provides a springboard to think about and discuss ideas using thought-provoking books about issues that are of importance to our state. This year our theme is *War Comes Home: Our Veterans, Our Communities*. How can we best reweave veterans into the fabric of our communities when they return? What will the experience of going to war mean for their families, and their own life stories into the future? What can we learn from veterans' experiences?

To help us explore these questions, we will be reading Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Marlantes is a Vietnam veteran, a Rhodes Scholar, and the author of the *New York Times* best-selling novel *Matterhorn*. His newest book has received much reader and critical acclaim since publication in 2011, and has often been cited by veterans as the work that best expresses their experience. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, it "ought to be mandatory reading by potential infantry recruits and by residents of any nation that sends its kids—Marlantes's word—into combat."

In addition to an author tour in fall 2014, over 800 book discussions, forums, and other activities are planned to help stimulate dialogue about this important topic in libraries, on campuses, and in other centers of community cultural life over the course of the year.

Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book are partnering on this project because we feel books – and the conversations they spark – can make a difference. This is the second statewide read under our California Reads banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter.

Whether you are joining the conversation by way of a program at your local library, bookstore, school, or community center, or reading the book on your own or with friends or colleagues, we hope you will find inspiration, new insights, and a deeper sense of connection to your community and our state.

With gratitude,

Margaret Shelleda, Board Chair, Cal Humanities

Mary Menzel, Director, California Center for the Book

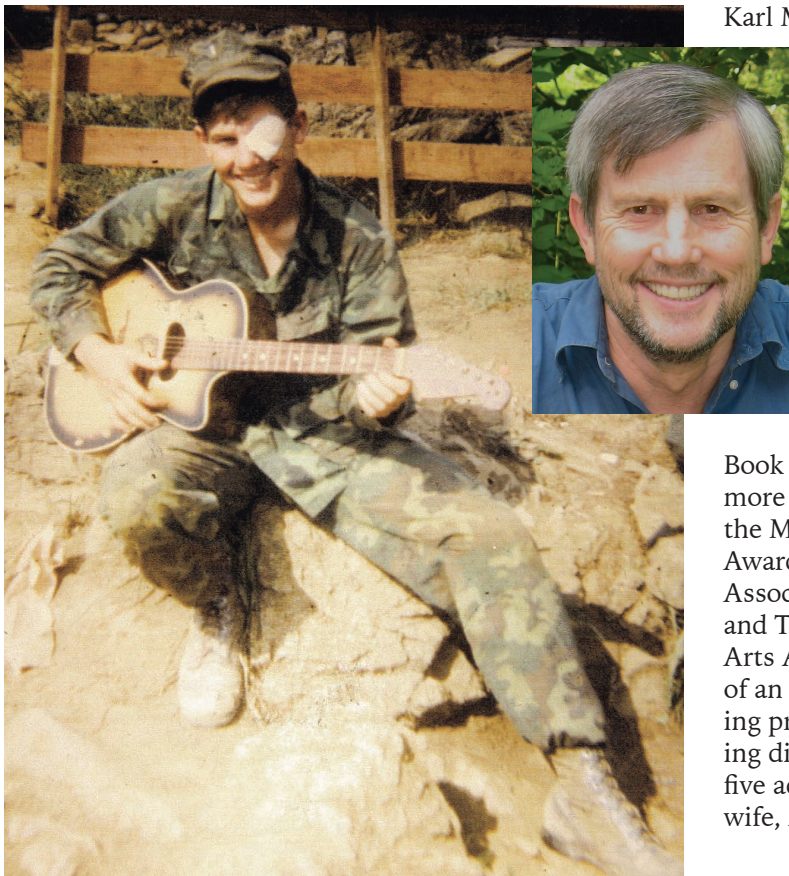


War Comes Home is Cal Humanities' new statewide effort to engage Californians in thinking about what it means to home come from war: for our veterans as well as the rest of us.

As the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down, we believe this is an important moment in which to pause to reflect on the momentous societal changes that are occurring as thousands of veterans resume civilian life and to consider how our returning service people will rejoin their communities. How will veterans, those who bear the direct consequences of what it means to engage in war, as well as their parents, wives, husbands, children, relatives, and friends, create a new sense of home? Can the rest of us ever understand what it's like to go to war? What obligations do we have to those who serve in the name of our national defense? What can we learn from the past to understand the challenges faced by today's returning service men and women? How can we all welcome veterans home in a way that is helpful and meaningful to all?

This year, Cal Humanities and its partners will provide opportunities for Californians to explore these questions through hundreds of community events, forums, book discussion groups, exhibits, and interactive web events across the state. The Cal Humanities website (calhum.org) will be an online hub for all activities, where you can learn more and share what you have discovered.

about the author *Karl Marlantes*

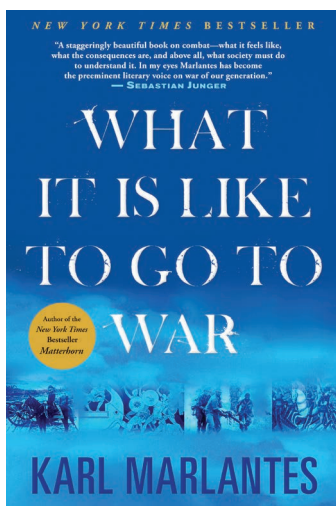


Karl Marlantes in Vietnam

Karl Marlantes grew up in a small logging town on the Oregon coast, attended Yale University on a National Merit Scholarship, and went on to study at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. He served as a Marine in Vietnam, where he was awarded the Navy Cross, the Bronze Star, two Navy Commendation Medals for valor, two Purple Hearts, and ten Air Medals. He is the author of two *New York Times* best sellers. His novel *Matterhorn*, published in 2010, won numerous prizes, including the William E. Colby Award given by the Pritzker Military Library, the Center For Fiction's Flaherty-Dunn First Novel Prize, the 2011 Indies' Choice Award for Adult Debut

Book of the Year, the American Historians James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical American Fiction, the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's James Webb Award for Distinguished Fiction, The American Library Association W. Y. Boyd Literary Novel Award for 2011, and The Vietnam Veterans of America Excellence in the Arts Award for 2012. Karl Marlantes was the sole owner of an international consulting business in strategy, focusing primarily on energy companies, and was the managing director of a corporation based in Singapore. He has five adult children and one grandson, and lives with his wife, Anne, on a lake near Duvall, Washington.

about the book *What It Is Like to Go to War*, Grove Press, 2011



Written nearly 40 years after his own tour of duty in Vietnam, Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War* recounts his experience of going to war and coming home through the lens of time and memory, illuminated by insights drawn from his study of history, literature, psychology, and philosophy. With unflinching honesty Marlantes offers the reader a window into the mind, heart, and soul of a combat veteran, revealing

his thoughts and feelings, then and now, about a wide range of topics: the meaning of loyalty, the morality of war, the complexity of truth, the healing power of narrative, the importance of empathy, and the changing nature of justice and war in a globalized era. Through

sharing his own story, Marlantes aims to make his readers, including current and future servicemembers, veterans, civilians, and policy makers, more aware of the human costs of war for individuals, families, and communities, as well as to raise searching questions about the way in which we prepare for war and cope, as individuals and as a society, with its aftermath.

Named one of the best books of 2011 by *The New Yorker*, *BookPage*, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, *Indiebound*, and *The Huffington Post*, the *Library Journal* reviewer called the book, "A gutting look into the psyche of a soldier, adding flesh to the often flat and stereotyped personage. Humanizing, empathetic, and wise, this reading experience will light corners in the human experience often judged dark."

For more information, visit the author's webpage at www.groveatlantic.com

Recorded interviews can be viewed at www.authormagazine.org and on the *Cal Humanities* website.

SCHOLAR ESSAY

Karl Marlantes and the Literature of Homecoming by Susan Derwin, PhD



Karl Marlantes in Vietnam

In the final phase of his arduous return from the Trojan War, Odysseus, adrift at sea, washes ashore on the land of the Phaeacians. Taken to the royal court, he provides a vivid account of the tumultuous years he has spent trying to make his way home to Ithaca. Hearing Odysseus' story of the obstacles he has encountered, the Phaeacian king and queen supply Odysseus with a ship, so that he may finally reach his destination.

In order for Odysseus to get back home, he had to be able to tell his story. Karl Marlantes' book *What It Is Like to Go to War* emphatically confirms that this is a crucial experience for all war veterans. In Marlantes' words, "Each and every one of us veterans must have a song to sing about our war before we can walk back into the community... to remain silent keeps you from coming home."

What It Is Like To Go To War is Marlantes' "song." Part memoir, it contains gritty stories about battles waged and comrades lost, enemies killed, and acts driven by blood lust. Part spiritual treatise, it draws upon the wisdom of myth and philosophy to explore the lines of guilt and sorrow that exposure to death etches into the psyche and soul of the warrior. Part cautionary tale, it encourages current and future soldiers to develop the self-awareness they will need to manage the stresses of combat. Part plea, it beseeches society not to impose silence upon veterans when they return home.

Cambodia, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Panama, Grenada, the First Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya again – the United States knows how to send its troops to war. But integrating them back into the mainstream remains a skill in its infancy. *What It Is Like to Go to War* is Marlantes' first-hand testament to the veterans' need to express "all sides of their experience, the guilt and sorrow and the pride" not only for their own sake, but for the well-being of society, so that its "attitude toward war and fighting can mature psychologically and spiritually."



Susan Derwin, PhD, is Director of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Professor of Comparative Literature and German. She is the author of *The Ambivalence of Form: Lukács, Freud, and the Novel* and *Rage Is the Subtext: Readings in Holocaust Literature and Film*. She has written numerous articles and lectured widely on European literature, Holocaust studies, trauma studies, and psychoanalytic approaches to literature. For the last four years, she has been facilitating a campus writing workshop for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and through the IHC she organized a year-long series of events exploring the impact of war on veterans and their communities entitled *Fallout: In the Aftermath of War*. Currently she is writing a book about reading, and listening to, veterans' narratives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What It Is Like to Go to War by Karl Marlantes

- 1 *What It Is Like to Go to War* contains many powerful and gripping accounts of combat experiences. What makes this book different from other war narratives with which you may be familiar?
- 2 It took Marlantes 40 years to write this book and the preceding one, his best-selling novel *Matterhorn*. Why does he believe sharing your story or “singing your song” is such an important element of homecoming? What obstacles to telling their stories do veterans face?
- 3 The author uses many mythological and religious figures in his discussion: Mars/Ares, the Greek/Roman god of war; the Germanic god of the hunt, Wotan; the Hindu deity Krishna; the ancient Germanic Tiwaz, god of war, and justice. Did you find his use of mythology interesting? Did it help him make convincing points?
- 4 The author writes, “Mystical or religious experiences have four common components: constant awareness of one’s own inevitable death, total focus on the present moment, the valuing of other people’s lives above one’s own, and being part of a larger religious community...All four of these exist in combat.” (page 7) How do you react to this portrayal of combat as akin to a mystical or religious experience? Are there viable substitutes for the kinds of “transcendent” and all-consuming experiences war produces?
- 5 The author shares several gripping stories of death in Vietnam battles, including the face-to-face killing of a North Vietnamese Army teenage soldier and the execution of a mortally wounded enemy fighter. Marlantes argues that warriors need to be allowed to grieve for their part in the sorrow of war, and that substance abuse and suicide among veterans “are ways of avoiding guilt and fear of grief” (p. 47). Did you find this idea surprising?
- 6 The last paragraph of chapter 3 (p. 60) discusses the burden of guilt and mourning (two distinct emotions) that “will be among the things that [warriors] carry. They will shoulder it all for the society they fight for.” Do you think that civilians share or should share these burdens?
- 7 Marlantes discusses the “deep savage joy in destruction” that young soldiers feel, and says, “The least acknowledged aspect of war, today, is how exhilarating it is” (pp. 61-62). He asks the reader, “Try to get inside this frame of mind. Try, because the world needs you to” (p. 67). Do you agree with Marlantes that it is important to acknowledge the appeal of war, both in terms of individual psychology as well as social life, rather than to deny it?
- 8 Marlantes says he and his family made a bad mistake when he tried to make the transition to civilian life: that the family should have celebrated with him, mourned with him, talked and listened, instead of letting him try to get back into his life alone. The “jolting juxtaposition of the infinite and the mundane” (p. 182) is just too severe for young warriors to integrate and handle. He “needed desperately to be accepted back in” (p. 184) and assumed that he had done something wrong to be getting so much rejection by society. Do you share that perspective or know veterans who do?
- 9 The author says that the “correct way to welcome your warriors back” does not include ticker-tape parades because “cheering is inappropriate and immature.” Warriors need to be welcomed back calmly and with dignity, reintegrated with their families and “thanked by the people who sent them.” (all on p. 195) Do you agree?
- 10 Marlantes argues that before soldiers are sent to war they should receive training similar to the spiritual aspects of martial arts, in which the recruit is told, “here’s how the killing fits in the great scheme of things, and here’s how you’re likely to feel afterward” (p.202). He also thinks that transitioning out of the military from combat should be a methodical process like “the slow boat home” that gave veterans of earlier wars a chance to decompress, talk, listen, share memories, and process the horrors they’d witnessed. He thinks that every transitioning servicemember should receive counseling during and after the transition. Did his advice strike you as practical?
- 11 The author discusses the club of manhood, and the club of warriors with its code of silence – self-imposed and imposed by society. Do you think this will change with the rising numbers of women in the military?
- 12 Marlantes writes that clubs like the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) help veterans feel pride and talk in a safe environment – but that they’re also “enablers in numbing” due to the presence of alcohol and cigarettes, and that they help to keep “veterans’ experiences and feelings quarantined from their families and communities” (pp. 218-219). What has your experience been with traditional veterans’ clubs and organizations? Do you think they could do more to integrate veterans with civilian life?
- 13 In the preface, Marlantes tells us that he wrote the book, in part, to inform citizens and policy makers about the reality of war and the consequences it holds for those who do the fighting. Did the book change the way you, as a citizen, think about war and what should be considered before a democracy decides to engage in war?

AN INTERVIEW

with author Karl Marlantes

Excerpts from an interview with Karl Marlantes conducted in March 2014, by Rachel Anne Goodman

What moved you to write *What It Is Like to Go to War*?

Three things. First, working on both books was a lot of good self-therapy. I got a lot of ghosts out of my system by writing. Another motivator was to write to young people who were considering going into the military as a profession. It's a calling, but we don't need romantics in the Marine Corps. They need to be clear-eyed and clear-headed about what's required of them. You are going to do something for your country that may involve taking a human life or sacrificing your own. You better be sure. And third, I thought if I wrote about my experiences that might help other veterans share theirs.

Matterhorn, your best-selling book, used fiction to examine the war experience. *What It Is Like to Go to War* is a true-life account. How do you think these different approaches affect your readers?

Fiction allows a reader to identify with a character and get outside of their own skin. I first figured this out in my early thirties. My children's godmother, who was quite literary, would always be after me to read Eudora Welty. She bought me a copy of *Delta Wedding* and said, "Read this." My first thought was: "This is trivial." But by the time I was halfway through the book, I was totally invested. I saw the world through the eyes of the main character, a woman who is putting on a wedding for her oldest daughter in the 1920s in Mississippi. For the first time, I had an experience outside of my skin. Literature is what allows that.

Everything that happened in *Matterhorn* happened to me or friends of mine. I wrote about these experiences in such a way that people could choose to be an 18-year-old black kid from Mississippi, or they could choose to look from the viewpoint of an alcoholic colonel. In fiction you let the reader reflect on the actions and the morality of the characters and draw their own conclusions.

In *What It Is Like to Go to War*, I'm telling people about my experience. The reader can agree or disagree with me, but I don't expect them to identify with me or to see the world through my eyes. Fiction and nonfiction are different means of communicating. If I tried to communicate philosophy in fiction it would be very bad writing.

What effect did reading Joseph Campbell's work have on your life and your decision to write?

I got interested in mythology when I started studying Carl Jung's work on psychology, particularly his concept of shadow and the collective unconscious. Mythology is the expression of the collective unconscious of a culture. Campbell shows us how some myths are common to every culture, and what the similarities are between the myths

of different cultures: every ethnic group, from Aborigines to Vikings, has hero myths. Reading Jung and Campbell made me think about how what goes on in my life is connected with what goes on in other people's lives, and how my experiences are shared by others. As a result, I know that whatever I'm going to write about may be unique in its particulars, but ancient and universal in its structure.

How can the divide between veterans and the rest of us be made smaller?

One of the things we have to get over as a culture is avoiding talking about the fact that we've been at war. We seem to have an unconscious conspiracy of silence, an unspoken norm that "we don't talk about that." It's the elephant in the room: Like the father who drinks in the alcoholic family, people talk about everything but what's really important, which is the drinking.

Many veterans don't want to talk about their experiences because they don't want to disturb their friends. They don't think people want to know what really happened. If you let a veteran tell his story, he'll get over one great fear of veterans, which is being judged, because you do bad things in war. You do things you're not proud of. You can do them to save your own skin, to save someone else's skin, or because you're angry and mean. Believe me: I did things back then I wish I hadn't. Many veterans are afraid of how people will react to hearing the truth.

Veterans have got to be allowed to tell their stories. We have to step up to the plate and say: We've been at war and we're willing to hear what it was like for our veterans, the people who have done the fighting for us.

How can reading and discussing your book help veterans?

People, including veterans, their family members, people who work in service organizations, VA counselors, and wounded warriors will be coming together in libraries, discussing coming home from war. If you talk about what's in my book, you're going to talk about things that people are probably going to find uncomfortable. Bringing these experiences into the open, so that people discuss them, will help veterans rejoin their communities. You're going to see people proud, you're going to see people cry, you're going to see people angry, and that's okay. It will be a major step towards bringing people home because in essence the community will be saying to its veterans: "We want to hear, we want to know." I'm optimistic.

SUPPLEMENTARY LIST

for reading

Regeneration, Pat Barker (1992) Fiction

The first novel in a best-selling trilogy based on the true story of British officer and poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was sent to a hospital for “shell-shocked” officers in the grim days of World War I.

Shifting Loyalties, Daniel Cano (1995) Fiction
(Southern California author)

This novel by a Santa Monica College English professor and Vietnam paratrooper paints a nuanced portrait of five Chicano boys who volunteer to go to Vietnam.

Something Like Normal

Trish Doller (2012) YA Fiction

A teenage boy returns from a year in Afghanistan to battle nightmares, the memory of his dead friend, and his own complicated emotions.

The Things a Brother Knows, Dana Reinhart (2010)
YA Fiction (Northern California author)

A teenager struggles to understand and communicate with his brother, who has returned from three years in Iraq a changed young man.

Girls Come Marching Home: The Stories of Women Warriors Returning from the War in Iraq

Kirsten Holmstedt (2009) Memoir

Profiles of women returning home to deal with physical and emotional wounds, relationship problems, guilt, and grief.

Soft Spots: A Marine's Memoir of Combat and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Clint van Winkle (2009) Memoir

An Iraq War veteran interweaves battle stories, flashbacks, and hallucinations into the story of his journey back to a productive life.

Thank You for Your Service, David Finkel (2013)

Nonfiction

Journalist David Finkel follows several Iraq War veterans through their return to civilian life, in an intense and frustrating report on the state of veterans' affairs.

Here, Bullet, Brian Turner (2005) Poetry
(Central California author)

Superb, accessible poetry from an Iraq War veteran who also served in Bosnia.

for viewing

The Best Years of our Lives, dir. William Wyler (1946)

Feature, 172 minutes

The intertwined homecoming stories of three World War II veterans facing difficult readjustments. Based on MacKinlay Kantor's novel.

Gran Torino, dir. Clint Eastwood (2009) Feature, 116 minutes

A disgruntled, racist Korean War veteran develops a life-changing relationship with his young Hmong neighbor.

Dead Presidents, dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes (1995)

Feature, 119 minutes

An African-American teenager witnesses unspeakable horrors in Vietnam and then, upon returning home, turns to a life of crime in order to support his family. Based on a true story.

In Country, dir. Norman Jewison (1989)

Feature, 120 minutes – suitable for teens

Based on the novel by Bobbie Ann Mason. A teenage girl determines to find the truth about the father she never knew, who was killed as a 19-year-old soldier in Vietnam.

Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields, Dulanie Ellis (2013)

Documentary, 41 minutes (California filmmaker)

An optimistic account of combat veterans who are rebuilding their own lives and revitalizing their communities by becoming organic farmers and ranchers.

Hell & Back Again, Danfung Dennis (2011)

Documentary, 88 minutes

Vérité-style story following the efforts of a 25-year-old Afghanistan War veteran to overcome his physical and emotional wounds.

The Invisible War, Kirby Dick (2012) Documentary, 93 minutes
(California filmmaker)

The stories of women and men who have been victimized by military sexual assault and who fight to change military policy and attain justice.

Killing Memories, Pete Pepper (2010) Documentary, 85 minutes
(California filmmaker)

Five Vietnam veterans reunite to tour battlefields, confront the ghosts of their past, and make peace with former enemies.

Service: When Women Come Marching Home, Marcia Rock (2011)

Documentary, 60 minutes

Compelling portraits of women in service and after they leave the military, wrestling with challenges that include PTSD, homelessness, sexual trauma, and the loss of a limb.

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about cal humanities

Cal Humanities is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the human condition. We produce, fund, and support cultural experiences in media, literature, discussion programs and more. Through engaging and inspiring work, we encourage our audiences to learn more, dig deeper, and start conversations that matter to create a State of Open Mind.

To learn more about us, please visit www.calhum.org



about the california center for the book

As part of a network of Centers for the Book in every state of the Union, all affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the California Center for the Book develops statewide programs that celebrate California's rich literary heritage, encourage reading and discussion, and promote libraries as centers for community engagement and lifelong learning. It is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

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