

BY THE AUTHOR OF **THE YELLOW BIRDS**

"A masterpiece. Powers has written a novel that includes all the literary complexity and racial violence of the American South, from its fall to its eternal rebirth."
—Philip Meyer, author of *American Rust* and *The Sea*

A SHOUT IN THE RUINS

A NOVEL

KEVIN POWERS



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Set in Virginia during the Civil War and a century beyond, this novel by the award-winning author of THE YELLOW BIRDS explores the brutal legacy of violence and race in American society.

Spanning over one hundred years, from the antebellum era to the 1980's, *A Shout in the Ruins* examines the fates of a diverse cast of characters connected to Beauvais Plantation in Chesterfield County, Virginia. When war arrives, the master of Beauvais, Anthony Levallos, foresees that mastery in a new America will be measured not in acres of tobacco under cultivation by his slaves, but in industry and capital. A grievously wounded Confederate veteran loses his grip on a world he no longer understands, and his daughter finds herself married to Levallos, an arrangement that feels little better than imprisonment. And two people enslaved at Beauvais plantation, Nurse and Rawls, overcome impossible odds to be together, only to find that the promise of coming freedom may not be something they will live to see.

Seamlessly interwoven is the story of George Seldom, a man orphaned by the storm of the Civil War, looking back from the 1950s on the void where his childhood ought to have been. Watching the government destroy his neighborhood to build a stretch of the interstate highway system through Richmond, Virginia, and recognizing that his days on earth are coming to an end, he travels south to try to fill in that void. With the help of a young woman, he goes in search of his beginnings, all the while remembering the life that witnessed so much change during the 20th century, and so much that didn't. As the narrative finds that young woman farther in the future, now in her middle age, the questions remain: How do we live in a world built on the suffering of others? And can love exist in a place where for 400 years violence has been the strongest form of intimacy?

Written with the same emotional intensity, harrowing realism, and poetic precision that made *THE YELLOW BIRDS* one of the most celebrated novels of the past decade, *A SHOUT IN THE RUINS* cements Powers' place in the forefront of American letters and demands that we reckon with the moral weight of our troubling history.

A Shout in the Ruins Details

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From Reader Review A Shout in the Ruins for online ebook

Jill says

When I reviewed Kevin Powers' elegiac first novel—*The Yellow Birds*—I began with this line: “All pain is the same. Only the details are different.”

In this, his second novel, Kevin Powers does not stray far from that theme; indeed, this new book explores the brutal legacy of violence that spans from the antebellum era to the 1980s. The focus is on the devaluing of human life through the hideous notion that one human could be “master” to another.

There are two key plot lines at play: the first centers around the Beauvais Plantation, outside of Richmond, Virginia. There, two enslaved individuals—Nurse and Rawls—struggle to keep the embers of love alive with the fates turned against them. The master of Beauvais, Antony Levallois, holds the key to their fates, as he does the fate of Emily, the daughter of a neighboring plantation owner who he does not love but wishes to possess. Interspersed with that line is the story of George Seldom, an orphan, who, in the 1950s, questions who he really is and where he comes from. It is no surprise that these two storylines merge.

I could not help but compare the two books, both written by an immensely talented author. There is, in *The Yellow Birds*, a strong sense of authenticity, mainly because Kevin Powers is writing from deep knowledge: he served in the U.S. Army in Mosul and Tal Afar, Iraq. In *A Shout in the Ruins*, Mr. Powers seems to be relying less on experience and more on research and the resonance is not nearly as deep. There are extraneous characters, such as Lottie Moore, a waitress connected to George Seldom; her role in the novel seemed dubious. Other ancillary characters take space away from the ones we, as readers, hope to invest ourselves in.

The portrayal of the world as indifferent and often nightmarish is the main canvas that Kevin Powers is working with; the characters' stories are broad strokes that complete the picture. Here, for example, is one rumination: “Rawls did not know what people deserved, but he knew they did not get it. Instead they seemed to get what they did not deserve, as if the world had been built that way, like a machine that could produce only one outcome.” There is plenty of pain to go around and those who want relentlessly positive (or Pollyanna-ish) stories will not find it here. What they will find is fine prose from an author who knows how to command a story. My thanks to Little Brown for the kind offer of an advance copy in exchange for an honest review.

Trish says

At a time when our country is again in the midst of a noisy national conversation about race, Kevin Powers creates a powerful fiction to illuminate the not-so-distant terrors and strains of our Civil War. Powers touches our sensitive places and his sentences carry knowledge from which none of us can hide.

The work is a feast of imagination, packed full with exemplars of character definition, narrative structure, tone, style, language choice. The language is the first thing one notices. Each sentence conveys both a history and a future, though we won't know that until later. Rounding back on the novel's beginning after a time we realize how much we have already been told, by given names and place names, though we couldn't have understood it. We grow watchful, anticipating these signposts, and read carefully.

The economy and poetry of the language gives our read a languor; we won't rush to some conclusion because the journey is the point. We breathe in the foggy sea air, and the stench of rotting limbs. We note what the narrator chooses to notice: "Emily had been to Richmond only twice in her life. She found the endless stone and brick suffocating." But of course. Only northerners or outsiders wouldn't crave the breezy clapboards on tree-lined drives outside the city center in the heat of the summer.

Characters have real depth. We are introduced to the slave Rawls; at no time does this feel like appropriation of the black man's experience. Rawls has a quiet unquenchable fury "inscrutable and vast," but he determines to find something within himself his owners can't touch. Levallois is Rawls' white landowner near Richmond, Virginia in the mid-1860's. The pathology of his character is sharp as a shard of untempered glass. He is calculating and exploitative, transactional only, sly in exploiting the human nature of others less damaged than himself.

The novel's dreadful propulsion is because of this character Levallois: what horror he will perpetrate next, and will he get his comeuppance? How many will he infect with hatred or kill before he is stopped? The path to that answer winds through a later century that hints to some of what happened. We are introduced to a man called George Seldom, believed to be a Negro of ninety some-odd years in 1955, who carries a sharp, thin-bladed knife with a handle of elk antler with which we are already familiar. In 1863, Levallois used it to kill noiselessly, needlessly a ferry owner named Spanish Jim.

We read for voices like Rawls and his wife Nurse, strong and resistant yet vulnerable. They arouse in us a sense of justice, and give us strength in light of very poor odds, shades of the heroic classic *Les Misérables*. We know enough of Levallois to know his sociopathy and hollowness, his wife Emily not much better. Near the end of this small corner of Civil War history Emily begins to grasp responsibility for her role, but we can't forgive her. She'll have to carry her burdens alone in the many years she has to contemplate them in backward glances.

The timeline in the novel is ever-shifting, but that merely adds intrigue and mystery—the kind of the puzzlement books of history often leave us with. When George Seldom admits a kind of suspicion towards history, this reader is inclined to agree that fiction, done well, may capture more truth than some histories. We read to know why, not just how, and history doesn't often give us that.

"The truth has not mattered for a long time...the only thing that matters here...is what people are willing to believe."

Of the several lives recorded in this novel, there are two that don't fit easily the genealogies revealed here. One is a woman artist and part-time mail carrier who marries a reformed alcoholic and auto mechanic. The two live well together, deeply in love. Her heritage is mixed race including Croatan, black, and white and her maiden name is Bride. He appears to be white, his surname Rivers, perhaps descended from Sheriff Patrick Rivers, a "wholly unremarkable" and dull man who appears in this history after the war in Virginia near Beauvais Plantation.

There, it happened. This fiction has become a kind of history, or this history has become a fiction. We're not exactly sure except that the time is not that long ago—only a generation or two—and we should be able to grasp motivation if we had a few more connections. What we do know is that plenty people died before their time for reasons their children and their children's children no longer recognize. When does memory become fiction and does what happens now matter more than what happened then?

This is a deeply involving read; the author spans one hundred years but he left out the boring bits. The work is a kind of model for how to keep the reader understanding complicated knots in intertwined personal histories that last more than one lifetime. The language is peerless, and the capture of human nature cannot be denied. It feels a long time since I have been as enraptured by a fiction. Beautiful work.

Postscript There is a young Australian author who has Powers' similarly expansive sense of literature and the writing chops to pull it off. Rohan Wilson places his fiction in earlier-century histories of Tasmania and manages to make the work as big and heroic as those he implicitly references. My reviews here cannot capture his overwhelming talent and the skill he demonstrates in *The Roving Party* and *To Name Those Lost*.

Ron Charles says

Kevin Powers's debut novel, "The Yellow Birds," was one of the first about the Iraq War and one of the most celebrated novels of the era. A finalist for a National Book Award, it won praise from Tom Wolfe, Dave Eggers and writer-vets who knew the horrors of battle firsthand. If Powers's prose sometimes sounded florid, that seemed a blemish worth tolerating for the emotional insight he offered on that quagmire 6,000 miles away.

But now Powers has turned his scope on slavery and the Civil War, the most well-trodden battlefield of American fiction. "A Shout in the Ruins" marches with a phalanx of great novels by Colson Whitehead, Toni Morrison, Edward P. Jones, Geraldine Brooks, E.L. Doctorow, Paulette Jiles, Charles Frazier, Jeffrey Lent, Michael Shaara, Gore Vidal, Stephen Crane and so many more, stretching all the way back to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Any new writer who tries to join the ranks of these authors risks tripping over their feet or, worse, being set upon by the clichés that scamper after them like mangy dogs.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

Jim Angstadt says

A Shout in the Ruins
Kevin Powers

There are two intersecting stories here, one set during the US Civil War, the other 100 years later, both set in the vicinity of northern North Carolina and southern Virginia. The narrative jumps back and forth between the two time-frames. But in one's mind, a third time-frame -- right now -- adds another data point as we compare progress, or lack, over time.

Levallois, the plantation owner, is cunning, resourceful, greedy, hungry for power and control, but without a code of ethics. Rawls and Nurse are slaves on the plantation. Emily, the overseer's daughter, gradually loses her grip on reality. These characters, and others, could have been treated as stereotypes, but rather they seem real and appropriate to their situation. There were a few stray characters that didn't seem to serve much purpose, but that didn't detract from the story.

Thinking of our laws and practices over those time-frames, we have clearly made significant progress. But,

with respect to emotions and values: not so much.

Brian says

This compact and powerful novel is remarkable in the way it conveys over a hundred years of Virginia (and by extension, United States) history, tracing the lives of characters who are deliberately archetypal and also credibly presented as individuals. It's a well-written and moving book, to my mind, ultimately an origin story: both about the roots of people in a specific place, and those of violence in all people. Just after finishing it, I am left with a sense of tragic interconnectedness that is hard to shake.

Bamboozlepig says

This could've been a great read...but it wasn't. Powers' prose is fine, but the storyline jumps around in different timelines, often without warning. Some of the bits don't mesh well with the overall plot. Some characters are finely drawn, others fall flat. There's a lot of headhopping, often within the same scene. It might've worked better if told in a linear mode, or at least with some cohesion to the timeline.

Gumble's Yard says

“Open your eyes. Tell me what it looks like. Come back in five years, in ten, in a hundred and tell me what you’ve accomplished.”

Kevin Powers debut novel was the widely acclaimed novel *The Yellow Birds* which examined the lives of soldiers through and after the war – a novel which drew on his own experiences in the US army in Iraq.

This his follow-up novel has much in common: set around a war (in this case the Civil War) and examining the consequences of the war (in this case over more than a century). And that represents the strongest element of the book – examining how the injustices and violence of slavery and the Civil War resonate for generations in the South of the US (as alluded to in the opening quote of my review taken from a pivotal confrontation between a Confederate plantation owner and a Federal Colonel spearheading the occupation at the end of the war).

The book effectively has two main plotlines.

One is set in Virginia around the years of the Civil War: it features two slaves – Rawls (a “runner” who was hobbled as a child to stop him escaping) and a wet nurse Nurse with who he falls in love. Rawls owner is Bob Reid and Bob’s daughter Emily, despite being a rather distant presence in the book, both opens and ends it (disappearing after a fire destroyed a plantation house). When Nurse’s owner sells her to another, notoriously cruel owner (after she fails to save her first owner’s life after a horse fall) – Rawls attempts to flee and find her, only to be caught by the main plantation owner in the area, the domineering and manipulative Levallois who stabs to death a boat owner than shelters Rawls before purchasing him for his own use.

The other is set some 90 year later – George, a 90 year old (and hence we immediately gather with some connection to the earlier story) has his house demolished without compensation to make way for a turnpike and sets off back to the Virginia area where he was bought up to try and understand his own background.

He had not taken much from the house he'd left behind; a few changes of clothes, a copy of The Negro Travelers Green book ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Neg...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Negro_Travelers_Green)), another book he had been given as a gift ... and a lovely little knife with a handle of elk antler that he'd owned as he could remember.

The large book is an old and unread diary gifted to him which he “*found useful mostly for the way it's weight functioned as a preservative for his oldest possession*”, that possession being a note saying “*1866. My name is George, I'm nearly three years old. Look after me. I now belong to you*” which was handed to the lady that adopted him as a child.

He meets a young waitress Lottie and with her help finds the now ruined shack where he was bought up and finds some limited healing in his memories.

I have commented on the similarities with the author's debut novel - where it differs is the narrative voice – first person on his debut, but omniscient third person in this book – and voice is probably the most intrusive I have read in any literary novel I can recall and gives the novel a distinctive (and often not completely successful) feel.

To give some examples:

Firstly at best each character's dialogue and thoughts end up as best as simply a cipher for the author's own artistic writing (regardless of their own levels of intelligence or education

Nurse we are told

was taught a language beyond speech, one that existed when the ground on which all her torments occurred had been submerged below a channel sea, with a vocabulary that remained unchanged even with the unending forces of thrust and rift at work.

And at worst they are completely over-written, for example on the first meeting of two characters – I am still not sure what this means:

Though still very much a girl, Emily looked to Levallois like a woman who had once been beautiful. It seemed somehow difficult to see her clearly, as if a thin haze obscured that beauty, rather than the fact that what he saw in her was more possibility than residue, though each could have diverged from his ideals by a matter of the same degree.

Secondly the narrator cannot help interfering in the novel – a classic example is when Lottie sits with George and his foundation-note protecting book and the narrator tells us:

The diary of William Byrd II of Westover still sat open on the table between them, though they

never acknowledged it, and it's doubtful either of them bothered to read the passage it lay open to, which was as follows: November 13, 1710 [we are then given the diary entry]

So a diary never even read by any of the characters is read by the narrator to us – the sole purpose of which (as far as I can see) is to set the story of slavery 150 years before the civil war – presumably in symmetry with our position 150 years after it.

Thirdly the narrator (and by extension) author has a George R.R. Martin tendency to be distracted by a minor character, lose attention to the main characters and start tracing the minor character instead. For example we suddenly veer off to trace Lottie's life through two future marriages and into the 1980s and even have a point of view chapter from her second husband. At another stage we are told about the Federal colonel (himself a secondary character) and some postcards he sends to his parents who the narrator tells us have actually died (even though the Colonel does not know it) and then for two paragraphs about the postman on whose desk they sit undelivered and a conversation he has about them with his wife.

Astonishingly though and unlike George R.R. Martin, Powers manages this level of narrator interference, chronological wandering and minor character distraction in 250 well-spaced pages.

I referenced earlier George's "lovely little knife with a handle of elk antler that he'd owned as he could remember" and this is perhaps the most impressive element of the whole book, the narrator and author giving us space here for once to gradually unravel its backstory and its fundamental links to George's own story.

The book relies on a level of deus ex machina coincidence and cross-links (for example Nurse nursing Rawls as he lies in a hospital recuperating from terrible wounds received in a battle; the same scavengers that Reid witnessed bashing in the face of a wounded Union soldier as he lay wounded, later playing a crucial role in George's story) but there are two operators of the "machine" – the narrator/author but also the terrible and manipulative Levallois.

Overall a powerful and memorable if flawed novel.

Faith says

I made it to the 41% point of the book and gave up. There were too many characters and too much shifting among time periods. I also didn't enjoy the writing style. About an injured soldier: "He saw where he had been before his birth. The darkness there, too. A void broken only by spirals of color. A vastness so great as to be meaningless." About a slave "...she was taught a language beyond speech, one that existed when the ground on which all her torments occurred had been submerged below a channel sea, with a vocabulary that remained unchanged even with the unending forces of thrust and rift at work." What the hell does this mean? I'm sure this book will work for some people, but not for me.

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher.

Sam Law says

This is a story of actions and consequences, as well as inactions and their consequences, and the ripple effect

they have on lives.

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Common Thread:

George Seldom is the common thread that weaves through the lives of the inhabitants of Beauvais Plantation, Virginia just after the American Civil War in 1865, all the way through to the closing years of the 1980's.

George, we are told, was rescued as a three-year-old boy by a travelling band of brothers called Seldom, who gave him their name. They left him with their old teacher, and rode off to be hanged as bandits, and in later life the grown George himself leaves this house, and never looks back. However, nearing the end of his life 75 years or so later, George retraces his steps and, through a helpful waitress called Lottie, returns to find his roots in the tumbledown shack.

The lawless nature of the defeated South is laid bare early on, with roaming bands of Confederate soldiers raping, pillaging and murdering across Virginia. Newly liberated slaves are most at risk, especially if they give the wrong person "a look", a situation that can only end in violence.

Characters:

Anthony Levallois is the shrewd, rapacious and debauched master of Beauvais, when we meet him just after the war. His neighbour Bob Reid went off to fight and presumed dead, Levallois swooped to take his land and daughter. He builds a railroad through the old homestead, and has ambitions to buy up the whole county. When Reid arrives back, he finds his wife dead, his daughter married, his home destroyed, and he lives on the charity of his son-in-law, slowly descending into madness.

We also meet Nurse and Rawls, two emancipated slaves (though still slaves in Lavallois's eyes), and are privy to the brutal lives that was their lot in post-War Virginia. George is Nurse's child, by Levallois.

Emily is the young daughter of Reid, who grows up very fast as a married woman, and her actions/inactions tear the Plantation apart. We watch helplessly as she becomes lonely and embittered, her girlhood gone before it really arrived. She feels as much a slave or a prisoner as Rawls and Nurse, except she volunteered for this life.

There are minor characters in the book, and their descendants are also relatively minor characters (e.g. the Sherriff Rivers and Billy).

There is no overseeing, ex machina narrator. We have the dialogue of each of the participants, and see events through their eyes, as they happen. There is an undercurrent of violence, especially in the 1860's chapters.

Plot:

The book opens in the 1950's with George, about 90 years old, being forced to move from his home as the Interstate is being built through it. It is a black neighbourhood, the only whites being the Jewish shopkeepers, who, when George says they must be the last white people there, tell George they "will be Jews when they cross the river to the white neighbourhood". Racism is alive and well.

George begins to reminisce, for example about his old friend Huggins, and undertakes a journey to get back to his roots. He eventually meets Lottie, who helps him find the old house where he grew up. We leave George broken-hearted at the site.

While that journey is happening, interspersed we travel back in time to the 1860's, where we see the fallout of the war, as well as how George came to be found.

We also go forward in time to the now middle-aged Lottie in the 1980's, who has had her own life's troubles and joys to deal with.

It is a very well-written book, a lot of things hinted at as opposed to being overt, and Power keeps the story flowing steadily. There is a strong connection between the main characters, although sometimes invisible and unknown inter-generationally.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to NetGalley and the author for giving me a free copy to review.

Alena says

3.5 stars A very slow burn. I was tempted to give up on this Virginia family saga multiple times in the first half. It's confusing, and desolate and the story kept swerving before I could settle in. But there were flickering moments of beautiful prose and raw emotional truth.

There always might be trouble. The good Lord's up there playing dice, far as I can tell.

The trouble he was born with was not the kind that can be locked away in a cedar chest and left behind. And he also knew that the terms the world lays out for us are not negotiating me.

Then, halfway through those flickers became a steady flame. Either Powers began drawing threads together or I somehow found a way to connect, but either way, I ripped through the second half with my heart in my throat.

It's still desolate, as most stories of the Civil War and its long-lasting devastation are, but there was beauty to be found in the wreckage.

We are born forgetting. It's a kindness nature grants us, one of the few, because it lets us believe we are not born whole, that we'll have some say in the matter, when in fact our ending is written long before our beginning.

Callum Macdonald says

A must read - Powers taps into a harrowing sense of fatalism that remains unparalleled. Moving and intimate.

Kathleen says

As a National Book Award Finalist for *The Yellow Birds*, Powers was able to capture how war can unleash evil and violence among the combatants; and then be haunted by these memories in their dreams. In *A Shout in the Ruins*, Powers tackles the brutality of the Civil War and Reconstruction. He moves between two storylines: the nonagenarian George Seldom, whose home is destroyed in 1956 to make way for the new Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, is seeking to solve the mystery of who his people were; and the inhabitants on a Virginia plantation owned by the ruthless Antony Levallois before, during and after the Civil War. Powers has distilled the essence of the Southern Gothic novel to its bare essentials. He does not shy away from writing about the inherent violence of the Civil War period and how mean and capricious plantation owners could be to their slaves. And not just to slaves--Levallois' greed drives him to virtually 'steal' his neighbors' land. As for Civil War battle scenes, Powers' vivid imagery is so real that the reader will smell the infected wounds and feel the phantom pain from amputated limbs.

As counterpoint to the villain Levallois are the slaves Rawls and Nurse, and George Seldom. These are heart-warming characters and their respective stories are tied together eventually. The lyrical writing sometimes gets a little overwrought, but it is clear that Powers is a gifted writer.

Dax says

How is it possible for love to exist in a world, or more specifically, in a country built on war and hate? That is the question Powers poses in his second novel. And what a special novel it is. The writing is beautiful, the characters are beautiful, and the story is both beautiful and horrible. A Civil War novel that does not paint with a broad brush. This is not a novel about two warring factions: it is a novel about individual actors who are fighting to find love and happiness.

Some samples that I hope will provide a taste of why this book is so great:

"You think you'll never love another thing in this world. And somehow it is there again. It comes from nothing and from nowhere. It comes from less than nothing. How does it happen? It is the only miracle."

"You want to have a debate about justice? You're a young man yet, Colonel. Open your eyes. Tell me what it looks like. Come back in five years, in ten, in a hundred, and tell me what you've accomplished. In the meantime, I will take what I need."

"You will take what you want."

"You act like there's a man anywhere on earth who can tell the difference."

The best book I have read this year. I can't recommend it enough.

Diane S ? says

3.5 The lingering effects of the civil War is explored in this novel, using multiple threads. The latter takes place nearly a hundred years after wars end, and this thread follows the quest of a very old black man named George. A man who doesn't know who he came from but does loosely remember where. He was only three when he was taken for safety, and given to someone else to raise. As he journeys back through time, we also follow the story of Emily, her father John, two blacks who try to do anything and everything to stay together, and lastly Levellois, a man who will use any means necessary to gain what he wants.

These stories are not told consequentially, but are skipped back and forth, making it hard for me to follow. It wasn't until I finished that I could put the whole story together in my head, while reading I often felt like I had come in half way through a movie. The prose is lush, sometimes in my opinion, too much so. At its heart it has important things to say, the deleterious effects of war, the plight and effects of slavery and the many who lost life, limb and property, and the unscrupulous who will take advantage of those unable to fight back.

I liked this but did not find it easy to read. My favorite thread was that of George, and the people he meets trying to discover from where he came. The author does to a fine job combining the threads showing how these people are connected to each other, but it was not easy getting there. Did like how the ending connected so wonderfully to the beginning.

ARC from Goodreads.

J.L. Sutton says

I really enjoyed Kevin Powers' *A Shout in the Ruins*. A central thesis of this multigenerational novel which begins right after the Civil War is that history is destiny. And violence and racism are unfortunately part of that destiny which we need to come to terms with. Because of my own family history, I was especially intrigued by the references to the Lumbee/Croatoans of North Carolina. I continue to see consequences of my family history playing out in the present. Likewise, in Powers' novel, the story doesn't just end with what happened after the Civil War, but continues to impact his characters up through the 1980s. The shifting narrative, which swings back and forth in time, further demonstrates how memory and history are reshaped. Like the land which Powers so beautifully describes, his characters inhabit and live their shared and changing histories.

Aside, I met and introduced Kevin Powers at an author event in Wyoming in April. While he mainly talked about his powerful debut novel, *The Yellow Birds*, he also discussed *A Shout in the Ruins* and his view that fiction is one of the most powerful ways to come to terms with history. He was super nice, great to meet him! I highly recommend both *A Shout in the Ruins* and *The Yellow Birds*. I believe Powers has a great career ahead of him!
