

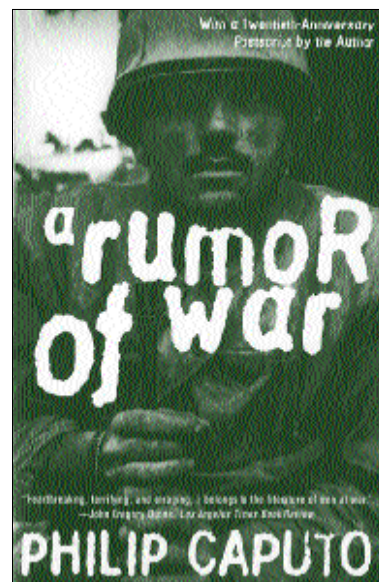


A Rumor of War

by Philip Caputo

“Heartbreaking, terrifying, and enraging,
it belongs to the literature of men at war.”

—John Gregory Dunne, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*



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TO THE TEACHER

When it first appeared, *A Rumor of War* brought home to American readers, with terrifying vividness and honesty, the devastating effects of the Vietnam War on the soldiers who fought there. And while it is a memoir of one young man's experiences and therefore deeply personal, it is also a book that speaks powerfully to today's students about the larger themes of human conscience, good and evil, and the desperate extremes men are forced to confront in any war.

A platoon commander in the first combat unit sent to fight in Vietnam, Lieutenant Caputo landed at Danang on March 8, 1965, convinced that American forces would win a quick and decisive victory over the Communists. Sixteen months later and without ceremony, Caputo left Vietnam a shell-shocked veteran whose youthful idealism and faith in the rightness of the war had been utterly shattered. *A Rumor of War* tells the story of that trajectory and allows us to see and feel the reality of the conflict as the author himself experienced it, from the weeks of tedium hacking through scorching jungles, to the sudden violence of ambushes and fire-fights, to the unbreakable bonds of friendship forged between soldiers, and finally to a sense of the war as having no purpose other than the fight for survival. The author gives us a precise, tactile view of both the emotional and physical reality of war.

PRAISE FOR
A RUMOR OF WAR

When Caputo is reassigned to headquarters as “Officer in Charge of the Dead,” he chronicles the psychological cost of witnessing and recording the human toll of the war. And after his voluntary transfer to the frontlines, Caputo shows us that the major weapons of guerrilla fighting are booby traps and land mines, and that success is measured not in feet but in body counts. Nor does the author shrink from admitting the intoxicating intensity of combat, an experience so compelling that many soldiers felt nostalgic for it years after they’d left Vietnam. Most troubling, Caputo gives us an unflinching view not only of remarkable bravery and heroism but also of the atrocities committed in Vietnam by ordinary men so numbed by fear and desperate to survive that their moral distinctions had collapsed.

More than a statement against war, Caputo’s memoir offers young readers today a profoundly visceral sense of what war is and, as the author says, of “the things men do in war and the things war does to men.”

“To call it the best book about Vietnam is to trivialize it. . . . *A Rumor of War* is a dangerous and even subversive book, the first to insist—and the insistence is all the more powerful because it is implicit—that the reader ask himself these questions: How would I have acted? To what lengths would I have gone to survive? The sense of self is assaulted, overcome, subverted, leaving the reader to contemplate the deadening possibility that his own moral safety net might have a hole in it. It is a terrifying thought, and *A Rumor of War* is a terrifying book.”—John Gregory Dunne, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Caputo’s troubled, searching meditations on the love and hate of war, on fear, and the ambivalent discord warfare can create in the hearts of decent men, are among the most eloquent I have read in modern literature.”—William Styron, *The New York Review of Books*

“Every war seems to find its own voice: Caputo . . . is an eloquent spokesman for all we lost in Vietnam.”—C. D. B. Bryan, *Saturday Review*

“A book that must be read and reread—if for no other reason than as an eloquent statement against war. It is a superb book.”—Terry Anderson, *Denver Post*

“This is news that goes beyond what the journalists brought us, news from the heart of darkness. It was long overdue.”—*Newsweek*

The questions that follow are designed to enhance your students' understanding and appreciation of Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*. They follow both the book's chronological organization and the author's mental and emotional development, from confident idealism and naiveté to a painfully heightened awareness of all the things, both good and bad, that the war reveals to him about himself and about human nature. The book should appeal to students on a number of levels—as a riveting, fast-paced, and very intense narrative, as a deeply revealing account of the Vietnam War on the ground level of combat forces, and as a personal confession that does not turn away from even the harshest truths. Encourage students to talk and write about their reactions to the story and how they feel they would have behaved if they had been in Caputo's position. You should also encourage them to reflect on the specifics of the Vietnam War, how their view of it has been changed by Caputo's memoir, the nature of war and violence in general, and what it does to the human beings who experience it.

PROLOGUE

Why does the author write, "America seemed omnipotent then"? (p. xiv) He also allows that he and his fellow soldiers thought they were champions of "a cause . . . destined to triumph." (p. xiv) Why did they have such faith in the American cause?

What do we learn from the Prologue about the author's view of the Vietnam War? What are his attitudes toward combat?

Caputo describes the scene on the main line of resistance as "the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as geographical wilderness." (p. xx) What does he mean by this?

What is the relationship the author portrays between soldiers and the American population?

What are Caputo's goals in writing this book?

PART ONE: THE SPLENDID LITTLE WAR

CHAPTER ONE

“At the age of twenty-four, I was more prepared for death than I was for life.” (p. 3)
Why do you think the author opens the first section with this statement? What is he foreshadowing?

How does he describe himself as a young man released from the Marine Corps? (p. 4)
4) What is his relationship to killing? (pp. 3-4) How does he feel about it?

The author writes, “The future would hold no further surprises, good or bad.” (p. 4)
4) Why does he feel this way? What is he trying to communicate?

Why did Caputo join the Marine Corps? (pp. 5-7) Do you imagine his instincts toward heroism were common among young men at that time? How do you think this compares to today’s outlook?

He writes, “Throughout, we were subjected to intense indoctrination.” (p. 12) Describe this process. Why do you believe marines are trained in this manner?

How did basic training change the author? (pp. 21-22)

Describe the Marine Corps birthday ball. (pp. 22-24) What importance does it have for the author? (p. 24)

CHAPTER TWO

What are the author’s memories of his first command? (pp. 25-30) What problems does he face? (pp. 31-33)

How is Caputo described in the fitness reports of his commanding officers? (p. 35) What does this tell us about him?

How are the young soldiers and officers further indoctrinated in the art of war on Okinawa? (p. 36)

CHAPTER THREE

What illusions did Caputo have about war when he was sent to Vietnam? (p. 43)
Do you believe this was typical of soldiers at the time? Why or why not?

Where in Vietnam is Caputo sent? What is the mission? (p. 46)

What are the author's first impressions of Vietnam? (p. 54)

How do the soldiers feel upon arrival? (p. 56)

What do they experience during their first night on watch? (p. 58)

CHAPTER FOUR

What is the author's view of the counteroffensive staged by the ARVN? (p. 62)

What do we know about the ARVN soldiers?

The author describes the Viet Cong as phantoms. Why?

Who was the battalion's first casualty? How does it occur? (p. 63)

Where does the title for Part One, "The Splendid Little War," come from? (p. 66)

Caputo meets two Australian commandos whose patrol had taken a "souvenir" off the body of a dead Viet Cong. What is the "souvenir" and what is the author's reaction to it? (pp. 66-67)

"Since the landing, we had acquired the conviction that we could win this brush-fire war, and win it quickly, if we were only turned loose to fight." (p. 69) The author makes this assertion about his and his fellow soldiers' views at the time. Do you think Caputo still believes this? What was holding them back?

What is the author's reaction to "contact," as he calls confrontation with the enemy? What does he learn from the experience? (p. 71)

Are the officers in Caputo's battalion clear about their mission? What are they supposed to accomplish and how? (p. 74)

Sergeant Colby has a very different take on the coming search-and-destroy mission. What is it, and why does he have this reaction? (p. 75)

CHAPTER FIVE

The author writes, "When the helicopters flew off, a feeling of abandonment came over us." (p. 83) Why? How was this different from the previous firefight? What did they face?

The author recalls, “The patrol that morning had the nightmare quality which characterized most small-unit operations in the war.” (p. 85) What does he mean by this? What is the origin of this nightmare quality?

Describe the village of Hoi-Vuc. (pp. 87-89) How is it unusual?

What happens in Hoi-Vuc? (pp. 89-93) The author writes, “For the first time in my life, I had the experience of being shot at by someone who was trying to kill me specifically.” (p. 93) How does this affect him?

CHAPTER SIX

Chapter Six opens with a description of the war as initially experienced by the author. How does he describe it? How does he describe camp life? How does he describe the fighting?

Caputo recalls a series of events from this part of the war. What are these events? Can you speculate why he remembers and records them? What ties them together?

On hearing Parker and Esposito reminiscing about their long friendship, the author feels embarrassed, “As if I am listening in on the conversation of two lovers who are about to be separated.” (p. 103) Why do you think he feels this way?

What happens to Powell? How does the loss of Powell affect the author? (pp. 105-6)

As they set out on a mission Caputo describes his company. “With our helmets cocked to one side and cigarettes hanging out of our mouths, we pose as hard-bitten veterans for the headquarters marines.” (p. 106) What is he telling us about his battalion and their reaction to the war?

“We have learned that, in the bush, nothing ever happens according to plan. Things just happen, randomly, like automobile accidents.” (p. 106) What do you suppose causes the author to make this observation?

What happens at the hamlet of Giao-Tri? (pp. 109-110)

CHAPTER SEVEN

How does Caputo react the first time he sees the body of an enemy while on patrol? Describe and explain this reaction.

Describe the Viet Cong camp that the author's platoon discovers. (p. 123) How does Caputo react to finding letters and photographs in the camp? What do they mean to him? (p. 124)

On page 127, the author talks about being aware of a "subtle difference" among his men after this action. What was it? How does he describe it?

What are his impressions of this first major firefight? (pp. 127-28)

What are his reactions to encountering the bodies of the dead Viet Cong? (p. 128) When discussing them he uses the first person plural, "we." Can you explain why, in this instance, he includes all of his men in his own personal thoughts?

The author ends this chapter, which describes his first major firefight, thus: "Finally, the sun dropped below the notched rim of the mountains, the Asian mountains that had stood since the beginning of time and probably would still be standing at the end of it." (p. 131) Why do you think he chose this image to end the chapter?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The author's platoon passes through Giao-Tri, the village that had been destroyed earlier. What are the villagers' reactions to the soldier's return? How does it affect him? (pp. 133-34) Why?

Caputo describes his soldiers as "fairly ordinary men who sometimes performed extraordinary acts in the stress of combat, acts of bravery as well as cruelty." (p. 137) Is this how they seem to you? Defend your answer.

Caputo is sent on liberty to Danang. What is Danang like? Has the presence of American soldiers changed the character of the town? If so, how?

What happens to Lemmon toward the end of the author's first combat command? How does it affect Caputo?

How does the author feel about the war at the end of his first combat command? (pp. 149-50)

PART TWO: THE OFFICER IN CHARGE OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER NINE

How does Caputo feel about being reassigned to headquarters? Why? (p. 154)

How is life at headquarters different from the front lines? (pp. 153-55)

Why does Caputo visit C Company? How have things changed since he left for Japan? Why? (pp. 155-57) How does the author react to news of Sullivan's death? (pp. 158-63) Why does he suppose his old platoon is treating him differently? (p. 162)

CHAPTER TEN

Where does Caputo get the title for Part Two, "The Officer in Charge of the Dead"? (p. 175) What does this position entail? (pp. 165-66) How does he describe (and feel about) his new job? (p. 169)

Caputo muses on the phrase "traumatic amputation." (p. 167) Why? What does it mean?

On his first day as Officer in Charge of the Dead, the author is ordered to leave the bodies of four dead Viet Cong in the camp. Why is he given this command? Discuss the impact of this experience on Caputo. (pp. 173-77)

What does Chaplain Ryerson say to the author? (p. 178) What is Caputo's reaction? (p. 179) How does this communication affect his attitude toward the war?

How do the events concerning the Viet Cong corpses affect Caputo's religious beliefs? (p. 179)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

How does Caputo describe being a staff officer? (pp. 184-85) Does this seem like essential work to you? Explain.

Does Caputo see the attack on the airfield coming? (p. 184) Is anything done to prepare for it? Why or why not?

Describe the attack on the airfield. (pp. 186-90) What impact do you think it had on the soldiers stationed at Danang?

CHAPTER TWELVE

In Chapter Twelve we begin to see the effects counting bodies has on Caputo. Describe these effects. Do you think it made a difference that he served on the main line of resistance beforehand?

Caputo goes to the hospital to identify three bodies from C Company. What does he discover? (pp. 198-99) Describe the dream he has in the wake of this experience. (p. 199) What does it show about his state of mind?

The author writes, "In war, a man does not have to be killed or wounded to become a casualty." (p. 207) What does he mean by this? What does he stand to lose?

Describe the questioning of Viet Cong suspects by the ARVN. (pp. 204-8) What happens to the old man at the end of this chapter? How does Caputo describe it? Does it seem to be a commonplace experience?

PART THREE: IN DEATH'S GREY LAND

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

How has the war changed since Caputo first landed at Danang? (pp. 211, 218) Is anything different at headquarters? (pp. 211-15) What, exactly?

Caputo uses the departure of his old battalion, the One-Three, to reflect on the war and its meaning. What are his thoughts? (pp. 215-16)

Caputo's old battalion is replaced by the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. How does he describe these soldiers? He admits that he "was both charmed and saddened by their innocent enthusiasm." (p. 217) Why?

Amid all the killing, why does Levy's death affect the author so much? He even steps out of the narrative to address Levy directly: "As I write this, eleven years after your death, the country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died." (p. 223) What is the author trying to achieve in this passage?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Caputo talks about the unwritten rule, "If he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC'." (p. 229) What does this tell us about the war? He says, "The fighting had not only become more intense, but more vicious. Both we and the Viet Cong began to make a habit of atrocities." (p. 228) Why do you suppose this was the case?

Why did Caputo return to a line company? Did he request it? Why or why not? (pp. 230-31)

Caputo writes, “That is the secret to emotional survival in war, not thinking.” (p. 231) Why is this? What precisely can the soldiers not afford to think about?

In his new platoon, Caputo describes the soldiers under his command: “Looking at them, it was hard to believe that most of them were only nineteen or twenty. For their faces were not those of children, and their eyes had the cold, dull expression of men who are chained to an existence of ruthless practicalities.” (p. 235) Describe the lives of infantry soldiers in Vietnam at the time.

What does “Situation remains the same” mean in the context of the front line? (p. 240) Does its repetition imply that it has a different or more important meaning in the context of this account? What does it mean for Caputo, and for his story?

Caputo reports, “At the end of the month, the Viet Cong staged a small attack on the village.” (p. 240) Describe that attack.

What does the author find in a “quiet quarter” of Saigon while on leave? (p. 245)

The old gunnery sergeant whom Caputo meets while waiting for his transport back to the front is a veteran of Iwo Jima and Korea, yet he says, “Goddamn this war. Goddamn this war.” (p. 248) What is the importance of this statement for the larger narrative?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The author recalls, “Two weeks had passed since Saigon, but I was as tired now as I had been before the R-and-R. No, more tired. It was as if I had had no rest at all, as if no amount of rest could overcome my fatigue.” (p. 250) Why is he so exhausted? Is this true of the men serving under him as well?

The author’s platoon is assigned to clear the village of Hoi-Vuc. How does the author feel at the start of this mission? He says he had “a sudden and mysterious recovery from the virus of fear.” (p. 260) What does he say accounts for this? Why?

The author writes, “Those who had lost the struggle had not changed anything by dying. The deaths of Levy, Simpson, Sullivan, and the others had not made any difference.” (p. 261) What does this say about the author’s changing attitude toward the struggle?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What happens at the pagoda? How do Caputo and his soldiers respond to the action at Hoi-Vuc? How does Caputo perform as an officer?

Caputo writes, “Perhaps that is why some officers make careers of the infantry . . . just to experience a single moment when a group of soldiers under your command and in the extreme stress of combat do exactly what you want them to do, as if they are extensions of yourself.” (p. 268) Comment on what he is describing here.

What does the author experience in the foxhole on the night of shelling? (pp. 272-73) Explain this scene.

Later, during a cease-fire, Caputo and his men encounter a mine. (pp. 279-85) What happens? How does the author respond?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

How does Caputo view the dangers of land mines and booby traps? (p. 288) How do they, in the author’s view, influence or mirror the emotional impact of the war?

How does Sergeant Horne respond to one marine’s breakdown? (p. 289) Why do you think he responds in this way?

Caputo talks about crossing that line between “stability” and the “unstable.” (p. 293) What does he mean by this? What does this distinction say about the war?

What do you think about the destruction of Ha Na? Why did it occur? Was this an inevitable part of the war, or could it have been avoided? Are Caputo and his troops to blame? And, if so, in what way? What does the author think about it? What does Captain Neal think?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The author reports, “That is the level to which we had sunk from the lofty idealism of a year before. We were going to kill people for a few cans of beer and the time to drink them.” (p. 311) What has caused this change in attitude? Why does the captain choose to adopt a new policy? What does this say about how the war was fought?

The author writes, “I was outwardly normal, if a little edgier than usual; but inside, I was full of turbulent emotions and disordered thoughts, and I could not shake that weird sensation of being split in two.” (p. 314) What is the author’s state of mind? What role does it play in his command? Give examples from the text.

Caputo also writes, “Hatred welled up in me; a hatred for this green, moldy, alien world in which we fought and died.” (p. 315) What is the origin of this hatred? Who is it directed at? What role does it play in the events to follow? Earlier, the author had confessed the hatred he developed for the enemy, “a hatred buried so deep that I could not then admit its existence.” (p. 231) Why did he have so much hatred? Is this a normal part of war? How do you think Caputo feels about the enemy today?

The author writes, “In my heart, I hoped Allen would find some excuse for killing them, and Allen had read my heart.” (p. 317) Why does the author want these two men dead? What fuels his desire?

What happened when they tried to capture the two Viet Cong at Giao-Tri? Was the mission successful? Who was killed in the end? (pp. 317-21) What are the repercussions for Allen, Crowe, and Caputo? (pp. 321-22)

Caputo recalls, “They had taught us to kill and had told us to kill, and now they were going to court-martial us for killing.” (p. 322) What does he mean by this statement?

What does Caputo consider the explanatory or extenuating circumstances of the incident at Giao-Tri? Does the Marine Corps accept his thinking? (p. 323) What defense does Caputo’s lawyer use? What do you think about this application of the rule of law in wartime? Is it fair? Why or why not?

Caputo writes, “And so I learned about the wide gulf that divides the facts from the truth.” (p. 329) What does he mean by this? What are the facts of the case? What is the truth of it? How do, and how should, facts and truth apply to men at war?

What is the outcome of the trial? Do you think it is just? (p. 336)

Describe the South Vietnamese insurrection. (p. 334) What does it tell us of the war?

EPILOGUE

What purpose does the Epilogue serve? How has Caputo changed since his time as a soldier?

How does Caputo relate the final month of the war? (pp. 341-42) Do you think the outcome was inevitable? Or could it have been avoided? Explain.

What was the author’s “grand gesture of personal protest?” (pp. 341-42)

How is the evacuation of Saigon described? (p. 344)

POSTSCRIPT

What does Caputo tell us about the difficulty of writing this “intensely personal and private experience?” (p. 352)

THE WAR

How do Caputo’s experiences in Vietnam affect or alter his view of war?

How do they change him as a person?

What were Caputo’s attitudes toward the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese when he arrived in Vietnam? What about when he left the conflict? What do you believe they were when he wrote *A Rumor of War*?

What did you learn about the Vietnam War from reading this memoir? What did you learn about war in general?

The author writes, “I knew then that something in me was drawn to war. It might have been an unholy attraction, but it was there and it could not be denied.” (p. 71) What is your impression of war after reading this book? Can you understand this “unholy attraction?” Where does it come from?

How do you rate *A Rumor of War* as a critique of war? What do you believe Caputo is trying to achieve with this book? Is he successful? Defend your answer.

What is the effect of Vietnam on the author’s religious beliefs?

What did this book teach you about the psychic toll of Vietnam? How did the war affect the hearts and minds of those who fought it? How does it still affect them?

What is your overall impression of the war effort? Despite the difficulties the soldiers faced, was the war effectively managed? Explain why you do or don’t think so.

Caputo makes it clear that the war was being fought not over territory but over a body count. Looking back on the narrative, how did this reality affect the author and his men? What does it say to you about the war they were fighting?

Caputo makes it very clear that he takes exception to those who claim the war was winnable. Why does he think this? What do you think?

Like many tales of modern military conflict, *A Rumor of War* tugs between glorifying and damning warfare. What is the meaning and purpose of such tension?

“We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age.” (p. xv) What was lost for the author and his fellow soldiers? What do you suppose the long-term effects were for the author and the other soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War?

THE CONTEXT

On the first page of the Prologue, the author writes, “This book does not pretend to be a history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy. . . . It is simply a story about war.” Why do you think Caputo makes this disclaimer? Discuss the book in the context of the time during which it was written. What do you imagine was its importance when this book was first published? What makes it important today?

Caputo writes, “Only ten years separated the two events, yet the humiliation of our exit from Vietnam, compared to the high confidence with which we had entered, made it seem as if a century lay between them.” (p. xiii) Discuss the period he is referring to and the reasons for this change in American attitudes.

The author reflects in the Epilogue, “My mind shot back a decade, to that day we had marched into Vietnam, swaggering, confident, and full of idealism. We had believed we were there for a high moral purpose. But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten.” (p. 345) What caused this unfortunate transformation to occur?

Research what has often been called the “war at home.” This phrase refers to America’s many and various domestic struggles over Vietnam policy. Describe these struggles. Why did we become involved in, and why did we eventually exit, the conflict? What finally made Vietnam so controversial, and what were the results of this controversy?

BRANCHING OUT FROM THE TEXT

“When readers came to the end,” writes Caputo, “I hoped they would look into the mirror, or, better yet, into their souls, and ask themselves, ‘Now what do I think? How would I have behaved if I had been there?’” (p. 350) What do you think? How would you have behaved? In a brief essay, consider specific passages in the text in order to compare and contrast your own impressions with how Caputo thought, felt, and acted.

SUGGESTIONS FOR
FURTHER READING

Dispatches by Michael Herr; *The 13th Valley* by John M. Del Vecchio; *Close Quarters* by Larry Heinemann; *Born on the Fourth of July* by Ron Kovic; *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien; *Fields of Fire* by James Webb; *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright; *In Pharaoh's Army* by Tobias Wolff; *Fire in the Lake* by Frances FitzGerald; *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam; *A Bright Shining Lie* by Neil Sheehan; *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque; *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane; *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo; *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* by Siegfried Sassoon; *The Naked and the Dead* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* by Norman Mailer; *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller; and *Fortunate Son* by Lewis B. Puller, Jr.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Discharged from the Marine Corps in 1967, Philip Caputo went on to a prizewinning career as a journalist, covering the war in Beirut and the fall of Saigon before leaving the *Chicago Tribune* to devote himself to writing full-time. His is the author of five novels (*The Voyage*, *Horn of Africa*, *DelCorso's Gallery*, *Indian Country*, and *Equation for Evil*), a second volume of memoir (*Means of Escape*), and a collection of novellas (*Exiles*). A contributing editor for *National Geographic Adventure* magazine, Philip Caputo has also written for *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He and his wife, Leslie Blanchard Ware, live in Connecticut.

Edward Kastenmeier wrote this teacher's guide. An editor at Vintage Books, he lives in New York City.

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RAY BRADBURY'S FAHRENHEIT 451, Tim Hamilton
ROBERT FROST'S POEMS, Robert Frost
A RUMOR OF WAR, Philip Caputo*
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