



Harmless

by Brett Neveu
directed by Edward Sobel

STUDY GUIDE

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BRETT NEVEU

Born in San Pablo, Calif., Brett Neveu was raised in Newton, Iowa, a small Midwestern town similar to those that are the settings for many of his plays. And though his works tackle issues of national importance — school violence; the effects of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; drug addiction; the dissolution of the nuclear family; the legacy of slavery — they're always filtered through the modest lives of the residents of these small towns.

“These plays look at how people in power, the decisions that they make, trickle down into everyday life,” Neveu says. “These are families and people just struggling along, people who have to go to work, make a living and keep everything balanced. Then some arbitrary decision throws that balance off.”

In the Louisiana-set *Heritage* (2006) the state government decides to renovate an old slave plantation, using inmates at a local prison as cheap labor. This decision sets off a tragic series of events that amplify how the legacy of that dark chapter in American history and its present implications on class systems continue to ripple through the lives of whites and blacks, inmates and prison guards.

The Last Barbeque (2000), an early work originally produced in Chicago by The Aardvark, deftly examines that distinctly all-American activity, the backyard barbeque. But Neveu subverts it by focusing on a family that concerns itself with the minutia of preparations — the setting up of a croquet set, the location of the charcoal — so as not to concern itself with its imminent dissolution.

Edward Sobel, who directs *Harmless*, previously collaborated with Neveu on the world-premiere productions of *American Dead* (2004) and *Heritage*. As Director of New Play Development at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Sobel also has commissioned Neveu twice.

“There’s incredibly rich subtext in his plays,” Sobel says. “Brett often writes characters who are dealing with great depths of emotion but who are unable or unwilling to articulate them.”

Positive Aspects to a Nuclear Winter — produced in 2003 with its original title, *the go*, by Chicago’s Terrapin Theatre — depicts a man, Ross, who volunteers at a drug rehabilitation center by day and struggles to be a single parent to his young daughter by night. Barely able to keep the façade intact, Ross finally crumples under the pressure of his disintegrating family and past failures, effectively abandoning his daughter while goading the crystal-meth addict he counsels into building a new meth lab.

Similarly, in *Eric LaRue* (2002), the mother of a boy who shot and killed three classmates struggles to come to an understanding of how she should feel about this act of violence. The local pastor, well-intentioned but ineffectual, sets up an informal meeting between the mother and the mothers of the victims. The result is simultaneously darkly comic and devastating: None of the participants quite know how to say what they are feeling.

Russ Tutterow, the artistic director of Chicago Dramatists — where Neveu has been a resident playwright — directed *Drawing War* (2001) and finds a familiar aspect to Neveu’s voice.

“His work has a real Midwestern feel about it,” Tutterow says. “A lot of his work, especially his earlier work, is about people in smaller towns in the Midwest — it feels like home to me. Of course, strange things go on in Brett’s small towns, but they did in my hometown, too.”

“Brett’s plays operate like a mystery,” Sobel says. “He’s very skillful in his ability to disclose — or withhold — information. You don’t know why these people in his plays are behaving the way they do, but you sense the reason is important and will be revealed to you.”

An important presence at several Chicago theaters for the better part of a decade, Neveu is beginning to attract attention internationally. *Eric LaRue* was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon and London last year as part of its “Postcards from America” series. The play garnered praise for its clear-eyed look at the forces that drive a young man to commit horrific acts of violence and the dazed search for understanding such brutalities leave in their wake.

Neveu also is a company member of A Red Orchid Theatre, which has produced three of his plays. A fourth, *The Meek*, will be presented in April 2007.

“Brett is beginning to move away from his ‘small-town’ plays,” says Guy Van Swearingen, Red Orchid’s artistic director. “He’s starting to work on a wider canvas.”

Harmless is the latest installment from this increasingly exciting writer — and a step in a new direction.

“There’s a coldness to *Harmless* that’s less present in other of Brett’s work,” Sobel says. “Whereas a play like *American Dead* is incredibly compassionate and has characters who are trying to thaw emotionally, there’s an underlying anxiety about the world in *Harmless*. I wouldn’t characterize Brett as an angry writer, but this play feels anguished to me.

“This is a sharp, pointed little play. It’s like a stiletto: You’re walking along, and suddenly you feel a pain in your side and the blood is beginning to blossom on your shirt. And before you even know it, you’ve been hit.”

BRETT NEVEU: A SELECTED PRODUCTION TIMELINE

- 2000: *The Last Barbeque* (The Aardvark, Chicago)
The Last Barbeque (The Asylum Theatre, Las Vegas)
- 2001: *Drawing War* (Chicago Dramatists, Chicago)
The Last Barbeque (The 29th Street Rep, New York City)
- 2002: *Empty* (Stage Left Theatre, Chicago)
Eagle Hills, Eagle Ridge, Eagle Landing (The Factory Theatre, Chicago)
Eagle Hills, Eagle Ridge, Eagle Landing (Spring Theatreworks, New York City)
Eric LaRue (A Red Orchid Theatre, Chicago)
- 2003: *the go* (Terrapin Theatre, Chicago)
- 2004: *American Dead* (American Theater Company, Chicago)
Eagle Hills, Eagle Ridge, Eagle Landing (remount, Spring Theatreworks)
twentyone (Spring Theatreworks)
- 2005: *4 Murders* (A Red Orchid Theatre)
Eric LaRue (Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon and London, England)
- 2006: *The Earl* (A Red Orchid Theatre)
Heritage (American Theater Company)
Eric LaRue (Vs. Theatre Company, Los Angeles)
- 2007: *Harmless* (TimeLine Theatre Company, Chicago)
The Meek (A Red Orchid Theatre)

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Known by several names throughout history and often regarded as a failing of the victim, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) only became officially recognized as a psychological disorder in 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association included it in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*.

Triggered by a traumatic, life-threatening event, PTSD manifests itself in such symptoms as flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, hyper-vigilance and other psychological effects indicating increased arousal, avoidance and re-experience of the traumatic event. Combat veterans are at particular risk for the disorder.

Written evidence of PTSD occurs in Egypt as far back as three thousand years, with additional accounts affirming its presence among Greeks and Romans. In “A Short History of PTSD: From Thermopylae to Hue Soldiers Have Always Had a Disturbing Reaction to War” (*The Veteran*, 2005), writer Steve Bentley observes the many labels it has accrued. In the 17th Century, the Swiss termed it “nostalgia;” around the same time, the Germans referred to it as *heimweh*, “homesickness;” later, the Spanish named it *estar roto*, “to be broken.”

In America, the beginning of the Civil War ushered in a new level of power and efficiency in weaponry. This resulted in greater numbers of soldiers who suffered negative psychological effects. Dr. Jacob Mendez Da Costa, a surgeon, wrote an account of these effects — including heart palpitations, sweating, tremors and fatigue — that he termed “Soldier’s Heart.” (The illness also was known as “Da Costa’s Syndrome” at the time.) The Army began screening soldiers for susceptibility to the malady; those who showed signs of the illness in battle were prescribed digitalis, which strengthens the heart’s contractions, or sent home. This discharge was not entirely honorable: The victims were thought to lack discipline, and their symptoms seen as indicative of faults located in the person.

World War I brought with it still greater advances in weaponry. PTSD sufferers now were thought to suffer from “shell shock” — that is, a physiological concussion to the brain brought on by the intensity of artillery fire. Still, those who suffered from shell shock were considered cowards or deserters. In England, more than 300 soldiers were executed for those charges between 1914 and 1918. It was not until August 2006 that the British Ministry of Defence issued formal pardons to those soldiers.

In World War II, prevailing attitudes moved PTSD from the physiological realm back into the psychological. The military began extensive screening of draftees and, according to Bentley, rejected roughly 5 million men. Nevertheless, PTSD — or “battle fatigue,” its then-current *nom de guerre* — was fairly rampant in combat veterans. Still, the pervasive belief that the illness was a deficiency of the victim remained: Sufferers often were only prescribed a period of rest before being returned to the front lines.

As opposed to World War II — which has been called, somewhat oxymoronicly, “The Good War” — America’s participation in the Vietnam War was viewed with well-

documented moral disdain. Returning soldiers were not greeted as heroes; on the contrary, they were openly and loudly derided. These factors, among others, paved the way for legions of PTSD cases in returning veterans. Indeed, for a time it was called Post-Vietnam Syndrome, and the sheer multitude of victims was a driving force in the American Psychiatric Association's decision to finally recognize PTSD as an official mental disorder.

As recently as 2004, the year in which *Harmless* is set, roughly 161,000 Vietnam veterans still received disability payments for PTSD.

Despite being an accepted disorder, evidence from the Iraq War shows our military is still struggling with ways to identify and treat those suffering from the malady. The Department of Defense has issued reports indicating an attempt to better recognize early warning signs of PTSD.

Nevertheless, with a dearth of available reinforcements, the DOD, according to an article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (March 2006), is sending traumatized soldiers back into battle.

TIMELINE

1871: During the American Civil War, Dr. Jacob Da Costa's paper categorizes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms as "Soldier's Heart."

1914-1918: In World War I, PTSD is termed "shell shock" and believed to be a physiological response (i.e. concussions to the brain) caused by the impact of explosions.

1941-1945: The United States' involvement in World War II sees nearly 2 million soldiers suffering from PTSD-related symptoms, which will be recognized as psychological by the war's end. These symptoms are called "combat exhaustion" or "battle fatigue."

1950-1953: Nearly 25 percent (roughly 50,000) of American combat veterans in the Korean War are believed to suffer from PTSD.

1961-1975: 2.8 million American soldiers serve in the Vietnam War. One later study estimated that nearly 900,000 have exhibited either full-blown or partial PTSD.

1980: The American Psychiatric Association includes PTSD as a psychiatric disorder in its third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

1991: Though the percentage of PTSD sufferers is much lower in the Persian Gulf War, owing to relatively limited combat operations, studies in 1996 and 1999 showed a growing number of soldiers experiencing the illness in the years following the campaign.

2003: A New England Journal of Medicine study finds one in six returning Iraq War veterans suffer from PTSD.

2004: Nearly 30 years after the cessation of fighting in Vietnam, more than 160,000 veterans receive disability benefits for PTSD.

2006: Within six months of each other, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *The Hartford Courant* and CBS News report the U.S. Department of Defense is sending American soldiers suffering from PTSD — many of whom are on antidepressants — back into active duty.

THE ART OF COMBAT

Given the horrors encountered on the battlefield, it's no surprise that so many combat veterans attempt to channel their experiences through creative outlets. There is a rich history of soldiers, burdened by all they have seen, who have returned home and sought to make sense of their experiences by incorporating them into works of art.

Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* drew on his experiences as a young man sent to the front lines in World War I. Eschewing tales of heroism and derring-do, the novel instead paints a picture of the pointlessness of war, with the protagonist, Paul Bäumer, growing increasingly numb to the monotony of artillery fire and death. When his death occurs, it happens on a day so quiet that the report reads only, "All quiet on the Western Front" — further underscoring the limited value a war places upon human life.

Scores of WWII veterans have sought to make sense of war through poetry, prose and visual arts.

The poet and novelist James Dickey, perhaps best remembered for his 1970 novel *Deliverance*, recalled his days as a WWII fighter pilot in the poem "The Firebombing," which opened his 1966 National Book Award-winning collection *Buckdancer's Choice*. In this excerpt, Dickey comments upon the disconnection between the firebomber and his victims:

*It is this detachment,
The honored aesthetic evil,
The greatest sense of power in one's life,
That must be shed in bars, or by whatever
Means, by starvation
Visions in well-stocked pantries.*

Kurt Vonnegut's seminal book *Slaughterhouse-Five* was inspired by his experiences as a prisoner of war during the bombing of Dresden, Germany, in 1945. The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut, was captured during the Battle of the Bulge.

He and fellow POWs found refuge in a subterranean meat locker. Both Vonnegut and Pilgrim emerged from their underground refuge to find a destroyed city: 135,000 German civilians had perished during the bombing.

In one interview, Vonnegut remarked, “People in our war, the good war, were sickened by [the killing] afterward and would not talk about it. When we went to war, we had two fears. One was that we’d get killed. The other was that we might have to kill someone.”

He noted that writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* “not only freed me, I think it freed writers, because the Vietnam War made our leadership and our motives so scruffy and essentially stupid that we could finally talk about something bad that we did to the worst people imaginable, the Nazis, and what I saw, what I had to report, made war look so ugly. You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff. You’re not expecting it.”

Joseph Heller served as a bombardier in WWII, and his experience would pave the way for one of the most successful novels of all time. In telling the story of Capt. John Yossarian, a bombardier terrified of dying, Heller perfectly captured the absurdity of war, summed up by a title that has since become a mainstay in our lexicon: *Catch-22*. The catch was a bureaucrat’s dream — an illogical, no-win situation. Yossarian runs up against the power of the catch when he attempts to get grounded from his flight missions: The only way to be grounded is if the medical officer thinks one is crazy; however, if one asks the medical officer to be grounded, that person is obviously not crazy.

In an interview, Heller spoke about the how he perceived the war during his service: “It was fun in the beginning. We were kids, nineteen, twenty years old, and had real machine guns in our hands. Not those things at the penny arcades at Coney Island. You got the feeling that there was something glorious about it. Glorious excitement. The first time I saw a plane on fire and parachutes coming down, I looked at it with a big grin on my face. I was disappointed in those early missions of mine where nobody shot at us. ... I didn’t realize until I read Paul Fussell’s book on World War One that almost everybody who took my artillery shell or bombing grenade was going to be dismembered, mutilated. Not the way it is in the movies where somebody gets hit, clutches his chest and falls down dead. They are blown apart. Blown into pieces.”

The Vietnam War also spawned a number of challenging works by veterans.

David Rabe wrote a trilogy of plays focusing on his experience in Vietnam: *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones* and *Streamers*. In a published introduction to the plays, Rabe recounts the process of writing these works in the wee hours of the morning: “Often in those nights, I amazed myself. Not at the quality or art of what I wrote but at the kinds of thoughts I was having when the feelings that most filled me then, twined and (I now think) primal, were given a shape in language that made them ideas I understood instead of shifting phantoms possessing me.” These three piercing plays, interrogating the horrors of the war, were written “from the wish to discover. Or perhaps from the wish to formulate my discoveries. Or perhaps, even more correctly, from the need to see if I have *made* any discoveries.”

When filmmaker Robert Altman — a bomber pilot in WWII — set about adapting Richard Hooker's novel *M*A*S*H* (itself based upon Hooker's experiences as a doctor in a mobile army hospital during the Korean War) to the big screen, he attempted to craft a critique of the Vietnam War, then in full swing. Although he tried to eliminate all traces of the book's Korean setting in the movie, the studio insisted upon a title card at the beginning that located the action in Korea.

Speaking of the film in a 2001 Associated Press interview, Altman said, "Our mandate was bad taste. If anybody had a joke in the worst taste, it had a better chance of getting into the film, because nothing was in worse taste than that war itself."

Oliver Stone, a Vietnam veteran, directed a trilogy of movies set in and around the effects of the war: *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven & Earth* (1993). In a 1997 interview with Harry Kreisler, Stone talked about the personal changes that occurred because of fighting in a war:

"Perhaps one of the most significant things I learned over there was that there's sort of a perceived life that you get when you're raised. College students get it, you read it in books; your thinking is perceptions that have been taught to you. Very Pavlovian in a way. And when I got to the infantry, I really saw life smack up in front of my face. It was a non-cerebral exercise. Six inches in front of my face — survive! You have to rely on your sense, your smell, your sight — all your senses come into play. Tactile. As a result, you never can get quite back."

Few Vietnam veterans have been able to write about their experiences as richly or dynamically as Tim O'Brien, whose celebrated collection of stories *The Things They Carried* focuses on the tour of duty of a soldier named Tim O'Brien. One story, "The Man I Killed," illuminates the dehumanizing psychic weight of killing another human being. In the story, the narrator has just killed a Vietnamese man. As his fellow soldiers alternately tease him and try to comfort him, he can only repeat descriptions of the dead man's body ("his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole") and attempt to invent a history for the nameless stranger whose life he has ended.

Given the birth of new technologies, it's not surprising that one of the first creative outlets for Iraq War soldiers is blogs. Through this mode of communication, soldiers are able to "publish" their thoughts with an unheard-of immediacy. In 2005, *USA Today* reported that the number of soldier-authored blogs was expected to top 1,000 by the end of that year.

One of the most notable blogs was written by Colby Buzzell, a former infantry soldier stationed in Mosul, Iraq. Buzzell's blog reported both the mundane and terrifying aspects of a soldier's existence. The blog gained almost instant popularity, with several thousand visitors daily. It was taken down by the Army, which claimed to be concerned that Buzzell's postings contained information too important to be posted. Buzzell, now Stateside, has since released a book about his experiences, *My War*. It joins other first-person accounts of tours of duty in Iraq, such as John Crawford's *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* and Jason Christopher Hartley's *Just Another Soldier*.

TIMELINE

1916: Erich Paul Remark enlists in the German Army, fighting on the front lines during World War I.

1918: Ernest Hemingway begins serving as an ambulance driver in Italy during WWI, where he will be injured by artillery fire.

1929: Remark, writing under the pseudonym Erich Maria Remarque, publishes *All Quiet on the Western Front* (translated from the German, *Im Westen nichts Neues*).

1929: Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which recounts his injury and subsequent love for his nurse, is published.

1943: Robert Altman enlists in the US Air Force, serving as a co-pilot on B-24 bombers in World War II.

1944: Joseph Heller is stationed on the island of Corsica, where he serves as a bombardier in WWII. He will fly 60 missions before returning to the US.

1945: While a prisoner of war in Germany, Kurt Vonnegut narrowly escapes death during the Allies' firebombing of Dresden.

1961: Heller publishes *Catch-22*. Initially given a cold reception, more than 8 million copies of the book have been sold to date.

1967: Oliver Stone enlists in the Army and deploys to Vietnam.

1969: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is published.

1969: Tim O'Brien begins his tour of duty in Vietnam.

1970: Altman's film *M*A*S*H* is released. Though the story is set during the Korean War, Altman intends the film as a commentary on the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam.

1973: O'Brien's war memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, is published. It will be followed by the National Book Award winner *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and *The Things They Carried* (1990), among others.

1981: A group of Vietnam combat veterans create a historic and artistic collection that eventually would become the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, 1801 S. Indiana Ave., Chicago.

1986: Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is released; it is nominated for eight Academy Awards and wins four, including Best Picture and Best Director. It is the first film in Stone's trilogy about the Vietnam War. The others are *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven & Earth* (1993).

1990: Anthony Swofford serves in a U.S. Marine Corps Surveillance and Target Acquisition/Scout-Sniper platoon during the Gulf War.

2003: *Jarhead*, Swofford's memoir, is published. It will be made into a movie in 2005.

THE UNITED STATES V. JAKE BAKER

While attending the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1994, 20-year-old Jake Baker began submitting stories to an Internet newsgroup called alt.sex.stories. The stories' benign titles — "Gone Fishin'," "A Day at Work," "Going for a Walk" — belied their content, which was graphically pornographic and violent.

One of the stories — named after a female classmate of Baker's (referred to in subsequent court documents as Jane Doe) — follows the narrator and a male friend as they abduct, rape, torture (using, among other items, a hot curling iron) and, finally, murder the woman.

When the stories came to the attention of the university — through the 16-year-old daughter of a Michigan alumnus, who was living in Moscow — the reaction was swift. University police contacted Baker, who admitted to writing the stories and allowed the officers to search his room and student Internet account. In addition to the stories, the officers found e-mails Baker had written to Arthur Gonda, a friend living in Ontario, Canada, that contained similarly graphic fiction, as well as a chilling statement: "Just thinking about it any more doesn't do the trick ... I need to do it."

Determining Baker to be a danger to the student body in general and Jane Doe in particular, university President James Duderstadt suspended Baker without the formality of a hearing, enacting a Regent's By-Law that gave him the authority to do so. After being escorted to his dorm room, where he collected some belongings, Baker temporarily moved into a hotel off-campus before returning home to Ohio.

On February 9, 1995, the FBI arrested Baker. He subsequently was indicted on six counts of violating 18 U.S.C. s 875 (c) — "Whoever transmits in interstate or foreign commerce any communication containing any threat to kidnap any person or any threat to injure the person of another, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than five years, or both."

Five counts stemmed from Baker's e-mail communications with Gonda; the sixth involved his story about his classmate. Initially denied bail, Baker eventually was released on a \$10,000 bond.

Amid cries of censorship and concerns about the trampling of the right to free speech — at one point, the ACLU got involved over Duderstadt's actions — Baker prepared to stand trial.

On March 15, 1995, the charge originating from the Jane Doe story was dropped. Baker's legal team fought the other five, claiming that the stories were fictional and Baker had no intention of acting out the details.

In June 1995, Judge Avern Cohn agreed, dismissing the remaining charges. The government's appeal was denied in January 1997.

TIMELINE

October 1994 - January 1995: Jake Baker, a student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, posts a series of graphic stories to the newsgroup alt.sex.stories, including one that depicts the abduction, rape, torture and murder of a female classmate of Baker's, "Jane Doe."

December 1994 - January 1995: Baker sends e-mails to Arthur Gonda in Ontario, Canada, describing the kidnapping, rape, and murder of a woman.

January 19, 1995: After reading the Jane Doe story, a teenage girl living in Moscow reports it to her father, a Michigan alumnus. He contacts the university.

January 20, 1995: University police contact Baker, who waives his Miranda rights and admits to writing and posting the stories. With his permission, the officers search Baker's room and his student Internet account; they find an unpublished story and the e-mail conversations.

February 2, 1995: University President James Duderstadt suspends Baker on the grounds that he is an immediate threat to the woman named in his story.

February 9, 1995: The FBI arrests Baker on the basis of his stories and e-mail to Gonda. He is charged with violating six counts of 18 U.S.C. section 875(c).

February 15, 1995: Baker is indicted by a grand jury.

February 17, 1995: Baker pleads not guilty.

March 15, 1995: The criminal charge based on the Jane Doe story is dropped.

June 21, 1995: The remaining charges are dismissed.

November 21, 1995: The government appeals the dismissal.

January 29, 1997: The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upholds the dismissal of charges against Baker, ruling that the e-mail messages did not constitute a credible threat.

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Another Resource:

The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, <http://www.nvvam.org/>. Founded in 1981 by a group of combat veterans of the Vietnam War, the museum is at 1801 S. Indiana Ave., Chicago.