



In Country

By Bobbie Ann Mason
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Introduction

In the summer of 1984, the war in Vietnam comes home to Samantha Hughes, whose father, Dwayne, was killed there before she was born. The soldier-boy in the picture never changed; he seemed so innocent. "Astronauts have been to the moon," she blurted out to the face in the picture. "You missed Watergate. I was in the second grade."

Her father had died with his secrets. But her uncle Emmett was walking around with his. Sam has been fretting about Emmett all summer, worrying that his tour in Vietnam could have exposed him to Agent Orange, which may explain the aches, pains, and rashes that seem to crop up when he least expects them.

As Sam grapples with the challenges of late adolescence -- struggling to choose a college, sharing secrets with her friend Dawn, breaking up with her boyfriend, and coming to terms with her feelings for Tom, one of Emmett's veteran buddies -- she also must confront her need to know more about what happened to her father and the other Americans who served in Vietnam. Sam reads every history of the conflict she can find and asks questions of her family, many of whom seem reluctant to explore their memories.

In her ongoing search for information, Sam travels with Emmett and her grandmother from their home in rural Kentucky to Washington, D.C. to see the newly installed Vietnam Veterans Memorial. *In Country* takes readers along on Sam's journey from confusion and longing to acceptance and understanding.

Questions for Discussion

1. Describe the complex personalities of Sam Hughes, Mawmaw Hughes, and Emmett Smith as we come to know them in the opening pages of *In Country*. In what ways are these travel companions ill-suited for one another? Given the nature of their trip, were you surprised by the humorous moments that arose?
2. "It was the summer of the Michael Jackson Victory tour and the Bruce Springsteen *Born in the U.S.A.* tour, neither of which Sam got to go to." How did the many references to contemporary music in this novel aid in your appreciation of the era? What do these songs and their lyrics enable Sam to understand, and how do they connect to the rock n' roll music of her father's generation? Why do you think the author chose to include them?
3. How would you characterize Sam's relationship with her boyfriend, Lonnie Malone? How do Sam and Lonnie differ in their appreciation of Emmett's situation as a Vietnam veteran? In what ways does Sam's romantic encounter with Tom, an older friend of Emmett's, alter her feelings for Lonnie? What explains Sam's attraction to Tom?
4. What are some of the rumors about Emmett Smith spread by Hopewell citizens? How does Sam feel about these stories about her uncle? Does any of the local gossip seem grounded in reality? To what extent would you characterize Emmett as a sympathetic character?
5. What role do episodes of the television program *M*A*S*H* play in *In Country*? Why do you think this fictional depiction of military life in the Korean War resonates for Sam, and how does the show affect Emmett? Are there other television programs you know of that function as a form of social commentary in the way that *M*A*S*H* does for these characters?
6. How does the news of Dawn's pregnancy affect Sam, and what does Sam's reaction suggest about her feelings about parenthood, independence, and responsibility? How might Sam's unique family situation influence her thoughts on her friend's becoming a parent?
7. To what extent is *In Country* a coming-of-age novel? How are the challenges that Sam experiences as a young woman on the cusp of adulthood connected to the issues she faces in coming to terms with her father's death in Vietnam? What is at the heart of what Sam is wrestling with, and how does she go about finding the answers she seeks?
8. Emmett tells Sam: "You can't do what we did and then be happy about it. And nobody lets you forget it." What are some of the ways in which the Vietnamese conflict continues to affect these characters' lives decades after the fact? How do the citizens of Hopewell reflect the variety of American sentiments about the war in Vietnam? Were there any depictions of life in Vietnam that captured your imagination?
9. Describe some of the emotions that Sam experiences when she reads her father's wartime diary. Why does Sam decide to run away and camp out in Cawood's Pond after reading her father's final words? How does Sam's adventure, and Emmett's coming to find her, change her understanding of her father's life and affect her development as a young woman?
10. In the third part of *In Country*, Sam, Mawmaw, and Emmett finally reach the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Describe the different reactions each character has in the moment of seeing the wall for the first time. What was significant about this event, and why do you think the author chose to end the book at this venue? How did you interpret the final image of the book?

About the Author

Bobbie Ann Mason has won the PEN/Hemingway Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Book Award, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her books include **In Country**, **Shiloh and Other Stories**, **Clear Springs: A Family Story**, and **Feather Crowns**. She lives in her native Kentucky.