



# LETTERS HOME

Inspired by the New York Times article “The Things They Wrote”  
and the HBO Documentary *Last Letters Home*

Adapted by William Massolia



## Classroom Study Guide

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## Hello from Griffin Theatre!

We are thrilled that you have chosen to make *Letters Home* a part of your classroom this year. This guide has been designed to extend your students' experience of our production and make it a more meaningful and educational adventure for everyone involved.

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## Who is Griffin Theatre?

The mission of the Griffin Theatre Company is to create extraordinary and meaningful theatrical experiences for both children and adults by building bridges of understanding between generations that instill in its audience an appreciation of the performing arts. Through artistic collaboration, the Griffin Theatre Company produces literary adaptations, original work and classic plays that challenge and inspire with wit, style and compassion for the audience.

### OTHER TOURING PRODUCTIONS

#### THE STINKY CHEESE MAN AND OTHER FAIRLY STUPID TALES

Based on the book by Jon Scieszka  
Adapted by William Massolia

After Jack climbs up his beanstalk, he's trapped by a man-eating Giant. Jack's only means of escape is to keep the Giant entertained with stories. However, these fractured fairy tales aren't what you think.

*For grades Pre-K - 2*



#### FRINDLE

Based on the book by Andrew Clements  
Adapted by William Massolia

Some people might say that Nicholas Allen is a maverick. But his new language arts teacher, the notorious Mrs. Granger, thinks he's a hooligan. Things spiral out of control when Nick's simple class prank turns into a nationwide phenomenon.

*For grades K - 5*



#### GHOSTS OF WAR

by Ryan Smithson  
Adapted for the stage by William Massolia

*Ghosts of War* is a powerful memoir that will teach young people about the importance of volunteerism in their community and beyond. They will learn to not just think about the way they can change the world, or how they wish it could be, but to be a part of the change they wish to see in the world.

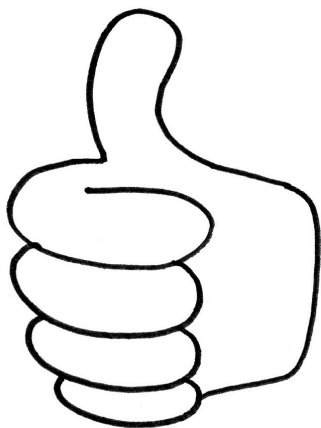
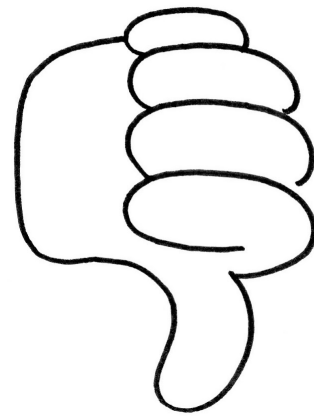
*For grades 7 - 12*



Before attending the play, please review the following tips with your students to ensure an enjoyable experience for everyone at the theatre.

### **DON'T:**

- Put your feet up on the seat in front of you or kick the chair in front of you.
- Take pictures during the play: this is really distracting for the actors.
- Talk to the people next to you during the play.
- Get up and move around during the play.



### **DO:**

- Laugh when the play is funny.
- Be attentive to the actors.
- Applaud during the play.
- Applaud when the play is over.
- Arrive to the theatre on time.
- Use the restroom before the play starts.
- Turn all electronics off before the play starts.
- Have fun!

*Letters Home* puts the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq front and center by bringing to life actual letters written by soldiers serving in the Middle East. The production is inspired by the New York Times Op-Ed Article “The Things They Wrote” and the subsequent HBO documentary *Last Letters Home*, and additionally uses letters and correspondences from Frank Schaeffer’s books, *Voices From the Front*, *Letters Home From America’s Military Family*, *Faith of Our Sons*, and *Keeping Faith*.

### WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Without politicizing, the play gives audiences a powerful portrait of the soldier experience in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The initial production was critically acclaimed and was nominated for a Joseph Jefferson Award for “Outstanding New Play.” Although the title of the play implies that all the letters are from soldiers, the piece includes a small number of correspondences from parents—their words, being no less important. These letters were written under the most difficult of circumstances; the disorientation of training, deployment, separation from family and loved ones and combat, and occupation duties in Afghanistan and Iraq. One theme seems to unite their diverse voices; the belief that the person standing beside you is more important than you are. They also help define for the audience—patriotism and what it means to serve our country today, through acts of bravery, compassion, social responsibility, sense of community and brotherhood. Collectively the production gives a voice to a generation that went to war against terror in Afghanistan and to war in Iraq, for reasons that are still being debated and who are still fighting and dying in those wars today. More importantly, the play reveals the humanity that lies within the war as seen through the eyes of the men and women fighting it.



The history of writing letters home dates back to the earliest American wars. Here are some excerpts of some letters found in *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*. Do you see parallels between all of them?

December 12th, 1862  
From: Clara Barton, Nurse  
"...the acres of little shelter tents are dark and still as death. no wonder for as I gazed sorrowfully upon them. I thought I could almost hear the slow flap of the grim messenger's wings, as one by one he sought and selected his victims for the morning sacrifice... Oh northern mothers wives and sisters... would to Heaven that I could bear for you the concentrated woe which is so soon to follow..."

June 18th, 1918  
From: Ed Lukert, First Lieutenant  
"...We were all subjected to several different kinds of gas today, with and without masks... It sure is horrible stuff, honey."

November 15th, 1918  
From: Lloyd Brewer Palmer, Private

"November 11th 1918 will always be remembered by yours truly . . . At 10:45 the order came to cease firing. . . That was absolutely the happiest moment of my life. The rest of the day little groups of smiling Germans came up to the line with tobacco and wine . . ."

April 14th, 1968

From: Timothy G. Robinson, Private

"Remember when we were kids on Easter the girls would be all dressed up in new hats, pretty dresses... and us boys with new shoes and shirts and off to church we would go and after come home to look for our Easter baskets. What good times. I hope God will bring me back home so that I may marry the girl I love, which will be in March if things go OK. Then I can watch my kids get all dressed up and head for church and live that day over again. Holidays are no different than any other day. Every day is Monday in Vietnam."

January 19th, 1945  
From: Sidney Diamond  
"Busy, Busy... Been moving constantly—Excuse brevity— I love you—you make my foxhole warm and soft..."

July 10th, 1969

From: Dean Allen, First Lieutenant  
"Being a good platoon leader is a lonely job. I don't want to really get to know anybody over here because it would be bad enough to lose a man... don't want to lose a friend... But as hard as I try not to get involved with my men I still can't help liking them and getting close..."

Throughout the entirety of this study guide, keep an eye on the bottom of the page. There, you'll find important dates and events that influenced the course of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The **Iraq** events can be tracked in **blue**.

The **Afghanistan** events can be tracked in **red**.

The start of both wars can be attributed to the events of September 11th, 2001. Hijackers took control of four commercial airplanes and crashed them into the World Trade Center Towers in New York, the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C., and a Pennsylvania field, killing thousands. Days later, U.S. officials said Osama bin Laden, the Saudi Arabian exile believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, was the prime suspect in the attack.

*September 18th, 2001* – President George W. Bush signs into law a joint resolution authorizing the use of force against those responsible for attacking the United States on 9/11

*October 2001* – Following unanswered demands that the Taliban turn over bin Laden, U.S. and British forces launch air strikes against targets in Afghanistan as a part of Operation Enduring Freedom. American warplanes start to bomb Taliban targets and bases reportedly belonging to the al-Qaida network. The Taliban proclaim they are ready for jihad.

*November 2001* – After weeks of intense fighting with Taliban troops, the Northern Alliance enters Kabul. The retreating Taliban flee southward toward Kandahar.

*December 2001* – The Taliban surrenders Kandahar and flees further into the mountains. Hamid Karzai is sworn in as the leader of the interim government in Afghanistan. Bin Laden escapes the Tora Bora Caves, after having been tracked there by Afghani forces.

*January 2002* – In President George W. Bush's state of the union speech, he identifies Iraq, along with Iran and North Korea as an "axis of evil." He vows that the U.S. "will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

*March 2002* – Operation Anaconda, the first major ground assault and the largest operation since Tora Bora, is launched. Nearly two thousand U.S. and one thousand Afghan troops battle the militants.

*June 2002* – The Afghanistan grand council elects U.S.-backed Hamid Karzai as interim leader. Karzai chooses the members of his government who will serve until 2004, when the government is required to organize elections.

*October 2002* – The U.S. Congress authorizes President Bush to use military force against Iraq.

*November 2002* – U.N. weapons inspections resume inside Iraq.

*March 2003* – The U.S.-led coalition invades Iraq.

*April 2003* – The Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein collapses. Hussein escapes.

*May 2003* – During a briefing with reporters in Kabul, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declares an end to "major combat." The announcement coincides with President George W. Bush's "mission accomplished" declaration of an end to fighting in Iraq.

## Timeline Continued

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*May 2003* – The Coalition Provisional Authority is established to rule Iraq. Economic sanctions against Iraq are lifted.

*August 2003* – U.N. envoy and 22 others are killed when a truck bomb destroys U.N. offices in Baghdad.

*December 2003* – Saddam Hussien is caught near Tikrit.

*January 2004* – An assembly of 502 Afghan delegates agrees on a constitution for Afghanistan, creating a strong presidential system intended to unite the country's various ethnic groups.

*March 2004* – Interim Constitution – A temporary constitution for Iraq is signed.

*October 2005* – Saddam Hussien's trial for crimes against humanity begins in Baghdad.

*February 2006* – The Shiite "Golden Mosque" in Samarra destroyed in bomb attack.

*May 2006* – Nouri-al-Mailki becomes Prime Minister of Iraq.

*July 2006* – Violence increases across the country during the summer months, with intense fighting erupting in the south in July. The number of suicide attacks quintuples from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006, while remotely detonated bombings more than double, to 1,677.

*November 2006* – Republicans lose control of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

*December 2006* – Saddam Hussein is hung after being found guilty by an Iraqi tribunal. Video of the execution appears online.

*January 2007* – President Bush announces 20,000 more troops will be sent to Iraq.

*May 2007* – President Bush vetoes legislation from Congress funding the Iraq War but imposing deadlines for American withdrawal.

*May 2007* – A notorious Taliban military commander, Mullah Dadullah, is killed in a joint operation by Afghan, U.S., and NATO forces in the south of Afghanistan.

*September 2007* – The U.S. commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus gives report on the war's progress.

*September 2007* – Sunni leader Abdul Sattar Abu Risha is killed in Iraq just ten days after meeting with President Bush.

*February 2008* – Turkey launches ground operations in northern Iraq to battle Kurdish separatists.

*April 2008* – General David Petraeus delivers highly anticipated briefing to Congress.

*April 2008* – General David Petraeus is chosen as the next leader of U.S. Central Command. General Raymond Odierno tapped to take charge in Iraq.

*September 2008* – U.S. forces give control of the largest Iraqi province to the Iraqi military.

*September 2008* – General Raymond Odierno becomes commander in Iraq.

*November 2008* – Iraq government passes agreement calling for U.S. withdrawal by 2011.

*December 2008* – Dozens dead and many more wounded in bomb attacks.

*January 2009* – United States gives control of airspace and Green Zone to Iraq.

*February 2009* – New U.S. President Barack Obama announces plans to send seventeen thousand more troops to the war zone. Obama reaffirms campaign statements that Afghanistan is the more important U.S. front against terrorist forces.



## Timeline Continued

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*February 2009* – President Obama announces his intention to withdraw most American troops out of Iraq by August 31, 2010. As many as 50,000 troops will remain there for smaller missions and to train Iraqi soldiers.

*March 2009* – President Obama announces a new strategy for the war effort, linking success in Afghanistan to a stable Pakistan.

*May 2009* – An American soldier being treated at a counseling center in Baghdad kills 5 fellow servicemen. The shooter, Sergeant John M. Russell, is serving his third tour in Iraq, and had been ordered recently to undergo psychological counseling and relinquish his gun

*May 2009* – Secretary of Defense Robert Gates replaces the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David D. McKiernan with counterinsurgency and special operations guru Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal.

*June 2009* – U.S. troops completed their withdrawal from Iraqi cities, including Baghdad and transferred the responsibility of securing the cities to Iraqi troops.

*July 2009* – U.S. Marines launch a major offensive in southern Afghanistan. The offensive, involving four thousand Marines, is launched in response to a growing Taliban insurgency in the country's southern.

*August 2009* – U.S. forces are to number between sixty thousand and sixty-eight thousand.

*November 2009* – After more than two months of uncertainty following a disputed presidential election on August 20, President Hamid Karzai wins another term.

*December 2009* – President Obama announces a major escalation of the U.S. mission. In a nationally televised speech, the president commits an additional thirty thousand forces to the fight, on top of the sixty-eight thousand in place. For the first time in the eight-year war effort, a time frame is put on the U.S. military presence, as Obama sets July 2011 as the start of a troop drawdown.



Below are some key statistics about our most recent wars. The data is taken primarily from think-tanks and media sources.

### **TIME**

The War in Iraq: 3,193 Days

The War in Afghanistan: 4,109 Days  
(as of January 6th, 2012)

### **FINANCIAL COST**

The War in Iraq: \$806,000,000,000

The War in Afghanistan: \$1,200,000,000,000  
(as of July 31st, 2012)



### **TROOPS**

The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2,333,972 troops total served (August 2011)

The War in Afghanistan: Approximately 68,000 troops (as of October 2012)

### **CASUALTIES**

The War in Iraq: 4,422 Americans Killed, Close to 30,000 Wounded

The War in Afghanistan: 2,165 Americans Killed, 17,644 Wounded (as of Jan. 2013)

### **CIVILIAN CASUALTIES**

The War in Iraq: Between 103,674 and 113,265

The War in Afghanistan: 13,009 (Between 2007 and June 2012)

Now that you've seen the play and read some historical letters from soldiers, can you identify some themes that you hear soldiers voice throughout all of the letters?

How about Patriotism? Brotherhood? Write a bit about the theme you identify, give some examples of when you heard that theme and explain why you feel its universal to all wars.

Next, identify some themes and issues that you believe are unique to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Consider the letters you heard throughout the show. Write about a theme of your choosing, where in the play you heard it and why you think it's unique to these wars.

When Congress decides to go to war, who does it affect? Our troops? Federal agencies? You? Your family? Make a spider-web with the Iraq war at the center and detail who you think is involved. Remember to think about many different factors, including the economy, policy issues, but, most importantly the personal stories like Ryan's.

So many American families have veterans among their ranks. Do you? Do some research and find out if any of your family members served in any of our country's wars. Did anyone you're close to serve in the War in Iraq or Afghanistan? How about in World War II or even earlier?

Ask your family members about any stories they have and if anyone you know ever wrote any letters home, like the ones in the story. If you find any, bring them into class along with any pictures and mementos that you're able to share. Read the letters together in class.

Griffin Theatre would love to read any letters that you'd be willing to share with us. Please make copies and send them to us!

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Receiving letters from home is just as important to our troops' well-being as writing letters. Our country has thousands of troops stationed around the globe and they would all like to hear from you. Please consider writing a letter to a soldier currently serving our country. You can send the letters through A Million Thanks! Follow the URL below to find out how:

[www.amillionthanks.org](http://www.amillionthanks.org)

Want to do more? Adopt a soldier and send him or her care packages through Operation Adopt-A-Soldier or Operation Gratitude here! Details can be found here:

[www.operationadoptsoldier.org](http://www.operationadoptsoldier.org)

[www.operationgratitude.com](http://www.operationgratitude.com)

What do you think of the War on Terror?

What did you think of *Letters Home*?

We would love to hear from you! Send us a letter with your thoughts, opinions and reviews to:

Griffin Theatre  
3711 N. Ravenswood Avenue, #145  
Chicago, IL, 60613

You can also tell your local elected officials about your opinions! Use the link below to find out who your congressman is and how to contact him or her! [www.house.gov/representatives/find](http://www.house.gov/representatives/find)