American Sniper is the autobiography of Chris Kyle, a Navy SEAL sniper who is credited with 160 confirmed kills during his military career. This astounding figure makes him the most deadly sniper in American military history. He was respected by his fellow SEALs as a “legend” and feared by his enemies, so much so that a bounty of $20,000 was put on his head after he was labeled “The Devil of Ramadi” by the insurgency in Iraq. He was also a loving husband and devoted father. This autobiography provides a compelling albeit strongly opinionated insight into the true life of a soldier, offering an insiders perspective on the War on Terror.

Chris Kyle grew up in the ranching community of Odessa, Texas. Kyle was always devoted to the farming lifestyle. He had a talent for breaking horses and eventually used this skill to somewhat support himself throughout his college career as a bronco rider in the various rodeo competitions that toured through the South. As a child, Kyle was no stranger to the lifestyle that would eventually become his own as a sniper in the Navy SEALs. Ranch life had familiarized him with the rough, physical lifestyle that would serve him well in the military. Additionally, his knowledge of weaponry began at an early age, as Kyle would take regular hunting trips with his family. He recalls beginning his shooting career with an air-soft pump action BB gun that his parents eventually upgraded to a 30-06 bolt-action rifle around the time of his seventh birthday. Since then, his fascination with guns has grown and throughout his adult life he became an avid gun collector, accumulating a collection of his own historical weaponry.

Kyle approaches the topic of his military career and training without hesitation, as he is proud of his service time in the SEALs in Iraq. Above all, Kyle stresses the importance of the brotherhood that he was able to find amongst his fellow servicemen. To him, being a soldier is the ultimate test of manhood, and in his mind, there is nothing more important than that, as he writes “In the end, my story, in Iraq and afterward, is about more than just killing people or even fighting for my country. It’s about being a man” (7). Kyle discusses ritual hazing involved in SEAL initiations – describing everything from routine beatings that new recruits were subjected to by their older team members to the fascination the brothers at arms showed with “choking each other out.” While this may seem aggressive to those not involved in the military, Kyle addresses these subjects within the context of an ultimate goal that all SEALs and servicemen must achieve – a level of comfort that must be reached with the subjects of violence and their own mortality.
The American Sniper shows absolutely no remorse about the 160 confirmed kills with which he is credited and for which he is celebrated. When asked if he ever regrets his actions, he replies “No... You do it [kill] again. And again. You do it so that the enemy won’t kill you or your countrymen. You do it until there is no one left for you to kill. That’s what war is” (7). In his mind, as he states countless times throughout his autobiography, he has been trained to do a job. He has been trained to kill. Countless government resources and taxpayers’ dollars have gone into this training, and for that reason he has an obligation to protect the people who have raised him in this lifestyle both at home and abroad.

It is this area of Kyle’s argument that I find most fascinating. His lack of remorse does not stem from a blood-lust, but rather an obligation. He is following orders. Unfortunately, this phrasing has been associated with great atrocities in the past, and therefore arguably demonizes him in the eyes of those who are anti-violence and anti-war. But Kyle offers a valid argument. When the United States government declared war, Kyle was not approached for his opinion. He was simply asked to honor his commitment and do his job. Without complaining about or even acknowledging the presence of those who disapprove of his line of work, Kyle attempts to clarify the fact that a soldier must be thought of first as an individual and then as a tool of warfare. The Iraq War is America’s battle, and therefore the soldier should not be condemned for doing his or her duty so long as it falls within the rules of engagement – an issue that Kyle takes very seriously.

Additionally, Kyle is not shy about expressing his disdain for the enemy. He repeatedly tells stories of their evils, labeling them as “savages”. “They hated us because we weren’t Muslim. They wanted to kill us... The insurgents didn’t worry about ROEs (rules-of-engagement) or court-martials. If they had the advantage, they would kill any Westerner they could find, whether they were soldiers or not” (98). Indeed, Kyle makes it clear that he never had a problem distancing himself from his enemy and even jokes about some of the insurgents he cut down in battle, saying, “cheap thrills in Iraq were priceless” (76).

From an outsider’s perspective though, perhaps the most interesting observation that can be made about Chris Kyle is what would become his own personal obsession with war. He is not ashamed to admit that in his mind, Country must always come before family. Throughout the book, this idea is contradicted by a series of shorter essays written by his wife, Taya, wherein she describes her own views as family first. Kyle repeatedly expresses his desire to return to active duty whenever possible. As long as there is a war to be fought, he feels an obligation to his country and his fellow soldiers to participate in active duty. In fact, Kyle re-enlisted and was deployed to Iraq within two weeks of the births of both his children.

*American Sniper* is a complicated book to analyze in terms of its place on the American Studies book list. From one perspective, it offers what is in my opinion a much needed look into the true lives and minds of a modern United States soldier
and reminds the country that the men and women overseas are not just nameless killers, but individuals doing a necessary job. It also draws attention to the negative affects of military life, focusing on the pressures that military service can put on a family. Yet it also seems at times like a strongly opinionated propaganda piece dedicated to validating and celebrating the benevolence of the United States in foreign conflicts. Kyle is highly opinionated and exhibits a strong pro-war, pro-violence sentiment throughout his autobiography, saying, “For some reason, a lot of people back home – not all people – didn’t accept that we were at war. They didn’t accept that war means death, violent death most times... It took force, it took violence of action, to create a situation where there could be peace” (343).

Kyle stands by the claim that there cannot be peace without violence of action first, and it is for this reason that I believe American Sniper should be on the American Studies book list. Kyle’s views on the issues of the Iraq war and warfare in general are based in first hand experience and are vastly different from those I have encountered in my own everyday life. In an increasingly liberal world like that of the small liberal arts college in the Northeast, I believe it is important to hear both sides of the argument in order to fully understand the issue. Many of Chris Kyle’s views may be considered less than popular in our current social society, yet they are explained in his autobiography from a rational standpoint and rooted in experience. Overall, Chris Kyle has earned the voice that he puts forth, and he certainly deserves to be heard.

Tragically, Chris Kyle was murdered in February, 2013, by a fellow Iraq war veteran suffering from extreme post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD).