

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why does the writer make a loose distinction between communism and fascism? Does she imply by this definition that Dr. Ross may be a fascist?
2. When she describes her role as a teacher, how does that affect her appeal to *ethos*? What part of her description do you find most effective? Contrarily, if you had written this letter, would you have explored a different approach? Explain.

WRITING TOPIC

The fallacy of *ad populum* substitutes content with a “just plain folks” appeal, which sometimes “disguises itself as patriotism.” With that idea in mind, what does Katherine Anne Porter see as her duty?

Frank Schaeffer and John Schaeffer

My Son the Marine? (2002)

When two Marine recruiters showed up at our Salisbury, Mass., home in dress blues, they bedazzled my younger son, John. He had talked to recruiters from the Army, Navy and Air Force too, but his eyes lit up while the Marines spoke. I watched, inwardly alarmed. John seemed to relate to these stern, clean men with their insanely flawless uniforms in some basic way that I could barely comprehend. My wife, Genie, looking concerned and a bit drawn, turned to one of the men and asked, “But when he’s done with the Marines, I mean—what will he have?”

The recruiter said, “Have, ma’am? I don’t understand.”

“I meant, what will he get out of it?”

The man’s cheeks flushed. “He’ll be a United States Marine, ma’am!”

- 5 There were no promises of college funds, “signing bonuses” or great “civilian opportunities” later on in life. Instead, the Marines promised that if John joined the Corps, he would find standards that had not been lowered. A young man wanting to measure himself against the tradition of maximum endurance would not be disappointed. “Boot camp’s still tough as hell,” one of the recruiters told us.

When the men left, John said to me, “I’m not sure I want to go into the military, Dad. But if I do, it’ll be the Marines. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

I was born in Switzerland to American missionaries, the youngest of four children. Perhaps because they were overprotective of me after I contracted

polio—I wore a leg brace—my parents home-schooled me, and then sent me to private schools in England and Wales.

Genie and I married in 1970 and moved to America ten years later. In September 1980, our son John was born. From the moment he entered our lives to his last high school poetry reading, I doted on him. He made the meaning of life clear to me.

So when he finally decided to join the Marines, I had no picture of how things would go. I felt ignorant. I vaguely imagined my son leaving for boot camp, and then after he graduated, being sent off to the ends of the earth. Why the hell was John going into the Marines?

It had been hard enough sending my two older children off to college. The normal separations were just about unbearable. Our daughter, Jessica, went to New York University, and our other son, Francis, to Georgetown. Couldn't John have gone on to college first? No other parent in our affluent town on the North Shore of Boston had a son or daughter who was going into the military, let alone as an enlisted recruit.

When I told another parent of John's decision to join the Marines, the man was incredulous. "He's so bright and talented and could do anything!" the man said. "What a waste!"

The day John left for boot camp at Parris Island in South Carolina, I woke very early. I had to get him to the local recruiting office by 4:30. At our front door, John and his mother hugged and she cried steady, silent tears. John told his mother he loved her.

At the recruiting office, I looked at my son as he shook the staff sergeant's hand and thought, *What is he trying to prove?* More than once during the last few months, I had asked him, "Why do you want to do this?" Sometimes he'd say, "I want self-discipline." The best answer he gave was, "I just do." We parted with a hug and a handshake. "I'll miss you, boy," I said. "I'll write every day."

"Okay."

"I love you, John."

"I love you, Dad."

Driving home, I lost my way twice on a road I'd driven a thousand times. I'd never experienced pride and fear as one emotion before. *Oh, Lord, please protect my boy and bring him home safe!* was all I could think as I peered forlornly into the gloom while trying to remember my way home.

After a brief call letting us know he'd arrived—plus two form letters sent by the Marines—John was not allowed to contact us. I bought a book by Thomas E. Ricks called *Making the Corps*, which, with its day-by-day account of boot-camp training, quickly became my bible. I followed John's activities: drill marching; classes in subjects like Tactical Weapons of Opportunity (i.e., using things like rocks and sticks to smash the enemy with when a rifle wasn't handy); and physical training—miles of running, thousands of repetitions of exercises, pugil stick fighting, and endless humps (marches in full combat gear and pack).

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Writing to John was a poignant experience. There was something so unequal about writing to him from the lap of luxury when he had essentially died and gone to hell.

20 For the first time in both our lives, my son was beyond my help. Did he have it in him to become a Marine? I knew that John's idea of a good time was to curl up in front of the fireplace and reread his favorite bits of *The Hobbit*. When he caught fish, he let them go. How could my son become a Marine? What sort of a person would he be when the Corps was done with him? Would John be absolutely devastated if he failed? I felt sick.

But he did not fail. Three months after John had left us, Genie and I went down to Parris Island for his graduation. We stood in the stands for the ceremony and watched our son parade in, third man from the front, a tall Marine—my son.

I wiped my eyes and looked around. It occurred to me that this was the first time I'd been in an integrated crowd of this size dedicated to one purpose and of one mind. We were dark-skinned, weather-beaten, Spanish-speaking grandfathers; black kids wearing head rags; Southern-accented mothers with big hair and tight sweat suits; and some people who looked like us.

The platitudes my educated friends mouthed about "racial harmony" and "economic and gender diversity" were nothing compared to the spirit shared among the people gathered in the stands that day to honor our Marines. Our children would room together as they had in boot camp, drink together, work together, united by a high purpose: the defense of our country and loyalty to the Corps.

Nearly two years later, I was packing my bags to fly down to Florida to visit John at his new base, where he was a squad leader and had been nominated by his platoon to represent it as "Marine of the Quarter," the best performer of his unit for that time period. My biggest worry was whether I would have trouble checking the cooler full of food I was bringing to John. It was September 10, 2001.

25 The next day, all flights were canceled, and civil air traffic over the United States was shut down for the first time in history. The cooler of food was forgotten. I was so scared for John. I longed to hold on to my son for dear life.

I finally spoke to him the next day, on September 12. He sounded calm and confident.

"Hey, Dad, this is worse for you than for me," he said.

"How's that?"

"All you have to do with yourself is worry, but we have a job to do." He paused. "Dad? I love you."

30 After I hung up the phone, I stared at the television. There were fire-fighters, cops and military personnel struggling to find survivors and thousands of dead. I felt deeply frustrated at being able to do nothing. At least I knew that I could look the men and women in uniform in the eye. My son, after all, was one of them.