

## NOVELS OF THE TWO WORLD WARS

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Television is filling the airwaves with programs about World War II and continuing to note the first installment of that war, the Great War of 1914-1918. Because I teach histories of World War I and World War II, students regularly ask me to recommend novels covering those epochal events. Although I do not let novels substitute for weightier tomes of required reading in my courses, I believe fiction helps to illuminate what was really going on during those years.

A modern historian must realize that to young people, those past decades, for all their bloody reality, are quaint. Men in baggy uniforms rising up out of muddy trenches to fling themselves on the barbed wire of World War I and little planes buzzing over Pacific islands in World War II seem unreal. To the modern student, the soldiers and sailors and airmen of the earlier twentieth century seem like Roman legionnaires or Vikings: romantic, to be sure, but insubstantial. By reading fictional accounts of those events and those lives, students can get inside the heads of World War I infantrymen or World War II pilots and put real life into those figures. In novels, readers get a level of characterization and detail not found in historical monographs, which can help to make the events live in their minds.

But not all novels are equal. Before I recommend a novel, it must meet several guidelines. The text must be "authentic," that is, it must have no serious errors of fact or tone. The author's having participated in the events described is, of course, the easiest way, potentially, to achieve that authenticity. But participation is not essential. After all, Stephen Crane, of *The Red Badge of Courage*, did not fight in the American Civil War. To me, what is important is that the author writes with authenticity in mood and authenticity in time, and I do not believe those standards can be achieved unless the author is contemporary with the events being chronicled. That is, I omit "historical" novels in favor of writing that is contemporary, more or less, with the events.

Second, I omit memoirs, even ones that probably are closer to novels than to real personal accounts. A good example of that category is Robert Graves's splendid study of his adventures in World War I, *Good-By to All That*; it is well worth reading, but it is not precisely either a novel or a memoir.

Third, a book must appeal to a late-twentieth century reader. Books that focus on sappy characters, or on moral dilemmas a modern reader simply cannot share, I save for advanced studies. Similarly, the books I recommend must be readily available. Many of my favorites have remained in print through the years, and others are likely to be available in a medium-sized library.

Finally, I aim for some degree of diversity. I want to recommend books that present different points of view, books that are pro-war and anti-war. I want novels from the pens of different national writers and novels that show different military services.

All those considerations helped to determine the suggestions that follow.

### WORLD WAR I

C. S. Forester, in *The General*, brings the strengths and weaknesses of command in World War I vividly to light. In his fictional creation of a British general, he follows Herbert Curzon from the beginnings of his military career through the German March Offensive of 1918. Forester shows Curzon as a man of sober virtue, even if lacking imagination and the ability to deal with new technologies. Hitler misunderstood the book, seeing it as an exposé of British failures, and he had copies of a German translation bound in leather and distributed to his warlords before the outbreak of World War II.

Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is the best known of the anti-war novels; the story had a vogue as a motion picture, too. The way Remarque presents the doomed German youths is dated, but the story still traps the students of today.

Another German novel came from the pen of Arnold Zweig, who fled Hitler's persecution to Israel while he was writing the trilogy that begins with *The Case of Sergeant Grisha*. The first novel, focusing on the trial of a deserter, is the best of the set, but students can learn something from reading the chapter, "Professor Mertens Resigns," in Zweig's *Education Before Verdun*. Mertens, a sensitive scholar in the great German liberal tradition, simply cannot deal with the brutalization that war causes, and he commits suicide.

The best known French novel is Henri Barbusse's anti-war *Under Fire*. Better, however, both in the picture given of the war and details of events, is Jules Romains's *Verdun*. Romains set out to duplicate Balzac or Galsworthy, and produce a saga of the twentieth century, "Men of Good Will." This part of the saga, *Verdun*, can stand alone, and in my view, it is the only volume of the series that deserves to live on.

Three other works are interesting for various reasons. For an understanding that atrocities are not limited to World War II, I recommend the Austrian Franz Werfel's *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which shows the terrible cruelties inflicted on the Armenians during the war. The Czech writer, Jaroslav Hasek, in *The Good Soldier Schweik*, shows through satire a great deal of sly humor as he details the struggles of Schweik against authority, and vice versa. Finally, just to prove that espionage is not the monopoly of the Cold War, Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden, or: The British Agent*, which he more or less based on his own experiences in wartime Switzerland, is still attractive.

### WORLD WAR II

No better sea story has come from the twentieth century than Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*, loosely based on the author's wartime experience aboard escort corvettes. *The Cruel Sea* shows what it meant to serve in undersized anti-submarine warships year after year, trying to protect the lumbering freighters that were carrying the goods of war. Monsarrat's novella, *H.M.S. Marlborough Will Enter Harbour*, is an even better brief story, but I think that it illustrates man's capacity to endure as much as it shows anything specific about the war itself.

On the land campaigns, the best is Konstantine Simonov's *Days and Nights*, which focuses tightly on the epic battle of Stalingrad. It comes from the pen of a Russian war correspondent, not a soldier; nevertheless, Simonov captures the great turning point of World War II, even writing, as he had to, under the rubrics of the Soviet Union's

socialist realism. Simonov's story of Russia's side of the Stalingrad campaign from initial German contact through the November Russian counterattack is compelling.

Taking up the story almost exactly at the moment when Simonov ends, and taking it up from the other side, is Theodore Plivier's *Stalingrad*. His diffuse story of the doomed, encircled Germans makes for a depressing read, but that too is the story of war. A modern student, accustomed to simplistic story lines, may find it difficult to follow the multiple characters in *Stalingrad*, but persistence is rewarded with a terrifying vision of the Russian Front. This novel in its depictions of the horrors of war is probably the crudest of all the books I recommend. Impressionable students might find it too graphic.

Also from the German side of events is Willi Heinrich's *Cross of Iron*. This book, like Plivier's, is notable for its grim realism in its depiction of the Eastern Front.

On the Pacific campaigns one of the best novels is Norman Mailer's classic piece, *The Naked and the Dead*. Anyone who has forgotten Talullah Bankhead's quip when she met him, that "he was the man who couldn't spell," will deduce the reason. Mailer follows a group of men through island-hopping events that are realistically described.

James A. Michener talks in a lighter vein and about another sort of campaign in *Tales of the South Pacific*. Before he developed all his irritating stylistic idiosyncrasies, Michener told good stories. His *Tales* became the basis of the famous musical of the same name and also set Michener on the road to fame and fortune.

The air war has gotten comparatively less attention. The best of the lot is probably Beirne Lay, Jr., and Sy Bartlett, *Twelve O'Clock High*. With great tension, it follows the fortunes of a group of flyers in England and their raids on Germany.

I think that fiction concerning the Holocaust should be the subject of a separate essay, but one book on the general subject might be noted here: John Hersey's almost forgotten chronicle of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, *The Wall*. Presented as a historical document, which it is not, *The Wall* includes all the ferocity of that terrible event, when the Jews confined to the Warsaw ghetto rose up against their persecutors.

Tangential to the course of the war, but giving a view of what it was like to be a prisoner, is Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, better known as a movie than as a book, but a good read all the same. It is a narrative of British Empire soldiers taken prisoner by the Japanese and set to constructing a railroad across Southeast Asia.

As I contemplate what I have written, I think that I could recommend more novels. So could any historian of the world wars. Nevertheless, these few novels offer a good starting point for a modern student.

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