

# Herman Wouk

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Readers wishing to immerse themselves in the Second World War era need look no further than Herman Wouk (1915–2019). His epic war novels—*The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978)—“pulse with the everyday details of 1940s America: what it felt like to wait for a letter in the post, the passage of time on a transcontinental railway trip, the crinkle of the carbon paper between two copies of an army report, the uncertainty of knowing who would win the war, and when, and how” (*Atlantic*).

Cinematic in scope, they offer sweeping views of battles, military decisions, and individual experiences. “But the main reason the novels still feel urgent has to do with the nature of Wouk’s ambition,” wrote the *New York Times*. “He didn’t set out merely to write a family saga or to smuggle a history lesson into a story. Wouk wanted to know how so many people in Europe and America allowed the Holocaust to happen. He uses the tools of the novel to anatomize the various psychological mechanisms and sociopolitical ratio-

nalizations that enabled intelligent, generally well-meaning and well-informed individuals to justify or ignore what was right in front of them.”

Though he is often grouped with middlebrow writers of popular historical fiction, Wouk's novels take place against a history shaped by a multitude of personalities with different moral agendas. His work astutely juxtaposes the human condition against the grand sweep of history; he won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Caine Mutiny* (1951), a study in leadership, power, and moral fallout from World War II. “Wouk has a fair claim to stand among the greatest American war novelists of them all,” praised the *Atlantic* on his 100th birthday.

Wouk also brought Judaism into mainstream culture. By the mid-1950s, he was the country's most successful Orthodox Jewish novelist. Unlike other writers, who described the immigrant experience as one of obstacle-strewn assimilation—Wouk's own parents immigrated from Belarus, arrived in New York City penniless, and worked their way up to a successful laundry business—he seamlessly integrated bar mitzvahs, Passover Seders, and the laws of kashrut. But because much of his fiction also espouses middle-class values, such as marriage, family, religion, and military service, as the country abandoned the more staid 1950s, some critics decried his writings as too conservative. “While the likes of Norman Mailer and Philip Roth challenged everything about post-World War II America, including its faith, morals and patriotic pieties, Wouk honored those same qualities,” wrote the *New York Post*.

Wouk was born in New York City in 1915 to a religious, Yiddish-speaking household devoted to books and the Talmud. He majored in comparative literature and philosophy at Columbia University; after graduating in 1934, he got a job as a show business gag writer and then headed to California, where he worked for five years on popular comedian Fred Allen's radio show. When the bombing of Pearl Harbor intervened, Wouk enlisted in the Navy. He served in the Pacific as an officer aboard two destroyer minesweepers, which inspired his first novel, the satire *Aurora Dawn* (1947). “I would spend many of the nights looking out at sea and being stirred with thoughts and I began to think there was a book to be written that would be like *War and Peace*,” he says. “At that time I didn't think at all that it would be something for me to write, but nevertheless I got the feeling that there was a whole other kind of writing to do” (NPR). By the time the novel was published, the war was over, he was married and living back in New York City, and he was writing.

Not all of Wouk's books were commercially successful or garnered the serious attention of critics. Of those that followed his first—about two dozen novels, plays, and works of nonfiction—none attained the success of *The Caine Mutiny*, *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), and *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*. Yet they illustrate his great literary range: the place of Jews in modern society (*This Is My God*, 1959), the travails of a Russian Jewish family (*Inside, Outside*, 1985), the life of American novelist Thomas Wolfe

(*Youngblood Hawke*, 1962), a semiautobiographical look at a midlife crisis (*Don't Stop the Carnival*, 1965), the State of Israel (*The Hope*, 1993, and *The Glory*, 1994), the science of particle physics (*A Hole in Texas*, 2004), and the tenuous balance between science and religion (*The Language God Talks*, 2010).

A natural storyteller a step consciously behind—even in opposition to—the avant-garde, Wouk was never quite in vogue. And yet his books sold millions of copies, and he provided dramatic, highly readable lessons in human purpose, morality, and history. As one of his characters writes in *War and Remembrance*, “I could contribute nothing new; but writing as I do with a light hand, I might charm a few readers into pausing, in their heedless hurry after pleasure and money, for a look at the things that matter.”

Here we celebrate his legacy and the things that matter.

## THE DEBUT NOVEL

### Aurora Dawn (1947)

♦ BOOK OF THE MONTH CLUB SELECTION

Naval books fascinated Wouk as a boy, and he loved being at sea. Once entry into World War II became inevitable, Wouk applied to be a midshipman, and he ended up in the South Pacific aboard a destroyer-minesweeper. It was, he recalled, the defining experience of his life and the one that made him an “accidental” novelist.

He started *Aurora Dawn* aboard the ship and mailed off chapters to one of his former professors at Columbia, who then turned it over to an editor. “The next thing I knew, I'm floating around off Okinawa when I get a letter from the girl who says Simon & Schuster has bought my novel. And that, so help me, is how I became a novelist” (*Washington Post*). Despite Wouk's experience in the Pacific, his great war novels were later to come; *Aurora Dawn* is a light satire of advertising in Manhattan and a parody of the Victorian literary style.

The title page reads: “Aurora Dawn or, The True History of Andrew Reale. Containing a Faithful Account of the Great Riot. Together with the Complete Texts of Michael Wilde's Oration and Father Stanfield's Sermon.” A take-down of modern American materialism—radio advertising in Manhattan—the novel recalls the adventures of the bright, ambitious Andrew Reale, who must choose his life's path. That which lay strewn before him: his ethics or his salary, a true love or a relationship of convenience. How far will he go—and what will he compromise or sacrifice—to be successful?



# THE EPIC WORLD WAR II NOVELS

## The Caine Mutiny (1951)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

*The Caine Mutiny* marked Wouk's first great success. This classic Navy drama, which asks questions about duty and about how authority is exercised or abused, remained fixed on best seller lists for two years, sold millions of copies, and inspired a film adaptation starring Humphrey Bogart as the unforgettable Captain Queeg. After the novel's success, Wouk adapted the court-martial scenes into a Broadway play, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*. The novel "also stamped Wouk as a novelist of a different contemporary mold," wrote the *Washington Post*. "It is ultimately a book about the conflict between duty and personal freedom, and unlike many of his fellow writers from the war, Wouk appeared to come down on the side of duty." As Wouk told the *Washington Post*, "We were in the general postwar period of disillusion and I wasn't quite following the crowd. There were still some things I believed in. And believe in still." The crew, he wrote in his journal, should have stood by its flawed leader.

When spoiled New Yorker Willie Keith joins the Navy to avoid being drafted into the Army during World War II, he reports to the antiquated minesweeper, the USS *Caine*. He comes of age, particularly in a moral sense, as he lives under the volatile, paranoid, and cowardly Captain Queeg, who ultimately jeopardizes his entire crew. The officers who mutiny are subsequently court-martialed, acquitted, but never forgiven by the Navy higher command. The novel's most famous scene is the meeting summoned by Queeg in the middle of the night to discover who pilfered the last of the ship's supply of strawberries. One scene less remembered, however, is the twist at the end: Lieutenant Barney Greenwald, the mutinying officers' defense lawyer, accuses them of undermining Queeg, who would have succeeded if the crew had not questioned his confidence during the storm.

"This has the sombre and dramatic values of *Mister Roberts*," wrote *Kirkus*. "It has the underlying sense of values of *Tales of the South Pacific*. ... [A]ll in all this stands out as perhaps the most important novel of the war in the Pacific."

## The Winds of War (1971)

## War and Remembrance (1978)

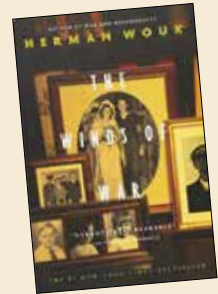
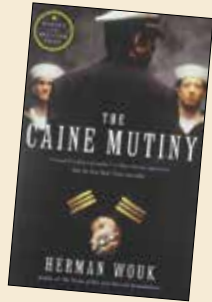
During the final days of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, at a time when the virtues of patriotism were under sharp attack, Wouk looked back at World War II with the mag-

isterial, boldly patriotic, 900-page *The Winds of War* and its equally long sequel, *War and Remembrance*. He spent more than a decade researching what he described as "the soul of the United States of America in action." He read Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, hundreds of volumes of World War II history, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. "Wouk never lets the reader forget that the Second World War was the biggest collective undertaking in the history of the human race," wrote the *Atlantic*. "... His war is the war of a documentary on the History Channel: violent, yes, but violence with a shape, a goal, and a justification."

On an extraordinarily large canvas, Wouk depicts the relationship between the actions of individuals and the events of war. Through one family's experiences and multiple perspectives—including Captain Victor "Pug" Henry and his circle of friends and family; a historical account of the war; and a member of Hitler's military staff—Wouk tells the story of war both in Europe and the Pacific, as well as the atrocities of the Holocaust. Two ABC miniseries based on the novels followed, the first broadcast in 1983 and the second in 1988. "Through Wouk's epochal *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*, it's safe to say, more people have learned more about World War II than they have from any historian" (*Washington Post*).

Career naval officer and FDR confidante Victor "Pug" Henry and his extended family take center stage. Mixing both real and fictional characters and ranging in locale from Washington, D.C., to Berlin (where Pug is U.S. Naval Attaché, and continues on in various capacities to other key wartime cities), Warsaw, London, Rome, and Moscow, the first volume starts six months before Germany invades Poland and concludes just after Pearl Harbor. As war escalates in Europe, Pug and his family—his socialite wife, Rhoda; their navy sons Warren and Byron, together with Byron's Jewish wife Natalie and her uncle, Aaron Jastrow, a Jewish American scholar living in Italy; and Pug's career-oriented daughter Madeline—find themselves at the center of the conflict, witness to major events and players, from FDR to Mussolini, Churchill, Stalin, and Hitler.

In *War and Remembrance*, Victor "Pug" Henry, Admiral Halsey's favorite commander, again finds himself in the right place at the right time, as witness to history's major battles: Midway, Guadalcanal, and Leyte Gulf; he then serves as FDR's emissary in Moscow during the Tehran meeting between FDR, Churchill, and Stalin. Meanwhile, his wife has a lover back home (who's working on the atomic bomb, no less). Pug's older son, Warren, a dive-bomber



pilot, and his younger son, Byron, a submarine officer, have tragically seen their share of combat. Meanwhile, Byron's wife, Natalie, and his baby, along with her uncle Aaron Jastrow, remain trapped in Italy, refusing to believe in Hitler's genocidal plans for the Jews. By the time they learn the truth, it's too late. Natalie's Polish cousin, however, escapes Auschwitz with filmed footage of the concentration camps. "Indeed," wrote Barnes & Noble, the book's "depiction of the Final Solution's day-to-day workings—above all, the excruciating scenes from the German perspective, convincingly putting us inside the mentalities of petty careerists jockeying for favor as the gas chambers operate—may be the closest Wouk has come to being a great writer, if only because no one else had had the nerve to try."

## THE COMING-OF-AGE NOVEL

### Marjorie Morningstar (1955)

Wouk's popular fourth novel—as different as *The Caine Mutiny* is from *Aurora Dawn*—was another commercial blockbuster. It landed Wouk on the cover of *Time* magazine and was adapted into a 1958 movie starring Natalie Wood (whose Palm Springs, California, home Wouk later purchased). *Time* described the plucky protagonist as the "American Everygirl who happens to be Jewish." And as *Flavorwire* noted, "Purely on a page-to-page level, it felt like discovering a lost Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald novel—except instead of being as horribly anti-Semitic as those books tend to be, it contains Passover Seder scenes, Catskill camps, and kibbitzing."

*Marjorie Morningstar* has a moralistic setup and is thus, perhaps, a cautionary tale. As the *Jewish Review of Books* put it, the novel "loosed Dickens on the Jewish Upper West Side of the mid-1930s and established that bourgeois ways and mores were darkly amusing but more conducive to the good life than those of Bohemia." Still, the "'happy' ending, set in the years long after the central events of the novel, suggests a certain unease, a lack of fulfillment in its heroine," wrote the *Weekly Standard*. But the denouement also, Wouk implied, represents a return to the protagonist's truer, better self.

Set in the 1930s and 1940s, the novel follows the journey of Marjorie Morgenstern. A pretty, naïve 17-year-old, she breaks from her respectable, middle-class Jewish family, who worked their way up from the Bronx to Manhattan's Upper West Side, to pursue an acting career. As Marjorie follows her ambitions, determined not to lapse into the



conventional household in which she was raised, she falls for a charismatic, bohemian director. During her adolescent rebellion, Marjorie strives to become the glamorous, free Marjorie Morningstar. But how reality forces her to compromise her dreams, and how fate ultimately guides her—toward a new life, or toward a return to her origins—are the book's central questions. "Indeed, in my view, no other American work of fiction has so successfully told the story of a young woman's coming-of-age" (*Weekly Standard*).

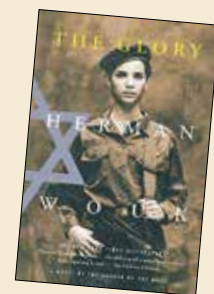
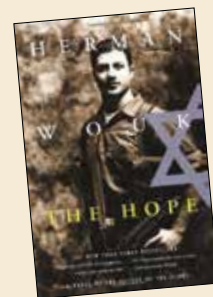
## THE SAGA OF ISRAEL

### The Hope (1993)

### The Glory (1994)

In his return to historical fiction (after *Inside, Outside*), Wouk explores the creation of the State of Israel and its ensuing conflict-ridden decades. Like *The Winds of War* and *War of Remembrance*, the novels combine fictional and historical characters, whose lives intersect with the major events of and following Israel's founding. Since Israel was a direct response to the Holocaust, in some sense the books can also be seen as a continuation of Wouk's epic war novels. Though never as popular as his World War II novels, *The Hope* and *The Glory* offer a valuable history lesson and insight into Middle East politics.

*The Hope* portrays the battles, disasters, and triumphant victories of three major wars—the 1948 War of Independence, the 1956 Suez crisis, and the 1967 Six-Day War—through the lives of Israeli army officers and the women they covet. Yossi Blumenthal ("Don Koshote"), a young Polish-born Holocaust survivor, becomes a paratroop commander; Zev Barak is a Viennese-born military commander, who, in 1967, serves as the Israeli military attaché in Washington; Sam Pasternak works for the Mossad. These and other compelling fictional characters interact seamlessly with real figures, such as Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Menachem Begin, Mickey Marcus, and Egypt's Anwar Sadat. "[A]ccounts of specific battles, behind-the-scenes political skirmishes in Israel and diplomatic strategy in Washington, D.C., provide the novel's fascinating historical background and true drama" (*Publishers Weekly*). "While his account



is sympathetic to Israel, Wouk does not paint the Arabs with a tarred brush; nor does he put a false gloss on less-than-admirable episodes in the short history of the Jewish nation.”

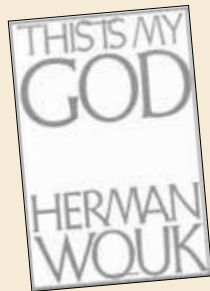
In *The Glory*, the young Israel once fights against annihilation. Set between the late 1960s and the Yom Kippur War, the dramatic Entebbe rescue, the bombing of Iraq’s nuclear reactor in 1981, and the first Camp David agreements, the novel again merges historical events with characters both real and fictional, as Wouk chronicles the region’s ongoing struggle for peace.

## NONFICTION

### This Is My God

The Jewish Way of Life (1959)  
One of Wouk’s most influential books, *This Is My God*—intended for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike—offers a thoughtful, evenhanded introduction to Judaism, while exploring the role of a traditional Jew in the modern world. Greatly influenced by his rabbi-grandfather, Wouk had, since childhood, studied the Talmud, and here he examines various aspects of the religion and its history. Originally serialized in the *Los Angeles Times*, the book reached a surprisingly large audience, exposing non-Jews to the tenets of Judaism, while raising some controversy from reform and conservative Jews for Wouk’s modern Orthodox perspective. Both *This Is My God* and *The Will to Live On: This Is Our Heritage* (2000), noted the *New York Times*, “took a similar approach to *Mere Christianity* and other works by C. S. Lewis. They preached not to the converted, but to the curious. They anticipated arguments about religion and tried their best to answer them.”

“I was gambling my whole existence on one hunch,” Wouk writes in *This Is My God*: “that being a Jew was not a trivial and somewhat inconvenient accident, but the best thing in my life; and that to be a Jew, the soundest way was the classic way.” Living this was “on a gamble, I learned ... that one can observe the laws of Moses and lead a life in the everyday world. Judaism presents steep difficulties, intellectual and practical.” It also, however, offered untold delights. Wouk covers the tenets of Jewish faith, the laws, and the religious holidays and traditions (the bar mitzvah, Purim, and Chanukah, for example), while showing that it is possible to be both American

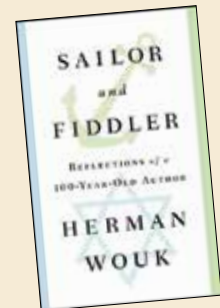


and Jewish at the same time. “Throughout the book, the ideals, the aspirations, the fibre of Judaism is contagiously reflected—providing together the answer to the miracle of Jewish survival for 3000 years and the miracle today of Israel” (*Kirkus*).

### Sailor and Fiddler

Reflections of a 100-Year-Old Author (2015)

At age 100, Wouk decided to write a memoir—and, given his life’s experiences and his famously lengthy tomes, the work is surprisingly slim, at 160 pages. “It’s light on details, but heavy on thought and charm,” wrote NPR, “and it’s a fitting final work for an author with a long and remarkable career.” Perhaps to come, posthumously: publication of the detailed diaries Wouk kept since the 1930s.



In these loosely organized, humble reflections, Wouk explains that the sailor represents his World War II navy service, and the fiddler (a reference to *Fiddler on the Roof*) his spiritual, religious side and devotion to tradition. He explores the sense of faith and purpose that inspired both his life and his literature, in particular, the great war epics that remain testaments to World War II and the Holocaust. Wouk is, as he recalls his wife saying, “not that interesting a person,” and while most readers will disagree, he’s somewhat tight-lipped on his childhood, his service during World War II, and the early years of his marriage—during which his first son drowned in an accident. Wouk more thoroughly charts his evolution from philosophy to humor (he credits Mark Twain for the latter) to writing, and readers get a sense of the inspirations for and personalities behind his most famous works. “The view from 100 is, to this centenarian, illuminating and surprising,” Wouk concludes. “With this book I am free: from contracts, from long-deferred to-do books, in short, from producing any new words. I have said my say, done my work.” ■