

Literature of World War I

BY PATRICK SMITH

The centenary of any major historical event almost always reprises the event's literature. World War I is no exception.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, set in motion the war that led to the deaths of some 15 million soldiers and civilians and altered the geopolitical landscape of Europe—and much of the rest of the world—forever. “All the horrors of all the ages were brought together; not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them,” Winston Churchill, who relished his role as First Lord of the Admiralty in the war, wrote two decades later.

In the war's ashes, writers spilled an ocean of ink hoping to make sense of the carnage.

Among the most canonized of the literature to come out of the war is Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* (1929), and the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon (who survived the war but protested it bitterly) and Wilfred Owen, a young British soldier whose verse describes the trench warfare that characterized the fighting and offers a moving tribute to millions of lives lost.

Owen was killed exactly a week before the Armistice that ended the war on November 11, 1918, and his “Anthem for Doomed Youth” immortalizes with grace and gravitas the futures wasted on the battlefields and in the trenches of Europe: “No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,/ Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—/ The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;/ And bugles calling for them from sad shires.”

The 100th anniversary of the war's onset provides us with an opportunity to examine the great variety of fiction and nonfiction written in response to that most divisive of times. The selections below, some well known and others a bit overlooked, explore the war itself, as well as its lasting aftermath.

FICTION

Regeneration

By Pat Barker (1991)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE NOMINEE

For the men who fought in World War I and survived, sometimes the homecoming was every bit as terrible as the horrors they witnessed in the trenches. Captain W. H. R.

Rivers, a pioneer in talk therapy stationed at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, takes a more empathetic view toward the men, treating them with the respect they deserve and helping them to return, as much as possible after such a traumatizing experience, to the normalcy of everyday life. The relationship between Rivers and poet Siegfried Sassoon, who had been committed to the Edinburgh hospital for his protestation of the war, lies at the heart of the novel.

“Barker has specialised in gritty feminist sagas, so this book represents an admirable extension of her range,” Paul Taylor writes. “Weaving together fact and imaginative speculation, it dramatises, in a manner that throws up many general insights into the social and psychological changes the war set in train, the profound effect these two men had on each other and the uncomfortable paradoxes in their respective positions.” *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995; ◆ BOOKER PRIZE) follow *Regeneration* and established Barker's Regeneration Trilogy as an instant classic and perhaps some of the finest contemporary antiwar fiction ever penned.

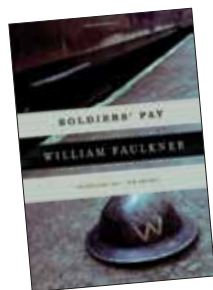
Soldiers' Pay

By William Faulkner (1926)

After reports mistakenly listed him among the dead, Donald Mahon, an American aviator in the British Royal Air Force, returns to his family and his shallow fiancée, Cecily, in Charlestown, Georgia. Disfigured literally and figuratively by the war, the amnesiac Mahon is ministered to on a train by former soldier Joe Gilligan and the young war widow Margaret Powers, who shape Mahon's life in Charlestown even as he treads a fine line between life and death.

Faulkner's debatable role in World War I has always been a point of interest and contention for scholars. He tried to join the U.S. Army, but was turned down because of his short stature; he then attempted to enter the Royal Air Force in Canada, but the war ended before he could complete flight training. Writing, not war, was Faulkner's forte, as readers came to realize with the publication of *Soldier's Pay*, a debut conceived in an apartment overlooking Jackson Square in New Orleans (a

bookstore paying homage to Faulkner marks the spot today). *A Fable* (1954), which Faulkner wrote nearly three decades later, details one week in France's ghastly trenches; it won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.





Soldiers marching beside a river and over a bridge into a shelled Verdun. The battle of Verdun in 1916 was the longest and costliest battle—in terms of lives—of the war.

Verdun

MAISON
JOUSSAINT
1916

ÉDITÉ PAR LA COMPAGNIE DES CHEMINS DE FER DE L'EST

COUSTELLE & SERRÉ - IMPRIMEURS 11, Rue du Torcage PARIS

Legends of the Fall

By Jim Harrison (1979)

Harrison's sweeping, eponymous novella, which takes place in the northern Rocky Mountains and the trenches of World War I, ends with the death of Tristan Ludlow in the 1960s. The driving force behind Tristan's barely controlled mania, however, is the death of beloved brother Samuel in World War I. Samuel's absence forever changes the family and sets the willful, peripatetic Tristan on a rampage to replace his brother, while the straight-laced Alfred, the eldest of the three brothers, seeks to establish himself outside the others.

Harrison, a gifted poet and novelist, was encouraged by his friend Jack Nicholson to take on a collection of novellas. The resulting title story was written in a matter of weeks, and, more than 35 years later, it remains the best known of the prolific Harrison's work, revived in part by a 1994 big-screen adaptation that includes a bone-shattering World War I sequence.

A Lonely Death

An Inspector Ian Rutledge Mystery

By Charles Todd (2011)

Having been sent home shell-shocked from World War I, Scotland Yard inspector Ian Rutledge can't shake the horrors that daily force him to question his own sanity. Not least among his many torments is the frequent appearance of Hamish McLeod, a friend whom Rutledge had executed for disobeying orders at the Battle of the Somme. When called from London to Eastfield, a small, quiet town in Sussex, in July 1920 to investigate the deaths of three men who had fought together in the trenches, Rutledge ruminates on the brutality of the murders and the violence in his own past. His life—together with the lives of the soldiers—hangs in the balance and brings Rutledge to the brink of his own destruction.

A Lonely Death is the 13th installment in the Ian Rutledge series from the prolific mother-son team writing under the pseudonym Charles Todd. Starting with *A Test of Wills*, which takes place in June 1919, the series focuses on the damaged Rutledge, whose PTSD keeps these books, favorably compared by critics to Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (see above), especially relevant and compelling. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2011)

The Return of the Soldier

By Rebecca West (1918)

Chris Baldry, an upper-class British soldier fighting in France, returns from the front shell-shocked. He remains

convinced that he lives during a time 15 years before the war: the summer when he was 20 and fell in love with Margaret Grey, an innkeeper's daughter. Baldry's wife, Kitty, who prides herself on maintaining appearances at all cost, enlists his cousin Jenny and Margaret, now middle-aged, to bring her husband back from the past with a piece of tragic news.

"What can be said with certainty is that her entire life and worldview were shaped by the Great War of 1914–1918," biographers Bernard Schweizer and Charles Thorne write of West's debut novel, one of the first books to examine the war. "Though the war remains a distant reality in *The Return of the Soldier*, West's letters, essays, and reviews of the time address the war directly, revealing aspects of it not addressed in the novel." West's portrayal of how the war disturbs the fragile peace at home has become a fixture in the canon of World War I literature.

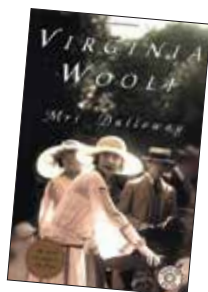
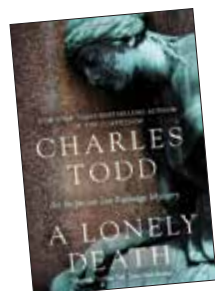
Mrs. Dalloway

By Virginia Woolf (1925)

◆ TIME MAGAZINE'S BEST 100 NOVELS

The bourgeois Clarissa Dalloway traverses London on a beautiful morning in preparation for a party that evening, all the while recalling events from her youth and early adulthood, including her choice of husband and the vagaries of courtship, love, and marriage. In a parallel story, Septimus Warren Smith and his wife, Lucrezia, spend a day in the park. Smith, a war veteran struggling to maintain his sanity, commits suicide on the evening of the party. Clarissa, hearing the news, connects the two narratives in a commentary on war and society.

In her inimitable impressionistic style, Woolf examines issues common to her work: interpersonal relationships and duty, identity, social expectation, and sexual and economic repression. The scenes involving the death of Smith and Clarissa's introspection are some of the author's most powerful, and the novel's outcome is eerily prescient. In 1941, distraught at having witnessed the outbreak of a second world war, Woolf committed suicide by drowning in the River Ouse.



Further Reading

FEAR | GABRIEL CHEVALLIER (1930)

THE GOOD SOLDIER ŠVEJK | JAROSLAV HAŠEK (1923)

TO THE LAST MAN | JEFF SHAARA (2004)

NONFICTION

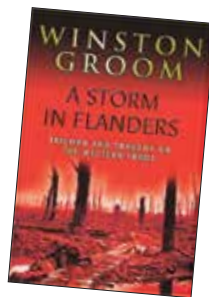
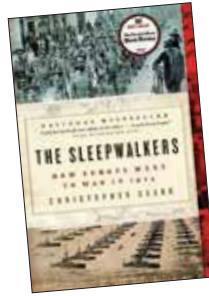
The Sleepwalkers

How Europe Went to War in 1914

By Christopher Clark (2013)

Global reaction to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was neither immediate nor aggressive. In fact, most of the world, embroiled in its own domestic concerns, glibly ignored the act. So begins Clark's reprise of the events surrounding the war's opening gambit, the behind-the-scenes subterfuge that brought Russia, France, England, and the rest of the "sleepwalkers" over the brink and into the bloodiest war the world had ever seen.

"The distinctive achievement of *The Sleepwalkers* is Clark's single-volume survey of European history leading up to the war," Harold Evans writes. "It is as if a light had been turned on a half-darkened stage of shadowy characters cursing among themselves without reason." In some ways an update to Barbara Tuchman's classic *The Guns of August* (see below), Clark's work brings fresh perspective to the often researched and analyzed first days of the Great War.



Rites of Spring

The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age

By Modris Eksteins (1989)

◆ FERGUSON PRIZE

◆ TRILLIUM BOOK AWARD

Thousands of books have been written on the history of World War I. But few have explored the artistic and cultural changes that the war engendered, which led to the rise of new modes of expression loosely categorized as "modernism." According to Eksteins, the war also cultivated the sensibility that allowed Nazism to flourish in the coming decades. Despite being a cultural history, replete with discussions on the choreography of Nijinsky and the groundbreaking work of Igor Stravinsky—the author derives his book's title and its artistic focus from the composer's stunning ballet, first staged to great fanfare and controversy in Paris in 1913—Eksteins's work sees the soldier in the trenches as "not just a harbinger but the very agent of the modern aesthetic, the progenitor of destruction but also the embodiment of the future." And in that war, Eksteins sees the seeds of another war.

Eksteins's award-winning book "conveys the terrible experience of trench warfare and explains why it so radically altered the psychology of Europe," Christopher Lehmann-Haupt writes. "For this accomplishment alone, *Rites of Spring* belongs on a bookshelf with Paul Fussell's *Great War and Modern Memory* and John Keegan's *Face of Battle*."

Good-bye to All That

An Autobiography

By Robert Graves (1929)

Graves entered the war as a young captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers with something to prove: his middle name,

von Ranke, didn't do him any favors at a time when Germans weren't highly thought of in Britain, and he was roundly disliked by his fellow soldiers, some of whom thought him a spy. By the time he left the war and his country behind, he didn't recognize his own life. As a disillusioned outcast, he recorded his story. "It was my bitter leave-taking of England where I had recently broken a good many conventions; quarreled with, or been disowned by, most of my friends; been grilled by the police on a suspicion of attempted murder; and ceased to care what anyone thought of me," Graves recalls in 1957 in a revised edition of this memoir, which discusses his experience as a British army officer (and gives details of trench warfare), his childhood and family, and his married life. "Reading *Good-bye to All That* over again, for the first time since 1929, I wonder how my publishers escaped a libel action."

Graves's memoir is one of the most memorable and vivid to come out of the war. He penned it in a style that gives an immediacy and epic weight to the horrific events that were quickly becoming part of the fabric of Western culture. "The world that the war has taught Graves to see is a world of contingency and constant mistakes," Paul Fussell writes, "not to mention outright fatuity."

A Storm in Flanders

Triumph and Tragedy on the Western Front

By Winston Groom (2002)

As World War I battles go, Ypres (EE-pre, or as British soldiers called it with bitter irony, "Wipers") was bloody but hardly the worst of the war. Still, nearly a quarter million soldiers died in that Belgian municipality, which, as Groom points out, was "an area not much longer than Manhattan Island." The site was also significant for the introduction of chlorine gas and flamethrowers and for the onset of a war of attrition that claimed millions of lives. "It is a powerful conclusion for any study on the First World War that seeks to draw in a new generation of readers," Rob Stout writes, "a physical testament to the destruction ... and a constant reminder of a time when the word Ypres was synonymous with slaughter and death."

With a lifelong passion for history, including previously published volumes on the Civil War and World War II, Groom is still best known for his novel *Forrest Gump*. In fitting fashion, he opens his exploration of the charnel house of Ypres with a novelist's eye for detail. "It is almost as if mischievous gods dropped a gigantic jigsaw puzzle from the sky in which some of the pieces will always be missing and others do not exactly fit the places for which they were designed," he writes, prefiguring the coming chaos and carnage to come.

Paris 1919

Six Months That Changed the World

By Margaret MacMillan (2002)

◆ SAMUEL JOHNSON PRIZE

Prevailing historical opinion has long suggested that World War II, and by extension much of today's political unrest, stems from the bungling of the World War I peace process by the main players who appeared in Paris in 1919: Britain's Lloyd George, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, and France's Georges Clemenceau. Not so, writes Canadian historian MacMillan, who argues that, even though the decisions made in Paris were hardly exemplary and long before what many saw as draconian measures were put in place, the die had already been cast for the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe and the Soviet Union.

"Margaret MacMillan's engrossing account of that seminal event contains some success stories, to be sure," Richard Holbrooke writes in his foreword to the best-selling account of the aftermath of the war and its role in World War II and beyond—"but measured against the judgment of history and consequences, it is a study of flawed decisions with terrible consequences, many of which haunt us to this day." MacMillan brings the period to life with a fiction writer's eye for detail and a seasoned historian's interpretive skill. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2003)

The Guns of August

By Barbara W. Tuchman (1962)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

Narrowly focused on a span of little more than a month, *The Guns of August* examines the war's onset, from Germa-

ny's declaration of war against Russia on August 1, 1914, to the first days of the Battle of Marne in early September. That battle slowed Germany's progress—despite its leaders' belief that the war would be brief, they made numerous tactical blunders along the way, not least in the world's opinion of the country's ruthlessness—and saved Paris. By the end of the war, the battle was a symbol of the bloody stalemate that cost countless lives and ripped the world in two.

"Her ability is exceptional in juggling a dozen scenes of simultaneous action, in clarifying the technicalities of military operations and in maintaining a judicious objectivity," Orville Prescott writes in an early review. "*The Guns of August* is a fine demonstration that with sufficient art rather specialized history can be raised to the level of literature." Considered a classic of World War I history even half a century removed from its initial publication, Tuchman's masterwork remains a study in how history should be written—with close attention to the events, of course, as well as with memoirs and other source materials that give the book an uncommon texture and lasting vitality.

Further Reading

THE GREAT INFLUENZA: THE EPIC STORY OF THE DEADLIEST PLAGUE IN HISTORY | JOHN M. BARRY (2004)

THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY | PAUL FUSSELL (1975)

THE FIRST WORLD WAR | JOHN KEEGAN (1999) ■

Return of U.S. Army Soldiers (Library of Congress)

