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War Is Not X-Rated!

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by Janet Francis

There was a time when an exploration of war in books written for young people would have been fruitless. Books designed to be read by children dealt with fluffy kittens and faithful dogs; with disobedient children who learned through sad experience the unquestioned value of courtesy, obedience and Christian principles. However, around the turn of this century, when the horn of plenty (in terms of juvenile books) began to fill, there were numerous series written by such popular authors as Joseph Altshelter, Victor Appleton, and George A. Henty which portrayed war as a glorious adventure calling up extraordinarily courageous response from every heart; supported by a sort of hazy battlefield and punctuated by distant firing and occasional death (never decimating the immediate cast of characters, naturally). Both boys and girls were addressed by the undeniable appeal of these works.

With the advent of World War II, the emphasis seemed to shift from series to single books and to more realistic individual experience. Such early adventures as McSwiggan’s Snow Treasure and Anne Holm’s North to Freedom gave young readers a participant’s point-of-view on at least the battlefield’s edges. Still prevalent was the heroic courage against a clear enemy—the antagonists were always wrong, the protagonist always on the allied side. Their choices were clear, and while difficult, always possible. Within the last decade, described attitudes, as well as conditions, have begun to make an about-face (albeit somewhat slow and not universal). In such books as Watkins’ So Far From the Bamboo Grove, Yoko, the young heroine, is a Japanese child, surviving World War II as a refugee in Korea. Her story is autobiographical and although somewhat fictionalized, serves as a kind of healing process recording the pain of her losses and the triumph of her survival. More recently in The Forty-Third War, Louise Moeri writes of a twelve-year-old Central American boy, conscripted from his rural village by revolutionary soldiers. As he learns soldiering, he is finally converted to the revolutionary promises of a better life with the realization that, for him, war is a way of life.

Book by book, the idea grows that war is not an adventure. From the English poets who wrote in blood and tears from the battlefront of World War I (but were not widely published until now), war was
portrayed war as bloody, cold and dirty, and defined by loss and pain. The loss may be as minor as that of Tessa Gray when her woolly mongrel must go to the vet to die because her family is evacuating Guernsey and he can’t be taken along in Trease’s *Tomorrow Is a Stranger*, or as major as that experienced by fourteen-year-old Jan, the only survivor of his village caught between Russian and German fire who must accompany the German troops in their march across eastern Europe. Jan’s story is a recent translation of a World War I narrative, *No hero For the Kaiser*, written in 1931 by Rudolf Frank and burned by Hitler’s officials in 1933. Apparently those who were more intimately acquainted with war did not disguise its effects even in earlier writings. Perhaps they learned more quickly the truth of Santayana’s admonition that those who could not remember the past were condemned to repeat it.

The impact of war on children’s lives is predictably the center of most of these stories, although occasional books like Robert Westall’s *Blitzcat* merely present a factual depiction of war (in this case, World War II in England) from end to end, letting the facts speak for themselves.

Development of the action in these stories seems to lie along one of three routes. The protagonists are fleeing the effects of war, running for their lives, abandoning all they have. *Angel With a Mouth-Organ* by Christobel Mattingly deals with such a rout, as a family is burned out of their village and escapes in a handcart, through the woods, finally being reunited in a refugee camp. Or, children may be enduring the immediate effects of war upon their lives, actively involved in combating unacceptable conditions, or simply making the best of them. Magorian’s *Good Night Mr. Tom* is found among the latter category as the children suffer major changes in their lives due to war and evacuation. Pearson’s *The Sky Is Falling* traces another experience in evacuation as Norah and her five-year-old brother are shipped to Canada and to a desolate experience in misunderstanding quite unlike the positive results of Willie Beech’s evacuation in *Mr. Tom*. In *The Morning Glory War*, Judy Glassman depicts young people’s lives basically unchanged by the impact of World War II as they deal with rationing, victory gardens, and V-mail. The rites of passage focus is slightly different, but still proceeds apace.

Finally there are those stories where the protagonist is abandoned or, of necessity, left behind, and who must make his own assessment of the war’s effects and adjust to its demands. As is most often true with
any arbitrary division, many stories mix and match, like *Harpoon Island* by Pieter Van Raven which deals with the rejection of an American man of German descent who finally makes a place for himself, and his withdrawn son, teaching on an isolated island, only to lose it when World War I is declared. Another homefront story, Marion Dane Bauer’s *Rain of Fire*, explores the adjustment of twelve-year-old Steve to his silent brother’s return from Hiroshima and his own ambivalent response to violence.

Picture books seem an unlikely ground for war-based stories, but in recent years, many authors/illustrators have turned their efforts toward producing graphic representations of this subject. Some are addressed to the coffee-table trade, but others are honestly scaled to the use of the very young. *Let the Celebrations Begin!* by Wild, *The Tin Heart* by Ackerman, *Cecil’s Story* by Lyon, and *Faithful Elephants* by Tsuchiya, all published in the past four years, illustrate this trend. The first book tells of a Polish prison camp and the victory celebration for the children there at the finish of World War II. *Faithful Elephants* also takes place in World War II, but in Tokyo where the zoo animals must be destroyed for the city’s safety. The last two take place during the Civil War and deal more intimately with individual children’s experiences. Each book presents war without detail, but with obvious responsibility for the sadness and situations which should be different. Almost, we might believe that the authors/illustrators seek to implant a seed of knowledge that may lie dormant through the maturing years but will arm that memory against the precept of war later on. Whether the warning can hold its own against media bombardment and popular expediency remains to be seen.

Numerous Holocaust stories have been written, some autobiographical, some seeking to expiate the racial/national guilt that burdens most who remember. *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, among others, deals with a more removed aspect of the Jewish tragedy through the eyes of Danish children who helped to smuggle nearly 7,000 people out of occupied Denmark. There will not likely be any reading child unfamiliar with that particularly grim testament to the ravages of war.

One major characteristic shared by virtually all of the newer juvenile books dealing with war is the lack of absolutes in character. Whether the books are well-written (which may assume less rigidity in character) or otherwise, there are good enemies and bad friends. Goals and desires are clouded, even undefined, and "truth" is in scarce supply.
Young readers (like the rest of us) may learn with their hearts from fiction, but their minds require more concrete instruction. To that purpose, several series have been published dealing with the surroundings and details of war. Among them are *World War II Series* published by Walker which covers each year of World War II, one volume per year, with vignette-like time divisions of the War’s events, and *World at War* published by Childrens Press which devotes single volumes to each battle or remarkable event of World War II. Along with these more serious, factual treatments, there are minor attractions like *Echo Company* published by Scholastic, complete with a metallic dogtag in the shrink-wrap covering and fictionalized camaraderie of the teams at war in Vietnam where boys can learn to be men.

From the pictures of primitive people at war, ably realized by Henry Treece and Rosemary Sutcliffe through this year’s non-fiction presentations of troops in Operation Desert Storm, the underlying tone always purports not to choose war, but to endure through it. No reasonable mind can dismiss the savagery caused by multiple groups of people intent on destroying one another, can it? Yet wars continue to happen. It seems evident that there are mixed messages in the juvenile literature about war, just as there are in adult reading materials. The ultimate expression of courage—to die for your beliefs—denies the human quality of fear which preserves he who runs away. The universal pain of loss, through death or absence, fades as time passes. The war books are written for all the same purposes other books are written and share the same shelves and profits. There is, however, one very basic difference. War is a foreign experience to most juvenile readers. Only through outside eyes can they experience its nature or see its boundaries. Perhaps that is the conclusion to be drawn from these books. They define the boundaries of the unknown beast, hopefully with enough urgency to make it familiar and abhorred.
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6 Brigham Young University


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