

For every yin, there is a yang. Within the black, we look for white. So when things fall apart, can new things form? Shahriar Feroze invites us to better understand how war has contributed to some great literature coming together. Joe Treasure calls out the politicians trying to police. And we rejoin Nupu Press as she moves from inspiration to perspiration on piecing together the first draft of her novel. Can you see the silver lining on this page? Comments, viewpoints and contributions are welcome at: [DSLitEditor@gmail.com](mailto:DSLitEditor@gmail.com)

MUNIZE MANZUR

# FORMING WORDS FROM WAR

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

What can a war deliver other than death and destruction?

One of the things it can do is give food for thought to a writer or perhaps force the poet to imagine. Not that I am wooing warfare in search of ideal plots for best-selling war books. But here's an

off point in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's war literature – especially for European literature. For those of us who grew up reading translations of the various European writers, it was hard to stay away from the war novels; as some of them had earned the distinction of being classics while others were as captivating as a 007 thriller.

Interestingly, not long before the WW1 began, war was considered a subject unsuitable for literature and more of a designated subject for objective reportage in newspapers. It was with the commencement of the Great War that the norm broke free of its chains, except in Germany where the nationalist revival between 1800 and 1814 engendered some novels (albeit quickly forgotten) and a great deal of verse, much of it still in print and also contributed to German nationalist sentiment in 1914.

The very first week of the war inspired enormous quantities of poetry and fiction. The claim that some three million war poems were written in Germany alone in the first six months of hostilities may be difficult to substantiate; but according to a reliable count, 2,225 English poets of the First World War existed, of whom 1,808 were civilians. Because of the war's intense demand on the young men of that generation, a number of women contributed to the war literature, often observing the effects of the war on soldiers, domestic space and the home-front in general.

The renowned poet and writer Alfred Noyes, a pacifist, in an attempt to vilify war had published a long anti-war poem called "The Wine Press" to portray its horrors. But it was his "The Victory Ball" published in 1920 that earned him recognition. He wrote it after attending a Ball held in London soon after the Armistice, where he found himself pondering what the ghosts of the soldiers would have said if they could observe the inconsiderate

frivolity of the dancers. The message of the poem lies in the line: "Under the dancing feet are the graves."

In portraying the tormented agony of a soldier: nothing beats Erich Maria Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front" along with its sequel. The book describes the German soldiers' extreme physical and mental stress during the war, and the detachment from civilian life felt by many of these soldiers upon returning home. Remarque's depiction provoked strong reactions coupled with anti-war sentiments around the world.

Then, almost in sync, appeared Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" – the classic that beautifully painted out a love affair against the backdrop of the First World War.

We had a notable volume of the war's history under the title "The Guns of August" composed by Barbara Tuchman. Together with a narrative, Tuchman included detailed discussions of the plans, strategies, world events and international sentiments before and during the war. Thus the reader may get the feeling of reading military history about the participants in the Great War.

Meanwhile in Bangladesh, an unknown Bengali soldier was deeply influenced by the developments and happenings of the war. His name was Kazi Nazrul Islam. During his less than three years military career the great poet understood his revolt should not come forward through the swords but by the pen. The rebel in him came through in the fury of his poems. Nazrul joined the Bengal Regiment of the British

Indian Army and his literary activities commenced from his posting at Karachi Cantonment. His prose and poetry were published in different literary magazines during the war. What a breeding ground for a genius poet and writer!

Opinion and analysis on First World War's impact on English and global literature could go on endlessly, but could it be the subject of a debate if popular chauvinism was stronger or more prevalent in 1914 than it had been a hundred years earlier? My point is that when the First World War began, the literary and intellectual climate was seemingly more favourable to war literature than in any earlier period. Perhaps this is why we had so many poets and writers depicting this manmade catastrophe.

As long as we consider war to be evil, it will continue to have its fascination. Poets, writers and creative artists will continue to write about its horrors and wickedness. Poems, novels, songs, paintings etc. will be composed. Readers will shed tears or be horrified, perhaps both. Inevitably, new writers will rise. The adventure, horror, romance and action of war will be even more intensely narrated than it had been by the writers of the 1914-18 conflict. To end with a final comment: World War 1 literature is full of paradoxes, amongst which the most profound one is it comments continuously on its own failure.

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interesting way to look at the First Great War's influence on literature – a war that broke out exactly a hundred years ago.

The two World Wars impacted the subjects, thought patterns and even styles of writers. And to be more specific while limiting the scope of war literature - First World War was the cut-

Indisputably, the 1914-18 conflict was far more of a literary event, but when it came to novels and stories of various length, WW1 was one of the more preferred subjects for fiction. During the 20's, 30's and latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the war occupied the imagination of so many writers that at times I regret how little I have read!

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## A Creative Zone

NUPU PRESS

In her monthly column, Nupu Press shares her personal path of writing a first novel:

To outsiders, artists and writers appear to conjure things out of nothing, as if a muse has knocked on the door. Perhaps that happens to a rare few. In my case, I needed to rely on diligence, perseverance, and a creative environment – a zone, so to speak.

I originally thought of this zone as a literal one where I was surrounded by curious, artistic minds. A scientist friend came to visit me in Italy when I was a teaching assistant, and noted that my friends and I spent the whole evening passionately discussing art, film and photography. And we did – every day. In that immersive environment, creativity felt nimble and expansive, and I felt inspired and supported. We were in the zone. I made a short film, took an

enormous amount of photographs and wrote story after story.

Following this year of teaching, I returned to my regular work in film production, this time to a shoot in Delhi. Clocking in sixteen-plus-hour days, I fantasised about the end of the shoot when I would have the space and time to write again.

I was midpoint in a ten-year stretch of living out of a suitcase. After the film finished, I visited London for some months, then moved to Brighton where the rent was cheaper. I was giving my writer self everything I needed: time, money in the bank, a cosy room in a charming city, an idea for a book. Yet I was paralysed.

I felt like a fraud for not writing. I was too solitary, and missed the

surround sound of my artist cohorts. Without that environment, I feared, I would drift aimlessly and never rouse myself to write.

With funds drying up, it was time to leave and work on the next film. I hadn't written much beyond an outline and a few chapters. The story lived in my head more than the page. Then my dear uncle in London had a massive stroke.

Seeing him lying on the hospital bed was devastating. Something in me snapped. I didn't have all the time in the world.

I postponed my departure from England and spent every other day at the hospital in London. In my highly fraught state, I needed to channel those emotions into something outside of myself.

I began each day in Brighton completing my chores – groceries, bills, loathsome cooking – and then wrote for the rest of the day. Each moment felt precious and not to be wasted. On the London days, my focus was my uncle. On my train ride back to Brighton at night, I would scribble down notes but not allow myself to look at what I had written the day before.

By the self-imposed pressure of day on/day off, combined with the newly realised fragility of time and, most of all, by writing daily, I had unwittingly created my own zone. By the time I left the UK, I had completed a rough draft of my book.

Nupu Press is a writer and film producer. Her blog is at [www.nupupress.com](http://www.nupupress.com)

## MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2014 LONGLIST ANNOUNCED

Following extensive consultation, the Man Booker trustees decided this year to change the rules which had previously allowed only British and Commonwealth authors to be considered for the prize. Consequently, the six judges chaired by philosopher Anthony Grayling chose 13 books by four Americans, six Britons, two Irish writers and one Australian.

- *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, Joshua Ferris (Viking)
- *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Richard Flanagan (Chatto & Windus)
- *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, Karen Joy Fowler (Serpent's Tail)
- *The Blazing World*, Siri Hustvedt (Sceptre)
- *J, Howard Jacobson (Jonathan Cape)*
- *The Wake*, Paul Kingsnorth (Unbound)
- *The Bone Clocks*, David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- *The Lives of Others*, Neel Mukherjee (Chatto & Windus)
- *Us*, David Nicholls (Hodder & Stoughton)
- *The Dog*, Joseph O'Neill (Fourth Estate)
- *Orfeo*, Richard Powers (Atlantic Books)
- *How to be Both*, Ali Smith (Hamish Hamilton)
- *History of the Rain*, Niall Williams (Bloomsbury)

The Man Booker, which is awarded to the best novel of the year in the opinion of the judges, is worth £50,000 to the winner. Previous winners include Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel and Life of Pi by Yann Martel. The shortlist will be announced on 9<sup>th</sup> September and the winner on 14<sup>th</sup> October.

## When politicians try to control our reading

JOE TREASURE

The British government has been making book-related news in recent months – and not in a good way. In May we learned that an intervention by Michael Gove, who was then Secretary of State for Education, had prompted exam boards to drop non-British classics from their GCSE English syllabuses. Apparently Gove was particularly disappointed at the popularity of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Gove insisted that he wasn't banning anything. He just wanted British school children to read more home-grown books.

Under the new regulations, pupils must study a Shakespeare play, a 19th-century novel, a selection of poetry since 1789, and a work of fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards. A teacher eager to engage the interests of pupils might well feel boxed in by a list with such a historical emphasis. But it's the

'British Isles' requirement that is proving controversial, excluding as it does writers as varied as Chinua Achebe, Anita Desai and Harper Lee.

Countering the charge of parochialism, a spokesman for the department of education pointed out that, though the twentieth century work has to have originated in the British Isles, the 19th-century novel does not. This was probably not meant as a joke, though it spectacularly misses the point that it was in the 20th-century that English literature went global.

In June it was the Prime Minister who was turning the clock back. In an article in the Mail on Sunday, David Cameron said that 'we are bringing proper narrative history back to the curriculum', naming as his favourite book *Our Island Story*. Written for children at the height of the British Empire,

this book could now only be read as a curiosity. It's hard to imagine it featuring on any syllabus except as an illustration of Edwardian attitudes and it's a dismal thought that it might actually be our Prime Minister's favourite, or that he might really consider more analytical approaches to history 'improper'. More likely this was a craven appeal to voters attracted to the UK Independence Party.

Meanwhile Justice Minister Chris Grayling was dealing with the continuing ripples of protest at his ban on parcels for prisoners. As Grayling was desperate to point out, he wasn't actually banning books, just parcels, whatever they happened to contain – underwear, toiletries, presents from prisoners' children. Cutting the supply of books was just a side effect.

This argument didn't seem to help. Grayling faced objections from Carol Ann Duffy, Salman

Rushdie, Irvine Welsh, Sarah Waters, Hari Kunzru and others, before the story became international, with former political prisoners from around the world expressing concern. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot, freed after 16 months in a Siberian jail, said that, for a prisoner, 'Books make up your entire world.'

Dissident Belarusian journalist Iryna Khalip put it this way: 'In prison books become the air... No books – you cannot breathe.'

Democratic governments have no business directing what we may and may not read. But as long as books matter, they'll go on meddling.

Joe Treasure is the author of two novels: "The Male Gaze" and "Besotted", and teaches creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London. Read more of him at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk>