

Voices From A Forgotten Generation:

A Sampling of Fiction Written by American and
British Women about the Great War

Scholarly articles, monographs, dissertations, and books abound that analyze, review and interpret the literature written by the great—and not so great—male writers from the period of World War I. Countless hours of research, thought, and writing, as well as untold reams of paper have been devoted to what has been generally perceived as a nearly all-male canon.

On a less scholarly level, one only need ask any undergraduate class if the students have ever read anything literary from the period of the First World War. The response, in all probability, will be a rote litany of major World War I poets: Brooke, Graves, and Sassoon. If one continues to press, students may also mention several well-known works like *Farewell to Arms* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. If the instructor is still not satisfied and queries, "Perhaps a woman writer?" someone may be able to dredge up Vera Brittain's *A Testament of Youth*. Whether any of these three novels would be mentioned at all if they had not been made into films or television specials is fortunately outside the scope of this paper. What does seem a telling point, however, is that nearly all the writers who come instantly to mind are, with only one exception, male.

The modern feminist scholar might in all fairness inquire why. In the first two decades of this century, the preponderance of work written by American women was popular: and while popular fiction may not be particularly noteworthy as literature, it may somehow merit careful review and analysis simply to provide fresh insights into the era that the fiction reflects.

A review of what little scholars and critics have said about British and American women's works written during and about the First World War produces an astonishing unanimity of opinion. Both vintage critics, like Hoffman, Cunliffe, and Spiller, and new feminist critics, like Gilbert and Khan, all essentially espouse the view that when writing about World War I, American women writers seem overwhelmingly sentimental and propagandistic in plot, tone, and theme.

Although a number of American women wrote about the experience of the First World War, few wrote anything other than popular fiction. Reasonably enough, these works, even those written by well-known writers such as Cather and Wharton, have not been studied extensively or seriously; they have lain unheralded in that critical limbo reserved for minor fiction. Until only recently, with the publication of critical works like Khan's *Women's Poetry of the First World War* and Helen Cooper's *Arms and the*

Women, little—if—any serious consideration has been given to the women writers of the World War One generation. And the few critical comments, until now, have been either disparaging or dismissive. To relegate all the fiction written by women, popular or otherwise, as peripheral is to lose or to ignore a valuable source of commentary on the lives, beliefs, and feelings of human beings, male or female, who were compatriots of the great writers.

These women may never have fought on the Front, but their sons, husbands, and loved ones did. If one begins with the premise that the significance of these minor works is what they reveal to the contemporary reader about their society, the everyday aspects of the times during which the writers lived, then this reason alone should deem it valuable to unearth these works and to review a sampling of the popular fiction written by women during and about the First World War.

These works seem on first reading to separate almost too neatly into opposing camps: the strictly propagandistic and the starkly realistic. Unlike the best known novels of World War I, in which the settings expose the nightmares of trench warfare, and the characterization explores the effects of the horrors of war on the soldiers' souls, a cursory glance at novels such as Cather's *One of Ours* or Wharton's *A Son at the Front* discloses this popular fiction's unrealistic glorification of war. Not unreasonably, too, reviewers and critics have commented on what seems a super-patriotic quality in the characterization of many of the women characters in these novels. All too uncomfortably—certainly all too frequently—for the modern reader, the female protagonists are presented as self-sacrificing women, who revel in patriotic generosity; after all, it is they who are selfless enough to encourage, nay, even to demand that their husbands, fathers, lovers, and sons answer duty's call and don uniforms.

Modern readers and critics are embarrassed by the sentiment of passages such as the ending of *One of Ours*:

As she read the newspapers, she used to think about the passage of the Red Sea in the Bible; it seemed as if the flood of meanness and greed had been held back just long enough for the boys to go over, and then swept down and engulfed everything that was left at home. When she can see nothing that has come of it all but evil, she reads Claude's letters over again and reassures herself; for him the call was clear, the cause was glorious. (458)

Such a passage is indeed mawkish. But critics too often ignore the realism that lies beneath the surface of sentimentality; the following paragraph, for example, exposes the reality of the way in which many women learned of the deaths of their sons, fathers, or husbands:

Mrs. Wheeler got the word of his death one afternoon in the sitting-room, the room in which he had bade her good-bye. She was reading when the telephone rang. "Is this the Wheeler farm? This is the telegraph office at Frankfort. We have a message from the War Department,—” the voice hesitated. "Isn't Mr. Wheeler there?"

"No, but you can read the message to me."

Mrs. Wheeler said, "Thank you," and hung up the receiver. She felt her way softly to her chair. (457)

In fact, what happened in this passage is not unlike the way my own grandmother learned of the death of her beloved younger brother.

The domestic realism embedded in the popular fiction by Cather, Wharton, Fisher, and Santmyer provides the scholar with insights into an historical era. However, on a different level, the female authors' lack of personal knowledge and first hand experience of warfare places serious limits on their writing. In the popular fiction of this era, their imaginative use of the front as a setting and their descriptions of battle scenes are so unreal that the reader often winces with embarrassment. At best they imaginatively recreate scenes and actions complete with epic heroes and medieval knights that are based more on their own literary background than on warfare.

With the exception of the novels of a few British women writers, such as Isabel Rathbone, who wrote *We That Were Young* and Vera Brittain, the author of *Testament of Youth*, death of the male characters in popular novels is almost always employed metaphorically as a redemptive motif. Thus the *dolce et decorum est* theme echoes and re-echoes throughout much of the popular fiction written by women about and during World War I.

A brief survey shows that American women writers are, on the whole, more inclined to write positively and enthusiastically about the war effort and the glorious sacrifices than the women writers of other nations engaged in war. This propagandizing and popularizing of the war is not limited, however, solely to American women writers. Jessie Pope, the extraordinarily popular British woman poet, and May Sinclair, a very popular English novelist, too, repeat the "glory, glory, glory" theme of Cather, Wharton, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Herbs and Apples, written by the American midwestern author, Helen Hooven Santmyer, was a popular American novel that examined the average young, American woman's ambivalent response to World War I.

The young heroine, Derrick, and her friends vacillate realistically between supporting the war effort and lauding the heroism of their boyfriends and brothers, and lamenting the waste of so many young lives.

The opposing strain within the canon of women's writings during and about the Great War is represented by the English writers, Isabel Rathbone, Vera Brittain, and Rebecca West. These works offer poignantly and painfully realistic commentaries on the horrors of a war that systematically stripped the warring nation of its men. These works, too, imply, but do not truly develop, an unspoken corollary: the annihilation of a generation of young men meant that the quality of life of the women of that generation and their futures would be irrevocably changed. Often, the woman who was betrothed at age eighteen in 1914 faced at the age of twenty-two perhaps fifty years of a single life; many a bride of nineteen or twenty in 1914 found herself widowed with one or two children, alone and uneducated to support herself and her family for perhaps the next four or five decades.

Just as any sampling of popular works divulges much about everyday activities of the period in which they are written, such a sampling will also uncover what was not noted, not discussed—what may have been tidied out of the sight and out of the thoughts of the ordinary reader. Popular writers did not want to chronicle the lives of quiet desperation that these forgotten women lived—women whose husbands or fiancés the war snatched away—for these lives were encumbered with the dreary sameness and bleak reality that surely mirrored the darkness and despair of many returning soldiers.

Understandably, the ordinary reader in the 1920's found the flappers and members of the lost generation more exciting and thrilling than these lonely women. Thus, many of the women who were young, married, or engaged during the First World War became the "forgotten generation" after the war. The average reader never sees or hears from them again after the war; they melt into woodwork of everyday life, alone and lonely, left somehow to earn their livings in those few honorable ways open to average middle-class American women: teaching, nursing, sewing, working in the stores or businesses owned by brothers or fathers, or keeping house for their married siblings. Their roles in popular novels were those of maiden aunts, school marms, and piano teachers.

How one survives an empty life is not a theme that appeals to a writer of popular fiction and thus is not touched upon in the works sampled. The idea that the experience of war changes the combatants is an axiom in the writings of the better known authors; what is not documented, however, is the way in which the lives of those left at home were changed irrevocably

by the war. The works by female writers cited in this paper address the initial grief felt by their women protagonists at the loss of their loved ones, but fail to comment on the loneliness of the war widow. How the ordinary woman faced day after dreary day as a theme has not been adequately confronted, and perhaps what a sampling of these works shows most significantly is that everything has not yet been written about the World War I generation. The "forgotten women" are waiting for another generation to respond.

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