

The wars critical essay



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We no longer believe that some subjects are more appropriate for literary treatment than others: nowadays, every human activity, no matter how banal or disgusting, offers itself as legitimate material for the imagination to work on and turn into art.... There seem to be some subjects, however, which have a built-in intransigence to literary treatment because their historical reality, overwhelmingly banal, perhaps, or overwhelmingly disgusting, surpasses anything that the creative imagination can make of them.

Writers instinctively shun these topics, it seems to me, and rightly so. It takes considerable nerve, therefore, to do what Timothy Findley has done [in *The Wars*]*—*to write a novel squarely about the unspeakable reality of the 1914–18 war in order to make that reality even more unspeakably real. Having read it, we’re meant to put his book down angered and disgusted once again by the sheer futility of those four years, with the additional wrenching caused by our concern for the fate of the book’s fictional Canadian hero, Robert Ross.

It’s plain that Findley realizes he’s dealing with intractable material because he camouflages the fiction of his story by pretending that the novel is a species of historical document, taking as its subject the life of Robert Ross, piecing it together from tape-recorded interviews, press-cuttings from the archives, old photographs, diaries, and the like.

This technique enables Findley to intersperse his fictional account with grim and telling statistics about the war itself, though, in fact, the greater part of the book is a conventional third-person narrative, a novel, telling the story of

its central character more or less straightforwardly as countless novels have done and will no doubt continue to do. But does the story of Robert Ross match, or add to, or make even more dire, the tragedy of which he is a tiny (though not necessarily insignificant) part?

At best, it seems to only fitfully: there's frequently such a sense of strain in the telling of his tale that the insertion of those cold statistics from the greater drama makes his own biography seem forced and untrue. Part of the trouble must lie in the clipped, portentous style that Findley chooses for most of the book's scenes whether or not they take place on the battlefield.... [The] dominant style of the book [is] obtrusively unobtrusive, especially in moments of crisis such as the death of Rowena, the revelation about Taffler and the Swede, or the various deaths on the battlefield.... At moments like these the book's Hemingwayesque style pitches over into sentimentality. To describe the style of *The Wars* as sentimental is the closest I can come to conveying the cumulative effect of the novel's various crises rendered in this flattened, yet oddly apocalyptic, manner. Such a style takes its toll of the characters.

Much of the time they exist in the shadows, wraiths, dream-figures caught fleetingly in various postures, their behaviour difficult to understand except that it in some way reflects the exigencies of their time. Distant eccentrics is the description that springs to mind—like Robert's mother and the appalling Lady Barbara d'Orsey with whom Robert falls in love. Robert himself is a hero in the silent tradition, more acted upon than acting, chief victim perhaps of the book's style.... [The] novel demands our anguished sympathy without really having done enough to earn it. (pp. 173-74)