



The Place of World Affairs in Fiction

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Julia Jarman on books about contemporary conflicts.

Are books which deal with world affairs 'political'? Do young readers enjoy them? Author and teacher **Julia Jarman** recommends a clutch of novels which reflect contemporary conflicts. <!--break-->

Last November another mum began to grieve for her soldier son's death in Iraq . Corporal Gentle joined the army to travel she said, not to get killed. But killing, getting killed, that's what soldiers *do*. That's what I told pupils in my school who were planning to join up. I got into trouble for being political ? from the teacher who ran the Army Training Corps! Is that why some teachers shy away from books dealing with world affairs? If so they're missing out. Fantasy may be the fashion, but many writers feel compelled to write about reality and some youngsters crave relevance as well as excitement.

Relevance to today

 They'd get both from **Death or Glory Boys** : Sarah joins the ATC to get insights into army life, not knowing that the actions of a terrorist are threatening her life. You might still want to join the army after reading this thriller, but you would be under no illusions about what soldiers do and why. It demands discussion.

 Today we're deluged with news but often feel no connection to it. Certainly a lot of young people feel that world affairs have nothing to do with them. Fiction can change that. Read **A Little Piece of Ground** , and you know what it is like to be a Palestinian boy who cannot play football because Israeli tanks occupy the pitch. You identify with 12-year-old Karim and care about him. You fear for his life. In some ways this novel is an old-fashioned war story with goodies, the Palestinian victims, and baddies, the Israeli occupiers. Author Liz Laird has been criticised for this, but felt she could not write it any other way and stay true to the facts of life in Ramallah. She felt compelled to be a voice for the dispossessed.

 For the Israeli point of view you must go elsewhere, to Lynne Reid Banks' story of kibbutz life, **One More River** , or for a more recent view, Linda Newbery's **Sisterland** in which the Arab-Israeli conflict becomes acutely relevant for teenager Hilly when she discovers she is partly Jewish. When she wants to visit Israel her Arab boyfriend is angry. How can he be racist and a victim of racism? How important are race and religion to a sense of identity? Do they help or hinder the unity of the human race? **Sisterland** raises all these issues in a thoughtful, thought provoking novel, with an intriguing mystery at its core, and shows how the Arab Israeli conflict is rooted in the past.

 In **Kiss the Dust** , Liz Laird again articulates the anguish of the dispossessed. Tara and her family flee Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Informative about the abuses of that regime and its persecution of Kurds, this novel is also exciting ? will the family manage to escape to another country? How will people react if they do? The reader cares about Tara , learns what it's like to be an asylum seeker, sees the people behind the headlines.

The two World Wars

Laird, a much-travelled writer, thinks writers should focus on contemporary issues. There is too much emphasis on both World Wars, she says, and this has led to children with German names being bullied. But these wars will continue to fascinate writers and readers. War embodies classic story elements ? conflict, heroes, villains, heightened emotions and big ideas ? and will always appeal. The word 'appeal' highlights the dilemma for writers today ? how to convey the excitement of war and make it *un* appealing. Writers of the past had a different agenda ? to bang the drum ? and could write of war as straightforward adventure.

☒ To counter anti-German bias I read Christine Nostlinger's **Fly Away Home** , an autobiographical story about growing up in Vienna during the Second World War, and **Traitor** by the prize-winning German writer, Gudrun Pausewang. In **Traitor** , Anna is hiding an escaped Russian prisoner of war, fearful of discovery by her brother, a fanatical member of Hitler Youth. Tension rises to a stunning climax. Both novels show that German children were also victims of Fascism.

Recent conflicts

☒ The more recent conflict in Bosnia is the background to **Dead Negative** , a thriller by Nick Manns. Teenager Elliot is haunted by his father, a war photographer, whose killers have never been found. Elliot sees and hears his dad urging him to stand up and be counted when racist thugs persecute his best mate, Jaspreet. Elliot tries, both to help his Muslim mate and to solve the mystery of his dad's death ? and puts his own life in danger. As his dad's killers close in on him ? to get the photographs that will prove they are war criminals ? the reader sees that racism at home and the racism that led to genocide of Muslims in Bosnia have the same roots.

Read any of these books to understand why people are fleeing the trouble spots of the world, why there are wars, why attitudes must change if wars are to stop ? yes, most writers for the young do want to change the world. The books also show how hard it is to bring such change.

Conflict in Britain

☒ In Bernard Ashley's **Little Soldier** Christian evangelists have rescued African boy soldier, Kaninda, and brought him back to London. But Kaninda doesn't want to be rescued. Brutalised by seeing his family killed and by being made a killer himself, he plots to return to Africa to fight the tribe who killed his family. Meanwhile he sets out to kill a boy in his class from that tribe. Ashley links racial violence abroad and gang war in London dockland in a thrilling story. The cover of this book, with its photo of a black boy cradling an automatic, will attract those looking for a story filled with violence, and there is violence but also a strong anti-war message for those willing to hear it.

For more seering realism and gripping plots showing how global events are affecting British life today try **Ruby Tanya** by Robert Swindells and Alan Gibbons' **Caught in the Crossfire** . Both action-packed novels show friendships bridging racial divides and National Front activity destroying the peace of communities where these friendships are made.

The relevance of historical fiction

☒ It's not just writers of contemporary fiction whose stories are influenced by world affairs. Kevin Crossley-Holland's **King of the Middle March** resonates with contemporary conflicts. Writing during the build-up to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, he says '?? points of similarity and correspondence kept suggesting themselves, not only of the situation in Iraq but the terrible ferment in the Holy Land.' And so Arthur de Caldecott ? surely anachronistically ? questions the morality of Crusade as well as Jihad.

In 2002 I began to write **Peace Weavers** , an historical novel about Anglo Saxon peace weavers. As war with Iraq seemed inevitable, I wondered what a twenty-first century peace weaver could do to prevent war. As pupils began to walk out of classrooms to protest against the war (they were called the 'politicised generation' by the media), my story gained a contemporary strand.

At a recent festival a school librarian said she hesitated to give pupils books like my **Peace Weavers** or Theresa Breslin's harrowing novel about the First World War, **Remembrance** . She asked, 'Aren't teenagers depressed enough already?' Before I could reply, a teenage boy said he'd read **Remembrance** and it had cheered him up! By comparison his own worries seemed insignificant. Could this be another reason for reading about the world's problems?

Julia Jarman is a writer and teacher. Her latest book is **Peace Weavers** .

The Books

Death or Glory Boys , Theresa Breslin, Egmont, 1 4052 0109 6, £4.99 pbk

A Little Piece of Ground , Elizabeth Laird, Macmillan, 0 330 43743 7, £4.99 pbk

One More River , Lynne Reid Banks, Puffin, 0 14 037021 8, o/p

Sisterland , Linda Newbery, Red Fox Definitions, 0 09 947282 1, £5.99 pbk

Kiss the Dust , Elizabeth Laird, Egmont, 0 7497 4932 6, £4.99 pbk

Fly Away Home , Christine Nostlinger, Andersen, 1 84270 227 0, £5.99 pbk

Traitor , Gudrun Pausewang, Andersen, 1 84270 313 7, £5.99 pbk

Dead Negative , Nick Manns, Hodder, 0 340 85566 5, £5.99 pbk

Little Soldier , Bernard Ashley, Orchard, 1 86039 879 0, £4.99 pbk

Ruby Tanya , Robert Swindells, Corgi, 0 440 86398 8, £4.99 pbk

Caught in the Crossfire , Alan Gibbons, Orion, 1 84255 096 9, £4.99 pbk

King of the Middle March , Kevin Crossley-Holland, Orion, 1 84255 155 8, £5.99 pbk

Peace Weavers , Julia Jarman, Andersen, 1 84270 295 5, £9.99 hbk

Remembrance , Theresa Breslin, Corgi, 0 552 54738 7, £5.99 pbk

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