



Once Upon A Wartime: Classic War Stories for Children exhibition

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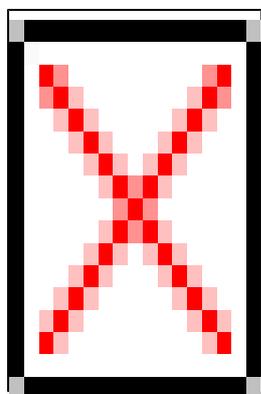
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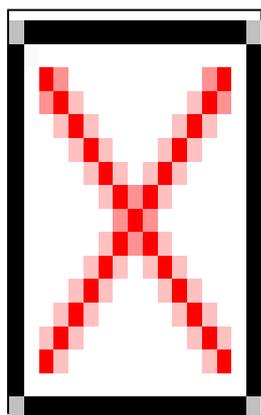
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Kate Agnew visits the exhibition for **Books for Keeps**.



Kate Agnew visits the **Once Upon A Wartime: Classic War Stories for Children** exhibition for **Books for Keeps**.

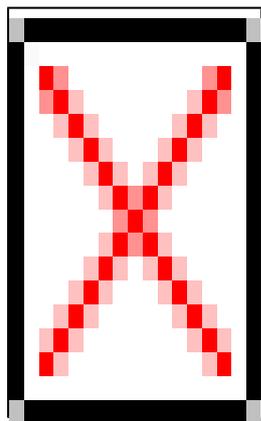
War has long been a favourite setting for British children's books: it offers ready opportunities to 'get rid of the adults' and provides child protagonists with a chance to put both courage and integrity to the test. The historical background often plays to our penchant for nostalgia while yielding endless possibilities for adventure and excitement, joy and sorrow. More than that, the child protagonists caught up in war are ordinary people, just like their readers; their plight readily fires imaginations young and old alike. As I stood in front of a life-sized war horse in the Imperial War Museum's Once Upon A Wartime exhibition, I overheard one elderly woman ask another, 'Have you seen it?'. 'Yes,' came the answer, 'but I'd no idea it was a children's book.' In its hugely successful stage incarnation Michael Morpurgo's **War Horse** has reached a wonderfully broad audience. It's an audience that this exhibition of children's fiction set in wartime is well-timed to meet, with the book now transferring from stage to screen in Steven Spielberg's forthcoming adaptation.



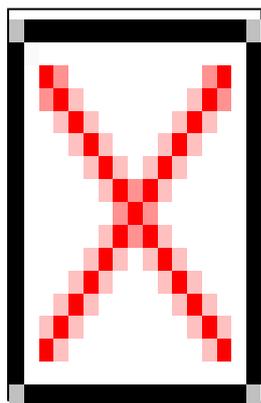
The difficulty for the organizers of Once Upon A Wartime will surely have lain in choosing which of many exceptional books to pick. They've opted to focus on five novels, four that are indubitably modern classics and

one that speaks to young readers of contemporary children's experience. Each book in turn comes to represent a generic theme in war fiction: Michael Morpurgo's **War Horse** exemplifies loyalty while **Carrie's War** by Nina Bawden is used to explore separation; **The Machine Gunners** by Robert Westall denotes excitement, and Ian Serrailier's **The Silver Sword** survival. Identity is the final topic, examined in **Little Soldier** by Bernard Ashley which features a child soldier from East Africa who comes to London where he encounters a different, but related, kind of warfare amongst the gangs on his estate.

Each book is given its own separate area within which a life-sized theatrical installation sits alongside cases displaying an eclectic range of material. As well as exhibits from the author's archives are photographs, cine-film, artefacts, and fascinatingly intricate models which together build a richly detailed impression of each book, its period and its genesis. Thus the life-sized wooden horse is surrounded by cases containing articles of soldier's equipment and weaponry from the First World War and a scale model of the trenches shows just how narrow the divide was between the two armies. Visitors can try out the weight of a soldier's pack for themselves or pick up a telephone to hear Michael Morpurgo talking about his inspiration for the book.



Like all the best exhibitions, Once Upon A Wartime offers a range of experiences with cross-generational appeal. For the adults who've read the featured stories it is a rare chance to see the authors' own material, especially their annotated manuscripts. On the day I went, those who clearly hadn't read the books were nevertheless enjoying the trips down memory lane inspired by the artefacts: the elderly ladies I'd overheard went on to admire the full-scale replica of Hephzibah's kitchen from **Carrie's War** ('My aunt used to have a cupboard like that when I was a child?'). Children who had read the book were taking this display fascinatingly slowly, pacing towards the table almost like actors getting into role; one sensed them trying out the experience of 'being' Carrie. Others, regardless of whether they'd read the book, were eagerly swarming in and out of Chas McGill's dugout, complete with wartime comic strips pasted to the walls. One family was having a fierce argument, started by a parent but continued by his belligerent sub-teenage offspring, about whether children really could have built 'and got away with building' such a remarkable creation, even in wartime. There was a wealth of detailed material on display, so much so that one sometimes had to queue for the smaller cases, with a particular bottleneck as exhibition goers lingered over a display that included Nina Bawden's teddy bear and a photo of the author as an evacuee herself, and then an exquisite model train for transporting evacuees. It was well worth the wait.



It was quite magical to see the original silver sword 'the letter opener that gave the story its title' but it was the huge map of Jan's route across Europe that enthralled children and adults alike as they set his extraordinary journey in the context of their own travels. Perhaps most fascinating of all was to observe teenagers

making the connections between the familiar urban landscape of **Little Soldier** and the wartime worlds of the previous books, seemingly so different in both time and place.

In a final display suggesting further reading, children were busily ticking off which titles they'd read from the range on offer. I'd earlier found myself longing to tell a group of children intrigued by the model of the trenches about Michael Foreman's **War Game** with its account of the Christmas 1914 football game played in No Man's Land. It was good to see that title here, though I wished some of the additional books had been grouped with each relevant exhibit, to garner children's enthusiasm and lead them through the wonderfully rich selection of titles on display. This was a minor grumble though, about an exhibition that was busy, crowded and filled with enthusiastic families. Already I've found myself repeatedly recommending it to customers in the bookshop?

Once Upon A Wartime is at the Imperial War Museum, London, until 30 October. The exhibition website is at: <http://wartime.iwm.org.uk> [3]

The owner of the Children's Bookshop, Muswell Hill, **Kate Agnew** is co-author with **Geoff Fox** of **Children at War** published in Continuum's 'Contemporary Studies in Children's Literature' series at £12.99.

Read our reviews of the books mentioned

[War Horse, Michael Morpurgo, Egmont, 978 1 405 22666 0, £5.99 pbk](#) [4]

[Carrie's War, Nina Bawden, Puffin, 978 0 14 030689 7, £5.99 pbk](#)

[The Machine Gunners, Robert Westall, Macmillan, 978 0 330 39785 8, £5.99 pbk](#)

[The Silver Sword, Ian Serraillier, Red Fox, 978 0 09 943949 3, £5.99 pbk](#)

[Little Soldier, Bernard Ashley, Orchard, 978 1 86039 879 7, £5.99 pbk](#) [5]

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