



# Stories Inspired by Objects from The Great War

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'We were fed up with it: all these poems; Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke; all the faded pictures of the trenches and the troops; Kitchener pointing out from the posters; the lists of the battles; the Western Front, the dreadful Somme, the whizz bangs and the rats ?? This is David Almond's narrator in 'A World That Has No War In It?', looking back from the present to his 12-year-old grammar school self in 1964 during the 50th Anniversary commemorations. Maybe young readers are at that point now, 100 years on. The War's everywhere ? school, television, radio, exhibitions, books. And we've only just reached the Christmas Truce.

The black and grey of the dust-wrapper is relieved only by a poppy-red shadow outlining the title letters; slip off the wrapper to find the disconcertingly angled numbers, 1914 and 1918, bleeding off the front and rear boards. The 11 stories are punctuated by Greenaway-winner Jim Kay's unsettling illustrations: shards of dark images slash across the generous pages, searchlight beams, tanks and trenches, convoys and submarines, biplanes and Zeppelins. Tortured trees grope upwards from wilderness battlefields; boxed snippets of information about the war stand out from these sombre images; Lusitania, wounded faces, planes, women welding, the Somme.

These images and snippets are as close as the book gets to the conflict itself, apart from letters from loved ones, or stark news of a death. All the stories have children or young people at their centres. Some are set during the War, some look back from later perspectives. So we are on the Home Front, mostly in the UK, but also in Ireland, New York, France and Australia. There's a sense of careful editorial planning here, not only in the impressive physical impact of the book (well priced at £12.99), but in the balance of authors (six women, five men, six from the UK, five from overseas). It's a Premier League line-up too, not all of them regular writers for children ? A.L. Kennedy, Adele Geras, John Boyne, Tracy Chevalier, Michael Morpurgo et al. A brief introduction tells us that all the stories 'are inspired by objects from this terrible conflict' which still exist. If you read on into the stories, you might often not spot the inspirational object, since these are only revealed and illustrated in an appendix.

Many stories here both inform and entertain. Readers will learn more about women at work, the return of men wounded in mind and body, pacifism, lessons learned from the War. Nothing here would satisfy Mr Gove's wish for tales of British heroism and traditional values; some writers cannot resist a contrary didacticism. For example, here's a boy

?starting to feel things that he doesn't know the words for. The words would be things like ?futile? and ?tragedy? and ?unjustified?? ?; the story's title and concluding words are, ?Don't Call It Glory?. Few contributors are quite as direct as this, though implicitly most share that stance toward the War. My reservation is that in attacking the Old Lie, we forget that the notion of ?futility? belongs largely to a post-War perspective, which has become increasingly established over a century of hindsight. We may then risk perpetrating a New Lie, for contemporary evidence suggests that despite the undeniable hell and terror of the fighting, most combatants remained convinced during the conflict that this was a war which had to be fought. In siting the stories away from the Front and seeing most adults only from the outside, that conviction is rarely glimpsed. Without an empathy with the mindsets of the men and women of the time, we might do them less than justice.

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