



# Old Lies Revisited: Young Readers and the Literature of War and Violence

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Like her father before her, Winifred Whitehead is a life-long pacifist. As an ex-Senior Lecturer and expert on children's literature, she is also particularly concerned that Thomas Hardy may have been correct when he wrote that 'War makes rattling good history; but peace is poor reading.' If that is so, then the vital task of educating the world's children away from the idealisation of war and violence could turn out to be an impossible one. It is highly relevant therefore to look at the way war-mongers and peace-makers have been portrayed in children's literature this century.

To assess this, the author has read an enormous range of war books dealing with everything from the American Civil War to the troubles in Northern Ireland. Charting so many descriptions of human cruelty and moral short-sightedness must have been a peculiar agony to someone of her beliefs. But she spares neither herself nor her readers in her determination to get to the truth about war as opposed to the many literary fantasies about it. Some of the quotations she includes from autobiography as well as from fiction make painful reading. She also has the courage to ask whether total pacifism is really sustainable, quoting examples from history where fighting back seems like the only logical response.

Many of the books she quotes from are by authors who no longer believe that fighting can still bring out the best in most people. Yet by choosing writers who know war for the dehumanising, degrading thing it is, this study neglects those more popular voices that have also always been around to give warfare a good name. Although there was little British enthusiasm for entering into the Second World War once the horrors of World War One had sunk into general consciousness, it did not take long for contemporary comics and novels to return to the old clichés featuring glorious Allied soldiers regularly putting swinish German troops to rout. In literature like this, it is not war itself that is the enemy but a particular race of people. William Golding was eventually to write **Lord of the Flies** in order to remind everyone that the potential for evil exists in all of us, not just in those we fight against. Yet morally facile war comics and booklets still exist today despite Wilfred Owen's warning years ago against continuing to peddle the old lies 'to children ardent for some desperate glory'.

But what exactly are these old lies? That extraordinary heroism and idealism can exist in those who fight there is no doubt. The lie is to trivialise the actual experience of killing and suffering so that defeating an enemy in battle is described as a glorious game where only the bad get hurt, and swift death rather than lingering injury is the rule of the day. In reality, soldiers do not seem to enjoy killing other soldiers very much. Those who go to war expecting it to be fun are almost always quickly disillusioned. One such was Robert Lawrence, hero of **Tumbledown**, a television film by Charles Wood, and co-author with his father of **When the Fighting is Over**. As a badly wounded survivor, he had no

place in the Falklands Victory celebrations. Nor was he prepared for the indifference with which he was treated, having been reared on films and novels where crippled soldiers are no problem to anyone simply because they barely exist. The fact that he went into battle still expecting the glamorised war of so much popular entertainment says a lot for the continuing failure in our culture to insist that a fundamentally ugly activity should in general always be depicted as such.

Will the violent literature sustaining these false images ever lose its hold, particularly where young male readers are concerned? Given the psychological pressure on the young always to behave well and in general come up to our expectations of them, it is not surprising that they sometimes turn to literature where they can be as violent and untamed in the imagination as they like. Bernard Shaw has described such imagined mayhem as the violence that hurts no-one. Yet it still seems important that literature which celebrates violence for violence's sake should not also masquerade as a description of real life at the same time. 'Fighting Fantasy' books are unlikely to mislead young readers into thinking they are about anything other than over-the-top daydreams. War stories that seek to glamorise real events are a different matter, possibly leading young readers into dangerous ignorance either about their own future lives or about other people's right to exist peaceably.

Many more important questions are raised in this study. Numerous books are quoted from, including obscure titles which often look extremely interesting. The author's intention throughout is to warn us that unless we all take a more critical view about violence and war as an ultimate solution to political problems, then in the long or even perhaps the short run, we are all probably doomed. Sadly I think she has failed in this aim ... not because she has written a bad book, but because her message is simply too uncomfortable in today's world of International Arms' Fairs and incessant war and rumours of war. **Old Lies Revisited** has received little press attention, even in areas that could reasonably be expected to have been sympathetic. When such a worthwhile study falls largely on deaf ears, it is a bad look-out for all of us.

**Nicholas Tucker** teaches courses in psychology and children's literature at the University of Sussex. He's well-known as a broadcaster and critic, and is the author of **The Child and the Book** (Cambridge, 0 521 39835 5, £5.95 pbk), a standard text on the development of children's reading interests.

**Old Lies Revisited: Young Readers and the Literature of War and Violence** by Winifred Whitehead is published by Pluto Press (0 7453 0428 1, £17.50; 0 7453 0483 4, £8.95 pbk).

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