

If Memory Serves

Writers Who
Challenge How
We Think About
the First World
War



High Wood

Ladies and gentlemen, this is High Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des Fourneaux,
The famous spot which in Nineteen-Sixteen,
July, August and September was the scene
Of long and bitterly contested strife,
By reason of its High commanding site.
Observe the effect of shell-fire in the trees
Standing and fallen; here is wire; this trench
For months inhabited, twelve times changes
hands;
(They soon fall in), used later as a grave.
It has been said on good authority
That in the fighting for this patch of wood

Were killed somewhere above eight thousand
men,

Of whom the greater part were buried here,

This mound on which you stand being ...

Madame, please,

You are requested kindly not to touch

Or take away the Company's property

As souvenirs; you'll find we have on sale

A large variety, all guaranteed.

As I was saying, all is as it was,

This is an unknown British officer,

The tunic having lately rotten off.

Please follow me - this way ...

The path, sir, please,

The ground which was secured at great
expense

The Company keeps absolutely untouched,
And in that dug-out (genuine) we provide
Refreshments at a reasonable rate.

You are requested not to leave about
Paper, or ginger-beer bottles, or orange-peel,
There are waste-paper baskets at the gate.

PHILIP JOHNSTONE, 1918

The master-narrative our era is most familiar with, that the war was futile, a pointless waste of civilians' and soldiers' lives and the consequence of selfish disputes among political leaders, was not adopted until roughly a decade after the war ended.





JÜNGER

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Even though most of the best-known writers' works fit the master-narrative—that the war was futile—there are so many differences in how they express that futility. To categorize First World War literature as either anti-war or pro-war simplifies the complex responses various authors presented.

THE
GREAT PUSH

PATRICK MACGILL

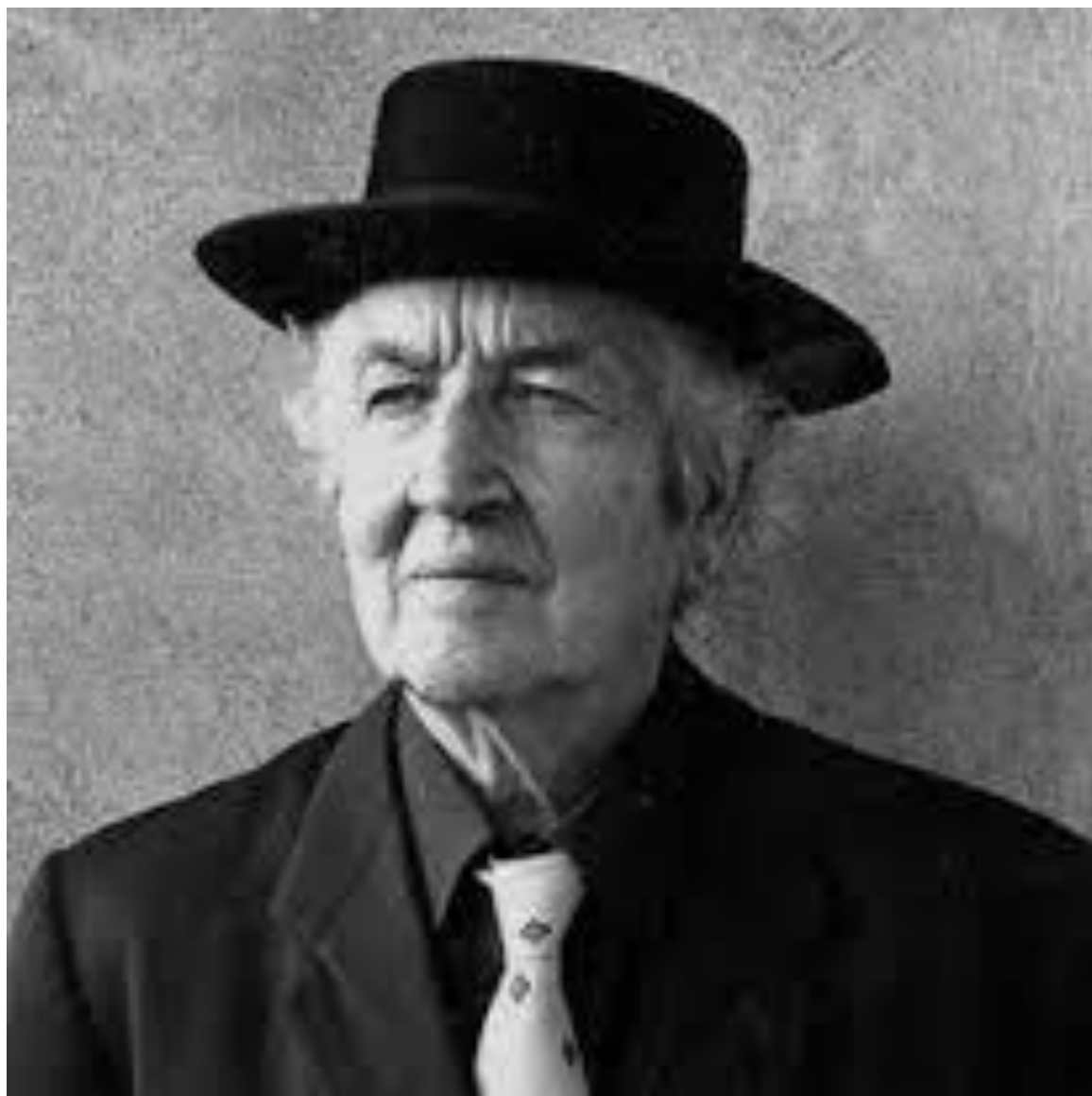


U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVE 14710

1917









An author need not have served in the war to produce a meaningful, even profound work. Literature by individuals removed from the war by one, two, or more generations may be just as valuable—if not more so—than literature written by those who participated in the war.

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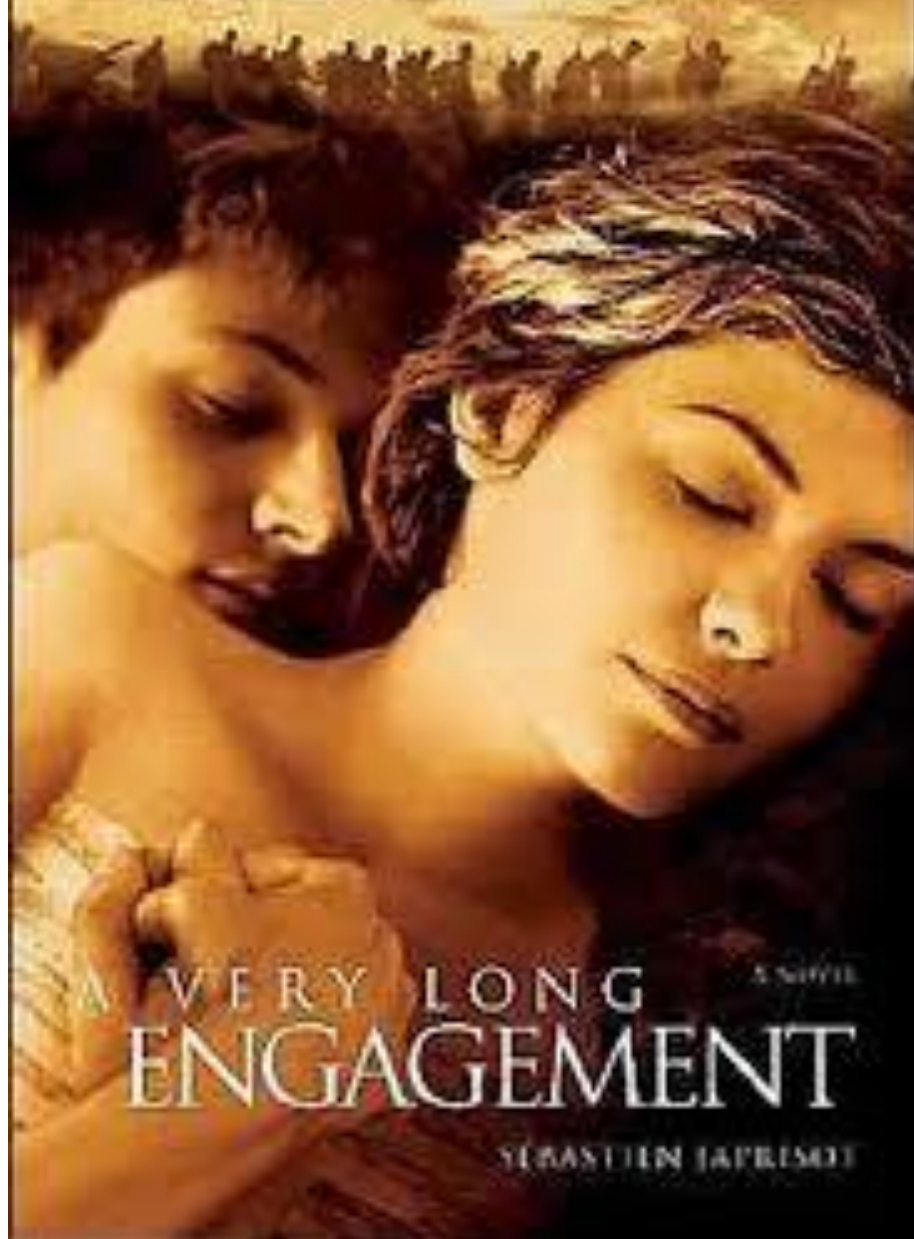
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The best literature of the First World War indicates forcefully that no clear closure can be placed upon the war. Treating the dead victims as heroes is neither honest or consoling when the number of losses is in the millions. Grief cannot be expressed for so many.





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