

book @ bedtime

In the latest instalment of **David Grove's** exploration of novels with a political message he looks at Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Sticking to an internationalist focus on novels with a political punch, I'd now like to recommend a German classic. When it was published in 1929 Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* was one of the first books to tell the truth about the pointless suffering and squalor of the 1914-18 imperialist war. In the 1930s it influenced millions of people to become pacifists or anti-fascists. The book was publicly burned by the Nazis; Remarque, who had escaped to Switzerland, was deprived of his German citizenship.

Today many more millions of people know what war is like and are prepared to take some action to prevent it. Still, with some charities blithely collecting funds to "help our heroes" many young

people may need reminding of what war was – and is – like. Remarque describes not just the death and destruction, the appalling mutilations and the shocking conditions. He also brings out the brutalisation and alienation inseparable from hostilities. His narrator is sorry he went home on leave; he can't bring himself to tell his family about life at the front, and he won't indulge in meaningless small talk. His is a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.

In the sequel to *All Quiet – The Road Back* – this comes out even more clearly when the returning soldiers struggle to reconnect with their old communities. There is mental illness, suicide, divorce,

murder, and general frustration. Such things have also been widespread among veterans of the wars in Viet Nam, Afghanistan, Iraq (Gulf War Syndrome), and countless other conflicts.

If these two novels had been written more recently the language would probably have been different. 'Arsehole' is the only word that slips out from the soldiers' colourful lexicon of swearing; but it shocks a mother and shows her how much her son has changed.

All Quiet on the Western Front is not just

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one of the finest pieces of anti-war writing; it is a great proletarian novel. Most novels and plays about war have been written by former officers. Though they often show some sympathy for the plight of the rank-and-file, they usually see the latter from the superior position of an upper middle class observer. Remarque (1898-1970) came from a working class family. The narrator and his mates are ordinary lads conscripted to fight as common soldiers.

They rapidly bond as they struggle to survive in appalling conditions.

No respecters of rank, they even assault a sadistic corporal.

They use tricks that any group of workers would use against their bosses, like sharing out the rations sent up the line for comrades already dead. They scorn the Kaiser's visit to the front, when the new uniforms issued for the occasion are taken away from them as soon as the emperor has left.

Remarque was no communist. He never describes the war as imperialist, though his soldiers know it's a profiteers' war, not theirs. They're class-conscious but not politically conscious. It's their solidarity that offers the only hope for the future. One of them, lost in no man's land between the opposing trenches, hears his friends shouting: "They are the strongest and most comforting thing there is anywhere – they are the voices of my comrades."

