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All Quiet?

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Memories of war can be the key to peace, says writer Erich Remarque

The most popular and passionate novel to evolve from World War I was Erich Maria Remarque's »All Quiet on the Western Front« – written 10 years after formal firing ceased. That fact has much significance, not only for writers but for the millions of men and women who are coming back home with wartime experiences.

»Before a man can look objectively at a tremendous experience such as war, his emotions must cool off,« Remarque says. »He has been shaken by an earthquake. He cannot construct well while the ground still is trembling under his feet. But memory works marvelously for all men, including writers. If a man waits before he writes his book, his impressions will sift through his memory and he will be left with only the real things he wants to say.

»You know my most poignant impression of the First World War? One Christmas Eve in the trenches a truce was declared. We met the French soldiers in No Man's Land to exchange little gifts. Tobacco, candy, bits of food.

»*Why Must I Shoot Him?*«

»When we returned to our side I noticed a little fellow, formerly a shoemaker, crying to himself. I asked him what the trouble was. ›I was just talking to a French soldier, also a shoemaker,‹ he said. ›He was a nice man, with a family. He cuts his shoes the same way I do. Why must I shoot at him tomorrow? Why can't we go home and make shoes?‹«

»All Quiet« was Remarque's third novel, but the first published. It was written when he was 30. It was his vivid, strong protest against war and what it does to people, all kinds. And he wrote it so that his readers, too, would protest.

»There is a passage in which a boy is wounded mortally,« Remarque went on. »He cannot live more than a day and his young friends, who grew up with him, know it. The wounded man has a fine pair of boots which his friends would like to get after he dies. If he should die during the night, they can take the boots, but if he lasts until the next day the Red Cross will get them. I had my characters hoping, without pity, for their friend to die quickly, talking of nothing but those fine boots.« He raised a clenched fist above his head.

»I wanted to torture the reader until he cried out, ›How can people be so monstrous? How can they be so beastly when their friend is dying?«

Turmoil

»I wanted the reader to realize for himself that war robs soldiers of decent instincts, turns them into animals. The turmoil comes from the reader, not the characters. In that way, the author's protest against war is made even more effective.«

The protest was not enough. World War II came. But Remarque believes that men must protest and writers must echo those protests if the world is to live. »Some truly great books should come out of this war,« he says. »For one thing, it was more dramatic than ours. All we did was sit in the trenches, hardly ever seeing the enemy, waiting to be killed by artillery.

»Then, boredom was the chief enemy, and you cannot describe boredom without boring the reader.

»*But this war had more point to it. This time we fought ideas, not people. It was more of a challenge to the mind.* For this reason, I expect Americans to write the best books because they fought the most idealistic war in history. To me, it is incredible that Americans, who were not immediately threatened by the war, fought so magnificently. It is such idealism that makes great books and great people.«