

Remarque Got His Success The Hard Way

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Seventeen years ago a sports writer in Berlin, who was covering a six-day bicycle race, mentioned to his fellow reporters that he had just written a novel about the war. His friends threw up their hands; nobody wants to read a war book, they said. But that war book sold more than a million copies in Germany alone, became an international best-seller, and was made into one of the most successful movies ever produced. The book was »All Quiet on the Western Front,« and the sports writer was Erich Maria Remarque.

Remarque earned his success the hard way. Drafted into the Kaiser's army at 18, he was wounded five times. In the economic chaos that followed the war he tried practically everything to keep going; he taught school, worked on newspapers, was a test driver for a tire company; at one time he even played the organ in an insane asylum.

The Nazis hated Remarque. They burned his books, took away his citizenship. The author became a refugee, one of the people he writes about in his new novel, »Arch of Triumph.«

»I wanted to see what I could do with a hero who is over forty and intelligent,« is Remarque's modest way of summing up the five years' work he put into his latest novel. He thinks »it's good for a writer to sit on a book« because »it gives him time to really digest it.«

Interviewed in his New York apartment, the world famous author seemed more eager to talk about his antique rugs and paintings (his collections of Cezanne water colors is reputed to be the best in America) than his book. »Once I am through with a book,« he explained, »I hate to think about it again until years later.«

But »Arch of Triumph,« which depicts the grim life of the refugees in Paris in 1939, has been called »disillusioned« – and the word set him talking. »On the contrary, I think I've written an optimistic book,« he said. »I wanted to show that no matter how much of what we normally call the essentials of living are taken away from democratic man – home, country, family, money, and, most important, freedom – his essential humanity and will to live never die.«

Like Remarque's other novels about the victims of war and fascism, »Arch of Triumph« grew out of the author's personal experiences. As a refugee in Paris himself, he knew the people he writes about in his book. »Even my hero, the German refugee surgeon forced to practice his profession illegally, is modeled after an actual character,« he explained. »While in Paris, my wife had a serious operation. We only found out later that it was a refugee German doctor who had performed it.«

Remarque actually got the idea of the manhunt in »Arch of Triumph« in the same Paris café in which his hero finally catches up with his Nazi persecutor. He was sitting in Fouquet's one day when he saw, for the first time in ten years, a small-time Nazi who had once attacked

a friend of his. It was then that the thrilling scene for the meeting between his hero and the Nazi came to him.

Remarque will receive his final U. S. citizenship papers this year. Right now he is at work on a new novel, about which he is characteristically reticent. »All I will say about it is this,« he stated. »If the Nazis had known what I am writing about in my new book – well, they would have stopped at nothing to prevent it.«

»Arch of Triumph,« like »All Quiet On the Western Front,« is a Book-of-the-Month club selection and like its predecessor is slated for the best seller lists and the films.