



All Quiet on the Western Front

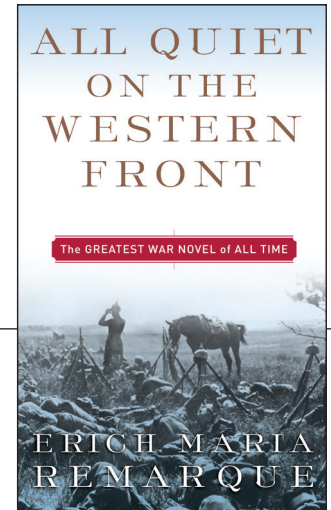
by Erich Maria Remarque

Translated by Arthur Wesley Wheen

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Reading Level: 9.0



• about this book •

Paul Baumer enlisted with his classmates in the German army of World War I. Youthful, enthusiastic, they become soldiers. But despite what they have learned, they break into pieces under the first bombardment in the trenches. And as horrible war plods on year after year, Paul holds fast to a single vow: to fight against the principles of hate that meaninglessly pits young men of the same generation but different uniforms against each other—if only he can come out of the war alive.

plot summary

More than fifty years after its jolting prose, haunting poetry, and powerful truths slashed their way into the consciousness of a worldwide readership, *All Quiet on the Western Front* still stands at the forefront of a host of novels on that most tragic recurrence in the history of human experience: war.

Through the observations of Paul Baumer, a 19-year-old volunteer to the German army during World War I, readers taste war in all its horror. Baumer and his classmates charge fresh out of high school into military service, egged on by parents, teachers, and other one-track-minded adults who are unable to foresee or unwilling to consider the hell into which they are cheering their “Iron Youth.”

But war soon transforms Paul and his comrades into “old folk” and “wild beasts.” Thrust into an open-air asylum reeking of sulfur, excreta, and clotting blood, emblazoned by colorful fireworks that kill, teeming with flesh-eating vermin, these battered, weary, famished friends struggle to make sense of their plight, capturing some measure of peace only when they accept the fact that their reality makes no sense, has no reason. For these soldiers, there is no thrill of victory, only the certainty of one onslaught after another. To look to the future brings them no comfort: they envision no careers, no use for their pre-war education, no romance, no life beyond the battlefield. What lies before them is “the abyss.”

War strips away ideals these boy-men once valued. Their respect for authority is eroded by their disillusionment with the schoolteacher Kantorek who pressed them into service—a laughingstock when forced to don a uniform himself—and is shattered by the contemptible tactics their superior officer Himmelstoss perpetrates in the name of discipline. Even their belief in the sanctity of human life must be compromised every time they kill; this is best illustrated by Paul’s journey from anguish to rationalization of his dispatch of Gerard Duval, the printer turned enemy who leaps into the shell-hole already occupied by Paul.

War destroys these men—even those who survive the bombings, the bullets and bayonets. Yet unless their bodies are annihilated by physical attacks or their sanity exploded by the weight of one too many atrocities, some soldiers manage to maintain vestiges of humanness: their caring for animals (Detering, the farmer turned warrior, rails against the army for its

“vilest baseness” in exposing innocent horses to slaughter; the group shares its once-in-a-wartime feast with a little grey cat); compassion for each other (Baumer, little more than a child himself, comforts a terrified, crying recruit and literally covers his behind); their sense of fun (Baumer and Kropp ride high atop a truck on a canopied, four-poster bed; the Second Company risks their lives amid a shower of explosives for two roast pigs and a platter of potato pancakes); a flair for the romantic (ailing soldiers band together to allow Lewandowski, his wife, and child an intimate reunion in the infirmary); defiance of the near-inevitability of an ugly death (Peter, young and lung-damaged, triumphs over the spectral aura of the Dying Room).

Their hope in a seemingly hopeless situation attests to the endurance of the human spirit. That ghost of a chance that they would return home someday inspires them to think and fight like murderous automatons, to thump along on bleeding stumps where feet used to be until they could reach relative safety from a barrage.

But as the war wears on and the western battlefield soaks up the blood of Kemmerich, then Haie Westhus, then Muller, Paul's hope ebbs. His trip home on leave whets his appetite for family life, civilian clothes, and a civilian job and at the same time tortures him with the knowledge that should he succeed at fighting his way back home he can no more fit into the life he led at peacetime than he can fit into his old dress suit.

After the deaths or dismemberment of his classmates, other comrades, and finally his most cherished friend Kaczkinsky, Paul speaks of being “broken, burnt out, rootless.” When, on the eve of the resolution of World War I, Paul's own end arrives, the expression on his corpse indicates that he has welcomed it.

about the author

Born in Osnabruck, Germany on June 22, 1898, Remarque (pronounced Raymark) attended school there and at the University of Munster before being drafted at age 18 into the German Army and serving on the Western Front. Wounded five times, Remarque, like his protagonist Paul Baumer, swallowed poison gas and sustained injury to his lungs.

Remarque took on several post-war jobs and sandwiched work on a novel in between wage-earning pursuits.

Copyrighted as *Im Westen Nichts Neues* in 1928, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was Remarque's first book. Though Nazis burned the book and the film based on it in front of Berlin University in 1933, *All Quiet on the Western Front* sold more than a million copies in its homeland the first year of publication, followed by millions more when translated and distributed in other nations.

Nazi Germany deprived Remarque of German citizenship in 1938. In 1947 he became a U.S. citizen. He died of heart collapse on September 25, 1970 in Switzerland.

World War I branded an indelible mark on Remarque as man and artist. Each of Remarque's 10 other novels, published posthumously in 1972, dealt with war or its aftereffects. When World War II erupted in Europe in 1939, Remarque told reporters, “I think there is no reason in the whole world for any war. . . This will not be a war on the front. It will be a war on women and children.”

(Principal sources for this biographical information were *The New York Times* Biographical Edition, Vol. 1, No. 52, December 31, 1970, and Jacket Notes for *Shadows in Paradise* by Remarque, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.)

— discussion and writing

comprehension questions

1. Baumer paints a grim, sadistic picture of Corporal Himmelstoss, yet credits the training period under him with supplying the recruits with attributes they lacked. Is it possible that Himmelstoss purposely employed his methods to “toughen up” the recruits and inspire esprit de corps in them? Support your position with examples from Himmelstoss' encounters with his troops.
2. Why does Kat say “we are losing the war because we can salute too well”?
3. What does Haie Westhus mean when, after the recruits ambush Himmelstoss, he comments that “Revenge is black-pudding”?
4. A certain matter-of-fact quality pervades the descriptions of the wounds inflicted and

received by soldiers; the face-to-face attacks with rifle butts, spades, and grenades; the sounds, smells, and colors of death and dying in this book. Why do the soldiers regard war in such an indifferent manner? Point out dialogue and events that lead you to believe that Paul and his fellows are not as nonchalant as they sometimes sound.

5. Paul says in Chapter Six, "I wonder whether, when I am twenty, I shall have experienced the bewildering emotions of love." Trace the comments and episodes throughout the book that seem to indicate that Paul does indeed experience love, in one form or another.
6. While on the front Paul daydreams about his lovely, tranquil home; when he finally makes it home on leave, he fights back visions of his comrades in the war. Why does he regret having made the trip home? In what ways does his experience there support Albert Kropp's assertion that "The war has ruined us for everything"?
7. As Paul stands guard over the Russian prisoners, he ponders how commands from higher-ups have transformed men so like his own countrymen into enemies and could just as swiftly turn them into friends. But his thoughts frighten him. What is "the abyss" to which he fears such thoughts will lead?
8. Why does Paul feel a "strange attachment" to the soldiers in his outfit once he returns from leave?
9. While on an especially risky patrol, Paul promises himself that, should some soldier hop into his shell-hole, Paul will be the first to strike. Once he carries out this strategy, why does he try to save the French soldier he has mortally wounded? Why does he later make promises to the dead man that he soon realizes, or decides, that he will not keep?
10. *All Quiet on the Western Front* abounds with reports of inadequate medical supplies and care, slipshod or shady procedures, and outright malpractice (refer to Chapters One and Ten). How could the government and army allow this problem to go unrectified? How could the soldiers tolerate it? Why didn't more of them report, if not revolt against, the treatment they received?
11. Why do you think the author timed Paul's death in October 1918, just before the long-rumored armistice? (Germany signed The Treaty of Versailles on November 11, 1918.)

discussion

1. When *All Quiet on the Western Front* debuted in the United States it drew tremendous reviews from critics. Even so, one critic tempered admiration of the book's realism with this comment: "It is not a great book; it has not the depth, the spiritual insight, the magnitude of interests which make up a great book" (*The New York Times Book Review*, June 2, 1929). Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? What ingredients are essential to the making of a great book? Debate these issues with your classmates and cite examples of books that you feel are great.
2. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is but one of many novels about war written during the 20th century. Among other well-remembered ones are *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway (1929), *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer (1948), *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller (1955), *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969), and *A Midnight Clear* by William Wharton (1980). Choose a 20th century novel on war, not necessarily one of those just mentioned, and explore how this book's characters, tone and messages parallel or contrast with those in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Explain what you think accounts for the divergence or similarity of the two authors' viewpoints.

composition

In Chapter One we are introduced to Stanislaus Katczinsky, a forty-year-old survival artist who always figures out an angle for making the best of a bad situation. By Chapter Six Baumer is able to say of his relationship with Kat, "We don't talk much, but I believe we have a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have." Putting yourself in Baumer's place, write your own remembrances of your friend Kat, showing how and why your admiration and affection for him have deepened during your three-year relationship.

→ suggested activities

activities

Impromptu role playing: Paul and Kat (you and a classmate) have survived the bombardment in the graveyard (described in Chapter Four). While exploring the area you come across the new

recruit whose hip has been shattered. After bandaging him as best you can, you discuss the excruciating pain that the young man feels and will feel before he dies within, as the two of you predict, a few days. One of you suggests putting him out of his misery. But in this case, unlike the episode in the book, no other soldiers come near: If you decide to carry out this proposal, you will not be prevented. Will you go for medical assistance, or will you speed his death? Play out the scene, discussing the pros and cons, and make a decision. Instead of role playing, you might write out your own dialogue for Kat and Paul.

Vocabulary skill-building: *All Quiet on the Western Front* contains many words and expressions that are not in common use today. Try your hand at matching the words in Column I to their definitions in Column II.

Column I

1. perambulator
2. apoplexy
3. parapet
4. pince-nez
5. saveloy
6. billets
7. bog-myrtle
8. lorry
9. misère ouverte
10. quartermaster
11. baldaqu

Column II

- a. eyeglasses held on the nose by a spring
- b. truck
- c. canopy
- d. soldier's lodgings
- e. officer responsible for providing troops with shelter, food, clothing, transportation
- f. declaration by card player that he/she will take no tricks (that is, won't win anything in this round)
- g. sudden loss of bodily function because a blood vessel bursts or is clogged
- h. protective wall or elevation
- i. baby carriage
- j. cooked and dried sausage
- k. a plant with bitter tasting leaves

ANSWERS: 1: i; 2: g; 3: h; 4: a; 5: j; 6: d; 7: k; 8: b; 9: f; 10: e; 11: c.

• **about this guide's writer**

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