

The Wars, Timothy Findley

My Radical Introduction

The Wars is perhaps Canada's darkest and most depressing little literary gem. A young man lives in the best country on Earth, or so some people do boast, but his family is dysfunctional and he feels utterly lost and confused. He is, however, a worthy hero. He loves animals and loves his disabled sister, and he is profoundly in tune with Nature. However, to escape from his family home, perhaps even to escape from Canada, he chooses to join the army and fight in WWI, a conflict about which he knows nothing – thanks, of course, to his parents, teachers and the media. The consequences are horrifying and tragic.

Is the novel relevant? Certainly. Now we do not send many soldiers to foreign conflicts, but as Findley's novel implied, we live in a world of many wars, and now the greatest war is the one that is now everywhere; it is the war of civilization against all our children, all the animals, and against life generally.

Background Reading

WW1(1914-1918), The Great War or The War to End All Wars, is seen as a dividing point between the old world order dominated economically, politically and culturally by Western Europe and the new world order dominated by American business, industry, warfare, music, film and culture.

Fought primarily in France and Belgium with the English and French troops fighting the Germans and Italians, it was characterized by trench warfare, with both armies separated by only a few feet of ground and fighting back and forth over those same few feet. The antiquated use of cavalry was a huge romantic blunder in the mud fields of Flanders and represents the end of a heroic and gentlemanly style of fighting. This was rendered obsolete by the guns, munitions and material of the first modern, mechanized war, a fact driven home by Findley with his ruthless statistics of enormous death and destruction

The Wars presents to us graphically the cataclysmic effects of the most terrible war to date in history, the hundreds of thousands of dead largely due to the efficiencies of new military technologies. The story is a coming of age novel, where a youth confronts the truths of adult, ethical behaviour. These include cultural hypocrisy, the failure of religious thought, the loss of nature as a spiritual home and the high costs of a personal freedom which can only be had by escaping corrupt social, religious and economic values.

Robert Ross is the son of a wealthy Canadian industrialist, a man who fails his wife and children in many typical ways. His wife has settled for a secure materialistic marriage, an empty and meaningless spiritual life, for which she gradually loses her sanity. Robert leaves his Rosedale existence in an attempt to 'light out for the territories' (Huck Finn) and after encountering the shocks of experience: the sadism of training camp, the brutal first horse incident, the death of his beloved free spirit poet boy/man Harris, the English aristocracy and their snobbish, blind, coddled, elitist, decayed life, enduring trench warfare with other terrified

and brutal and insane comrades. In an act of questionable heroics, he essentially suicides on the battlefield of France.

The story weaves together many thematic threads: family and peer group demands versus the needs of the developing self, the hidden social and sexual agendas of families and their silences, man's deteriorating relationship with nature (seen thru Edwina's rabbits, the coyote on the prairie, Rodwell's sketch book, the horse killing, the lone dog, the bird song in the trenches that saves their lives and Robert's heroism with the horses); the yearning spirit's refusal to conform to the dictates of conventional sexual, social and warmongering hatred of life; materialism against spirituality, acceptance by peers versus self-expression, racism and religious divides, class wars and, in particular, homosexuality, the "love that dares not speak its name" ..

Assignment: Respond to some of the following questions as fully as you you're your goal is to develop a focused response with clear evidence, not an essay but a couple of pages of good writing.

1. Why is the title of the book plural? Are there other wars than military ones referred to?
2. Discuss the novel's representation of the failure of religious thought. How does this contrast with *Life of Pi*?
3. According to Bates what is the greatest terror of war? Why is Robert the only human in Rodmell's sketch book?
4. What is the meaning of the last paragraph at the end of Chapter 4?
5. What is the meaning of Juliet's inscription on the gravestone?
6. How is Robert alienated from his family? Is it the same way Juliet is? What are the gender differences in their struggles?
7. Why kill Rowena's rabbits?
8. Is Robert a hero? Why or why not?
9. Why are the photographs central to the truths Findley is trying to show us here?
10. "Nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing of it." Explain significance to novel themes.
11. Why does the book end with a female archivist and 'the researcher' in the dusty bowels of a museum reading room? What is the significance of the final paragraph?

12. "Clarify who you are thru your response to when you live". What is it to be human in the novel?
13. How would you describe the wide use of different narrative voices in the book? How do we view him differently than if he told his own story? How does the omniscient narrator, the researcher, function in the story?
14. How are themes woven together thru symbols in the story? Robert as part of the animal/native clan?