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Storying War: A Capsule Overview

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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What counts as a representation of war? What kinds of war stories have found favor over time? What trends emerge, and what genres and themes appear worldwide? War stories encompass varied fictional genres and perspectives, as well as quasi-fictional autobiographical accounts; settings include not just the actual war zone but also the home front (as in World War II's many hiding out stories); war's aftermath at home or conflicts of the future are related topics. Tales featuring armed conflict, usually from an anti-war perspective, as in "Things by Their Right Names" and "The Price of a Victory" in Anna Letitia Barbauld and John Aikin's *Evenings at Home* (1792-96), have contributed to juvenile literature since its late-eighteenth-century take off. The American Civil War starred in many children's magazines; adventure tales, usually nationalistic, were popular in the later nineteenth century, an approach that also resurfaces during the earlier years of twentieth-century wars. Although war stories are sometimes categorized as pure adventure or combat zone tales, they are inherently didactic: they inculcate patriotic moral values or, more often, question the morality of war. Most are variants on the oldest adult genre borrowed by children, the *Robinson Crusoe* survival story, often directly alluded to within texts, as in Uri Orlev, *The Island on Bird Street* (1981, trans. Hillel Halkin, 1984). Although tales may be overtly aimed at boys or girls, war stories are read across genders, and war activities frequently allow fictional protagonists (like real-life girl readers) participation in heroic activities, from nursing under fire to escaping enemy pursuers.

Captain W. E. Johns's Biggles books are set in both twentieth-century wars and are still avidly read. Johns remarks of his flying hero that he may seem to give young readers merely the excitement they want, but "I teach . . . under a camouflage." British girls' series stories, as in Elinor Brent-Dyer's *The Chalet School in Exile* (1940) and Dorlita Fairlie Bruce's *Dimsie Carries On* (1946), feature war too. Evacuation and spy-catching **[End Page 327]** were big war themes in British tales, as in national propaganda. World War I fiction still comes out, as in Michael Morpurgo, *War Horse* (1990), but World War II generates the most literature, although the United States has much Revolutionary and Civil War fiction. Vietnam and later wars begin to attract writers, but earlier conflicts still generate fine work, as in Mollie Hunter's tale of Robert the Bruce, *The King's Swift Rider* (1998), or the very different recent spate of young adult books concerning the early twentieth-century Armenian massacre, the attempted extermination of a whole people that Hitler explicitly cited as precedent, useful evidence that genocide could be perpetrated successfully because so few protested or remembered.

The platitudes that war books fascinate young readers because they provide risk-free real events more exciting than any make-believe, yet appealingly predictable because the audience knows who "won"; that they evade serious moral issues or reduce these to the good guys versus the bad, thus serving as conduits for national ideologies; or that they are usually escapist (combat books from "over there" for boys) or gendered (domestic contribution stories for girls on the home front) need scotching. Current proliferation in war writing for the young coincides with accelerating late-twentieth-century violence and reflects adult preoccupations with human evil: all forms of moral, psychological, and material destruction; past and present genocides, from the Holocaust to more recent "ethnic cleansings"; the ever-present possibility of nuclear disaster. Adult social history, cultural studies, and postmodern/postcolonial literary theory—all much concerned with redefining what counts as "war" and with exploring how conflicts escalate and how war is represented in history, memory, and words—filter into the expanding and impressive volume of war stories for the young. Not always comfortable or reassuring, many recent publications contrast sharply with previous simpler works in war genres that were in essence familiar forms like school tales...



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