The Wars

Author: Timothy Findley

The Wars tells the story of Robert Ross, a Canadian teenager from a well to do family in Toronto, Ontario who becomes an officer in the Canadian forces and goes to fight in Flanders fields in 1916 in the First World War. It tells the story of his family life, his sibling relationships, and his personal relationships in the context of the traumas experienced in joining the army, the training in Alberta, the boat journey across the Atlantic in the company of men and one hundred and fifty horses, the passage to the front and the experiences endured there and the relationships formed, the highlights and low lights of time on leave, and his return to the front lines of the war climaxed in a futile attempt to save innocent animals from its horrors and consequences.

The Wars is truly a Golgotha imaged tragedy. Everything points to an unkind ending from which there can be no redemption. It is true that in the midst of this carnage, there are constant instances of beauty and flowers, of animals and bird song despite chaos and carnage and deadly gases. There are powerful moments of fidelity and waiting, of endurance and acceptance, of courage and perseverance. But the mud of death and suffering, the inner storms of emotions unhinged, the aching grief of traumatic loss, the violent energies of soulless passion and destruction seem to obliterate the light of hope or the possibility of the happiness or peace. We are in the world of raw, a world where the chalice is exceedingly bitter.

Is there no light here? In part two of The Wars which describes most intense scenes of trench warfare, crows are always present. One is reminded of the Van Gogh painting. They are not a chirpy presence...they sweep in...they hover...they feed on the dead. They fit in with the mud, the fog, the dank and the dark, the emptiness. Who perseveres in this environment? Horses (army horses) persevere. It is a horse that swims across the dyke. This horse make it through the swamp and the darkness with an unquenchable stoicism, innocent yet knowing. Ross lies along the back of the horse as it slides and swims to higher ground. Ross finds himself relying totally upon the animal to find a way forward in the midst of blindness caused by the chlorine in the mud.
The Wars and the Call to Peace

*The Wars* was published in 1977 in the midst of the Cold War during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter. The Vietnam War had ended. There was much controversy at that time over the development of the cruise missile amongst those who were active in the peace movement. Pope Paul VI was still Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. Twelve years earlier in 1965 he had addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York and had made a passionate plea for peace, for the ending of war. “War never again.” He was following in the footsteps of Pope John XXIII who wrote the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace On Earth)* in 1963. This in turn was following on the pleading of Pope Pius XII who in 1943 made a passionate plea for peace during the Second World War. In the words of Pope Pius XII: "The calamity of a world war, with the economic and social ruin and the moral excesses and dissolution that accompany it, must not on any account be permitted to engulf the human race for a third time." (Pius XII's broadcast message, Christmas 1941, AAS 34 (1942) 17). During that address Pius XII referred to the letter of Pope Benedict XV written on August 1st 1917 in which the latter appealed to all belligerent parties to set up a dialogue to open the path to peace and a cessation of hostilities. In his letter Pope Benedict XV pointed to his previous failed attempts to intervene, and his lament at the horrors of the war as it was unfolding. “At the end of the first year of war, in addressing to them the most forceful exhortations, we also identified the road to follow to achieve a peace which was lasting and dignified for all. Unfortunately, our appeal was not listened to: the war continued fiercely for another two years with all its horrors; it grew worse and indeed it extended by land, sea and even air, where on defenceless cities, on quiet villages, on their innocent inhabitants, there descended desolation and death. And now nobody can imagine for how long these shared evils will multiply and become worse, whether for a few more months, or even worse whether another six years will become added to these bloodstained three years. Will the civilised world, therefore, be reduced to a field of death?” (*Letter of Pope Benedict XV to the rulers of the belligerent powers*, August 1, 1917, AAS 9 (1917) 418.)

In *The Wars* Timothy Findley reveals this field of death. In surgical writing that focuses on the witness accounts about one young Canadian officer he strains us to face up to the horror of the battlefield, its consequences, its unimaginable evil. He indicates how the generation caught up in the assumptions of the First World War were swept along by a force of nature over which they had no control, in a moment of history when they were thrown into a raging sea of violence in which they sank and swam in the chaos of a world that had turned to mud.
The Wars and Family

Family is very much to the fore in The Wars. The Ross family jointly owns a farm machine factory near Toronto. The Rosses have four children. Robert, the novel’s protagonist, had two older sisters, Peggy and Rowena and a brother Stuart who was 8 years younger. Rowena suffered from hydrocephalus and died tragically when she fell out of her wheel chair at age 25. Robert was supposed to be looking after her at the time. Robert’s father is always preoccupied with the business. He does care deeply about his son Robert. His relationship with his wife, Robert’s mother, is distant, and she suffers from alcoholism. Robert has a somewhat formal relationship with his parents. He writes to them regularly from the front in a very formal manner. Robert’s father is anxious to get the automatic hand gun to him that he requested. He shows that he cares.

The d’Orsey family also figure prominently in the novel. They were a noble family of means who had a beautiful property dating back to the time of William the Conqueror out in the countryside near London. The mother, Lady Emmeline, turned this property, St Aubin’s, into a convalescent home during the First World War. There are five children – Clive, Michael, Barbara, Juliet (a 12 year old) and Temple (a young boy). Lady Juliet in a recorded interview by the author tells of the love affair between her older sister Barbara and Robert Ross – the second lieutenant who on leave from the front came to visit his friend the legendary Captain Taffler….even though Robert didn’t realize that the latter had lost both arms in the war. She also points to the complexities of other relationships that her sister pursued and in particular what she believed to be the homosexual attraction between Robert Ross and fellow officer Harris, and also between her brother Clive and Captain Jamie Villiers. Taffler, Ross, Harris and Villiers all die as a result of wounds sustained in the trenches in Flanders fields.

It has been suggested that Timothy Findley named his novel The Wars…plural…because whilst he opened a window into the chaos of The Great War, he was also throwing light on the personal relationships within families that were dysfunctional, and those between friends that were ambivalent, and also on the war within each person as s/he confronted the challenges posed by his or her situation and temperament. There is a large cast of characters in The Wars, and Findley offers tantalising glimpses into the personalities, the belief systems, and the life stresses of them all.
**The Wars and Religious Imagery**

Part 2 of *The Wars* describes life in the trenches of the First World War. It is taut writing. You are in your situation. There is no going back. You are afraid, but you can’t be too afraid. The presence of violence and death are common place. Yet the soldiers that Ross meets in the trenches endeavour to introduce, beauty and gratitude and humour into this most extreme circumstance. For instance, Devitt collects works of stained glass from bombed out churches. They depict the Flight into Egypt, Christ Walking on the Water, the Martyrdom of St Marinus (p 84). The soldier Rodwell is an artist. He rescues birds, rabbits, hedgehogs, toads, and looks after them in the dugout. He makes drawings of them as a real life artist, and includes in his drawing book, which is discovered after his death, drawings of Robert Ross along with the animals. Robert has a surprise for the people in the dugout because he has brought some food supplies…eggs, condensed milk, canned peaches and canned salmon. He also has a bottle of cognac and cigarettes and another soldier, Willie Poole, has brought a chicken stew. Findley refers to this meal that the six of them share in the dugout, as a “banquet”. As Findley describes life in the dugout in words, one is reminded of the ethos of some of the drawings of Vincent Van Gogh of the potato workers….people whose faces glow in spite of long suffering and difficulty. In light of the inevitable destruction of the dugout in the trajectory of the novel this “banquet” has the feeling of a Last Supper, of community, of humanity…in the heart of agony, a kind of ecstasy.

**The Wars and the Loss of Innocence**

The vivid writing of the whorehouse and the bath house, the affair between Robert Ross and Barbara d’Orsey, the violence of the life in the trenches challenges one’s innocence as a reader. As an educator how do you guide teenagers through this kind of writing? How does one accommodate to different sensitivities as an educator? What is the wisdom of the educational community around initiating its young people into this array of discourse?

a. The classroom teacher is in a unique position to offer context and to allow a free exchange of ideas.

b. An atmosphere needs to be created such that a teenager can feel safe to express in the classroom setting or privately his or her unease at the difficult reading that is involved and how it can play on one’s imagination and one’s sensitivities, and how one is to cope with that in a healthy way.

c. There is room for a discussion that draws the distinction between a work of art and pornography, and also between media that use sex and violence as a drawing point for entertainment, and media that is serious in its intent to explore what is true.
It can be helpful for students to be aware of the formal position of the Roman Catholic community regarding art and literature as articulated in paragraph 62 of the Second Vatican Council document *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Second Vatican Council 1965). “Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world. They have much to do with revealing man’s place in history and in the world; with illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man and with foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions.”

**The Wars and the world of animals.**

*The Wars* begins with the image of an animal—a beautiful horse. It ends in the climax of the burning of scores of horses in a barn from which they cannot escape. Throughout the novel the lives of animals are noticed—dogs, hedgehogs, toads, birds and rabbits. In the disorder and chaos of war they are noticed, and cherished by the protagonist. Timothy Findley offers us through the person of Robert Ross someone living on the side of nature. Robert is sensitive to the animal world, and he doesn’t allow a chasm to build between himself and that world. He is at home in the animal world. There is a beautiful chapter early in the novel when we see Robert running with a coyote, and as he watches the coyote drinking from a pond Robert almost becomes one with the dust of the earth, the setting sun, and the green of the grass. Eventually, from a distance, the coyote turns and looks at him, and wags its tail. There is also a beautiful scene of his friend Harris swimming with whales. Harris and Robert are injured and sick after the transatlantic voyage and they are brought ashore in a kind of harness...similar to the way the horses were originally loaded on to the ship. They notice that they share the same lot as the animals, and do so happily.

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, published in June of 2015, Pope Francis moved the priority needle of the environment to the forefront of Catholic Social Teaching. The document is at pains to paint a picture of planet earth as our “home”. It issues a call to conversion to all people to be awake to the environmental challenges that the earth faces, and to take responsibility for the impact of human interactions on the water, the soil, the atmosphere, the various live species. Findley, through his character, Robert Ross is already there.
Resources


Higgins, Michael W. (Editor) *Faith and Literature Matters.* Novalis Publishing Inc 2014

Higgins, Michael W. *Thomas Merton – Faithful Visionary.* Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota 2014


Rogers, Carl R. *On Becoming A Person. A therapist’s view of psychotherapy.* 1961


Williams, Monty, SJ. *Stepping into Mystery. Four Approaches to a Spiritual Life.* Novalis Publishing Inc 2012

**Websites:**
Pope Francis Encyclical on the Environment [https://laudatosi.com/watch](https://laudatosi.com/watch)
St John XXIII Encyclical on Peace [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html)
Texts: *Hamlet, A Doll’s House, The Wars, Araby*
[http://putlocker.is/watch-a-dolls-house-online-free-putlocker.html](http://putlocker.is/watch-a-dolls-house-online-free-putlocker.html)