

Literature (USA)

By [Mark Whalan](#)

Summary

This article surveys the major fiction, drama, and poetry connected with World War I produced by American writers. It outlines the anti-war writing of prominent authors including Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, e.e. cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Dos Passos, as well as the major American soldier-writers. It also explores work that is relatively optimistic and hopeful about American participation in the conflict. Edith Wharton, Ella Glasgow, and Willa Cather all had more positive visions that focused on the massive transformations on the home front and civic life that the War had accelerated. Finally, the article considers the literary production of socialist authors, African Americans, and veterans' organizations, all of which struggled to shape the legacy of the conflict to their own particular agendas.

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Introduction

This article surveys the major fiction, drama, and poetry connected with World War I (WWI) produced by American writers. The best known American writing about WWI was written by a new generation of male participant-writers, and generally represents the War as being responsible for soldierly disillusion and psychological trauma. This focus, however, overlooks the diversity of American WWI writing, including work by [nurses](#), writers preoccupied with the home front, socialist writers, [veterans' organizations](#), and African American authors.

Major authors

Novelists

In 1921, the publication of the novel *Three Soldiers* incited considerable controversy. Its author, the recent Harvard graduate [John Dos Passos \(1896-1970\)](#), based the work on his service with the Norton-Harjes ambulance unit, a volunteer force of 600 American drivers in the [Verdun](#) sector of the [Western Front](#) in 1917. Initially rejected by fourteen publishers, and heavily bowdlerized, *Three Soldiers* was immediately hailed as an important work. One early reviewer called it a “live, virile, rebellious and violent book, as full of explosive power as a hand grenade.”¹ Yet others, including several veterans, were outraged by its portrayal of the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) (AEF). *Three Soldiers* broke with the fictionalization of the War by an older generation of novelists such as [Willa Cather \(1873-1947\)](#), [Edith Wharton \(1862-1937\)](#), [Booth Tarkington \(1869-1946\)](#), [Ellen Glasgow \(1873-1945\)](#), and [Zane Grey \(1872-1939\)](#) in its refusal to celebrate American [nationalism](#) and the moral righteousness of the conflict.

Its plot deals with three soldiers – “Chris” Chrisfield, John Andrews, and Dan Fuselli – and their experiences in the AEF. The scenes of fighting in the Argonne Forest are bloody and harrowing and depict American soldiers robbing corpses and executing [prisoners](#). Overall, however, it is not combat that causes the men to disintegrate, but the brutalizing and autocratic institution of the army itself: Chrisfield becomes a psychopath who murders an American officer; the musical composer and Harvard graduate Andrews deserts; and Fuselli ends up an embittered conniver disillusioned by his failure to achieve promotion.

This often heavy-handed treatment of how WWI had steamrolled individual and artistic freedom would be echoed by a series of postwar American novels that followed *Three Soldiers*’ lead. These works focused on soldierly and societal disillusion and were produced by writers that [Gertrude Stein \(1874-1946\)](#) famously characterized as a “lost generation.” (Dos Passos repeated elements of this critique in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and more fully in *1919* (1932), the middle volume of the *U.S.A.* trilogy). This “generation” generally consisted of participant-writers: [e. e. cummings \(1894-1962\)](#), [Malcolm Cowley \(1898-1989\)](#), [William Slater Brown \(1896-1997\)](#), and [Ernest Hemingway \(1899-1961\)](#) served as ambulance drivers, and [William March \(1893-1954\)](#), [Thomas Boyd \(1898-1935\)](#), and [Laurence Stallings \(1894-1968\)](#) were combat veterans. Together, these novelists fashioned a powerful myth of the War, asserting that American soldiers had entered the War idealistically and were buoyed by the immense propaganda circulated by the Committee on Public Information. Yet combat was shockingly brutal and callous, army life was characterized by institutional injustice and ineptitude, and the ideals of democracy and freedom that justified American participation

were reduced to little more than an ironic joke.

Like Dos Passos, William Slater Brown also had problems with the authorities due to his criticisms of war policy in his letters home in 1917. In contrast to Dos Passos, however, he and his friend e. e. cummings were arrested and detained in a French detention camp in Normandy because of their critique of the War and held under suspicion of sedition. This experience would become the basis for cummings' novel *The Enormous Room* (1922), a tragic-comic satire of the feckless and indifferent treatment of individuals by a wartime bureaucracy too lethargic and overburdened by the war's enormity to accept anything but blind conformity. The novel was named for the room which contained cummings' fellow inmates at the Dépôt de Triage detention camp at Ferté-Macé. He conceived of the novel itself as a room – "a vast grey box."² Within this box, the characters cummings meets float freely across a deeply ironical narrative that rages against the stupidity and cruelty operating in the heart of [France](#), a country that American war [propaganda](#) frequently represented as the beacon of world civilization. cummings delivered a similarly ironical perspective on the war – targeted particularly at the hollowness of U.S. political rhetoric – in his poetry of the interwar period, including "My Sweet Old Etcetera," "next to of course god america i," and "I sing of Olaf glad and big."

The most important American author to volunteer for ambulance service, however, was Ernest Hemingway. He was an 18 year-old journalist when he served in the [Red Cross](#) on the Italian-Austrian front in 1918. Hemingway was seriously wounded by a mortar round and hospitalized in Milan, where he fell in love with [Agnes von Kurowsky \(1892-1984\)](#), a Red Cross nurse, who later refused to marry him. These experiences underwrote the story collections and novels that made Hemingway's reputation: *In Our Time* (1924), *Fiesta (The Sun Also Rises)*, (1926); and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). These works explored the psychological and physical wounding that the war had wrought on millions of combatants. Intercut with short vignettes of bloody combat, stories like "Soldier's Home" and "Big Two-Hearted River" in *In Our Time* consider the psychological struggles of veterans returning home. Other stories depict a landscape of post-war unhappiness and emotional disconnection between men and women. This particular mood received its fullest expression in *The Sun Also Rises*, where a genital wound renders the protagonist Jake Barnes impotent. The novel follows him from the expatriate American community in Paris to rural [Spain](#) and the San Fermin festival in Pamplona, where he searches fruitlessly for meaningful embodied experience – a wearying bout of drinking, cabaretting, fishing, and attending bullfights – to compensate for what he has lost. Meanwhile, he helplessly watches as the woman he loves sleeps with seemingly everyone but him.

Hemingway's fullest treatment of WWI combat, *A Farewell to Arms*, deals with Frederic

Henry, an American ambulance driver. Henry is embroiled in the chaotic Italian retreat at the [Battle of Caporetto](#) and deserts to escape summary execution by Italian military police. Fleeing to [Switzerland](#) with his pregnant lover, the British nurse Catherine Barkley, the couple escapes from a world of obligation and horror into one of love. Yet, as literary critic John Matthews observes, the lovers “shop and splurge, though they’re hardly rich, and care as much about décor as desire, menu as making love.” In this way, it becomes less a love story than a “pleasure story,” one which “measures the after-effects of war’s trauma in modern America’s numb desertion of immaterial obligations.”³

Perhaps Hemingway’s most lasting legacy from the War, however, was his literary style. With its avoidance of abstractions and adjectives, short declarative sentences, and taut dialogue and interior narration, Hemingway’s style rejected the bombastic rhetoric that had propelled the [United States](#) into the War. He renounced the use of euphemistic or chivalric language that had helped make war’s ugly realities palatable.

Poets

An extraordinary generation of American poets responded to WWI. The most significant were the expatriate modernist poets who lived in Europe during the war, and who interpreted it as a crisis in civilization, political organization, language, and gender relations. [T.S. Eliot \(1888-1965\)](#) arrived in England in 1914 to study at Oxford on a graduate fellowship, and published the quintessential modernist poem in English – *The Waste Land* – in 1922. Featuring legions of ghosts, disquieting corpses, drowned sailors, and cruel Aprils, the poem’s symbolist landscape is highly reminiscent of the War’s carnage. His original title was “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” and the poem’s multiple and often unattributed voices form a cacophony of anxiety and desperation that was quickly identified as a definitive expression of post-war sensibility. [Ezra Pound \(1885-1972\)](#), also an American living in London during the War, and the major figure in promoting and defining Anglophone modernism in the 1910s, greatly assisted in drafting the final version of the poem. Both Eliot and Pound lost a number of close friends in the War, and in poems like “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” (1920) Pound raged against what he called “a botched civilization,” which had killed off “a myriad/And of the best, among them” for “two gross of broken statues/For a few thousand battered books.”⁴ In translations such as *Cathay* (1915), and later in “Canto XVI”, Pound further explored the waste of war and lamented the death of a generation of talented young artists in the trenches, particularly his friend the French sculptor [Henri Gaudier-Brzeska \(1891-1915\)](#). Notable work reflecting on the War was also written by [Wallace Stevens \(1879-1955\)](#), [Robert Frost \(1874-1963\)](#), [Amy Lowell \(1874-1925\)](#), and [Carl Sandburg \(1878-1967\)](#).⁵

Soldier-writers

The most well-known American soldier-authors did not see action. [F. Scott Fitzgerald \(1896-1940\)](#) was a notoriously inept infantry lieutenant who never made it overseas, and [William Faulkner \(1897-1962\)](#) was refused entry into the US Air Force because he was too short. (He enlisted with the Canadian R.A.F., but never made it to Europe; he nonetheless boasted about his heroic aerial exploits in France on his return to Mississippi).⁶ As literary critic Keith Gandal notes, the sense of failure at “missing” action preoccupied several pieces of Fitzgerald’s writing, including “I Didn’t Get Over” (1936) and his seminal essay “The Crack Up” (1936). The War recurs in Fitzgerald’s fiction, from the Princeton aesthete Amory Blaine’s letters home in his debut novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) to the long story “May Day” (1920), which focuses on the fractious atmosphere of May Day 1919, when returning soldiers clashed with socialists on the streets of New York. Jay Gatsby, the mercurial hero of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), is (by his own telling) a highly decorated Major whose wartime exploits recall the legendary endeavors of the “Lost Battalion” during the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Fitzgerald was also interested in the postwar tourist industry dedicated to the War’s battlefields. *Tender is the Night* (1934) features such a trip to the trenches of the [Somme](#).

William Faulkner, too, was preoccupied with the War, and centered two early novels on the experiences of veterans returning home: *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926), his debut novel, and *Sartoris* (1929), a heavily edited version of the novel *Flags in the Dust*, which was not published in its entirety until 1973. *Soldiers’ Pay* deals with the return home to Georgia of Donald Mahon, an American airman blinded, badly scarred, and suffering from amnesia. The novel concerns his relationship with two women: a war widow who becomes attached to him on his journey, and his flighty, self-absorbed fiancée who is horrified at the prospect of going through with a marriage to someone so disfigured. As in *Flags in the Dust*, the Great War in *Soldiers’ Pay* involves multiple wars. The novel replays many of the ideals the South had brought to the Civil War, but it also presents a war between generations. A youthful generation has discarded the romantic myth of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, a myth which mourned as it idealized a departed martial culture of an aristocratic planter class populated by virtuous, long-suffering women, officers gallant and brave to the point of recklessness, and governed by strict adherence to a chivalric code. Roadsters, dances, and Hollywood have pushed this aside, and a common commitment to self-indulgence and self-assertion has dissolved gender differences, delivering what Faulkner called a landscape of “boys of both sexes.”⁷

The most successful soldier-writer who saw action in WWI was Laurence Stallings, a Marine and second lieutenant. He achieved fame with the smash hit Broadway play *What Price Glory* (1924), co-written with [Maxwell Anderson \(1888-1959\)](#). The piece focuses on two hard-bitten

Army regulars leading a group of young, college boy “thirty-day wonder” officers to the front (and is enlivened by racy vernacular speech, which won the play many plaudits).⁸ Stallings later co-wrote the Hollywood epic *The Big Parade* (1925), and adapted *A Farewell to Arms* for the stage (1930). He also wrote works of history, with the acerbically titled *The First World War* (1933) and *The Doughboys: The Story of the AEF, 1917-1918* (1963).⁹ His novel *Plumes* (1924) is a semi-autobiographical treatment of the sufferings of Richard Plume, a romantic young Southerner who refuses a draft deferment and joins the Marines, only to suffer a debilitating knee injury. (Stallings himself had his right kneecap destroyed by a bullet while storming a [machine gun](#) nest in Belleau Wood in 1918. After many painful operations, and excruciating falls, he had his leg amputated in 1922). Rather than dwelling on the experience of combat, the novel focuses on the experience of disability, exacerbated by the constant pain of botched surgery – the result of a frugal and poorly administered system of veterans’ support that was engulfed in a series of scandals in 1923. In struggling to return to work too soon, and not having enough money to support his wife and their young son in a nightmarish Washington D.C., the psychological anguish of not being able to support and hold his family together is added to the physical anguish that Richard Plume suffers on almost every page. He becomes an autodidact in politics and economics, as he tries to reassure himself that he suffered in the service of a bigger cause. As his knowledge grows, so does his conviction that war is always wasteful and pointless.

Two other veterans of the Marine Corps produced searing accounts of combat in France: [Thomas Boyd \(1898-1935\)](#), whose novel *Through the Wheat* (1923) followed the Marines’ engagement at Belleau Wood and Soissons; and [William March’s \(1893-1954\) Company K](#) (1933), a collective reminiscence of the War from 113 narrators who comprised the fictional Company K in the Marines. *Through the Wheat* is a powerful recreation of the fog of war. Its protagonist, Private William Hicks, is a fine soldier hollowed into a sense of psychological and emotional numbness by a series of harrowing battles where he sees most of his comrades die. There is little overall narrative, just a rhythm of fear, respite, alternately anxious and listless waiting, and the hallucinatory intensity of combat. Near the end, Hicks advances alone under enemy fire and inspires his comrades to press the assault. Yet this supposed act of heroism is actually a symptom of acute combat fatigue. The novel closes with Hicks so disoriented and traumatized that he is unable to distinguish the living from the dead, or differentiate a pastoral landscape from the bloody aftermath of battle.

March’s *Company K* is built around a series of first-person narratives, tracking the collective experience of a military unit from enlistment through training, front-line combat, demobilization, and the after-effects of the War years. It, too, traces an arc of disillusionment, which stems from the execution of a group of German prisoners-of-war. The company’s true

heroes are modest and often go unrecognized, whereas by the novel's close one of the most arrogant, inept, and callous junior officers in the company is running for Congress. As with *Plumes* and the final section of John Dos Passos's *1919*, the Unknown Soldier becomes a way of exploring how the process of memorialization smoothed away all conflict or ambiguity from the War. In one of the book's most powerful narratives, a soldier is so disgusted by the platitudes and blind patriotism that accompany American practices of commemoration that he throws away his dog tags to avoid becoming incorporated into these rituals in the event of his death. Instead, he is selected as the anonymous body to fill the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

Several combat veterans wrote powerful autobiographical accounts of the War that challenged this predominant trope of disillusionment. [William Hervey Allen, Jr.'s \(1889-1949\) *Toward the Flame*](#), begun in hospital in 1918 but not published until 1926, narrates six weeks from the summer of 1918 leading up to Allen's unit of Pennsylvania Guardsmen in the 111th infantry participating in the Second [Battle of the Marne](#). Culminating in the disastrous engagement at Fismette, where Allen is seriously wounded, this clear-eyed account is distinguished by its unsentimental and unsparing style. As [Steven Trout](#) observes, its refusal of the clichéd and formulaic features of war writing renders it both complex and hard to assign to any particular politics of the War. It is both "unwilling to focus solely on battlefield misery and carnage and, at the same time, indifferent to conventional patriotism."¹⁰ Although Allen's spectacularly successful (and now largely forgotten) career as an historical novelist helped keep the book in print, it is now widely regarded as one of the finest combat memoirs from the conflict. [James M. Cain \(1892-1977\)](#), who achieved fame for his 1930s thrillers *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936) – both made into classic noir movies by Hollywood – was also a combat veteran, and wrote about his experiences in September 1918 as a runner for the Headquarters Troop of the 79th Division. In "The Taking of Montfaucon" (1929) Cain powerfully harnessed the hardboiled style that would become such a feature of 1930s crime fiction to describe the chaotic and disorienting experience of the first days of the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

Recently, literary scholars such as Margaret Higonnet, Jennifer Haytock, Ariela Freedman, and Lynne Hanley have urged us to move away from seeing front-line narratives as the only authentic form of war writing.¹¹ Attending to women's accounts of war service and life on the home front, they demonstrate how trauma and the dilemmas incurred by serving the wartime state were not restricted to men but were widespread experiences for American women in World War I. This scholarship has inspired an upswing in critical attention to the fiction and memoirs written by noncombatant participants, especially nurse's narratives. Examples include [Ellen N. La Motte's \(1873-1961\) *The Backwash of War*](#) (1916), as well as

[Addie Waites Hunton \(1866\)](#) and [Kathryn M. Johnson's \(1878\) *Two Colored Women with the A.E.F.* \(1919\)](#), which details their experiences with the Y.M.C.A. Particularly notable is [Mary Borden's \(1886-1968\) *The Forbidden Zone*](#), a collection based on her time nursing in a field hospital supporting French troops. A rich young heiress and Vassar graduate, Borden had financed the hospital herself. She later estimated that her team of twelve nurses, plus surgeons and orderlies, treated 25,000 men during the course of the Somme offensive.¹² She later called these stories "a collection of fragments." The concept of fragmentation may be understood as a metaphor that extends throughout the work: fragmented munitions have fragmented men, nations, and the nature of experience, which can now only exist as a largely disconnected series of vignettes.¹³ These shorter pieces reflect on various things: the gradual unfolding of a bombardment, a regiment straight off the line being reviewed by a general, and the transformation of heterosexual relationships because of the War. Perhaps the most striking transformation is in the nature of normality: at one moment a nurse reflects that "I could sleep with the familiar smell of blood on my apron, but the terrible scent of the new-mown hay disturbs me."¹⁴

Limits of the disillusionment theme

Especially early on in the conflict, a number of American writers produced works that were far more supportive of American participation than those of the "lost generation." These novels are often optimistic about what a post-war, American-sponsored global progressivism might look like. [Arthur Train's \(1875-1945\) popular novel *The Earthquake* \(1918\)](#) expressed hope that American involvement in the War would reverse the nation's social and moral decline, and that communal sacrifice would alleviate simmering class and racial conflicts.¹⁵ Booth Tarkington's *Ramsey Milholland* (1918) offered a more conservative version of this outlook – asserting that old-fashioned male martial heroism and patriotism would dampen down the excesses of pre-war socialist and feminist activism. Tarkington was a member of the Vigilantes, a syndicate of 328 writers formed to feed patriotic writing under strict editorial guidelines to the national press. It featured such luminaries as [Ring Lardner \(1885-1933\)](#), [Edwin Arlington Robinson \(1869-1935\)](#), [Vachel Lindsay \(1879-1931\)](#), [Amy Lowell \(1874-1925\)](#), and [Hamlin Garland \(1860-1940\)](#).¹⁶ This group contributed just a fraction of the extraordinary outpouring of occasional poetry devoted to the conflict. Poetry was a key medium for helping Americans understand and engage with the War, both intellectually and emotionally. Eighty anthologies of war poetry were published in the [United States](#) between 1914 and 1920, 86 different periodicals carried war poems, and over 1,000 war poems appeared in the *New York Times* alone during the course of the War.¹⁷

Other literary supporters of War urged US participation out of a sense of connection to France and England. The young poet [Alan Seeger \(1888-1916\)](#) volunteered immediately for the French Foreign Legion in 1914, motivated by a fierce loyalty to French Republicanism. His “I have a Rendezvous with Death,” the most famous American poem of the War, was published shortly after his own death on the Somme in 1916. Edith Wharton, who by this point lived permanently in France, was awarded the Legion of Honour for her work with war refugees and wounded veterans, and few writers did more to support the Allied effort in literary terms. She delivered medical supplies to Verdun, [Ypres](#), and the Vosges, and wrote about these experiences for *Scribner's* magazine, articles later collected in *Fighting France* (1915). She also edited an illustrated anthology in 1916, *The Book of the Homeless*, the proceeds of which went to Belgian [refugees](#). The volume took up her protest at American [neutrality](#) and contained writing by [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#), [John Galsworthy \(1867-1933\)](#), [Henry James \(1843-1916\)](#), [George Santayana \(1863-1952\)](#), [William Dean Howells \(1837-1920\)](#), [Joseph Conrad \(1857-1924\)](#), and [W. B. Yeats \(1865-1939\)](#). For Wharton, France was a “luminous instance,” a country typified by “intellectual light and ... moral force,” menaced by a militarism which was “stupid, inartistic, unimaginative and enslaving.”¹⁸ Fighting for France therefore became as much an aesthetic endeavour as a patriotic one, an idea she explored in the novella *The Marne* (1918) and the novel *A Son at the Front* (1923). Her great friend Henry James had similar views. Adopting British citizenship in 1915 partly in protest at America's persistent neutrality, he expressed his great dismay at “the awful proposition of a world squeezed together in the huge Prussian fist.”¹⁹

Perhaps the most sophisticated novel in this vein was Willa Cather's Pulitzer prizewinning *One of Ours* (1922). In this novel, Cather, whose cousin Lieutenant [G.P. Cather \(1883-1918\)](#) had died at the Battle of Cantigny in May 1918, explored her fascination with her cousin's letters, which described how fighting to save France had finally given him a sense of purpose and identity. The novel transforms G.P. into Claude Wheeler, an imaginative and melancholy young farmer in Nebraska born a generation too late for the frontier pioneering he idealizes.²⁰ Struggling to define himself through farming, an abortive education, and an insipid marriage, Claude eagerly enlists to fight in WWI. Although the battle scenes were heavily criticized as glamorized portrayals of combat – most notably by Ernest Hemingway and [Sinclair Lewis \(1885-1951\)](#) – Cather had rigorously fact-checked the details of the A.E.F. Steven Trout has recently revealed that many of her depictions of service in France are similar to veterans' memoirs and [letters](#) home.

Trout's work has argued convincingly that Cather's novel has been too easily dismissed. For many American veterans, the War was far from the shattering experience of disillusion depicted by the Lost Generation. Although many veterans were disappointed by the political

outcomes of the War, they saw their service as valuable in experiential terms, and both they and the government invested heavily in memorializing and archiving that service. This idea was particularly prevalent in the post-war fiction and art featured in *The American Legion Monthly*, the house journal of the American Legion. Writers such as [Leonard H. Nason \(1895-1970\)](#) nostalgically celebrated veterans' experiences of male camaraderie and grimly comic moments of heroism –rendered free of Wilsonian ideals.²¹

Socialist writers

The war presented a dilemma for left-wing writers in America. The socialist [Upton Sinclair's \(1878-1968\)](#) novel *Jimmie Higgins* (1919) focuses on a socialist doughboy tortured by military intelligence over his enthusiasm for the [Bolshevik revolution](#) during his posting in Archangel, [Russia](#), following the armistice with [Germany](#). It was a despairing comment on the difficulties of remaining committed to a principle of working-class solidarity in nationalistic times – difficulties which echoed Sinclair's own personal dilemmas. Similar strains also afflicted poet [Carl Sandburg's \(1878-1967\)](#) work during the War years. He wrote pro-war pieces under his own name for the government-backed American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, while simultaneously publishing under the pseudonym Jack Phillips to lambast government war policy in the *International Socialist Review*.²² He was briefly incarcerated and questioned by US military intelligence for carrying Bolshevik leaflets back into the United States in 1919. Sandburg was not the only writer to see the October Revolution as the one progressive ray of light to emerge from the War: Upton Sinclair, [W.E.B. Du Bois \(1868-1963\)](#), [Randolph Bourne \(1886-1918\)](#), and [John Reed \(1887-1920\)](#) were of the same opinion.

African American responses

The 1920s witnessed the Harlem Renaissance, an efflorescence of African American culture with signal achievements in music, literature, fine art, photography, history, and theatre, much of which reflected on [African American participation in the Great War](#). Often this work depicted black Americans as fighting two wars in 1917-18, "one with Germany and one with white America," as the novelist [Jessie Redmon Fauset \(1882-1961\)](#) put it in her novel *There is Confusion* (1924).²³ The final third of Fauset's work is devoted to the War, and the struggle of African Americans on both the frontlines and at home to represent America and have their patriotism fully acknowledged by the nation at large. The novel registers the sense of bitter disappointment that gripped black communities in 1919 as the anticipated political payoff for their wartime service failed to materialize, and as brutal [race riots](#) devastated several major American cities. During the so-called "red summer," one black newspaper claimed that "for valor displayed in the recent war, it seems that the Negro's particular decoration is to be the

'double-cross.'"²⁴ Yet *There is Confusion* also featured several motifs that became common in Harlem Renaissance writing about WWI, as authors sought to locate aesthetic and political resources to assist the struggle for greater civil rights in the postwar era. The novel took pride in the martial masculinity that African American soldiers had (albeit limited) opportunities to claim. This pride was particularly associated with the graduates from the African American officer training camp in Des Moines, Iowa. It considered whether fighting side-by-side against the Germans, and particularly in the de-territorialized and de-familiarizing surroundings of no-man's-land, would break down racial suspicions and prejudices between white and black Americans. It also questioned whether the relative racial tolerance of the French, who often warmly welcomed African American troops, would make American racism seem less like a natural state of affairs and more like a global anomaly.

Similar ideas were picked up (with varying degrees of optimism) in novels like [E. C. Williams \(1871-1929\)](#) *The Letters of Davy Carr* (1926; republished as *When Washington was in Vogue*, 2004), [Walter White's \(1893-1955\)](#) *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), [Nella Larsen's \(1891-1964\)](#) *Passing* (1929), and stories like [Rudolph Fisher's \(1897-1934\)](#) "The City of Refuge" (1925). There was less optimism on display in novels like the one from the Jamaican writer [Claude McKay's \(1889-1948\)](#) *Home to Harlem* (1928), whose protagonist Jake experiences a situation that was more typical for African Americans in WWI. Despite his eagerness to fight the Germans, Jake is allocated to a labor battalion and does the dreary work of unloading ships in Brest, all the while he is menaced by racist white military police. A similar opinion animates the only war novel by an African American veteran, [Victor Daly's \(1895-1986\)](#) *Not Only War* (1932). Despite a moment of reconciliation between the main black and white characters during the final assault on German lines, the novel focuses more on the intractability of racism and the meaningless carnage of war than any hope that shared sacrifice would deliver a more progressive racial politics. As temporal distance from the War increased, African Americans were often drawn to the form of memorial that was pioneered by the conflict: the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which had been adopted by most of the combatant nations after 1920. In poems like [James Weldon Johnson's \(1871-1938\)](#) "St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day" (1930) and stories like May Miller's (1899-1955) "One Blue Star" (1945) and her play "Stragglers in the Dust" (1930), the soldier's anonymity always contains the subversive potential that he was a black casualty of war. In this way, the Unknown Soldier simultaneously became the symbol of both the anonymity African Americans faced every day in relation to the broader American body politic, and a pointed reminder of their centrality to national life and service.

Conclusion

Although the disillusionment narrative so influentially shaped by novelists like Hemingway,

Dos Passos, Fitzgerald and Stallings is an important strand of the American literary response to World War I, recent literary scholarship has done much to show that this was far from the whole story. Criticism by scholars such as Mark Van Wienen, Jennifer James, Chad Williams, Jennifer Haytock, Steven Trout, Celia Malone Kingsbury and myself has urged the reconsideration of marginalized, popular, ephemeral, and non-canonical texts, which reveal the diversity of hopes, experiences, and memories American writers derived from the conflict.²⁵ While “lost generation” writers identified the War as the main reason for their fading faith in large institutions and patriotic sentiment, women writers, African Americans, and socialist authors often held out hope that the War would be a catalyst for national and international political change. Moreover, while some veterans saw the war as hellish and degrading, others celebrated it as the definitive formative experience for a national generation of men. Steven Trout suggests that WWI became America’s forgotten war partly because none of these multiple and conflicting accounts ever became enshrined as the singular national memory. Yet the War was certainly the launching pad for a highly influential new generation of writers, and is inextricable from the radically experimental stylistics of modernism. It also provided the occasion for an intense and wide-ranging exploration of the relationship of culture to citizenship at a moment of national self-scrutiny and dramatic transformation.

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Notes

1. Anonymous: Three Well-Known Authors Write Views of ‘Three Soldiers’, in: New York Tribune, 9 October 1921, p. 8. [↑](#)
2. Cummings, E.E.: The Enormous Room, New York 1934, p. 113. [↑](#)
3. Matthews, John T.: American Writing of the Great War, in: Sherry, Vincent (ed.): The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War, Cambridge 2005, pp. 217-242, p. 240. [↑](#)
4. Pound, Ezra: Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, in: Ezra Pound: New Selected Poems and Translations, New York 2010, pp. 110-118, p. 113. [↑](#)
5. Many of these poems are collected in this excellent volume: Wienen, Mark Van: Rendezvous with Death. American Poems of the Great War, Urbana-Champaign 2002. [↑](#)
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