

BOOKS

The Enduring Interest in WWII Novels

By Rona Simmons

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It may be D-Day and the Normandy invasion all over again. If you don't believe me, take a glance at the number of books about World War II swarming bookshelves this year. I've given up trying to find an accurate count. Goodreads identified 61 newly released WWII novels at midyear, compared with 100 last year at this time. While Amazon had no trouble finding 100 titles about the war to fill their list of "hot new releases" and a search of Barnes and Noble's site produced a list of 1,000 WWII fiction and nonfiction titles released so far in 2021. Recently, one blogger (frappesandfiction.com) threw up her hands in frustration and dodged the issue by posting about new historical fiction that is *not* about World War II.

Why all the interest? It's 2021 and you might think interest would have peaked last year during the many commemorations of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the war. But interest is strong and the end is nowhere in sight. Perhaps the reason is that the Second World War changed everything, and touched everyone, Tyrants rose to power, cultures clashed, borders shifted, and a staggering number of people lost their lives. The war pit good against evil on the global landscape with real-life villains (from Hitler to Stalin to Hirohito) and heroes (from Churchill, Roosevelt, and Eisenhower to lesser known and all but invisible heroes on the battlefield, undercover, and behind the lines). Even a modicum of research into any aspect of the war uncovers another nearly ready-made story. Add a dash (or ladle) of atmosphere, suspense, mystery, and romance and *voila!* Another WWII title emerges.

In part, I attribute the ongoing interest to the fact that sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters of "the greatest generation" can still see the war clearly, despite its now nearly eighty-year distance. Its stories are integral to our family and our heritage. My father was a P-38 fighter pilot in North Africa and lived long enough to tell me his story. My father-in-law was a B-17 bomber pilot, and although his story was nearly lost to time, after years of research and interviews, I have reconstructed it from records and diaries of his cohorts. And, there are the albeit dwindling numbers of WWII veterans who walk among us and who when cajoled gladly offer their firsthand accounts.

But book lists and my opinions aside, I checked in with a few noted authors with books on the war to their credit.

Author Kristin Harmel (*The Forest of Vanishing Stars*, July 2021) agreed with me. She too believes readers feel a connection to the era through a parent or grandparent's war experience, and because almost the entire world was involved, and the good guy and bad guy

WWII HISTORICAL FICTION

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THE LAST NIGHT IN LONDON
BY KAREN WHITE
April 2021

THE SHANGRI-LA RAIDERS
BY BUZZ BERNARD
July 2021

THE FOREST OF VANISHING STARS
BY KRISTIN HARMEL
July 2021

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paradigm. Of course, she adds, “it’s what you do in the gray area within that paradigm that can make a story so interesting.” Karen White (*The Last Night in London*, April 2021) added she thought “we are a bit tired of the ‘me’ generations of today, and need to be reassured that there was once a time when we truly believed that we were all in this together and would sacrifice for the common good.” H. W. “Buzz” Bernard (*When Heroes Flew: The Shangri-La Raiders*, July 2021) pointed to the war being a historical turning point, as the world evolved from a largely agrarian state to a predominantly industrial-technological one with immense upheaval. And, he adds, the war was “the deadliest, costliest, and most widespread in the history of mankind.”

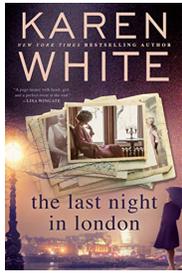
Each of these authors also cited a personal connection with the war. In Harmel’s case, two grandfathers served in the war and her family heritage can be traced to France and Eastern Europe—central geographies of the war and the settings of some of her books. For her part, White counts a number of relatives who were war heroes and although she admits she never knew them, she knew the stories that were passed down and that she now passes along in her works. Bernard came closer than most of today’s authors can to the war—his wife had grown up in Nazi Germany and witnessed Hitler’s rise to power. No doubt, her memories have influenced his writing and flow through his books.

Given the astonishing number of World War II books already on the market, I asked these three authors one last question on how important they thought it was to find a new angle on the war. Harmel, with multiple World War II novels on bookshelves already, says with each new book she tries to uncover “a piece of history that hasn’t been explored in depth.” She adds she hopes readers will walk away from her novels having learned something new. For her part, White believes, with the global scope of the war, “we could write WWII stories for another couple of decades and never repeat ourselves.” And, finally, Bernard said he chose a single thread to link his books in the trilogy *When Heroes Flew*, the thread being the “astonishing valor of the men who performed almost inconceivable aerial exploits,” with each book exploring a different theater of war and aspect of wartime flying.

As an author focusing on the Second World War, I hope Harmel, White, and Bernard are right. I hope readers will continue to find stories of the war compelling and that like us, they love to uncover an aspect of the war that hasn’t been told before.



Kristin Harmel’s most recent book is *The Forest of Vanishing Stars*. She has family ties to France and Eastern Europe and has set more than one of her books in the region. The forest in this book is deep in eastern Poland, a forest that became known as the Bielski forest for a true life group of partisans who helped establish a safe haven for Jewish refugees. As if the story of heroism and bravery were not enough, Harmel infuses the whole with mystery and mystical elements.



Karen White’s book of historical fiction, *The Last Night in London*, is set in the years of the Blitz when, as she says, “heroes were everyday people, and spies lurked in every coffee shop.” At one point in her life White actually lived in London in a building that was damaged during the Blitz. “I was always wondering about the people who lived there ... and since I became a writer I’ve wanted to tell their story as I imagined it.”



H. W. “Buzz” Bernard is the author of the trilogy *When Heroes Flew*. In *The Shangri-La Raiders*, the second in the series, Bernard tells of exploits of pilots who flew from US aircraft carriers to attack the Japanese homeland during the war. Like so many others in the war, they rarely hesitated to put their lives on the line, even in the face of sometimes certain death. I knew how deep Bernard’s research was from the opening pages—his pilots talk of their wings making every flier attractive. My own father, at 97, using today’s perhaps not so politically correct term referred to them as “chick magnets.”

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