

All Quiet on the Western Front: Literary Analysis and Cultural Context, by Richard A. Firda. New York: Twayne, 1993. Pp. 149. \$7.95.

One of the first book-length studies of *Im Westen nichts Neues* to appear in English, Richard Firda's *All Quiet on the Western Front: Literary Analysis and Cultural Context* certainly addresses a need. Unfortunately, however, this volume will primarily benefit first-time readers of Remarque's novel, rather than scholars or advanced students of modern literature. Though designed, as the latest volume in Twayne's Masterwork Studies Series, to offer crucial contextual information, as well as a "discussion of key themes and concepts," the book fulfills these objectives only in scattered chapters and generally suffers from a lack of depth.

In fairness, such weaknesses are perhaps due less to Firda, who demonstrates an impressive command of interwar German literature, than to the format of this new series, for which brevity has (in this instance at least) become an impediment. Put simply, this study tackles too many issues—historical, biographical, and textual—in too little space: 129 pages of text to be exact. One feels the resulting unevenness most keenly in the contextual chapters, which range in quality from a disappointing six-page overview of Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic to a very helpful discussion of three other German First-World-War narratives: Fritz von Unruh's *The Way of Sacrifice* (1919), Ernst Jünger's *The Storm of Steel* (1920), and Ludwig Renn's *War* (1929): Indeed, the latter chapter, along with Firda's fine discussion of Remarque's "sequels" to *All Quiet*, *The Road Back* (1931) and *Three Comrades* (1937), represents the most important material in this book. Together, these two chapters provide an essential background, establishing *All Quiet* as the first text in a trilogy devoted to the Great War and juxtaposing Remarque's comparatively apolitical fiction with narratives more overtly tied to the Left or Right.

Regrettably, however, the other background chapters, which include "The Importance of the Work" and "Reception in the

Marketplace,” often overlook significant contextual issues. When acknowledging, for example, that *All Quiet* “was not the only war novel being written” in 1929, Firda ignores the key role played by Remarque in the international explosion of First-World-War literature which occurred that year (6). As numerous critics have pointed out, much of this boom-literature came from writers who, after repeated rejections from publishers, were waiting for an indication of the public’s willingness to confront the past, a willingness that Remarque’s best seller spectacularly demonstrated: Firda also fails to mention the many hackneyed imitations that *All Quiet* spawned, including Helen Zeena Smith’s *Not So Quiet* (1930), which mimics Remarque’s prose style, and Charles Harrison’s *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), a textual clone narrated by a Canadian version of Remarque’s protagonist. Though offering an adequate account of the politicized debate ignited by *All Quiet* in Germany, this study neglects—as these examples suggest—Remarque’s profound international impact. And, finally, one wonders why the 1979 television remake of *All Quiet*, which Firda includes in the opening chronology, does not receive at least some mention in the chapter devoted to the 1930 film version. A brief comparison of these two productions might have further defined the enduring myths at the center of Remarque’s novel.

Somewhat more satisfying are the five chapters, grouped together under the title “A Reading,” that focus on the text and its autobiographical sources. Here again Firda manages, despite obvious constraints, to offer some insightful, if abbreviated, analysis. Throughout these chapters, Firda defends the often-challenged sincerity of *All Quiet* as an artistic vision of the Great War. Although it is true that Remarque experienced far less combat than his critics, including Adolf Hitler, *All Quiet* nevertheless reinvents, according to Firda, the most shattering period of its author’s life, and does so through a uniquely “impressionistic” literary style, one that effectively combines the prosaic and the poetic, the documentary and the philosophical. Firda is especially good at discerning the variety of tones and intertextual echoes in this style. Of the passage in which Paul imagines Kemmerich’s fingernails and hair continuing to grow

after his death, for example, Firda aptly remarks, "These are prototypical romantic images stressing horror and subjective fear of death. Remarque also introduces allusions from European Gothic literature: hair growing on a dead man's skull, waxlike hands on Death the Grim Reaper" (43-4).

Moreover, Firda convincingly argues that both Remarque's success and his vulnerability to criticism derived from his ambition to be "first a novelist" and only secondly an historian (59). Later a collector of French Impressionist paintings, Remarque sought, in *All Quiet*, to "paint" the war—rather than photograph it—"even if in doing so he sacrificed a sense of authenticity and whatever others chose to call reality in artistic expression" (42). Thus, Firda's perceptive assessment of Remarque's objectives in writing *All Quiet* helps to explain why this novel has continued to overshadow more documentary, less inventive First-World-War narratives.

Insightful as Firda is, however, in his assessment of Remarque's expressive, non-realistic literary style, the two short chapters devoted exclusively to the text (three of the five address biographical issues) hardly constitute an ample "discussion of key themes and concepts." And, unfortunately, one of these two chapters, entitled "Characters and Characterization," contains what many readers may regard as superfluous material. While the section focusing on Remarque's protagonist, Paul Bäumer, seems justified, it is less clear why Firda spends two pages classifying Kat, Himmelstoss, and others as either "intermediate characters" or "background characters," a distinction introduced by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. What do these categories, which lend themselves to almost any novel, specifically add to our understanding of Remarque's text?

Finally, two minor points need to be addressed. First, while generally free from errors, this book contains a misprint that obfuscates perhaps the single most controversial issue in Remarque's career: the length of his service on the Western Front. In the chronology, Firda states, correctly, that Remarque arrived "behind the Arras front" on June 14, 1917. The text, however, lists the date as July 14—which, if true, would leave only two weeks between Remarque's arrival in France and his wounding at Third

Ypres on July 31. (Interestingly, the current Fawcett-Crest edition of *All Quiet* states that Remarque was “wounded five times” during the war, thus perpetuating deceptions originally spread by Remarque’s publisher Ullstein). Secondly, Firda’s bibliography, while admittedly selective, contains some surprising and, for readers who are not fluent in German, unfortunate omissions—most notably, Modris Ekstein’s provocative discussion of *All Quiet in Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* and Brian Rowley’s incisive essay, “Journalism into Fiction: Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues*” (contained in *The First World War in Fiction*, Holger Klein, ed.).

Generally, then, *All Quiet on The Western Front: Literary Analysis and Cultural Context* provides an adequate introduction to the most influential war novel of the century. Readers already familiar with *All Quiet*, and with Remarque’s career, will still have to wait for a study that probes in sufficient detail both the milieu and the internal complexity of this under-analyzed text.

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