

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Life-Changing Literature

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All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque

I PULLED THE SHEETS up to my neck and waited. I let the last words of the last page echo. I knew I could not go back. I could not unknow what I now knew. I had come of age.

I was somewhere between thirteen and fourteen. A voracious reader. Words unlike numbers offered themselves easily to me — that and my world was rather elastic. What passed for reality – my praise-the-lord mother, my profane father, plus seven siblings – was already magical and so genre fiction seemed like a small step. I was also a conflicted kid: God-fearing and absolutely addicted to any form of titillation I could find. Echoing the spaghetti Western, Edge, Breed, Adam Steel were the heroes of my pulp phase. They were hollow men empty as the shells they fired from the guns they worshipped.

Conan the Barbarian competed for my affections. The hyper-masculine Hyborian warrior of a lost aeon was an alternative take on simpler times and simpler moralities. Conan's fantasy world was replete with the twentieth-century race and gender tropes I saw in black-and-white afternoon movies.

I got over those discomforts: after all, they were secondary to the diet of sex and violence. I can't recall why I bought *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I imagine I had thought it was going to be a more highbrow version of Edge, Steel, and Breed.

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It was the surprise that captured my attention. War was hunger, rations, camaraderie and dog-eat-dogness; meanness. There was no great revenge plot, no hero quest, bulging biceps; no busty Valkyries, just mud, rations and 'a mad anger' against death.

Perhaps most importantly it was a German story and it was the Great War. The Holocaust simplified World War Two. Britain was imperfect especially to a Black kid growing up in in the seventies and eighties, but at least we were on the side of the good in a war against evil. The German soldiers in this novel were not SS monsters: 'our fresh troops are anaemic boys in need of rest', wrote Remarque. So many have been slaughtered a protagonist observes: 'Germany will be empty soon.'

Eating together, excreting together, lying in mud together the boys were a relatable version of my peers and I. Had the novel been an unremitting compilation of horrors it might not have created a peculiar vibration in me. But the juxtaposition of grime and beauty was too stunningly close for prurient detachment: 'The summer of 1918 is worst and the most terrible. The days stand like angels in blue and gold, incomprehensible above a ring of annihilation.'

I could not return to Edge, Breed, Steel, and now I could see the cogs, the levers, pulling and twisting. Crude and threadbare they were unroadworthy and dishonest. I, nor my silly innocent friends, didn't want to shoot or scalp anyone: we wanted our mothers to love us, our fathers to be proud of us, and the girls we were too scared to approach to acknowledge our existence.

I had come of age.