

e does O'Connor
hat constitutes a
she offers her

what point does
discussion? What
paragraph form

our class, and
ful depiction

more atten-
istic vein —
re convince
k of science
details.

ach would-
content of
character

An Unquiet Awakening

by Mordecai Richler

1 Reading was not one of my boyhood passions. Girls, or rather the
2 absence of girls, drove me to it. When I was 13 years old, short for
3 my age, more than somewhat pimply, I was terrified of girls. They made
4 me feel sadly inadequate.

5 Retreating into high seriousness, I acquired a pipe, which I chewed
6 on ostentatiously, and made it my business to be seen everywhere, even
7 at school basketball games, absorbed by books of daunting significance.
8 The two women who ran the lending library, possibly amused by my
9 pretensions, tried to interest me in fiction.

10 "I want fact. I can't be bothered with stories," I protested, waving
11 my pipe at them affronted, "I just haven't got the time for such nonsense."

12 Novels, I knew, were mere romantic make-believe, not as bad as
13 poetry, to be fair, but bad enough.

14 I fell ill with a childhood disease, I no longer remember which, but
15 obviously I meant it as a rebuke to those girls in tight sweaters who
16 continued to ignore me. Never mind, they would mourn at my funeral,
17 burying me with my pipe. Too late, they would say, "Boy, was he ever
18 an intellectual."

19 The women from the lending library, concerned, dropped off books
20 for me at our house. The real stuff. Fact-filled. Providing me with the
21 inside dope on Theodore Herzl's childhood and *Brazil Yesterday, Today,*
22 *and Tomorrow.*

23 One day they brought me a novel: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
24 by Erich Maria Remarque. The painting on the jacket that was taped
25 to the book showed a soldier wearing what was unmistakably a Ger-

man Army helmet. What was this, I wondered, some sort of bad joke?
8 Nineteen forty-four that was, and I devoutly wished every German left on the face of the earth an excruciating death. The Allied invasion of France had not yet begun, but I cheered every Russian counterattack, each German city bombed, and — with the help of a map tacked to my bedroom wall — followed the progress of the Canadian troops fighting their way up the Italian boot. Boys from our street had already been among the fallen. Izzy Draper's uncle. Harvey Kegelemass' older brother. The boy who was supposed to marry Gita Holzman.

9 *All Quiet on the Western Front* lay unopened on my bed for two days. Finally, I was driven to picking it up out of boredom. I never expected that a mere novel, a stranger's tale, could actually be dangerous, creating such turbulence in my life, obliging me to question so many received ideas. About Germans. About my own monumental ignorance of the world. About what novels were.

10 At the age of 13 in 1944, happily as yet untainted by English 104, I couldn't tell you whether Remarque's novel was

- a. a slice of life
- b. symbolic
- c. psychological
- d. seminal.

I couldn't even say if it was well or badly written. In fact, as I recall, it didn't seem to be "written" at all. Instead, it just flowed. Now, of course, I understand that writing that doesn't advertise itself is art of a very high order. It doesn't come easily. But at the time I wasn't capable of making such distinctions. I also had no notion of how *All Quiet on the Western Front* rated critically as a war novel. I hadn't read Stendhal or Tolstoy or Crane or Hemingway. I hadn't even heard of them. I didn't know that Thomas Mann, whoever he was, had praised the novel highly. Neither did I know that in 1929 the judges at some outfit called the Book-of-the-Month Club had made it their May selection.

11 But what I did know is that, hating Germans with a passion, I had read only 20, maybe 30, pages before the author had seduced me into identifying with my enemy, 19-year-old Paul Baumer, thrust into the bloody trenches of the First World War with his schoolmates: Muller, Kemmerich and the reluctant Joseph Behm, one of the first to fall. As if that weren't sufficiently unsettling in itself, the author, having won my love for Paul, my enormous concern for his survival, then betrayed me in the last dreadful paragraphs of his book:
"He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the

whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence:
All Quiet on the Western Front.

"He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. Turning him over one saw that he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come."

The movies, I knew from experience, never risked letting you down like that. No matter how bloody the battle, how long the odds, Errol Flynn, Robert Taylor, even Humphrey Bogart could be counted on to survive and come home to Ann Sheridan, Lana Turner or — if they were sensitive types — Loretta Young. Only character actors, usually Brooklyn Dodger fans, say George Tobias or William Bendix, were expendable.

Obviously, having waded into the pool of serious fiction by accident, I was not sure I liked or trusted the water. It was too deep. Anything could happen.

There was something else, a minor incident in *All Quiet on the Western Front* that would not have troubled an adult reader but, I'm embarrassed to say, certainly distressed that 13-year-old boy colliding with his first serious novel:

Sent out to guard a village that has been abandoned because it is being shelled too heavily, Katczinsky, the incomparable scrounger, surfaces with suckling pigs and potatoes and carrots for his comrades, a group of eight altogether:

"The suckling pigs are slaughtered, Kat sees to them. We want to make potato cakes to go with the roast. But we cannot find a grater for the potatoes. However, that difficulty is soon over. With a nail we punch a lot of holes in a pot lid and there we have a grater. Three fellows put on thick gloves to protect their fingers against the grater, two others peel the potatoes, and business gets going."

The business, I realized, alarmed — not affronted — was the making of potato latkes, a favorite of mine as well as Paul Baumer's, a dish I had always taken to be Jewish, certainly not a German concoction.

What did I know? Nothing. Or, looked at another way, my real education, my life-long addiction to fiction, began with the trifling discovery that the potato latke was not of Jewish origin, but something borrowed from the German and now a taste that Jew and German shared in spite of everything.

I felt easier about my affection for the German soldier Paul Baumer once I was told by the women from the lending library that when Hitler came to power in 1933 he had burned all of Erich Maria Remarque's

books and in 1938 he took away his German citizenship. Obviously Hitler had grasped that novels could be dangerous, something I learned when I was only 13 years old. He burned them, I began to devour them. I started to read at the breakfast table and on streetcars, often missing my stop, and in bed with benefit of a flashlight. It got me into trouble.

22 I grasped, for the first time, that I didn't live in the centre of the world but had been born into a working-class family in an unimportant country far from the cities of light: London, Paris, New York. Of course this wasn't my fault, it was my inconsiderate parents who were to blame. But there was, I now realized, a larger world out there beyond St. Urbain Street in Montreal.

23 Preparing myself for the Rive Gauche, I bought a blue beret, but I didn't wear it outside, or even in the house if anybody else was at home. I looked at but lacked the courage to buy a cigarette holder.

24 As my parents bickered at the supper table, trapped in concerns now far too mundane for the likes of me — what to do if Dworkin raised the rent again, how to manage my brother's college fees — I sat with but actually apart from them in the kitchen, enthralled, reading for the first time, "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion."¹

25 Erich Maria Remarque, born in Westphalia in 1897, went off to war, directly from school, at the age of 18. He was wounded five times. He lost all his friends. After the war he worked briefly as a schoolteacher, a stonecutter, a test driver for a tire company and an editor of Sportbild magazine. His first novel, *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, was turned down by several publishers before it was brought out by the Ullstein Press in Berlin in 1928. *All Quiet on the Western Front* sold 1.2 million copies in Germany and was translated in 29 languages, selling some four million copies throughout the world. The novel has been filmed three times; the first time, memorably by Lewis Milestone in 1930. The Milestone version, with Lew Ayres playing Paul Baumer, won Academy Awards for best picture and best direction.

26 Since *All Quiet on the Western Front* once meant so much to me, I picked it up again with a certain anxiety. After all this time, I find it difficult to be objective about the novel. Its pages still evoke for me a back bedroom with a cracked ceiling and a sizzling radiator on St. Urbain Street: mice scurrying in the walls, and a window looking out on the sheets frozen stiff on the laundry line.

27 Over the years the novel has lost something in shock value. The original jacket copy of the 1929 Little, Brown & Company edition of

All Quiet on the Western Front warns the reader that it is "at times crude" and "will shock the supersensitive by its outspokenness." Contemporary readers, far from being shocked, will be amused by the novel's discretion, the absence of explicit sex scenes, the unbelievably polite dialogue of the men in the trenches.

28 The novel also has its poignant moments, both in the trenches and when Paul Baumer goes home on leave, an old man of 19, only to find insufferably pompous schoolmasters still recruiting the young with mindless prattle about the fatherland and the glory of battle. Strong characters are deftly sketched. Himmelstoss, the postman who becomes a crazed drillmaster. Tjaden, the peasant soldier. Kantorek, the schoolmaster.

29 On the front line the enemy is never the Frogs or the Limeys, but the insanity of the war itself. It is the war, in fact, and not even Paul Baumer, that is the novel's true protagonist. In a brief introduction to the novel Remarque wrote: "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war."

30 Since the First World War we have become altogether too familiar with larger horrors. The Holocaust, Hiroshima, the threat of a nuclear winter. Death by numbers, cities obliterated by decree. At peace, as it were, we live the daily dread of the missiles in their silos, ours pointed at them, theirs pointed at us. None of this, however, diminishes the power of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel that will endure because of its humanity, its honor and its refusal to lapse into sentimentality or strike a false note.

(1986)

1. The opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy.