

# CHILDREN IN WORLD WAR TWO:

## a personal choice of books

So many books have been published for children about the Second World War that it is impossible in a short article – or perhaps any article – to cover them all. I propose to look at six books covering life on the Home Front and seven more on displaced children of Europe, which of course often links directly to the Holocaust. Re-reading these books has been a fascinating exercise, not least seeing which still work after a period of time.

Several of the books mentioned are out of print at present, but now computers have made buying out of print books so much easier – simply go to Amazon and tap in the title, or Abebooks, or, of course, go to your own favourite bookshop. This is not to undermine those valiant publishers who are reissuing titles that have fallen out of print; but it is a simple and easy way to search for titles. Though not entirely replacing the pleasure of browsing in second-hand book shops.

## HOME FRONT

Four of the five most impressive books giving a view of the Home Front were written – perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not – by women and published within six years of each other (1969-1975.) Maybe the war was far enough away, 25-30 years. Maybe the writers were of the right age; all would have had some first-hand memories of the war. Nina Bawden who was born in 1925 is the oldest, with Jill Paton Walsh the youngest (1937). Three of them begin with an adult looking back at the war and maybe because those three have an adult viewpoint can be read and enjoyed equally by adults and children. Indeed it could be argued that *Going Back* (Penelope Lively) was not intended for children and this seems to have been reflected by the publisher who bought it out under the Penguin imprint as well as Puffin. The fifth, *The Machine Gunners* by Robert Westall, was published in 1975. And the author fits into the age range of the others, being born in 1929.

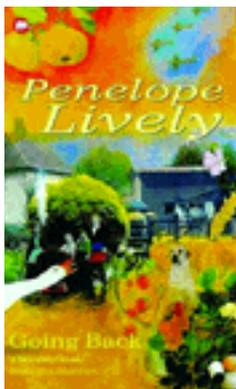
*Fireweed* (1969) by Jill Paton Walsh gives a vivid picture of life in London during the terrible blitz of 1940. Bill is a returned evacuee whose home has been bombed and he is living on his wits on the streets. Julie was on a ship that was torpedoed, rescued and returned to London, but couldn't face attempting to evacuate again to Canada on another ship. Julie and Bill team up and live in a bombed-out house. There were, apparently, many children living

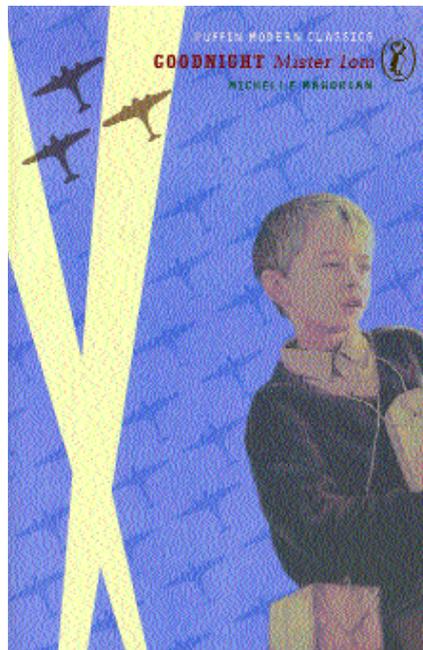
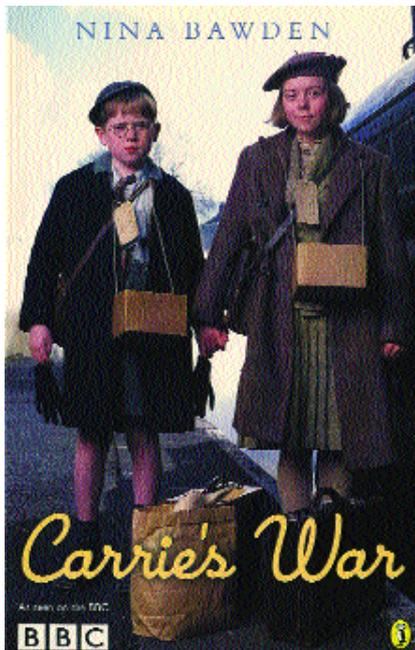
rough at that time, living on their wits. The authorities did attempt to round them up but with the pressure of the bombs and the blackouts and the general air of chaos and despair, it was not impossible for children to live outside the accepted norm. It is a story of innocent love, showing that under the worst of circumstances there can be light.

*Dawn of Fear* (1970) by Susan Cooper. All the war meant to Derek was the excitement of plane-spotting, the hope of finding a piece of shrapnel, nights spent in shelters and hero-worshipping the boys who were old enough to fight. His main passion though was in building a camp with some friends and feuding with a neighbouring gang. But then an old lady he knew is killed by a direct hit and worse is to come. This is very much a novel for children, not teenagers, unlike the others in this section. But adults will find it devastating in its portrayal of the death of innocence.

*Carrie's War* (1975) by Nina Bawden is a superb snapshot of the life of two young evacuees sent to Wales. Looking back at that time, the thought of young children being bundled out of the cities to live with strangers is quite extraordinary. The book begins with Carrie, now a young widow, returning with her children to Wales and saying, "The Government sent the children out of the cities so they shouldn't be bombed. We weren't told where we were going. Just told to turn up at our schools with a packed lunch and a change of clothes, then we went to the station with our teachers". She was eleven and her brother ten. What follows is a clear, simple and beautifully told story of the stern Mr Evans, his timid sister Lou, his estranged sister and her beguiling companion Hepzibah. It is the local war between the relations that Carrie and Nick get caught up in and Carrie has the awkward ability to feel sympathy for all. Both this and her later novel, *Keeping Henry*, are based on her experiences as an evacuee. Nina Bawden has an equally high reputation for her adult and children's novels. She has said of her dual role "The things I write about for adults, I wrote about for children, too: emotions, motives, the difficulties of being honest with oneself, the gulf between what people say and what they really mean".

*Going Back* (1975) by Penelope Lively charts how the changes in everyday life during the war affect Jane and her brother Edward. Their father is away in the Army, their mother dead, and the children are bought up by the housekeeper, Betty. Their father is a bully (as is Mr Evans in *Carrie's War*) and disrupts





their pleasant way of life on his rare visits home. His relationship with his son is particularly bad and sets up the perhaps pivotal moment in Edward's young life. The novel gives a portrait of country life changing around the children, with land girls billeted on them, a conscientious objector as a lodger, and hovering over all is the never-ending war.

*The Machine Gunners* (1975) was Robert Westall's first novel and won the Carnegie Medal. It tells of a gang of boys (and one girl) who retrieve a machine-gun from a crashed German bomber. It is a powerful story packed with character and incident. Westall was initially criticised for the violence but was inundated with stories from adults recalling their wartime childhoods. This resulted in Penguin publishing *Children of the Blitz* (1985) which includes the real-life "Machine-gunners" from Withernsea, Humberside who wondered how he had learnt their secret! As Westall says in his introduction "As the heap of letters grew, it became clear there had been more than one secret war. For the things the kids got up to, all questionable, many illegal, and some downright lethal, would have sent their parents into fits – if the parents hadn't been too busy, too worried, too tired to notice".

The last book in this section is Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom* (1981). It was, and still is, hugely popular and won The Guardian Children's Fiction Award. On re-reading however, the overt sentimentality missing in the five books above comes through loud and clear. All the countryfolk, for example, are kind and extraordinarily considerate. It tells the story of an under-sized East End boy evacuated to the countryside. All his life his mother has terrified him. But life in the country changes him for the good and restores the grumpy old man, Tom Oakley, with whom he lodges. Against a background of care he has never known, Willie blossoms and makes friends, especially with a slightly exotic fellow evacuee, Zach. It is a cracking story and a real page-turner but does not have the authentic feel of the other titles.

If you are interested in reading more about real life on the Home Front seek out the three books culled from the Mass-

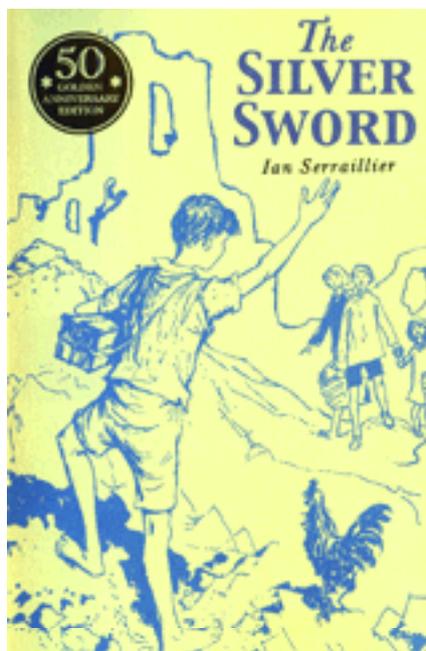
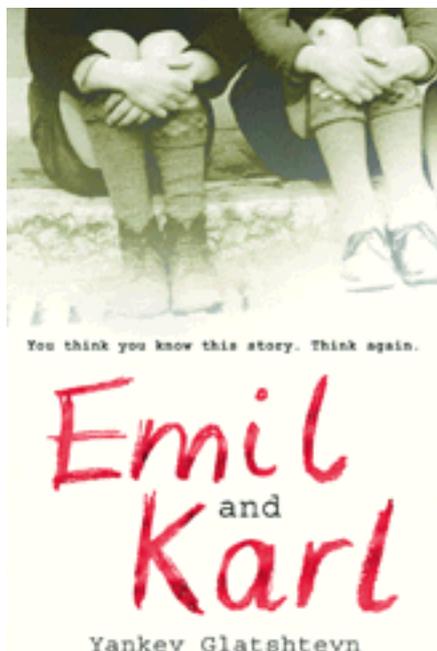
Observation diaries and compiled brilliantly by Simon Garfield (*Our Hidden Lives, We are at War and Private Battles*) or *Few Eggs and No Oranges: the Diaries of Vere Hodgson 1940-45*. They serve to underline how the novels by Bawden, Lively, Cooper, Paton Walsh and Westall have the tone exactly right. All the novels are a remarkable achievement and deserve re-reading and being kept in print.

## THE DISPLACED CHILDREN OF EUROPE

The complete and utter chaos and destruction of any form of "normal" life is what comes through loud and clear when reading the seven remarkable books set in wartime Europe. And it takes very little thought to extend the obscenity of war to what is taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Darfur, to name but a few of the world's trouble-spots. When you come to think of it, what a euphemism 'trouble-spots' is. A comfortable phrase to lessen the horrible reality.

The seven books I have selected – and they are all true books for children – despite the grimness of the subject are not at all grim reading. They are all suffused with a sense of hope, and all have an element of adventure. They may be harder for adults to read because of our knowledge of war.

*Emil and Karl* (1940) by Yankev Glatshteyn was originally published in Yiddish in New York and only translated into English by Jeffrey Shandler last year – 66 years on. Emil and Karl are friends at school until one day Emil no longer attends and Karl is not welcome at their house. Both boys are threatened by the occupation by Germany of Austria in 1938: for Emil is a Jew and Karl the son of socialists and Vienna is no place for either. Karl's mother is a widow and when she is seized by stormtroopers, he goes to Emil's family for help but finds Emil's mother in a catatonic state. The Nazis have killed her husband. Karl and Emil go on the run and are helped by extremely brave,



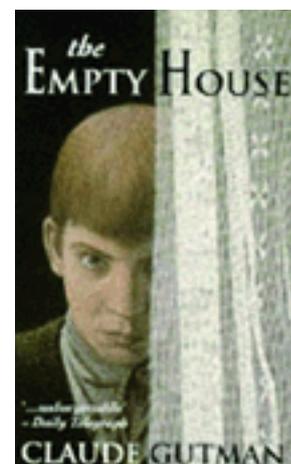
ordinary people, who risk their lives standing against the regime. This clear, simply told story shows the terrifying period leading up to the Holocaust. Yankev Glatshteyn was born in Lublin, Poland in 1896 and emigrated to New York where he joined his uncle in 1914. He became one of the major figures in the burgeoning Yiddish literary scene. On his return to Poland for a brief visit to his ill mother in 1934 he witnessed the worsening Jewish situation. His literary response was two semi-autobiographical novels and this book for children – published before America entered the war.

*The Silver Sword* by Ian Serraillier was republished in 2006 in a handsome Golden Anniversary edition by Jonathan Cape. The original illustrations by C Walter Hodges retain a splendid period feel. In the Afterword, Ian Serraillier's daughter writes of her father's notebooks crammed with cuttings from magazines, like the Quaker publication *The Friend*, telling of the ruined cities of Europe, of children who jumped the trucks of goods trains to steal food; a *Picture Post* article on the newly opened Pestalozzi Children's Village; Michael Tippett's opera *A Child of our Time*; Unesco publications. The children in the book were based on real children in Red Cross records, though in real life all from different families. The novel is about a Polish family whose father, a teacher, was arrested by the Nazis. He manages to escape and return to Warsaw to find his school and his home destroyed. Jan, a street child, agrees to help to try to find Joseph's three children (his wife was taken to Germany as forced labour); Joseph departs for Switzerland, leaving with Jan a keepsake of a tiny silver sword. The story continues two years later with Jan and Joseph's children's extraordinary pilgrimage across war-torn Europe. This is an astounding novel very much driven by Ian Serraillier's pacifist convictions, which can be read purely as an adventure, though older readers see the human suffering, the sense of communal pilgrimage and the allegorical significance of the search. This perhaps explains why it has been continually in print for 50 years.

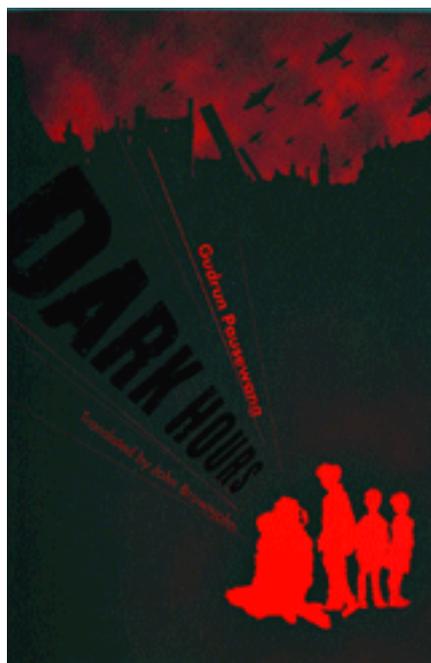
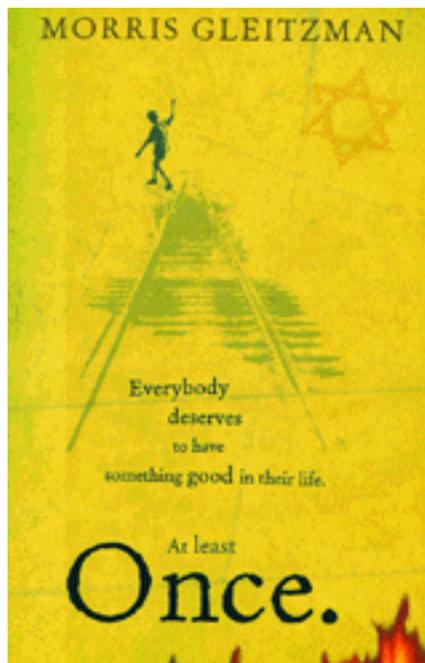
*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971) by Judith Kerr is the first in a trilogy of autobiographical novels, describing the life of Anna and her family. Her father is a famous Jewish writer whose

articles are banned when the Nazis come into power in 1933. They are forced to flee Germany to Switzerland, thence to France and finally, England. It is a powerful novel giving a sense of the physical, as well as mental, uprooting; of simple things such as leaving well-loved toys behind; leaving friends; leaving everything that had been familiar; leaving what had been a safe well ordered life for the uncertainty of a refugee. A child unfamiliar with the horrors of the Holocaust can read the book – because complex situations throughout the three books are dealt with in simple language that can be read on many different levels. For older readers familiar with the history of Germany during the 1930s, the story is rendered all the more potent because of Anna's ignorance of what was in store for the Jews.

*The Empty House* (1989) by Claude Gutman, translated from the French by Anthea Bell, is narrated in the first person by fifteen-year-old David. His father believed, until the very last dreadful moment, that nothing could happen to the Jews in Paris; France was the land of liberty and fraternity. And he was right; until Paris is occupied and all Jews forced to wear yellow stars. Before long, David watches from his neighbour's flat as his parents and his neighbours are rounded up and marched off to concentration camps. He escapes and has to endure the anguish of being on the run. His survival is due to the courage of ordinary people. His is a story repeated many times over across Europe.



*Once* (2005) by Morris Gleitzman is told by Felix, who has lived in a convent orphanage high in the mountains of Poland for nearly four years. Felix is an optimist with a strong (and somewhat bizarre) sense of humour who is convinced that his parents are alive and will come for him. However, when he sees books being burnt in the orphanage he becomes fearful for his

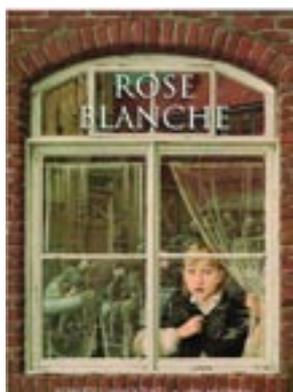


And one final book. *Rose Blanche* (1985), text by Ian McEwan based on a story by Christophe Gallaz and illustrated by Roberto Innocenti. Roberto Innocenti wanted to illustrate how a child experiences war without really understanding it. He says "I was a little child (in Italy) when the war passed in front of my door. My father did not want to answer my questions, but I knew something terrible was happening". Rose watches as the streets of her small town in Germany are filled with soldiers. One day she sees a small boy attempting to escape from a truck, only to be roughly recaptured. She follows the truck and finds a strange place where many other children stare out from behind electrified barbed war. Roberto Innocenti's magnificent paintings highlight the degradation and tragedy and is a fitting book to end this article, encapsulating as it does the whole obscenity of war.

Enid Stephenson

Jewish parents' bookshop. Escaping, he makes the long and dangerous journey to his hometown, where he finds the bookshop is no more. Ever optimistic, he befriends a young girl whose parents have been killed and together they trek to the city where they shelter with a doctor who was looking after other Jewish orphans. Morris Gleitzman says that the doctor in the novel was inspired by Janusz Korczak, a Polish Jewish doctor and children's author who devoted his life to caring for young people. Over many years he helped run an orphanage and when in 1942 the Nazis murdered the orphans, they offered Janusz Korczak his freedom but he chose to die with the children rather than abandon them.

*Dark Hours* (2006) by Gudrun Pausewang, translated from the German by John Brownjohn, tells of a German family caught up in the chaos of war. Winter 1945 and the Russian army is advancing through Lower Silesia. The family has to flee, taking the minimum of belongings. Gisel is nearly sixteen, her brothers twelve and six and eighteen months. They planned to go with their grandmother to relatives in Dresden but whilst changing trains at an over-crowded train station the air raid siren goes off. In the panic to get to a shelter they lose touch with their grandmother and most of their belongings. The bombs fall and they are trapped underground with hardly any food or water. Gudrun Pausewang writes, "Monstrous crimes were committed in my country's name. We cannot undo those crimes or turn back the clock; we can only do our utmost to ensure that no new dictator gains a hold over us, leads us into a war, and persecutes, torments and annihilates our fellow creatures, no matter what their race or religion. The history of Germany during the twentieth century should be a lesson to people of all nations."



*Carousel* would be interested to hear of your recommended books of that period. Let us know at The Saturn Centre, 54-76 Bissell St, Birmingham B5 7HX or email us [carousel.guide@virgin.net](mailto:carousel.guide@virgin.net) We could include your recommendations on our website - probably on our blog news section - [www.carouselguide.co.uk](http://www.carouselguide.co.uk)

- Fireweed* Jill Paton Walsh (out of print)
- Dawn of Fear* Susan Cooper (out of print)
- Carrie's War* Nina Bowden  
Puffin Modern Classics £4.99 ISBN: 0141317094
- Going Back* Penelope Lively (out of print)
- The Machine Gunners* Robert Westall  
Macmillan Children's Books £4.99 ISBN: 0330397850
- Goodnight Mister Tom* Michelle Magorian  
Puffin Modern Classics £6.99 ISBN: 0140372334
- Emil and Karl* Yankev Glatshteyn  
Scholastic Children's Books £5.99 ISBN: 0439943932
- The Silver Sword* Ian Serraillier  
Jonathan Cape £9.99 ISBN: 0224070770
- When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* Judith Kerr  
HarperCollins £5.99 ISBN: 000713763X
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- Once* Morris Gleitzman  
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- Dark Hours* Gudrun Pausewang  
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- Rose Blanche* Robert Innocenti  
Red Fox £5.99 ISBN: 0099439506
- Few Eggs and No Oranges: The Diaries of Vere Hodgson 1940-1945*  
Persephone Books £10.00 ISBN: 0953478084