



The Great War

Edited by Walker Illustrated by Jim Kay
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This presents stories from well-known children's authors that were stimulated by artefacts from the Imperial War Museums.

Below, Adèle Geras talks about her contribution.

First World War anthologies have sprung out of an understandable desire to bring the stories from 1914 -18 to the children of today.

The Great War is a conflict that has a special place in people's imagination. They know about it from the arts: the poets, the novelists, the painters and the film makers, and of course, Blackadder. Their understanding is partial. Not many could tell you why the war began, and there is a great deal of argument about whether it was a just war. But whatever your views, it's a war with no image problem whatsoever. Just say the words and your head is filled with pictures of trenches and mud and exploding bodies caught on barbed wire.

When Walker Books invited me to contribute to their collection, I was very honoured to be asked to join ten wonderful writers and a brilliant illustrator. The approach that Walker was taking was a little different, and most intriguing.

My heart sank slightly at first. Everything seemed very military. Well, that's to be expected in a book about a war, but I didn't want to write about the fighting. Not in any way. I am always interested in what happens to those who are waiting, hoping, grieving, anxious and terrified. Those who are left behind: the women and children.

I chose the butter dish as soon as I saw it. I wanted to write a very simple domestic story about the women and girls for whom the war, as well as being a cataclysm, was a kind of liberation. They moved into the places left empty by the men. They were not going to relinquish this freedom once the war was over. This was the time of the Suffragettes, and after the Armistice, the way was open to things like Votes for Women.

The Great War was about suffering and dirt and gallantry and comradeship; about fear and death and blood. But it was also about opportunity and change of a better kind. I hope readers enjoy *Maud's Story* and the other contributions to this anthology.



Another contributor is Marcus Sedgwick.

In 2005 I published a novel set during the First World War; *The Foreshadowing*. Set in 1916, the denouement of the novel takes place during an engagement of the Battle of the Somme. This required me to do a lot of research, but about halfway through I had a sudden crisis. I don't know exactly what brought it on, but I know when and where it happened. I was staying the night in a converted monastery in a small town in Picardy, having gone to scout the locations in the novel, when I had a nightmare. In the dream, the souls of the dead from the war rose up and were angry with me: how dare you turn our suffering into your pale fictions?! We were those who died; you will now profit from it! They railed at me and shouted curses; it was a truly disturbing dream.

Awake, the next day, I realised what it meant – I'd been feeling uneasy for some time about what is, after all, the essential act of a writer: to take truths, and make lies of them. Paradoxically, we use those lies to tell truths, truths about life, but in the case of writing about the war, I felt anxious over the way, as a writer of war fiction, I had immersed myself in an ocean of awful things. As you read about war, it's so easy to get swept along in the pornography of horror: as you learn about this horrendous battle, or some specific death, as you shudder from the comfort of your armchair about gas attacks, and lice, and amputations, and drowning in mud, it's easy to become addicted to finding out just one more awful, awful thing.

I finished that book, however. It was too late to do otherwise, and I just tried my best not to glorify any aspect of war, at all, in any way. I also swore that I would not write on war again. The horror of war can give a powerful thrust to any story but this is a big subject and I have limited space here; let me just acknowledge that it is a complicated issue, but one that I feel strongly and very uneasy about.

I turned down three other requests to write a story about the First World War. I finally agreed to Walker's invitation, thinking it sounded a bit different but even then, I was on the verge of picking up the phone to pull out.

The essence of the problem is this: war is senseless. Episodes of conflict do not have neat beginnings, trajectories, and endings. In short, they are not stories. But to make them work as a story you have to give them all those things. François Truffaut, the great French director, famously said, 'You can't make an anti-war film.' What he meant is that any attempt to 'storify' a war turns it into something that it isn't: neat, satisfying, conclusive, even if it's saturated in horror and anti-war rhetoric. There are perhaps a couple of exceptions: Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* is almost without plot. It doesn't follow a narrative arc; it does as close a job as possible to catching the senselessness of war.

Deciding I had left it too late to let Walker down, the challenge remained of how to write a war story when war is not a story. My solution was to find a way to talk about all these things but still, I hope, have a story that captured the reader.

It's very important, when discussing such potent subjects, that we don't get dragged into simplistic and divisive arguments – these are complex issues and complex arguments must be given space. It's my fear that certain quarters of the media and of government are already using the centenary with relish to foist jingoistic emotions onto us. Feelings that should have died a hundred years ago as the war that was supposed to be over by Christmas got stuck in the mud of France and Belgium. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we shouldn't remember. We absolutely must remember. But how we remember is vital, and that's why I chose the title of my story for this anthology: *Don't Call It Glory*.