



# La belleza y el dolor de la batalla

*Peter Englund*

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"Es este un libro sobre la Primera Guerra Mundial. No es, sin embargo, un libro sobre qué fue esa guerra –es decir, sobre sus causas, su progreso, su final y sus consecuencias-; sino un libro sobre cómo fue. Lo que el lector encontrará aquí no son tanto factores como personas, no tanto procesos como impresiones, vivencias y estados de ánimo. Lo que he intentado reconstruir, más que el curso de unos acontecimientos, es un mundo emocional.

El lector seguirá de cerca a veinte individuos, personajes reales todos, por supuesto (no hay en este libro nada ficticio, su contenido se basa en los documentos de diversa índole que dichas personas dejaron), todos ellos rescatados del anonimato o del olvido, todos situados en las capas más bajas de la jerarquía.

Mayoritariamente se trata de gente muy joven, hombres y mujeres de apenas veinte años. De esta veintena de personajes dos caerán en combate, dos serán tomados prisioneros, dos se convertirán en héroes homenajeados, dos acabarán siendo, físicamente, unas piltrafas. Varios de ellos reciben la guerra con los brazos abiertos pero aprenden a aborrecerla; algunos la aborrecen desde el primer día; otro la ama de principio a fin. Uno de ellos perderá literalmente la razón y dará con sus huesos en un hospital psiquiátrico, otro no llegará a oír ni un solo disparo. Y así sucesivamente. Pese a todas las diferencias en cuanto a destino, roles, sexo y nacionalidad les une el hecho de que a cada uno de ellos la guerra les robó algo: la juventud, las ilusiones, la esperanza, la humanidad – la vida.

La mayor parte de estas veinte personas vivirán experiencias dramáticas y atroces; sin embargo, lo que se pretende enfocar es el lado cotidiano de la guerra. En cierto modo este texto es un pedazo de anti historia, lo que he querido ha sido reencauzar a sus elementos más atómicos e ínfimos, es decir, al individuo y sus vivencias, un acontecimiento que, se mire por donde se mire, hizo época."

Peter Englund

## La belleza y el dolor de la batalla Details

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## Lindsey says

After "Birdsong" I wanted to read more about World War I, but whereas that novel had been solely about the western front, this history described every aspect of the war. I especially enjoyed the sections on East Africa and Mesopotamia, as I had very little prior knowledge about the fighting there.

The book also uses an unusual and highly effective format; basically, the author follows twenty individuals using their diaries, letters, and other sources, and as the years march from 1914-18, we read small vignettes of what each of them is experiencing in their daily life. What makes this book so unique is that the cast of characters includes both men and women ranging in age from about 12-55, who come from all over: Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Russia, Venezuela, Australia, the U.S., Italy, and more. Some of these people are civilians, some are soldiers, and some are medics, but they are all changed irrevocably by the war.

I'll admit I expected it to be a bit of a slog, but it moved surprisingly quickly, due in part to Englund's decision to write most of the text himself and only use direct quotes where they made a moment more vivid. This editing kept the structure flowing smoothly, rather than getting hung up on minor details in the primary documents, like some other historical works I've read.

A fascinating book overall and highly recommended!

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## Adam says

Beauty and the Sorrow is appropriate in both its slightly pretentious title and its subtitle as an "intimate history" of the first world war. Pretentious may be the wrong word as this book is very much filled with beauty and with much, much sorrow. Tracing about twenty lives through the events of those years and revealing history only as it affect each of them (though Englund does provide witty and informed footnotes to hint at wider events.), this is an ideal fusing of historical narrative and novelistic technique. The non-fiction novel that was so sought in the sixties realized. Lightness of style and clearheaded prose (in translation) makes this addictively readable. Most discussion and portrayal of this war is dominated by the grim imagery of the western front, while not ignored in the book, a wider canvas is employed giving all the forgotten theaters their due, such as the destruction of Serbia, genocide of the Armenians, the terror of the Zeppelin bombing raids, the eastern front, the horrific siege of Kut, bloody battle for Gaza, and the absurd guerilla campaign in Africa. The cast of "characters" is varied and provides piece by piece a very epic and thorough history without losing it's, for lack of a better word, intimacy. Whatever name you lay on this war, for all its cruelty and pointlessness, birthed the twentieth century and thus the world we inherited. Coming up on the hundredth year anniversary of its start I'm sure it will be much discussed, and this book should make the top shelf of books to turn to. A marvelous piece of history and literature.

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## Harry Maier says

Englund treats us to a masterful perspectival account of WW I. The narrative takes the form of a chronologically arranged set of diary entries from 20 different people who experienced the war, whether as soldiers, politicians, mothers, children, nurses etc. Englund offers an account that is thus non-reductive and that avoids clichés and moralizing. There is a kind of sleight of hand in the way Englund summarizes diary entries on the way toward quoting parts of them. This has a tendency to masquerade Englund's narration since selection, as is well known in historiography, is always value-laden. History is as much the history we tell as what happened and some would argue history is ever only the history we chose. Still, Englund honours an irreducible event by asking us to pause and see events unfold through the eyes of those the diaries represent.

This is not a patriot's history. Nor is it an objector's one. It is an account that asks us to take time to ponder a conflict whose aftershocks we still experience in our contemporary global order. It asks us to look down the well of history and see there an entire generation of 20-30 year olds wiped out in four years, a conflict so gruesome and so massive that its conclusion in 1918, as the term "armistice" implies, did not spell the end of the global conflict, only a hiatus while everyone waited for more people to be born, to grow up, and to fight.

Anyone who has a romantic view of war should read this book: what would it mean to drown in mud, to use cadavers or bits of them as barricades to hide behind to avoid being gunned down by machine guns, to starve to death at home to support a war no one believed in any more, to fall prey to insane generals and maniacal rulers? Englund does not answer these questions for us, he shows rather than tells, and this is what makes this such a masterful account. He does not wrap himself in the flag, nor does he put daisies in the barrels of guns. He honours history by asking us to take possession of it in these accounts of people whose lives were made and unmade in a terrible conflict. This is a great book.

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## Jaylia3 says

Drawn from personal journals and letters, *The Beauty and The Sorrow* interweaves poignant and harrowing stories of twenty ordinary people with widely varying backgrounds, nationalities and occupations, who are all caught up in the turmoil of World War I. The individuals include an English nurse in Russia, a 12-year-old German girl, an Australian army engineer, a Venezuelan cavalryman in the Ottoman army, and an American opera singer married to a Polish aristocrat. The number of entries for each person varies, and their stories are intermingled, presented in the order that they happened, but I found I enjoyed the book more when I untangled some of the accounts using the index so I could follow the people I was most interested in straight through from start to finish.

Every chapter covers one year of the war, and begins with a chronological list of that year's battles and invasions. Some of the source materials the author draws on are available in their entirety from Amazon or through Google Books, and the ones I've perused so far are well worth looking up if you want more information. I've especially enjoyed the book *When the Prussians Came to Poland*, written by Laura Turczynowicz, the American opera singer who was living in Poland with her family and leading a Downton Abbey-like life of luxury when the war began. As the Downton Abbey characters did, Laura abandoned some of her aristocratic lifestyle to tend to gravely wounded soldiers, but unlike her fictional British counterparts Laura's grand family home had to be abruptly abandoned when it became the front line of battle, and she and her children escaped with little more than their lives.

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## **Donna says**

I'm glad I read this after reading multiple non-fiction books on WWI - that allowed me to enjoy the stories having a lot of context.

I gave it 3 stars because while I enjoyed the book, it was rather easy for me to put it down. The nature of the method used - short sections - 2-3 pages - alternating between about 20 people, makes the reading a bit choppy.

The stories are definitely on the sorrowful side. But I do agree with what has been written about this book - this is the "feeling" of the war, and in that, it's fairly unique.

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## **Chris says**

Disclaimer: I won this book in a giveaway sponsored by Regal Literary.

Englund's book isn't a history of the First World War, at least not a normal history. Following the experiences of twenty nobodies, *The Beauty and the Sorrow* showcases the experience of people during the war, from the battlefields to the nursing stations to the home front. His cast is diverse, Germans, Brits, Americans, nurses, one house wife, and a schoolgirl. The book is organized by year and jumps around. The people come and go and not everyone makes it.

The book is more about personal experience than the general battle, though Englund does include a timeline for each year. So the reader discovers what the nurses went through or hears about cavalry man who had to see to the death of his horse and then eat the gelding. If works such as Tuchman's give you a global scope, this is intimate, and far more important because of that.

In the 100 years since the War, it is important that we remember it simply because of how it changed everything. IN the US, we don't really think about it, and while the National Mall in DC does boast a WW I memorial, it is for those from the area, not a National memorial like for the other wars. This book deals with the war in a far more intimate way, and does not romanticize it in a way that certain televised dramas do.

Highly recommended for history bluffs. Highly recommended for everyone.

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## **Steve Walker says**

Peter Englund tells the story of the First World War through the eyes, letters, and diaries of twenty individuals. They cover a range of nationalities and social classes. All lives are changed, and sadly, some are lost. The result is a powerful book about what war does to the people who participate in it. The war took a profound toll on old world Europe. The seeds of the world we know today were sown in the conflict that started in June 1914 and really did not end until September 1945. During the coming centennial the book

market, as well as the idiot box, will be flooded. Turn off the idiot box, pick this book, and say five other titles on the topic, and just read! You will have a much better understanding.

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## **Matt says**

For obvious reasons, writers and historians usually approach history from the top down. The focus is on the kings and emperors and presidents and field marshals and generals who make the big decisions that set the dominoes falling. To be sure, any writer worth his salt will throw in a few viewpoints from the common man, for a bit of color; mainly, though, history is told through the eyes of the fellows atop the organizational flowchart.

This is all well and good if your sole object in reading a history book is to learn, in broad strokes, what happened. I've always been of a mind, though, that history is more than a timeline, or a recounting, or a description of abstract political/cultural/socioeconomic movements. It is the story of normal people in extraordinary times.

The central conceit of Peter Englund's *The Beauty and the Sorrow* is to upend the usual construct and give us a history as told from the ground floor. As the subtitle states, this is an "intimate history" of World War I.

To that end, he has chosen to follow the lives of twenty men and women throughout the cataclysm of the Great War. With a couple exceptions – the glaring one being famed Belgium fighter ace Willy Coppens – these individuals come to us unknown. They are from thirteen different countries. They are soldiers, sailors, nurses, politicians, and civilians fleeing an oncoming army. Some of them see battle; others never fire a shot; still others are far away from the front lines.

Englund divides his book into five chapters – one chapter for each year of the war, from 1914-1918 – as well as a concluding chapter that (sort of) attempts to tie up loose ends. At the start of each chapter is a broad chronology of major events taking place that year. The chapters themselves are constructed much like a diary. There will be a heading with the date, and then a short introduction telling you which character is involved, where that person is, and what he/she is doing.

Englund does his best to minimize his own presence. He writes in the present tense (again, mimicking a diary or journal) and maintains the oft-constricted viewpoint of his chosen character, referring geopolitical contexts and broader explanations to footnotes.

The prose is oddly lifeless. At first, I attributed this to the translation from Swedish to English. Upon further reflection, though, I think it was intentional. When Englund directly quotes his characters, their words often leap off the page with piercing details, exceptional insights, and flashes of real elegance. In keeping his own writing minimalist and uninflected, I think Englund was just staying out of the way. For instance, at the beginning of 1918, we meet up with Pal Kelemen, a twenty year-old Austro-Hungarian cavalryman. He watches an Italian bomber crash:

By the time I get there the body of the Italian flying captain, killed by a machine gun bullet, is laid out on the turf beside the plane...The Italian officer is clad in a full leather suit, his faultless elegance disturbed only by the angle at which his cap is crushed over his clean-shaven face. A fine-worked silver wrist-watch ticks on unshaken and the whole body stretched out at ease seems to be only sleeping.

We search his pockets; his portfolio is handed to me. Besides letters, banknotes, slips of paper, there is a double-folded card in a hard black binding: “Season tickets to the circus, Verona.”

Here on this barren, shell-plowed field the circus is just a printed name on a piece of cardboard. The glittering lamps at the base of the box rows, the grubbed-up carpet of the sawdust, the snapping whip of the ringmaster, the bareback rider with her tulle skirt and flashing jewels, and all the other endless delights of youth have been left behind forever by one young life...

I should like to slide the card back under the bloodstained shirt so that, as in pagan times when everything that served the hero followed him into the tomb, this property of his also should disappear from the face of the earth and there should be at least one place left empty in his memory, in the circus in Verona.

When you have diarists and memoirists of such talent, it is perhaps wise to let them take center stage.

Despite the obvious literary talents of the people Englund chose to follow, I found the book uneven. Certain of the characters make a lasting impression; just as many, however, flit in and out of the narrative, leaving just the faintest mark. And frankly, some of the stories told in this book are barely worth the mention. Certainly, they illustrate a point – that a soldier’s life is just as much boredom as terror and excitement – but that doesn’t necessarily make for thrilling reading.

(Despite following a number of soldiers, *The Beauty and the Sorrow* is an unusual World War I book in that battles are the last thing on its mind. They are few and far between and described only fleetingly by the participants. This is only an observation, not a critique. Anyone looking for first-person accounts of trench warfare can easily pick up *Storm of Steel*).

When I finished *The Beauty and the Sorrow*, my overall impression was one of respect, rather than love. I really liked the idea of a pointillist view of World War I. History as seen through a pinhole. No generals. No politicians. No talk of strategy. Rather, a book that focused on the details: the fear and sadness of fleeing your home; the youthful pride of putting on a uniform and marching off to war; the mundane details about what people ate for dinner in 1916.

However much I liked the concept, I was not won over by the execution. In distributing the stories across twenty people and thirteen nationalities Englund provided breadth, but sacrificed depth and detail (and also left me trying to remember who was who). Moreover, Englund’s understated style of writing, while a humble choice, also kept me at arm’s length. As I noted before, he billed this book as an “intimate history,” but his style belies that assertion. This was a book that I wanted to cuddle with, but could not. I was kept at bay by the dry, often inert presentation.

Lately, I’ve been on a real World War I kick. After consuming a couple general histories, and then digging into a detailed study of the Battle of the Marne (a book meant to refute arguments I didn’t know existed!), I found *The Beauty and the Sorrow* to be a bracing tonic. It cleared my head of hopelessly complicated maps and strategy and gave me a nice dose of humanity. I’m glad it was written; I’m glad I read it. It just fell short of the emotional jolt I initially expected.

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## João Carlos says

**Buckingham Palace, Londres** festejos do fim da Primeira Grande Guerra

“**A Beleza e a Dor da Guerra – História Íntima da Primeira Guerra Mundial**” é um livro do historiador sueco **Peter Englund** (n. 1957), que desde 2008, é o Secretário Permanente da Academia Sueca, que atribui o Prémio Nobel da Literatura.

*“Este é um livro sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial. Não é porém, um livro sobre o **que foi** essa guerra – as suas causas, a sua evolução, a sua conclusão e as suas consequências. É antes um livro **como foi** a guerra.”* é com esta frase que **Peter Englund** nos relata que o mais importante são as pessoas, neste caso específico, dezanove indivíduos, homens e mulheres, de várias nacionalidades, com idades que variam entre os 12 anos, de uma menina alemã - Elfriede Kuhr, a mais nova, até aos 45 anos, de um funcionário público francês e de um médico americano, num relato autobiográfico, sobre os sentimentos de pessoas com existência real, sobre as vivências e as atmosferas, tanto da frente ocidental como da frente oriental, dos Alpes, dos Balcãs, da África Oriental e da Mesopotâmia.

### Elfriede Kuhr

Homens e mulheres que *“Apesar dos seus diferentes destinos, papéis, sexo e nacionalidade, todos têm em comum o facto de a guerra lhes ter roubado alguma coisa: a juventude, as ilusões, a esperança, o sentimento de fraternidade – a vida.”*

A narrativa de “**A Beleza e a Dor da Guerra – História Íntima da Primeira Guerra Mundial**” é construída cronologicamente, sobre o dia-a-dia da guerra, em que invariavelmente, acontecimentos dramáticos ou actos terríveis, presenciados e vividos pelas dezanove personagens, que vão anotando cada um no seu diário, pequenos fragmentos que **Peter Englund** utiliza e que enriquecem os relatos individuais de cada um, revelando uma combinação, quase sempre inexplicável, de ignorância e negação, numa das maiores catástrofes do século XX.

**Peter Englund** escreve um livro intenso e dramático, que exige uma atenção extrema e muitas anotações, que fala também sobre a honra e a bravura, sobre a imprevisibilidade dos comportamentos e sobre o heroísmo, numa escrita perfeita – mas que me suscitou algumas dúvidas sobre o “método” de leitura a utilizar – seguir a ordem cronológica (a do livro) ou acompanhar cada um dos dezanove indivíduos isoladamente, desde 1914 até 1918.

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## Occhionelcielo says

Mi ci sono imbattuto per caso, una domenica, leggendone l'entusiastica recensione su "Il Sole 24 Ore". Ho subito pensato: "E' mio"; un po' perché la Grande Guerra è un evento rimasto un po' in ombra nell'interesse generale, benché fondamentale per capire il nostro tempo; soprattutto, per la percezione di una qualche analogia con la mia parabola personale-professionale-generazionale, partita con grandi aspettative e oggi, impantanata in una continua trincea fatta di pericoli senza avventura e senza gloria, dove ogni giorno cresce il disgusto verso istituzioni, gerarchie e retoriche del potere. Peralto, a quanto si intuisce dalla prefazione, si tratta delle stesse motivazioni che hanno spinto l'autore a scrivere.

Che dire della lettura? Oltre ogni aspettativa, appassionante, incalzante, coinvolgente, non vedi l'ora di tornare a casa per ritrovare i tuoi 17 amici al fronte, ne segui le alterne vicende, la lenta discesa da quella che in seguito sarà chiamata belle époque sino all'abbruttimento totale.

Ti rendi conto che le nostre conquiste, il nostro benessere, le nostre certezze non sono acquisite per sempre. Il baratro è in agguato, nelle forme e nei modi che non ti aspetti, siano essi una guerra, un default economico-finanziario, una catastrofe ecologica.

I protagonisti non sono selvaggi allo stato brado, sono persone come noi che leggono, scrivono, provano i nostri stessi sentimenti, hanno sostanzialmente le nostre coordinate culturali, in alcuni casi sono menti brillanti. Semplicemente, sono nati negli anni sbagliati: prima di noi ma mica poi tanto.

Alla fine ti consola sapere che qualcuno sopravvisse alla guerra ed alla terribile influenza spagnola, qualcuno tornò alla vita di prima e qualche simpatico vecchietto hai pure fatto in tempo a conoscerlo quando da bambino andavi alle parate del 4 novembre e li vedevi nelle loro divise.

Ripensi a loro, alla trincea, quella vera.

Ti sei quasi dimenticato delle tue vicende personali.

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## **Karyl says**

One hundred years ago (and some change), the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by a Yugoslav nationalist, and it was this seemingly small event that touched off one of the bloodiest conflicts in modern history, that of World War I.

I have the sense that a lot of people have largely forgotten World War I. We still have veterans alive that fought in World War II, and there was a clear evil we were fighting in that war. But all of the people who fought in the First World War and most of the people who had to endure a war-torn Europe are dead now, and we tend to forget that it was Germany's loss in the WWI that set Adolf Hitler on his mad rise to power which ultimately turned into WWII.

Peter Englund has chosen to show us not the tactics or battle formations or even the lives of the most important characters of WWI, but instead the most ordinary of people. We see the war through the eyes of the soldiers, the sailors, the nurses, people drawn from all over the world to fight for their colonial rulers, or people who simply felt they needed to be part of this big adventure. We see the tedium of life in the trenches, of the horror of seeing men obliterated next to you, of dealing with the stench of rotting bodies when you're trying to eat a meal to keep your strength up. We see the hardships of the people left behind, the refusal of the governments to allow the media to publish the reality of losses, the lack of food and milk and diapers and coffee for the average person. We also see the class system that still existed in some of the armies, in which the common soldiers have barely enough to eat but the officers are still eating four-course dinners.

While it is fascinating to see how the long years of war affecting the common man, this book can be frustrating and long at times. It's difficult to keep all twenty characters straight, and when Englund does devolve into strategy and tactics of the war, it was difficult for those details to sink into my brain. I do appreciate that Englund composed it almost like a communal diary, going chronologically, but at the same time, I have to wonder if it would have been more effective to concentrate on one person at a time.

Highly recommend this book to people who enjoy history, and especially the history of the ordinary person. But just keep in mind it is really long and can be dry at times.

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## **Xan says**

A través de los recuerdos personales de varios protagonistas de la contienda (unos en el frente, otros en casa) el narrador construye una visión del avance de la guerra en la que el entusiasmo patriota va dejando paso al miedo y al hastío. Interesante porque la narración en primera persona se basa en los diarios y cartas de los protagonistas, que cubren un amplio espectro de la población que sufrió la guerra, de manera que son los detalles cotidianos que escapan a los grandes libros de historia los que ganan el interés del lector.

No sirve como guía de la guerra, son demasiados frentes y escenarios para un lector que no conozca la cronología de la contienda, pero sirve para dar color a quién ya tenga una idea del desarrollo básico de las campañas.

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## **Hadrian says**

Out of the many millions of people who have served, in some sense, during the First World War, the last one passed away today (7 Feb 2012) - a little old lady, aged 110, who served as a waitress to the British Royal Air Force. Now the last fragments of war shall fade from memory, and into history.

And this emphasizes the importance of this new narrative history. It follows the lives of some 20 individuals, each offering various perspectives and detailing new incidents about the war - a German schoolgirl in one chapter, a Venezuelan man-at-arms for the Ottoman Empire, a French civil servant, a Russian engineer, and so forth. The 'big names' of history get a passing mention at best. Paul von Hindenburg is met by a civilian, who finds him to be a bit stuffy and proud of himself. Instead, you get a long slow look of life at the bottom. One gets a sense of the unending tedium of horror, the easiness with which life is destroyed, and rots away.

In a way, I'm morbidly glad that this collection of stories is selling well, and is critically acclaimed. We all need a reminder about this 'war to end all wars', and how wars are their own cause and destruction, and why none should ever wish for them.

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## **Alexandra says**

It was great, if you love history or wars (which I do!). It had a lot of detail. I mean, right down to the way things sounded when they exploded or whizzed past your head. Or the way decaying bodies smelled. The details were sometimes hard to read (I mean, it's war. Things are horrible). But It followed the lives of several people throughout the war. It used their diaries and letters to loved ones to follow their lives during the war. Some were part of the army for various nations, some were nurses, doctors, pilots. Some were average people. Some died or went crazy. Others fell in love and got engaged. I loved it. I wish it had been assigned in school. Reading what each person was thinking gives different perspectives on the war. The youngest person was 12, and the oldest was 49, so it really covered a lot of emotions and thoughts. If anyone enjoys history, I would highly suggest this book.

My biggest complaint is that it lists every person on one page in the beginning of the book: their age, what they do and where they do it. Now, it gets confusing when reading the book because the book is arranged in chronological order, so it shows every diary or letter from that day for every person in the book (if they

wrote that day). It gets confusing because it only gives their name, and remembering each person can be quite challenging. I had to bookmark the page in the beginning of the book so I could go back each time someone wrote so I could remember where they are from and what they do. Too many footnotes too.

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## **Cathy says**

I can't explain the rave reviews on this one. The reporting is definitely there. The author has found 20 ordinary, but interesting, people engaged at some level in World War I. They come from all sides of the conflict (no Turks -- but he's got a S. American who fought for the Ottoman Empire). It looks like quite a bit of the material comes from memoirs that would have been lost in some dusty old library (if they ever made it to one to begin with). Unfortunately, the writer just forgot to. . . write. The book takes the reader through the war years with short journal entry style chapters. Cutting to the chase is definitely not Mr. Englund's style. We're subjected to 500 pages of paragraphs that start with: "Early autumn, clear skies", "A light mist. Hazy sunshine." or "Nothing of any importance has occurred." Particularly aggravating is that some of the best material is in the footnotes -- long, footnotes that sometimes take up half the page in itty, bitty type. The author also makes the mistake of quoting some of the memoir writers at length. This is when you realize that while these people led interesting lives during the war, their turgid prose was probably one reason we haven't heard of them today. We don't have any Primo Levi's in the bunch.

I stuck it out because I was curious about the people but I wish the author had spent more time editing and crafting the narrative.

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