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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Veterans Day: Five Books to Read

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- MATTERHORN BY KARL MARLANTES** (\$15.95 PAPERBACK; GROVE PRESS)
- WHAT IT IS LIKE TO GO TO WAR BY KARL MARLANTES** (\$25; ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS)
- WILLIE & JOE: THE WW II YEARS BY BILL MAULDIN** (\$39.99 PAPERBACK; FANTAGRAPHICS)
- WILLIE & JOE BACK HOME BY BILL MAULDIN** (\$29.99; FANTAGRAPHICS)

Today is Veterans Day, so I've been leading up to it by reading some of the current and classic works about war and soldiers. You can't go wrong with any of them or a hundred other books one might name. These are just the few that happened to snag my attention in the last few weeks.

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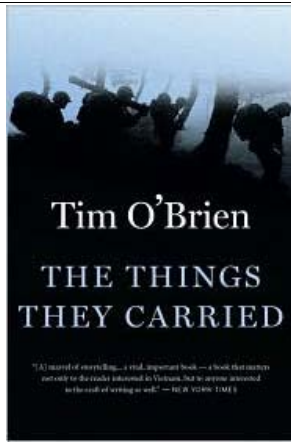


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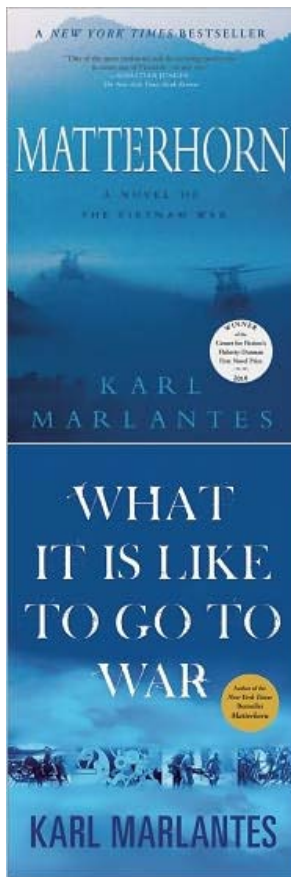


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You can't go wrong with *The Things They Carried*, acclaimed as a modern masterpiece the day it was released in 1990 and, if anything, its reputation has only grown. The Tim O'Brien collection of short stories is a favorite "handseller" of independent bookstores. That is, it's one of those books they will always recommend to lovers of good fiction looking for a discovery. It's based on O'Brien's experience in the Vietnam War.



That's also the source for the work of Karl Marlantes, who quietly set up shop on the bestseller list with the novel *Matterhorn* last year. Now he's returned with *What It Is Like To Go To War*, a nonfiction work about his experience in war and how ill-prepared most 19-year-old kids are to endure it. It's already appearing on lists of the best books of the year and is a fascinating companion piece to *Matterhorn*.

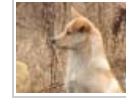
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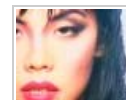


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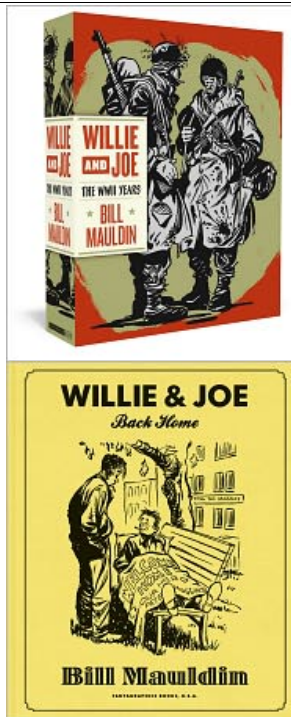
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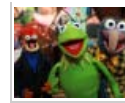
But today I want to talk art inspired by another war: the cartoons of Bill Mauldin. At one point, this man who made the cover of *Time* magazine twice was perhaps the most famous average soldier in the world (as compared to generals like Patton and Eisenhower). Mauldin's Willie & Joe were grunts, regular foot soldiers who sat in the mud, complained about the food and otherwise captured the cynical, direct, let's get this job done right so we don't have to do it again attitude that soldiers embodied during WW II.

First and foremost, Willie & Joe are funny. Fantagraphics has put the WW II years out in paperback, but I've got the also available hardcover, a great looking slipcase in army green with two fat volumes of his captivating artwork. Never having served (or even fired a gun), it's an absorbing glimpse into the day-to-day life of soldiers while it was happening and the end not known. It's easy to identify with: employees in any capacity gripe about their bosses. But the more specific Mauldin is, the more biting and fascinating his work is. The strip was a remarkable outlet for frustrations and annoyance and genuine anger: it didn't just poke fun at the higher-ups; it revealed problems and gripes that needed to be addressed. Seeing Willie & Joe endure the same craziness was surely comforting. But this wasn't just an easy way to redirect attention from the actual problems they faced. And while the war was on, people at home took just as much comfort in their sad sack endurance. It was wildly popular among civilians as well as soldiers; being able to joke about the hardships meant they'd be okay in the end, right?

Finally, it's *Willie & Joe: Back Home* that moved me the most. The cover shows a soldier without a place to stay, sleeping on a park bench and covered in a poster saying "Welcome Home" to the soldiers. Too often, soldiers are praised and appreciated in the heat of battle but treated like an annoyance once the fighting has stopped. Bill Mauldin wasn't even sure anyone would want to hear about Willie & Joe once World War II had been won and, indeed, the strip faded in popularity, especially as Mauldin tackled social issues and kept a spotlight on the poor treatment of soldiers, who deserved better.

Clearly, veterans don't get two votes at the ballot box despite their service and the risking of life and limb when called to duty. But sometimes even that one vote, that one voice is begrudged, whether it's the veteran in Oakland sent to the hospital by cops during an apparently peaceful protest in the Occupy movement or a soldier getting booed during a Presidential debate because he identified himself as gay and said he wanted to serve his country without having to lie.

it's all happened before. Todd DePastino's excellent essay details Mauldin's career, his artistic achievements and the battles he fought within himself and with his syndicators over this series. Mauldin is always funny, but those with a rosy image of WW II will be surprised by the complex world shown here: sometimes veterans are chagrined to discover that jobs they were assured would be waiting for them have disappeared while other times they're disconcerted to see the person who is going to be fired to make way for them. Again and again, veterans are forgotten, forced to travel home by riding the rails or wondering where the crowds are that greeted vets after the victory in Europe but have moved on by the time the Pacific boys head home.



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How to Talk to Little Girls

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The Pioneering Genius Of Anne McCaffrey

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This was bad enough as far as some newspapers were concerned, but Mauldin really lost them when he continually focused on social issues. Mauldin skewered the prejudice that treated a returning vet as a Jap because of how he looked, never mind where he was born or where he fought. He mocked the VFW, at the time held hostage according to Mauldin by the soldiers of a different era who blocked moves to give WW II vets real say in the organization and then publicly supported hateful agendas like segregation that had nothing to do with the group as such. Mauldin could tease young college students fired up by social consciousness but turn around and be blistering over the vicious prejudice and hatred of lynching.

People turned away. Where were the easy laughs of Willie & Joe? Papers dropped him, even as Mauldin found the right voice to balance his heart with his humor. By December 31, 1946 it was all over. Willie & Joe were home but forgotten. Mauldin had just won the Pulitzer Prize one year earlier but no one wanted to hear him now. In the 1950s he would focus on editorial cartooning with great success. And Willie & Joe were still beloved by the greatest generation, given tribute by Charles Schulz in his Peanuts strip on Veterans Day in 1998. Willie & Joe and Mauldin made it onto a stamp in 2010, seven years after he died. And now Fantagraphics has captured Mauldin's most enduring characters in two releases that do him justice.

If Veterans Day proves the spur to dive into any of these books (or the many others I might have mentioned), then that's just one more reason to say thanks to the people who have served in the past and do so today.

BOOKS I'VE READ -- 2011

Unbroken by Laura Hillenbrand *** 1/2
The Songlines by Bruce Chatwin ****
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Cart & Cwidder by Diana Wynne Jones ** 1/2
A Game Of Thrones by George R.R. Martin ****
A Clash Of Kings by George R.R. Martin ***1/2
Just A Dream by Chris Van Allsburg * 1/2
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Prince Valiant Vol. 3: 1941-1942 by Hal Foster *** 1/2
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Queen Of The Falls by Chris Van Allsburg ** 1/2
A Feast For Crows by George R.R. Martin *** 1/2
The Greater Journey: Americans In Paris by David McCullough ***
The Great Night by Chris Adrian ** 1/2
Empire State Of Mind by Zack O'Malley Greenburg
The Little Red Pen by Janet Stevens & Susan Stevens Crummel * 1/2
21: The Story Of Roberto Clemente by Wilfred Santiago ** 1/2
The Siege Of Washington by John Lockwood & Charles Lockwood ***
Malcolm X; A Life Of Reinvention by Manning Marable ****
Dawn, Dusk or Night by Yasmina Reza ** 1/2
Unforgivable by Phillipe Djian **
On Being: A Scientist's Exploration Of The Great Questions Of Existence by Peter Atkins **
Mygale by Thierry Jonquet **
Berlin, 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev And The Most Dangerous Place On Earth by Frederick Kempe *** 1/2
High Strung: Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe and the Untold Story Of Tennis's Fiercest Rivalry by Stephen Tignor ** 1/2
Death At La Fenice by Donna Leon ** 1/2
Death In A Strange Country by Donna Leon ***
My Friend Flicka by Mary O'Hara ***
Drive by James Sallis **
The Magicians by Lev Grossman ***
The Magician King by Lev Grossman ** 1/2
The Buddha In The Attic by Julie Otsuka ****
Fly By Night by Frances Hardin ***
Thunderhead by Mary O'Hara *** 1/2
The Hypnotist by Lars Kepler ** 1/2



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[Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson *** 1/2](#)

[Cousins: A Memoir by Athol Fugard **](#)

[The Art Of Fielding by Chad Harbach ***](#)

[The Rings Of Saturn by W.G. Sebald ****](#)

[Siddhartha by Herman Hesse * 1/2](#)

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Abigail Tarttelin: Book Review: The Uncoupling by Meg Wolitzer: Your Christmas Shopping Done

For the last few weeks I've been on a thriller chase, so to speak, so this week's book, *The Uncoupling* by New Yorker Meg Wolitzer, is a welcome break, kind of like a soy frap = fluffy, light, and curious.



ascamacho Veterans Day weekend was a great time for me at the Northern VA Christmas Market! I signed a record # of books-<http://www.ascamacho.com>

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madeljurke <http://t.co/UTNwKGPb> Books for Veterans Day Week: New Bio of Eisenhower, Grant's Final Battle ... - Tucson Citizen

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