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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

'Not All Bastards Are From Vienna,' by Andrea Molesini

By **KATHERINE A. POWERS** JAN. 29, 2016

"Not All Bastards Are from Vienna," winner of Italy's 2011 Campiello Prize, is Andrea Molesini's first novel for adults — though it still possesses the straightforward narrative line and colorful characters of a story for children. Set during World War I, events are related by 17-year-old Paolo Spada, recently orphaned and now living with a menagerie of relations and servants in the Villa Spada, in a small town north of Venice.

First, though not foremost, among the Spadas is Grandpa Gugliemo, Paolo's anticlerical, acerbic-tongued great-uncle. He is married to Grandma Nancy, "a white-haired panther of a woman," a mathematician and a devotee of enemas. Then there is Aunt Maria, "the victim of a haughty manner," a powerhouse who runs the place. The family is served by Teresa, blocky, resourceful and loyal, and by her daughter Loretta, resentful and moonstruck by the estate's steward, Renato. He is a wily character and, as we discover, an Italian intelligence officer. Other key players include lush-bosomed, high-spirited Giulia, six years older than Paolo and the object of his urgent passion; the village priest, Don Lorenzo, well fed and authoritarian; and, finally, a lurking presence attached to Grandma Nancy known as the Third Paramour.

A German officer's monocle glinting in the night sets off the plot. It distinguishes the horse-mounted person of Captain Korpium, fresh from victory at Caporetto, Italy's humiliating defeat by combined German and Austro-Hungarian forces in November 1917. He has come to requisition the Villa Spada for his fellow officers and to quarter his troops in the village. The family is forced to squeeze itself into a couple of rooms, and there is much German smashing of furniture and seizing of valuables, though Grandma's cache of jewels and coins in an enema bag remains undetected.

Notably, the family is spared the brutality, rape and methodical pillage suffered by the common people. Of these atrocities we get some dreadful glimpses, but much of the novel dwells on the Spada household's domestic arrangements under German and, later, Austrian occupation. Food is scarce, but the black market and Teresa's gift for producing nameless roasts mean they do not starve. Their greatest trial, until events turn lethal, is the feeling of degradation: A soldiers' latrine abuts the Spada graveyard, and the family is forced to attend a dinner, in their own dining room, honoring Otto von Below, the victor of Caporetto.

An air of suspense gathers as the Spadas and friends are drawn into the Italian resistance, eavesdropping, sending coded signals and carrying messages. Eventually, Paolo is sent on a desperate mission to assist a British airman — and the family oversteps the boundary of immunity granted by their class with fatal consequences. Some 20 miles away, the Battle of Piave of June 1918 has commenced. It was here that the Italians, strengthened by Allied support, reversed their enemies' seemingly unstoppable advance in a victory that struck a mortal blow to the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself.

As events unfold, various characters observe with sorrow that this war is destroying the old order and its civilized way of life. Still, we never sense that so much as we do the immemorial horrors of battle; the motivation behind betrayal, of which there is a calamitous instance; and the appetite for vengeance in even the noblest heart. Based on the reminiscences of an actual Maria Spada, "Not All Bastards Are From Vienna" is not a deep

novel, but is wonderfully alive — often terribly so — as a wartime adventure and story of youth arriving at manhood.

NOT ALL BASTARDS ARE FROM VIENNA

By Andrea Molesini

Translated by Antony Shugaar and Patrick Creagh

348 pp. Grove Press. $26.

Katherine A. Powers received the 2013 Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle and is the editor of “Suitable Accommodations: An Autobiographical Story of Family Life: The Letters of J. F. Powers, 1942-1963.”

A version of this review appears in print on January 31, 2016, on page BR17 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Not Without a Fight.

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In a Gathering Twilight

A poet is faced with a wobbly memory and a late-in-life affair.

LÉA MAUPETIT

By BRIAN DOYLE

SOME NOVELS DELIGHT their readers with an intricate and irresistible plot, in which pace and clues and the stumble of events offer an alluring puzzle. Others are wonderful at evoking a time, a place, an emotion. Still others are notable primarily

THOMAS MURPHY
By Roger Rosenblatt
210 pp. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers. $24.99.

for the way the author creates unforgettable characters — beings so real, so complex, so absorbing that you think about them long after you finish the book, and you cannot quite believe they will no longer be holding your attention, provoking that startled pang of understanding and fellow feeling.

This last feat, the unforgettable character, is the prime virtue of Roger Rosenblatt's novel "Thomas Murphy," for the aging poet who gives the book its name — whiskey-soaked; cheerful; mourning his late beloved wife, Oona; haunted by his bleak Irish childhood; best friends with his 4-year-old grandson, William — *is* the novel. He narrates it, he drives the ephemeral plot, he philosophizes and ruminates and remembers, he occasionally scrawls a poem. He is slowly losing his memory; he may soon be evicted from his vast rent-controlled New York City apartment; he is lured into another man's whopping lie, which leads, perhaps, just maybe, to new love; and that, essentially, describes the entire arc of the narrative.

But Rosenblatt's accomplishment is to draw the reader so completely into Murphy's mind and heart and memory, so thoroughly into the poet's amused (and sometimes bemused) consciousness, that the minimal plot and even less action are rarely cause for complaint. Within the first few pages we are all ears for Murph's stories and memories — the hard first years on a wet, cold, rocky island off Galway ("I hated the place, but I didn't want to lose anything about it"); the years since in Manhattan with Oona and their daughter, Maire; tales of his close friend Greenberg, murdered by a madman not long before; and then, soon after the book begins, a conspiracy that starts in a bar when a "square-shouldered bruiser twice my size and half my age" tells Murph he needs a poet for a certain subtle but crucial task.

Murphy (or Rosenblatt) does get windy sometimes, and there are philosophical passages that may tempt you to turn the page hunting for meatier fare, but more often the writing soars and you are grateful for the fine writer who puts poetry in Murphy's mouth: "A saw's wheezing through a plank of pine. . . . The blunt smell of dung and oil lamps. . . . A cloud of lambs. The poise of an egret. The bent teeth of a harrow." And even more for Murphy's honesty and shy courage. "I see the world," he says, "as equally beautiful and ridiculous. . . . Absurd. No? But lovely too, and touching. And that, boyo, is life for you, is it not? A serious joke?"

In a less cynical age we would call "Thomas Murphy" a life-affirming story, for despite the hero's fading memory, the loom of mortality, the death of those he loves, the myriad aches and embarrassments of old age, Murph's wit and verve are unquenchable, and he is as ready for new love at the end of his tale as any spry young soul is at the start of his or hers: "So live," says this irrepressible Irishman toward the close. "More noisily than ever. Court life. . . . Sing it a love song. Belt it out at the top of your lungs." It is a fitting message for a book in which he has done just that throughout. □

BRIAN DOYLE *is the editor of Portland Magazine at the University of Portland in Oregon. His fifth novel, "Chicago," will be published in March.*

Not Without a Fight

An aristocratic Italian clan joins the World War I resistance.

By KATHERINE A. POWERS

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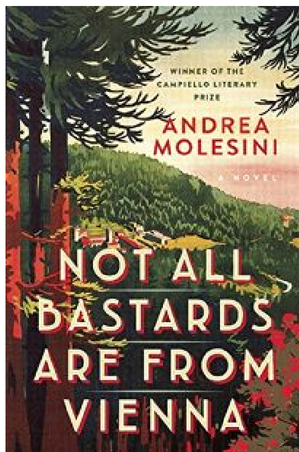

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★ Not All Bastards Are from Vienna

Andrea Molesini, trans. from the Italian by Antony Shugaar and Patrick Creagh. Grove, $26 (352p) ISBN 978-0-8021-2434-0

Tweet

Italian author Molesini's award-winning debut novel is set during World War I, amid the bitter fighting between the Germans and Italians in northern Italy in 1917–1918. Inspired by his great-aunt's wartime journals, Molesini tells of the Spada family's stoic efforts to survive the German occupation of their villa and their village of Refrontolo, north of Venice. This is a powerful tale of endurance, sacrifice, love, and war's suffering and cruelty, as the villa is looted, village girls are raped, and the resistance effort becomes increasingly risky. Paolo, 17 years old, lives at the villa with his grandparents, his aunt Maria, and their servants, including the mysterious steward Renato. German soldiers are everywhere after the Italian army is routed. Frightened and starving, Paolo, his family, and Renato devise a coded system for passing information to the Italian soldiers. They rescue a downed British pilot and spy on German generals, but when an aristocratic Austrian major takes possession of the villa, the Spadas' resistance activities become even more vulnerable to betrayal. This is an excellent war novel, as well as a powerful depiction of a family's strength and mankind's justification for war's barbarity, movingly told and full of vivid imagery. *Agent: Marcella Marini, Sellerio Editore. (Feb.)*

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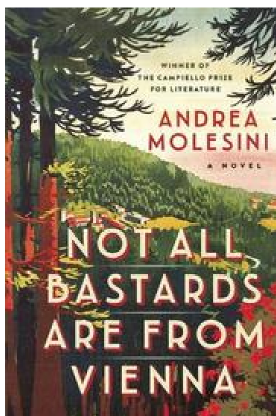

NOT ALL BASTARDS ARE FROM VIENNA

by Andrea Molesini, translated by Antony Shugaar, Patrick Creagh

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KIRKUS REVIEW

War and resistance, sexual awakening and shell shock, sacrifice and survival color the extreme coming-of-age of an Italian teenager experiencing the last year of World War I among the gentry in a small country town.

Humor overlays tragedy in Molesini's impressively controlled, gently paced, ultimately piercing debut. The setting is the Villa Spada in Refrontolo, Italy, home to an aristocratic family—two grandparents; aunt Maria; 17-year-old orphaned grandson Paolo—and their servants. It's 1917 and, with occupying German troops billeted in the town, atrocities have been committed: women have been raped; valuables looted. While the family attempts to maintain its role in the community, Paolo assists its steward, Renato, a member of military intelligence, in running missions, including rescuing a downed British pilot. Times are hard, food is short, and life is perilous, yet Molesini's portrait of the community is delivered with a light, often wry touch. Grandma's enemas are a weekly ritual and her enema bags a good place to hide valuables. The villa's shutters and washing line are used to send coded messages. And Paolo's adventures with Renato are matched, for thrills, by his sexual relationship with Giulia, a beautiful but unpredictable older woman. But tragedy gradually takes the upper hand. The German troops are replaced by Austro-Hungarians who, as the 1918 offensive begins, suffer devastating losses; and Paolo, assisting with the wounded and on a steep learning curve, eventually plays his own part in the historic proceedings. While Molesini can't refrain from dropping plangent hints about the world that awaits after this war is over, it's the tragic impact on the Spada family that the reader will remember.

Drawn in part from the true-life diaries of Maria Spada, this unusual novel, reflecting the war in microcosm, captures a turning point in the fates of empires.

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What Hemingway Left Out

'War and Peace' meets 'The Leopard' in a novel set among Italian aristocrats during the Great War.

ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

By **ALLAN MASSIE**
March 4, 2016 5:31 p.m. ET

Few of us probably know much about World War I's Italian Front. For many English-speaking readers it was a sideshow, and such knowledge as we may have comes from Hemingway, first from the romanticized account of his own somewhat experience in "A Farewell to Arms" and then from the memories he gave to the battered-up Col. Cantwell in "Across the River and Into the Trees." Yet, slight as this is, Hemingway's work at least made clear that the war on the Italian Front was, in its way, every bit as brutal and terrible as the much better-known war in the trenches of Flanders and northern France. Now Andrea Molesini's rich and moving novel leaves us with no excuse for ignorance.

This is only the first merit of **"Not All Bastards Are From Vienna" (Grove, 348 pages, $26)**. Mr. Molesini, already well-known in Italy as a poet and author of children's fiction, has drawn on the privately printed wartime diaries of his great-aunt to fashion a remarkable story. His book is a war novel, a family novel and a philosophical novel.

In 1917, the war is going badly for Italy, following the disastrous defeat at Caporetto. The

NOT ALL BASTARDS ARE FROM VIENNA

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Grove Press. 348pp. $26.00

northern part of the Veneto is occupied by the Austro-Hungarian army. In the village of Refrontolo, the house belonging to the aristocratic Spada family is requisitioned by the enemy. The narrator, 17-year-old Paolo, lives there with his eccentric grandparents; his strong-minded, horse-loving Aunt Maria; and their three servants, among them the steward Renato, who is in fact a major in the Italian intelligence service, now working behind enemy lines.

So the novel is in part a story of resistance, as the Spada family contrives the means of passing information about enemy troop movements to the Italian high command. At first, their activities seem almost like a game to Paolo, but it would be a dull reader who didn't guess that they will become more and more dangerous and may end in tragedy. The thriller element intensifies the further you read.

As the title indicates, the novel is also concerned with questions of nationality and class. Italy has been united for less than half a century. The monarchy, the House of Savoy, is not popular. It is at odds with the Catholic Church—the pope does not recognize the regime and is known as "the prisoner in the Vatican." The Veneto itself had been a province of the Habsburg Empire for 50 years before its incorporation in the new Italian state.

Finally, there are social tensions. The aristocratic Spada family may be loyal Italians, but in many respects they have more in common with the officers of the occupying army than they do with their own peasants. Like the soldiers, they belong to an order that this terrible war is going to destroy. In this way Mr. Molesini's novel echoes Lampedusa's masterpiece, "The Leopard."

Reviewers and critics tend to dwell on a novel's themes; these are, after all, its discussible elements. But for the novelist himself, themes are rarely more than the background music. He is concerned principally with incident, conversation and character. These are what give a novel life, what distinguish it from an essay or indeed from history. When we have closed "War and Peace," we are likely to forget Tolstoy's philosophical disquisitions, but we remember, vividly, Natasha's first ball or the chill atmosphere of the Bolkonski household. This is what D.H. Lawrence meant when he said that the novel is "the great book of life."

Mr. Molesini has the true novelist's ability to bring scenes and individuals immediately before our eyes, so vividly that they take possession of our imagination. When, for instance, the old grandfather, at once a comic character and a man of rare intelligence who poses as a fool, says, "Defended by a servant! If this is what the world is coming to, I don't mind going to another," we feel his realization that what was once familiar is

shifting under his feet—and we understand that, for him, the only possible response is ironic amusement. This is a man who, having shaved off his moustache, is often observed stroking what is no longer there. In such moments you see what the novel can do and history can't.

There are horrors here, because no picture of war could be true without them. But there is also humor and moments of calm and beauty. There is even hope, for the novel is also the story of Paolo's moral education, the story of how an imaginative boy is forced to confront the grimmest of realities and yet learns how to come through. In short, this is a very fine novel indeed, a historical novel that speaks to the present as powerfully and clearly as it does of the past.

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NOT ALL BASTARDS ARE FROM VIENNA by Andrea Molesini , Antony Shugaar , Patrick Creagh | Kirkus Reviews

KIRKUS REVIEW

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THE QUIVERING PEN

JUST NOW I CAN FEEL THAT LITTLE QUIVERING OF THE PEN WHICH HAS ALWAYS FORESHADOWED THE HAPPY DELIVERY OF A GOOD BOOK. --EMILE ZOLA

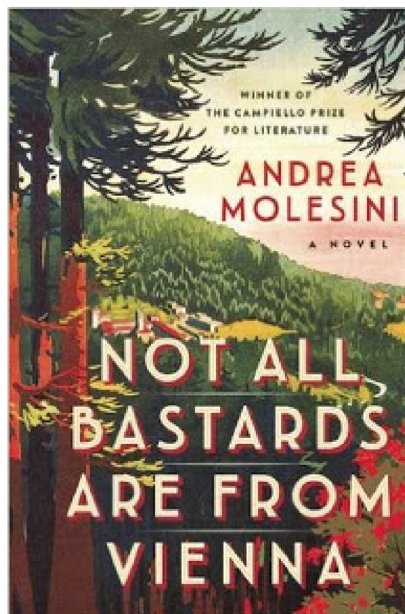
THURSDAY, JANUARY 21, 2016

Front Porch Books: January 2016 edition

***Front Porch Books** is a monthly tally of books—mainly advance review copies (aka "uncorrected proofs" and "galleys")—I've received from publishers, but also sprinkled with packages from **Book Mooch**, independent bookstores, Amazon and other sources. Because my dear friends, Mr. FedEx and Mrs. UPS, leave them with a doorbell-and-dash method of delivery, I call them my Front Porch Books. In this digital age, ARCs are also beamed to the doorstep of my Kindle via **NetGalley** and **Edelweiss**. Note: many of these books won't be released for another 2-6 months; I'm here to pique your interest and stock your wish lists. Cover art and opening lines may change before the book is finally released. I should also mention that, in nearly every case, I haven't had a chance to read these books.*

Not all Bastards are from Vienna

by Andrea Molesini
(*Grove Press*)



I'll confess, I am so in love with this cover design, if I was a cheating man, I'd be making it my mistress. Those colors pop and glow, the beauty making a sharp contrast to the word "bastards" in the title. Beyond the pretty wrapping paper, though, there's an intriguing story about wartime horror and heroism to be had here in these pages.

Jacket Copy: In the autumn of 1917, Refrontolo—a small community north of Venice—is invaded by Austrian soldiers as the Italian army is pushed to the Piave river. The Spada family owns the largest estate in the area, where orphaned seventeen-year-old Paolo lives with his eccentric grandparents, headstrong aunt, and a loyal staff. With the battlefront nearby, the Spada home become a bastion of resistance, both clashing and cooperating with the military members imposing on their household. When Paolo is recruited to help with a covert operation, his life is put in irrevocable jeopardy. As he bears witness to violence and hostility between

THE QUIVERING PEN

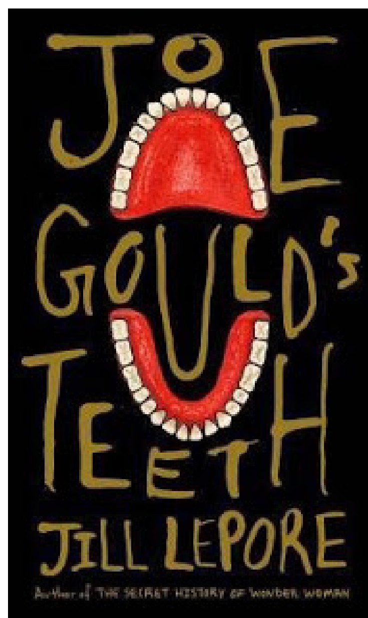
The Quivering Pen's motto can be summed up in two words: Book Evangelism. The blog is written and curated by David Abrams, author of the Iraq War comedy *Fobbit* (Grove/Atlantic, 2012), from his home office in Butte, Montana. It is fueled by early-morning cups of coffee, the occasional bowl of Cheez-Its, and a lifelong love of good books.

enemies, he grows to understand the value of courage, dignity, family bonds, and patriotism during wartime.

Opening Lines: He loomed up out of the night. And for an instant there was nothing to distinguish him from it. Then a glint, a reflection from the lantern the woman was holding up close to the horse's nose, attested to a monocle. The man addressed the woman in impeccable Italian, flawed only by certain gutturals that revealed his German mother tongue. There was something fierce and splendid in that face bathed in the swaying lamplight, as if the stars and the dust were met there together.

Blurbworthiness: "Take Hemingway's masterpiece *A Farewell to Arms* and Erich Maria Remarque's classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and cross these two war depictions with the portrait of Italian aristocracy in Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*....[*Not all Bastards are from Vienna*] is a powerful and effective blend of Bildungsroman, armchair travel, historical document, and war drama, with touches of a thriller." (*Kultur*)

Joe Gould's Teeth
by Jill Lepore
(*Knopf*)



I've been fascinated by the strange, homeless, possibly-genius Joe Gould ever since I saw **the 2000 movie based on his life**, starring Ian Holm and Stanley Tucci. I've had Joseph Mitchell's ***My Ears Are Bent*** on my shelf ever since—but, like too many of its neighbors, have yet to read it. Perhaps I could pair it with Jill Lepore's new book, which looks fascinating in its own right. My eyes are peeled.

Jacket Copy: When Joseph Mitchell published his profile of Joseph Gould in the December 1942 issue of *The New Yorker*, he deemed Gould's purportedly masterful but rarely seen Oral History project, which allegedly consisted of nine million words detailing everything anyone ever said to him, "the longest unpublished work in existence." But Mitchell, in fact, hadn't read more than a few pages of the Oral History. The manuscript seemed to have gone missing, along with other of Gould's possessions—his hair, his sight, his teeth—as he began to sink deeper into poverty, drink, and destitution. And as Gould neared the end of his life, lying pathologically, begging for money from friends and strangers alike, and deflecting publishers' requests to read his work, Mitchell couldn't help but wonder: Had the Oral History ever existed? After Gould's death in 1957, Mitchell wrote a second profile in which he insisted that it did not. Was Mitchell wrong? *Joe Gould's Teeth* is a literary investigation of this enigmatic figure of the early twentieth century, who, despite doubts surrounding his sanity, captured the imaginations of the most prominent writers and artists of the time. Renowned master of historical storytelling Jill Lepore carefully unravels the riddle of Joe Gould and his missing manuscript, probing deeply into our collective self-conscious, the nature of art, and how we define our reality for the future. Complete with appearances from the likes of E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound, and Augusta Savage

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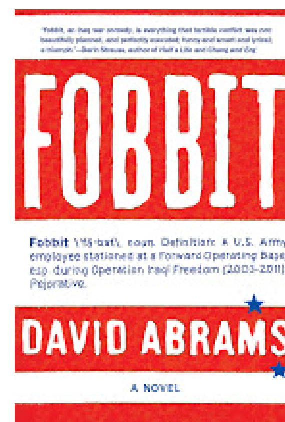

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By Bridey Heing | February 2, 2016 | 1:46pm

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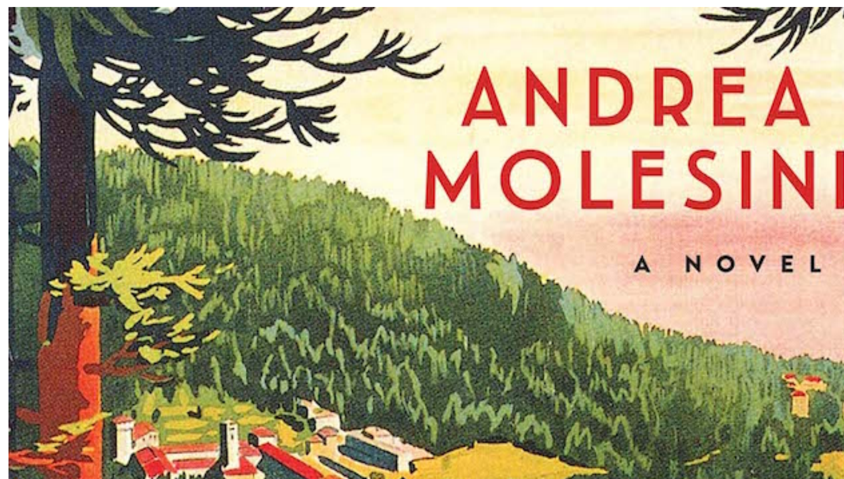
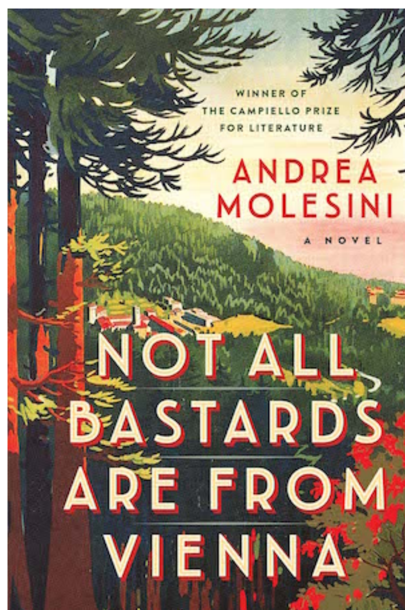


In his stunning debut novel, essayist Andrea Molesini examines the violence and tenderness experienced by civilians in German-occupied Italy during the First World War. Based on the journals of Molesini's great aunt, *Not All Bastards Are from Vienna* tells the coming-of-age story of Paolo, a 17-year-old Italian boy who discovers love and courage during wartime. Avoiding simple answers and transparent morality, the novel breathes life into a cast of vivid characters, all of whom are serving their country the best way they know how.

Paolo lives with his colorful extended family at the Villa, a lesser aristocratic estate in the village of Refrontolo. His grandparents are at constant odds, in part due to his grandmother's companion—a loathed figure with huge feet called the "Third Paramour." His aunt is an intimidating woman who captures the imagination of powerful men but prefers the company of horses above people. Paolo is especially fascinated by the mysterious steward, Renato, and a young village woman named Giulia, who lets Paolo come just close enough to give her an occasional kiss—but never further.

When the Villa is requisitioned by the Germans (and later the Austrians), the family begins collaborating with local British and Italian spy networks. Paolo slowly learns the extent of his family's involvement as he is trusted with tasks and missions, but as the fighting drags on, their operations shift from a fun adventures to life-and-death situations.



Molesini masterfully captures the changing perspective of his main character, giving his prose gravitas as Paolo's worldview expands. The story reads almost humorously early on, as Paolo worries about sneaking off to make out with Giulia even as soldiers guard his family's home. He feels a thrill at his inclusion in resistance activities, assuming he's fully in on the plot. But by the time Paolo comes face to face with the grisly truth of war—that it's not just being pulled from your bed at night to go on secret missions with your crush—he grapples with feelings about his own place in the conflict and what it means to kill and be killed. Watching a young man mature as he engages with the world around him makes for a decadently layered narrative.

Paolo's world centers around Refrontolo, a village north of Venice and close enough to the front lines for its church to serve as a hospital. The novel begins after German forces have already occupied the town and set up a base, revealing that Refrontolo is not a true seat of resistance. Situated in an otherwise abandoned landscape, Refrontolo is just one of many small villages that ultimately served as the background to fighting during the war. But Molesini's decision to tell this village's story allows for exploration of the long-term relationship between the occupiers and the occupied in an intimate setting.

Molesini also highlights the changing relationship between the aristocracy and the peasants—the shift from seeing people united by class to united by nationality. The German and Austrian commanders seem almost like friends at times, and Paolo acknowledges that they "speak the same language" of etiquette, education and subtle hints at elitism. There's a comfort and familiarity between the aristocracy, but they recognize times are rapidly changing and the ties that once bound them are breaking. It's a remarkable examination of the large-scale changes taking place across

European society, bringing the complex relationship between the family and the men taking over their home into a much larger context.

Riveting and heartwarming, Molesini balances a nuanced look at the nature of war with the minor triumphs and defeats that mark growing up and falling in love. Molesini's moving and lyrical writing proves that *Not All Bastards are From Vienna* belongs in the canon of great war fiction.

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Emotional Truths and Historical Lies in the Shadow of the Great War

The writing of a novel—particularly, a historical novel—is inevitably accompanied by a sense that one is betraying the truth, and therefore, oneself.

When writing a story set in a particular time and place, the narrator's task is not to be true to the facts as recorded in extant source material. That is the job of the historian. What the novelist has to do involves continual "renegotiation" of fidelity to historical objectivity, a process that concedes space to the exploration of emotion. For emotions are what the tale leaves the reader; it is only through emotions that the author can court the truth, even though he or she knows that truth to be unobtainable. By stirring emotions, a story can fascinate the reader, thus becoming a mirror image of truth. The writer may betray the truth, but by writing about it, by courting it in the articulation of emotions, he dresses before it, a mirror—the sort of looking-glass through which Alice has to pass.

What lies behind a narrative built upon historical events? What still remains concealed in the crypts of History? Above all, what is it in the tale that manages to create emotional involvement?

The heart of any story is its characters. Always.

Precisely because we are so unknown to ourselves, we need to feel that we are participating in the emotions of others. Their suffering, their joy indicates one possible way of getting to know our own sufferings and joys. Emotional involvement without characters is impossible. It is through them that we

participate; their deep contradictions resonate within us, who witness them play out their destiny. The contradictions within Anna Karenina, or Macbeth or King Lear are our own contradictions. Or rather, the mirror whereby we encounter contradictions that we did not know to lie within us until we find them exposed in the suffering soul of a character that has fascinated us. To achieve this end—to create *personae* who, on the printed page, are so vivid that the reader participates in what they are experiencing—the author has to draw upon the ferocious passion of his own involvement, rendered with linguistic skill and psychological insight.

In effect, any genuine, believable character is a real—a historic—character; he or she inhabits, and is inhabited by, a specific time and place. Any character that is not an individual but a type is, by its very nature, an artificial representation.

This is why every skilfully created character is more vivid for us than the people we encounter when we go to the office or to the supermarket. He or she is complete, even though contradictory—memorable precisely because of their mass of desires, ambitions and weaknesses, of cruelty and tenderness. And this is why they can break away from the specific historical context within which their story is set to take their place on a sempiternal stage, where they remain specific but not just part of the past. The sorrow and pain that leads to Anna Karenina's suicide is that of every woman caught between her own passion and the restrictions and prejudices that have been part of life in all societies throughout history. In *The Writing of Fiction*, Edith Wharton observes: “The novelist's permanent problem is that of making his people at once typical and individual, universal and particular.”

* * * *

If characters are imbued with their own individual life, they make choices; and in making those choices, they generate actions which, while participating in the flow of history, draw them into the elsewhere which is their fate. This is why Wharton stresses: “Verisimilitude is the truth of art, and any convention which hinders the illusion is obviously in the wrong place.” What is involved here is not merely accuracy in details of setting and clothing; it is the recreation of an atmosphere. One must make the reader conscious of sounds and smells that have gone forever, of long-forgotten ambitions and terrors. With their specific ambitions and fears, men, women and children whose social conventions are no longer our own must not only be brought to life, but given life and soul.

In writing the novel *Not All Bastards Are from Vienna*, I had to tackle a problem which is, I think, typical of any attempt to depict characters in a specific historical context (here, the Great War) and a specific setting (a small town in Northern Italy) facing specific circumstances (in this case, a military occupation that has devastating psychological effects upon both occupier and occupied). In such a situation, each of the characters sees their moral integrity, their previous certainties, under threat. The story takes place in a rural environment within a nation where peasants still outnumber factory workers, and the narrator is a 17-year-old youth who during the course of the story will experience sex and jealousy, betrayal and the desire for revenge.

In a rural society metaphors are forged in a totally different manner to the way in which they are coined in our highly urbanised society. For example, at a point towards the beginning of the book a light drizzle

revives all the smells of the countryside—the plaster on the walls, farmyard manure, the scent of wet grass—and Paolo, the young narrator, says: "The darkness was as dense as the breath of cattle." A simple, basic, simile, but certainly not one that would occur to the modern-day youth of Rome or Venice, London or Berlin—the damp richness of cattle's breath forms no part of their lived experience. Indeed, for many urban adolescents, cows and bulls are a mere abstraction, the breath of animals part of an ancient world far distant from an urban landscape that suggests very different demons and angels. That one detail is a mirror of the whole, like the atom of a universe.

When the story is played out in a historical setting that is of immense resonance—such as the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War or the Great War—then the author faces a hidden danger that is often overlooked: the historical prejudices that have set up house within his own mind and that of his readers. For it is always true that the prejudices of today differ from—conflict with—those of yesterday, any yesterday. For example, democracy has not always been viewed as it is now in the West—that is, as the best possible form of government. Furthermore, we don't even realize that what we think in such cases is a prejudice, something that we take for granted and are not willing to challenge. Jorge Luis Borges, the great poet of Buenos Aires, a truly original mind, dared to say: "Democracy is a superstition based upon statistics." Though here, paraphrasing Eduardo De Filippo, the Neapolitan playwright, one could add: "Superstitions may be for the ignorant, but it's bad luck to trash them."

If the novel aims to communicate some truths regarding the joys and fears that are an integral part of our participation in the great spectacle of human action, it must impose an original vision, even if this offends readers. Think for example, of the notion of the "White Man's Burden," with its view of "sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child." Taken for granted by Victorian/Edwardian society, it would be rendered ridiculous and untenable precisely because of a First World War which saw legions of whites and "coloured peoples" from the most varied of regions of the world mown down by the same machine guns, united in life and in death by the same courage and the same terror, the same rations and the same wretched living conditions.

In storytelling one has a responsibility both to the spirit of the age one is trying to depict and to the individual manifestations of that spirit, which lives through and conceals itself in, the characters. The story of one man is not a ring in a chain but one ring that fits one finger. Hence a novel of any value must be concerned with that ring and that finger. This is the one constant truth of nature: every living thing—be it a man, an oak tree, a ladybird—is absolutely unique.

In his *ABC of Reading*, published in 1934, Ezra Pound observes, "Literature is news that stays news." The goal of any artistic depiction of July 28th, 1914 is to communicate to our present—the eternal present of individual humans who cannot articulate their identity, their here-and-now; who are continually striving to find their place within the destiny of the species—how this "July 28th, 1914" is always lying in wait for us. Like a bathroom mirror, it searches us out and judges us. The fact is that we human beings live in a far from mystical cloud of unknowing. We do not know who we are, nor where we come from. Above all, we do not know where we are going—we never have. A gypsy curse goes: "May all your wishes come true!"

We carry this unknowing around with us. If, for the sake of argument—and convenience—one excludes the Yugoslav wars, we could say Europe has enjoyed 70 years of unbroken peace thanks largely to the threat of nuclear annihilation. And the result is that we somehow believe ourselves protected against the temptations of war. But in doing so, we underestimate the power of stupidity, the force which—in the future as in the past—will take us by surprise. We do not know for certain, but we have some vague sense of the maelstrom simmering below the surface of things; the hidden ruptures in our individual and collective psyche. We like to think that we live in an interconnected world, a place so well-informed that it will be able to avoid the pitfalls of the past.

Of course, history never repeats itself *verbatim*. How could it? But we should never forget that we have always been "sleepwalkers," given that the eras in history which were even vaguely tolerable have been so few and far between. The most recent of these, enjoyed by the tiny part of the world made up of Western Europe, began in May, 1945. But who, now that 70 years have passed since the Liberation of Europe from the Fascist nightmare, does not have some suspicion that this lucky moment might be coming to an end? We just do not know.

In a very touching letter of condolence to the sister of his great friend, the mathematician Michele Besso, Einstein wrote: "Michele left this strange world of ours shortly before myself. That means nothing. Not for people like us, who believe in physics and know that the distinction between past, present and future is nothing other than a stubborn illusion." That may well be the truth, but human beings are born not to *understand* but rather to *live* in "this strange world of ours." For all of us, one necessary part of living is the recounting of life, even if the stories that emerge have little to do with what actually happens.

A story is the mirror of the great spectacle of the world; it depicts but does not decipher. And even less does it try to explain "what it all means." So telling a story depends not so much on an ability to understand as on the ability to be moved, to feel emotions. On the contrary, recounting History is predicated upon making us understand what happened. However, ultimately, the emotional approach could—I stress, could—be more efficacious than that based upon rationality; a story could be more effective than an essay, emotions more telling than reflection. Obviously it would be foolish to argue that Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* tells us less about the reasons for the First World War than do the numerous novels on the subject. They embody very different approaches, and each reader must decide which, at that particular moment in his or her life, is the approach they are looking for. But the fact remains that the Great War does mirror our here and now. And this is more than just a rational deduction; it is something we feel. The Great War is a ghost that continues to haunt us.

It is art, and primarily literature—be it poetry or novels—which has the task of re-asserting Einstein's claim that "the distinction between past, present and future is nothing but a stubborn illusion." The truth of that observation is something we have always known instinctively, perhaps because we have always been sleepwalkers in search of sense and meaning. Yes, that is what we are: searchers after meaning and significance, even if we are often unaware of the fact. What holds at bay the shadows awaiting us all is that search, our insatiable curiosity and desire to learn.

Featured image Otto Dix's war sketches.