



WHEN BOOKS WENT TO WAR

The Stories That Helped Us Win World War II

By Molly Guptill Manning

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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By Maureen Corrigan January 30, 2015

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Leo Rosten is an author barely known today, but during World War II, he received the kind of “your book saved my life” fan letter that only the likes of Harper Lee or John Green usually get now. The letter was about Rosten’s collection of comic stories, “The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N.” Here’s an excerpt:

“I want to thank you profoundly, for myself, and more importantly, [for] the men here in this godforsaken part of the globe. We fry by day and freeze by night. What we are doing near the Persian Gulf . . . no one knows. . . .

“Last week we received your book on Mr. K*A*P*L*A*N. I read it and simply roared with laughter. As an experiment I read it one night at campfire. The men *howled*. I have not heard such laughter in months. Now they demand I only read one K*A*P*L*A*N story a night: a ration on pleasure.”

The author of that fan letter was one of the millions of soldiers and sailors serving overseas during World War II who benefited from what the late literary scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli once called “not only the biggest book

giveaway in history, [but] the biggest good book giveaway in history.” Between the time it was launched in 1943 and its end in 1947, that giveaway program distributed more than 120 million paperbacks of more than 1,000 different titles. The books ranged from classics such as “The Odyssey” and “Moby-Dick” to popular reading such as Mary O’Hara’s “My Friend Flicka” and Erle Stanley Gardner’s “The Case of the Black-Eyed Blonde.” Known as the Armed Services Editions (ASEs), those paperbacks were parachuted in to men fighting on remote Pacific Islands, sent to prisoners of war in Germany and Japan, and distributed to every man who boarded a landing craft on the eve of D-Day. In addition to lifting the spirits and, doubtless, saving the humanity of some servicemen traumatized by the brutality of battle, the ASEs also helped to rescue “The Great Gatsby” from the remaindered bin and to propel Betty Smith’s “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” into the ranks of modern classics.

The inspiring story of the ASEs is almost as little-known today as “The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N,” but a new book by [Molly Guptill Manning](#) aims to recover that lost history. “When Books Went to War” doggedly documents the years of bureaucratic maneuvering that resulted in the creation and deployment of the ASEs. In the early days of World War II, intrepid librarians across the United States solicited donations of hardcover books from civilian households with uneven results: Manning recounts how sorting centers rejected some 1.5 million books as unsuitable, among them such clunkers as “How to Knit” and “Theology in 1870.”

In the winter of 1942, publishing and newspaper executives gathered in New York City to discuss a better method by which books might serve as morale-boosters and weapons in “the war of ideas.” In cooperation with representatives from the Army and the Navy, an organization known as the Council on Books in Wartime was born; it had the brainstorm that became the ASEs. Printed as paperbacks on featherweight paper, the ASEs were long and

rectangular, made to fit into servicemen's pockets. A selection committee met each month to choose titles designed to speak to a wide range of tastes, from sports books to Westerns, books about science ("Your Servant, the Molecule") and Shakespeare. The largest single distribution of ASEs occurred in advance of D-Day: Among the titles reserved specifically for the men taking part in the invasion were Joseph Mitchell's "McSorley's Wonderful Saloon," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's "Cross Creek," Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," and the aforementioned "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" — a favorite with the servicemen. As Manning recounts, many of the soldiers who managed to climb the cliffs of Omaha Beach "would never forget the sight of gravely wounded soldiers propped up against the base of the cliffs, reading."

"When Books Went to War" is at its most compelling when it lets the ASE program speak for itself, through dramatic anecdotes or quotes from servicemen. Otherwise, as a history of the program, it's comprehensive but flat. Manning writes about the buildup to World War II as though she were prepping high school students for a standardized test. ("Germany declared war on Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France were compelled by treaty to declare war against Germany.") Often she indulges in a sentimental diction reminiscent of wartime newsreels, referring, for instance, to infantrymen as "souls" who "slumbered" to the "lullaby of squealing mortars." Such flourishes are unnecessary to the story of the ASEs, which is inherently full of drama.

Manning's book, flawed as it may be, fills a void. Readers who find their curiosity about the ASEs stoked, but not satiated, by "When Books Went to War" may want to pay a visit to the Rare Books and Special Collections Room of the Library of Congress, which houses the only complete collection of the ASEs — all 1,227 titles. To pick up a worn ASE of Stephen Leacock's "Happy

Stories Just to Laugh At” or Richard Llewellyn’s “How Green Was My Valley”
is to marvel at the power of books and the fate of the men they comforted.