



MICHAEL MORPURGO

WAR  
HORSE





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## INTRODUCTION

I've often told the tale that the idea of writing *War Horse* first came to me from a chance conversation in the local pub, in the winter of 1979, with an old man who lived in our village of Iddesleigh in Devon. Wilf Ellis he was called. I knew already that he had been a young soldier in WW1, and we got talking by the fire. He was just 17 when he joined up, and he went there, he said, 'with horses'. And it's perfectly true that if I hadn't met Wilf that day in the pub, I should never have written *War Horse*.

But in fact, the seed of the story grew out of my early childhood. I was a war baby, born in 1943. I grew up in postwar London, at a time when the pity and the loss of war was all around me. We played in the bomb-site next to our house, looked out of our classroom window at St Matthias School across the playground into another bomb-site.

At home there was a picture of my Uncle Pieter in his RAF uniform on our mantelpiece in the sitting room. He had been killed in WW2, in 1941, two years before I was born. My mother grieved for him all her life. To me he was always more a hero than an uncle. He was one of those who had helped save the country, died to save our freedom. I always wished I'd known him. I still do.

Then there was the family friend who used to come to tea, Eric Pearce, who had flown in the war in the Fleet Air

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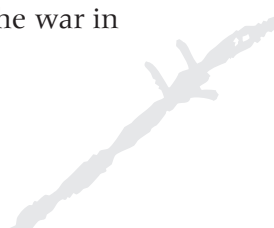
Arm. His face and hands had been terribly burnt when his plane crashed on landing. As a young boy I was fascinated by his scars, and found it difficult not to stare at him. Many years on I told him how ashamed I was to have stared at him like that when I was a child. He said he remembered how I'd looked at him, but he hadn't minded a bit. It was when people looked away that he minded.

So I grew up knowing what war does, right or wrong, any war. It kills uncles, it damages flesh and minds and lives, destroys buildings, and it also destroys families and societies, and more often than not – win or lose – leads to the next war, and the next.

As a teenager I read the poets of the First World War, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon. I read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, produced a school play as a teacher of *Oh What a Lovely War*, saw the film of *Paths of Glory*.

In the end writers must write about what they care about. I care, as most of us do, about the environment, injustice, war and peace. I have written about all these. I should never have written *War Horse* had I not lived my early years in the shadow of WW2. Of course we call that war into which I was born WW2, because there was another World War before it, which had been called The Great War.

Until recently we often refer to WW2 simply as 'the war'. And now that has all changed. Talk about 'the war' today as I write this, in April of 2022, and we mean the war in



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Ukraine. Every war, we always hope, will be ‘the war to end all wars’. But it never has been. War, it seems, has come back to haunt us yet again. Men and women, on both sides in Ukraine, are dying again in trenches, on the battlefield, and families and communities are being massacred, entire towns destroyed. Millions of refugees are on the road again fleeing their homes, seeking safety. Hate and vengeance is rife.

When *War Horse* first came out in 1982, there were those who said that a book about war and peace – and *War Horse* is about both – is not a proper or relevant subject for a children’s book. Better not to dwell on such matters, best not to look back to those times. And anyway, one eminent writer told me, children don’t like history. It was a book out of its time.

There were no accolades, no prizes for *War Horse*. It was shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize, but didn’t win. Rosemary Debnam was my editor then, at Kaye and Ward, the original publishers. She had great faith in the book, and was as disappointed as I was. Sales of the first edition, with its beautiful Victor Ambrus cover, were few and far between, so much so that first edition copies are rare these days, and valuable. It was eventually published in paperback, but not before being turned down by one publisher who told me they were sorry, but they would be hoping next time for a better book from me. It was not an auspicious start.

I worked for seven years on a film-script of *War Horse* with a dear friend of ours, Simon Channing-Williams,

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the producer who had made a film of *Why the Whales Came*. Despite our best efforts it came to nothing. So *War Horse* looked as if it was destined to be remaindered, and forgotten. But, wonderfully, my publishers, Egmont – now Farshore – have kept the book always in print. They still had faith and hope. I had hope, but it was dwindling.

Then out of the blue, 25 years later, comes a phone call from Tom Morris, Creative Director at the National Theatre. After the great successes of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and Jamila Gavin's *Coram Boy*, he was looking to create another family play for the NT. He had worked before with a South African puppet company, called Handspring, and wanted to bring their unique life-size puppets, and their totally original way of puppeteering, to the big stage. He needed a story with a large animal centre stage, as the main character.

He had read *War Horse*, he told me, on his mother's advice, and thought it had possibilities. I didn't. A puppet playing out a deeply serious story of a horse in WW1! It seemed doomed. But then Tom Morris, Marianne Eliot and Nick Hytner and the whole remarkable team at the National spent two years workshoping, gathering the greatest talents in theatre making, in music and song, in design, in lighting, in writing, and created a show like no other, with puppetry at the heart of it.

The show wobbled to start with, took a while finding its way, but they worked at it. They had faith, and within weeks it was a hit, a palpable hit, in the end the greatest hit the National Theatre has ever had. So began twelve

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years of this wonderful record-breaking, award-garnering show, only brought to a halt on its second world tour by the pandemic. (Joey may be resting, out in his Devon pasture now, but he'll be back!)

And do you know what? People began to hear of the book, to read the book!

Two years into the theatre run in the West End, a great Hollywood producer called Kathy Kennedy – who happened to work with Stephen Spielberg – decided to see the play in London with her daughter, because her daughter liked horses. The next thing we know, there is a huge Spielberg film, with an amazing cast, and soaring John Williams score, multi-Oscar nominated and soon showing all over the world.

And do you know what? *War Horse* was now in bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic. Before, there had been perhaps four or five foreign editions of the book, now there were dozens. And I could at last buy the socks I so badly needed!

Now people from all over are making pilgrimages to my village of Iddesleigh, to discover where Joey and Albert grew up, to see the painting of Joey in the Village Hall, and the clock above it, that they have read about in the introduction to the story. (The clock was always there, but the painting is, in fact, fictitious, until, that is, we commissioned Alexandra Bannister, the horse artist on the film, to paint a picture of Joey just as he is described in the book!)



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What of course is sadly not fictitious is the war that took Joey and Albert, and millions like them, on all sides, away from their villages and towns and cities, to die in the fields and trenches of WW1. That worldwide slaughter led to the next worldwide slaughter 20 years later. There have been wars since, all of them terrible, with the geo-political fault-lines constantly shifting with each one.

All my life there has been a growing hope and belief that even after all these wars, we would somehow find a way to unite the nations, to resolve old enmities, to establish understanding and empathy between peoples. Much progress was made. That hope and belief and resolve is still alive. I hope and believe that books and plays and films like *War Horse* help to keep it so. For *War Horse* is finally about that hope, about reconciliation, about our longing for peace.

Today, deep in the heart of the English countryside where Joey and Albert grew up, there is peace all around me. The swallows came back yesterday, my great granddaughter is coming for Easter, and all seems so well. But the talk of war, the images of the horror and cruelty and suffering of war, are with us again. We cannot ignore, nor simply wish it away. We know we have to help those that need help.

Sadly war has become again part of the world we live in. Stories have to reflect this real world my children and grandchildren and great grandchildren are growing up in. We must not look away. They must not look away. They do have to know it has happened before, that there was hope, that in the end there was

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reconciliation and peace, and that there will be again, if we all work for it.

As the song goes in the play of *War Horse*: Who'll sing the anthem? Who will tell the story? We will because we must.

Stories can help us come to terms with the world about us. They can bring knowledge and understanding of others, and empathy, above all empathy. This is for me the most important function of the arts.

You will see that this new 40th anniversary edition of *War Horse* is illustrated by George Butler. He is a journalist and a war artist. He has spent his working life travelling to countries at war, meeting the people living through it, and drawing them, soldiers and civilians, on the battlefield, in the ruins of their homes, in refugee camps, in Afghanistan, in Syria, and now in Ukraine. Like those before him – Paul Nash in WW1, Ronald Searle in WW2, and others – he draws the destruction and the suffering and the courage. He draws wonderfully well because he knows the place and the people, has witnessed the suffering, and feels it deeply. Every life matters to him.

Through his drawing George Butler brings together in this book so much that I have tried to do over the years in all my writing about war and peace. He draws finely, sensitively, reflectively, the thread of war throughout history, the consequent destruction of lives, of homes, from WW1 to the world of today. He helps us look again, think again, hope again. He refreshes our longing for

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peace, which is what I tried to do in the story of *War Horse* all those forty years ago.

My uncle Pieter helped bring Joey to life, so did Eric Pearce, so did Edward Thomas, Tom Morris at the National Theatre, Stephen Spielberg and Kathy Kennedy, my publishers who kept the faith for 40 years, my wife Clare who still thinks it's my best book, and all those who know and love the story, everyone who has kept Joey and Albert, and a longing for peace, alive in their hearts, in their mind's eye. They all made *War Horse*.

I thank them all. I thank you all.

Michael Morpurgo  
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