

THE SOMME & MEMORY

CURSE



Pat Barker

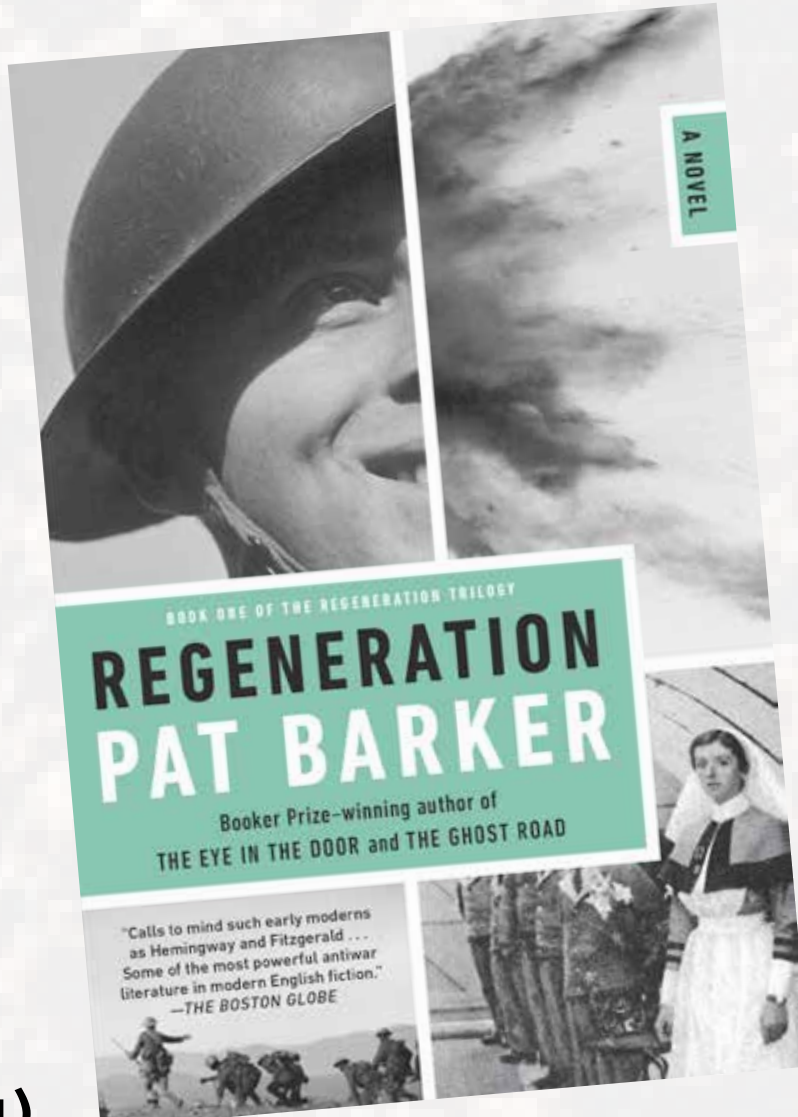
Barker features real people in her novel, *Regeneration*, most notably Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and their psychiatrist Dr. William Rivers. Dr. Rivers was a pioneering doctor in the field of treating shell shock or neurasthenia through "nerve regeneration" which inspired the title of the novel.

Barker based her fictitious characters on those soldiers who were patients in Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh where much of the novel takes place. Craiglockhart treated army officers suffering from shell shock and it is here that we encounter the poets Sassoon and Owen in 1917, the Somme Offensive being over a few months earlier.

One of Barker's more interesting fictitious characters in the novel is Billy Prior –

"Prior is a working-class officer from the north of England, intelligent, ambitious, and above all, awkward... Prior is not cut from the same cloth as aristocratic Sassoon or middle-class Wilfred Owen. His England is not the England of rolling green hills and honey still for tea, but a place of crowded streets, grey skies, and grim poverty. This alone makes him stand out in the pantheon of First World War popular characters, real and fictional"

(Dr Tracey Loughran, *Reviews in History* December 2011)



Regeneration – Pat Barker. (1991)

"Our understanding of the first world war has been shaped by these men [Sassoon and Owen] and their poetry. By bringing them to life in her novel it feels as if Barker is taking on a necessary challenge".

(Prof. John Mullan, *The Guardian*, Aug. 24 2012.)

Quote from Pat Barker on Sassoon and Owen-"

"I'm more and more interested in the way his poems and Owen's poems both claim a special status for the combatant and set out to be antiwar poems, because, as I mentioned before, it seems to me that there is a very important internal contradiction there. Sassoon himself became very dissatisfied with the kinds of poems he was writing. He didn't want to write angry poems anymore. But he never really found any other way of writing about the war other than through anger. And I think that he quite rightly saw that Owen was capable of another way of writing about it."

Excerpt from An interview with Pat Barker by Rob Nixon in the *Journal of Contemporary Literature* no. 45, March 2004.

Regeneration was the first of Barker's celebrated World War 1 war trilogy of the same name, the others being *Eye in the door* (1993) and *The ghost road* (1995).

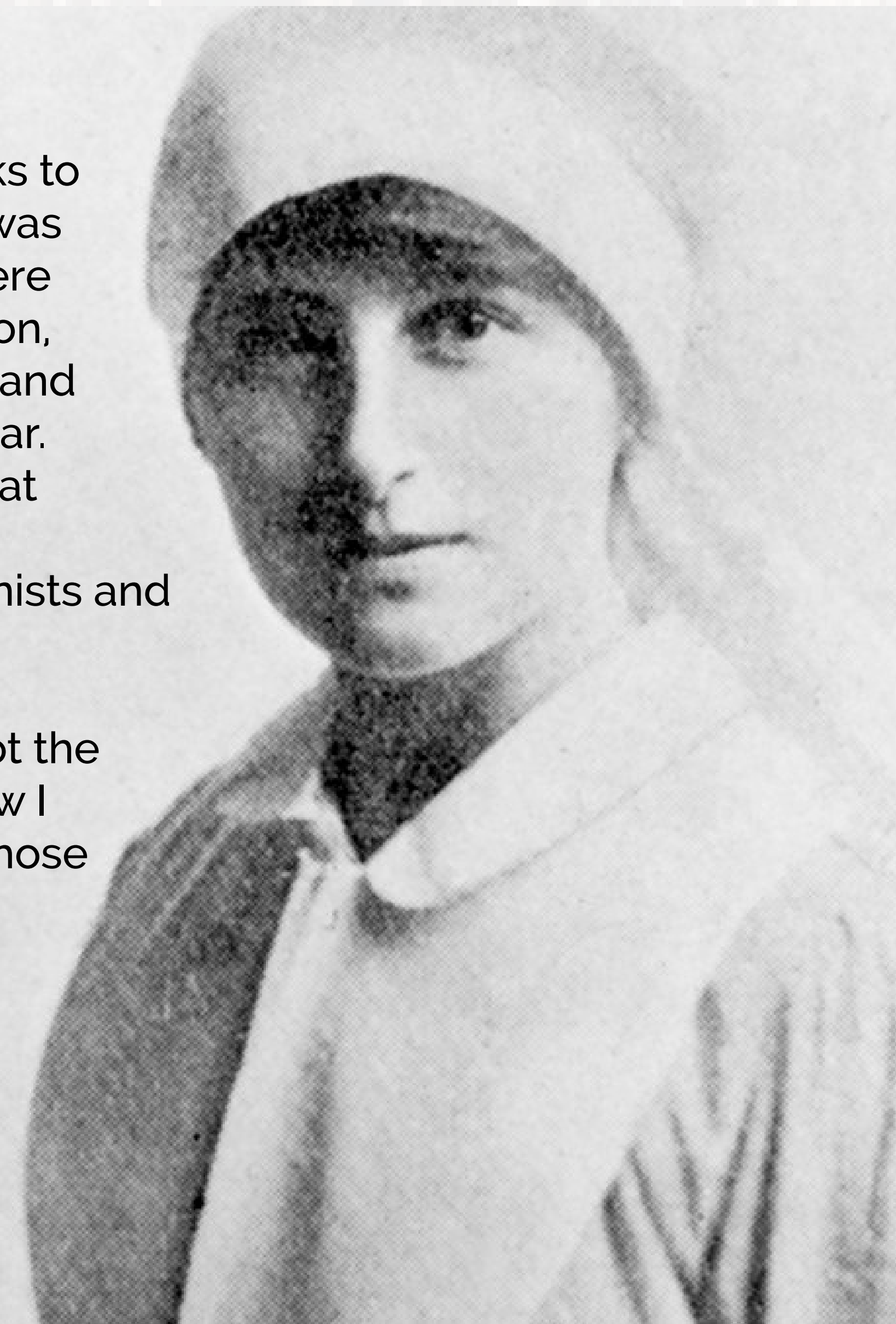
Vera Brittain (1893-1970)

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* is one of the great books to emerge from the pain and slaughter of World War 1. She was only 20 when the War broke out. Her family and friends were quickly caught up in the conflict - her fiancé Roland Leighton, close friends Victor Richardson M.C. and Geoffrey Thurlow, and her brother Edward Brittain M.C. were all killed during the war. She herself joined up as a nurse in 1915, leaving her studies at Oxford University to do so.

She lived until 1970, one of England's foremost writers, feminists and pacifists.

"It looked like a regular rot and I can't remember just how I got the men together and made them go over the parapet. I only know I had to go back twice to get them, and I wouldn't go through those minutes again if it meant the V.C.... They'd followed me across the open for about seventy yards when I got hit the first time; that was in the thigh. I fell down and got up, but fell down again; after twice trying to go on I gave it up and crawled into a shell hole. I was lying there with my arms stretched out and my head between them, as we'd been told to do, when a huge beast of a shell burst quite close to the hole. A splinter from it went through my arm; the pain was so frightful- much worse than the thigh- that I thought the arm was gone, and lost my nerve and began to scream. Then I saw it was still there and managed to pull myself together; and after I'd been in the hole about an hour and a half, I noticed that the hail of machine gun bullets on the British trenches seemed to be slackening..."

An extract of a verbal account given by Edward Brittain to his sister Vera, of injuries he sustained in the Battle of the Somme, as documented in her book, *Testament of youth* (p256).



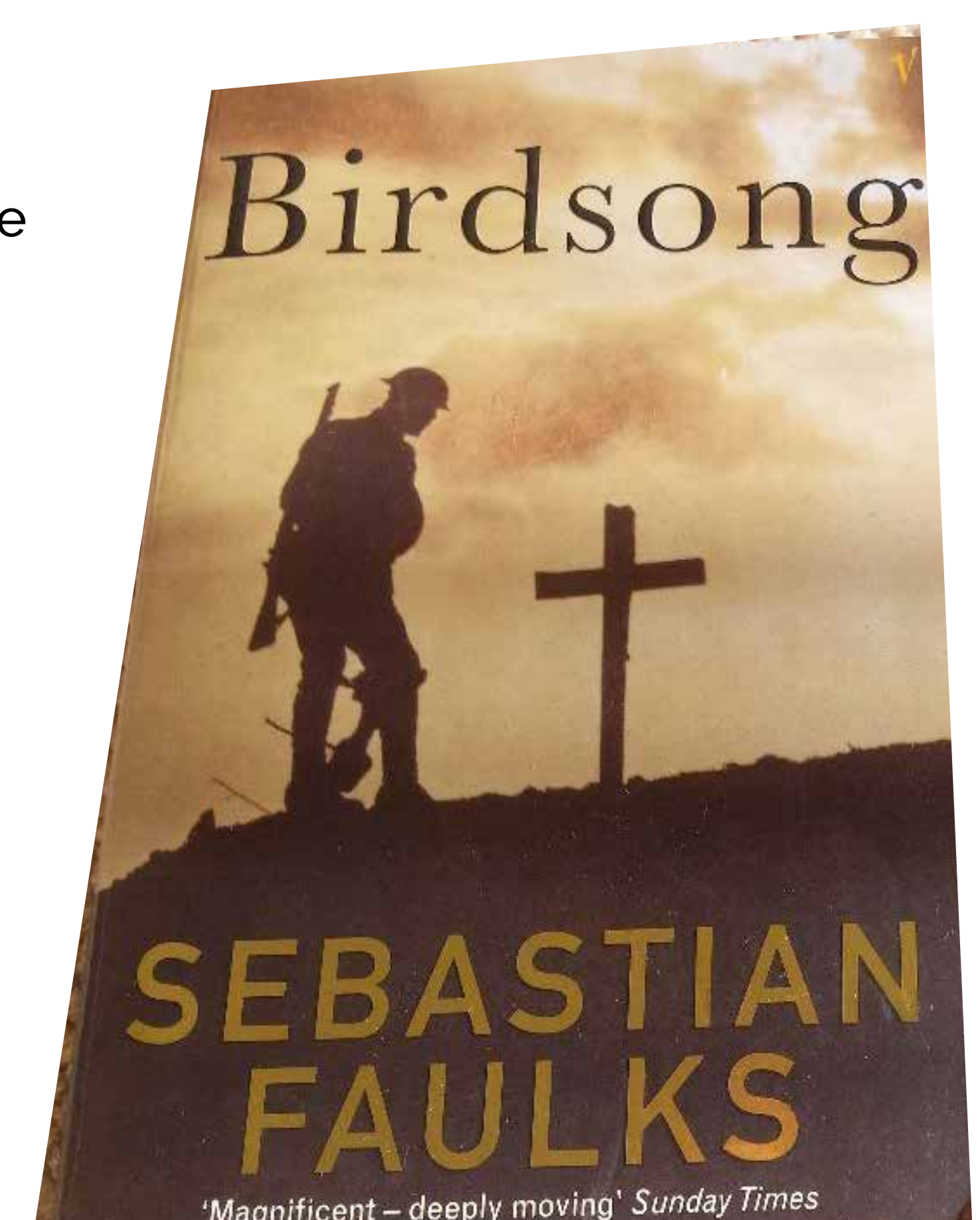
Sebastian Faulks

Birdsong is comprised of seven parts ranging from pre-war 1910, the war itself (particularly 1916-1918) to 1979.

The book starts before the war in 1910 when the main character, Stephen Wraysford, a young Englishman, arrives in Amiens, France. There, he experiences a doomed love affair. The story moves back and forth from the war to 1978 where we meet Stephen's granddaughter who finds his war diaries. She delves into Stephen's experiences in the war and talks to his war comrades.

Quote from Faulks when doing research for the book in France –

"In April I went to the Somme frontline with a battlefield map from the Imperial War Museum. I had long been interested by what infamous places were like before they acquired their terrible names....What had the Somme been like before it became 'the Somme'?..... I spent some days walking the length of the British line along the Ancre and across the pathetically small distance of the advance, bought at the cost of 60,000 casualties in a single day. I sat for hours in some small cemeteries. I didn't quite know what I was looking for; I was just immersing myself in this world, hoping, I suppose, to acquire the authority to write about it."



Birdsong – Sebastian Faulks, (Hutchinson, 1993)

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