

## Writing *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo

*This article was written for the War Horse London programme (2007)*

17 April 2008 was the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Merkem, or the Battle of the Kippe. The Belgian army retook the hamlet of de Kippe. It was a significant advance, much celebrated by the Belgians. To mark the occasion of this first Belgian victory, my grandfather Emile Cammaerts, a great poet and Belgian patriot, named my mother, who was born on April 18th 1918, Kippe. It is the name by which I've known her all my life. This is the first of many diverse influences that contributed to my writing *War Horse* many decades later.

I grew up in London just after the Second World War, a London of bombsites and ration books. I played in bombsites (surely the best playgrounds ever made.) We had cellars for dens, crumbling walls to climb, and in amongst the rubble I made endless discoveries. An old kettle, a shoe, a penny coin, a burnt book – they all became my treasures. Only later came the growing awareness of what war had done, not just to buildings, but to people's lives.

My mother often wept when she talked about the war. On the mantelpiece was a photo of my Uncle Pieter, who was shot down in 1941, two years before I was born. He looked back at me when I looked at him, and I knew he wanted to say something but couldn't. I used to talk to him sometimes, I remember. I wanted to get to know him.

A friend of the family used to come to tea sometimes. My mother always told me I must not stare at him, but I always did. I could not help myself. His face and hands were horribly scarred. I knew he had been shot down in the war and suffered dreadful burns. Here's what war did. It burned flesh. It killed my uncle. It made my mother weep. So I grew up with the damage of war all around me. I learned that buildings you can put up again, but lives are wrecked forever.

As a schoolboy I read the great poets of the First World War – Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas, Thomas Hardy. I learned of 'the men who marched away', of 'the millions of the mouthless dead', understood 'the pity of war'. I read Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I saw the film. I went to see Joan Littlewood's *Oh! What a Lovely War*. Britten's great *War Requiem*, the pictures of Paul Nash

and Stanley Spencer left an indelible impression on me.

In my early thirties, in 1975, we moved from Kent to Iddesleigh in Devon where my wife Clare and I were setting up Farms for City Children, an educational charity we hoped would enrich the lives of urban children by enabling them to spend a week of their young lives living and working down on the farm.

We found ourselves living in a small tight-knit community – Iddesleigh was a parish of less than 200 people, a church, a post office, a village shop, a pub. Here we settled, and began our project. I had written one or two books already but now for the first time I came across a subject that I cared about deeply, one that I felt I could write from the heart.

I was in the pub, The Duke of York. "Are you writing another book Michael?" said the old man sitting opposite me by the fire, cradling his pint. I told him that I'd come across an old painting of a cavalry charge in the First World War. The British cavalry were charging up a hill towards the German position, one or two horses already caught up on the barbed wire. I was trying, I told him, to write the story of the First World War, as seen through the eyes of a horse. "I was there in 1916," the old man told me, his eyes filling with tears. "I was there with the horses too." He talked on for hours about the horse he'd loved and left behind at the end of the war, how the old horse had been sold off to the French butchers for meat.

I determined then and there to tell the story of such a horse. But how to tell it? I had to find a way that didn't take sides. So I conceived the notion I might write the story of the First World War as seen through a horse's eye, a horse that would be reared on a Devon farm, by the forebears of the village people I knew, a horse that is sold off the farm to go to the front as a British cavalry horse, is captured by the Germans and used to pull ambulances and guns, winters on a French farm. It would be the horse's eye view of the universal suffering of that dreadful war in which 10 million men died, and unknown millions of horses.

But I had yet to be convinced that I could make this work, that the horse might respond



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credibly, might understand the needs and anxieties of the people he came to know.

Because I had been working for so long on the farm with the children, I was of course aware of the sensibilities of children towards animals, and vice versa. But it was one incident in particular that convinced me I could make my story work.

A young boy from Birmingham came to the farm with his classmates some 25 years ago. He was called Billy. Billy, I was told by the teachers, had been fostered by several different families, was withdrawn and so tormented by a stammer that by the age of seven he had given up speaking at all.

One November evening I had come to the farmhouse to read to the children. As I came into the stable yard behind the house I found Billy standing there under the stable light, talking freely to one of the horses. He spoke confidently, knowing he was not being judged or mocked. And I had the very strong impression that the horse was listening, and understanding too. It was an unforgettable moment for all three of us, I think. It was that extraordinary, inspirational moment that gave me the confidence I needed to begin writing *War Horse*.

