

## Service and duty in an age unbound

*Yossarian had done his best to warn him the night before. "You haven't got a chance, kid," he had told him glumly.*

*"They hate Jews."*

*"But I'm not Jewish," answered Clevinger.*

*"It will make no difference," Yossarian promised, and Yossarian was right. "They're after everybody."*

*~ Joseph Heller's Catch-22*

**B**y 1919, millions of soldiers had returned home, some to places like Canada, Newfoundland, the United States, India, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa, but most to countries nearer the battlefields. The more distant the home country, the more insulated it had been from the carnage. Soldiers from places like Canada brought the war home with them, but it was *their* war, foreign to friends and family. Estranged from non-veterans, many suffered alone, unable to relate what they'd seen and done.

Though fighting ceased with the Armistice on November 11, 1918, peace wasn't official until treaties were signed in and around Paris in June 1919. The main treaty, known as the Treaty of Versailles, set the Allies' terms for peace with Germany. The outcome of a "victors' peace conference" rather than a negotiated settlement with all parties present, the Treaty's terms were in place before the German delegates reached the table. Delivered as an ultimatum, the Treaty of Versailles was, from the German point of view, unjust and insulting, but the defeated nation faced social collapse, saw no way out, and signed.

From the start, neither side was satisfied. The Treaty's terms seemed too lenient to some, too harsh to others. Germany was burdened with war reparations, and with a responsibility for the war "which she refused morally to accept," while the United States declined to ratify the Treaty or support the nascent League of Nations. Smaller, emergent countries like Canada turned inward, while America "retreated into isolationism and abandoned Europe to her wheelchair."

With the seeds of the Second World War sown at Versailles, Europe entered a dissatisfied, distrustful, and apprehensive interwar period. Resentment and suspicion typified the diplomacy of the time, and little was done to reconcile the once and future enemies. There were people, especially in Britain, who had hoped for accord between nations, but in general the former combatants on both sides were bitter and intransigent.

In the years immediately after 1918, the losers struggled with defeat, the winners with empty victory. What, after all, had they achieved? Financially and emotionally spent, both sides tried to forget the war: "Faced by the horrendous idea that the war might not have been worth the effort, people simply buried the thought for a time. And if one was to bury that thought, one also had to bury the war. So be it. The war was buried."

Western culture had snapped at the Battle of the Somme, revealing civilization's insanity, and things would never be the same. Coinciding with the Spanish influenza of 1918-19 – far deadlier than the war itself – the conflict's aftermath confirmed the death of a discredited age.

Referring to the work of cultural historians Paul Fussell, Samuel Hynes, and Jay Winter, Jacqueline Hucker writes that in their analysis of writers, poets, and painters who lived through the war, they found that "many had experienced an acute sense of a rupture in history, which in their work took the form of images of irony, fragmentation and ruin. Fussell and Hynes demonstrated that, if the war did not actually create modern Western society, it fueled its development and shaped the character of our world."

In Fussell's case: "What he discovered was a deep fissure between the romantic views of the past, which saw warfare as a stage for gallantry and heroism, and the disillusionment bred by the shocking slaughter and grim hopelessness of trench warfare." Rupture in history; deep fissure. It was the moment, Henry Porter writes, "that humans began to realise the power of total destruction." Social bonds began to fall away, and it was the end of one era, the start of another.

If the war's end did bring a tense military peace to Europe, it also brought social disillusionment. Betrayed by politicians' promises and their own hopes, veterans became bitter. "Europe slumped into a monumental melancholy," with inflation, unemployment, and deprivation driving the survivors into sullen wariness. The social purpose of the war, "the content of duty and devoir," was a thing of the past, and most veterans in the post-war era "withdrew from social activity and commitment into themselves."

Their values undermined by the reality of mass, mechanized warfare, many lost faith in society and their connection with others.

It was little better for Europe's civilians. The devastation had been so great and the death toll so high. Too many grieving wives and parents had received a letter about their loved one's splendid courage or "the beauty of duty so nobly done." "How long," Modris Eksteins writes, "would these phrases sustain a generation of widows, orphans, and cripples?" As the culture's high diction and claim to authority vanished, disconnection from society and social duty was inevitable. Disillusionment cut to the bone, and if, as Jay Winter says, the Lost Generation in Europe "had died for a new world order, then it was clear soon enough that they had died in vain."

As Jonathan Vance shows in *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, the situation was different in Canada. The dominant political forces favoured a selective and positive memory of the conflict, one that supported the status quo and a set of safe and familiar values, including duty, respect for authority, and patriotism. In the main, it worked. Most Canadians accepted a traditional view of society and the war, and the stories, poetry, popular songs, and commemorative art from the interwar period demonstrate the persistence of a rugged, even stirring, memory of service on behalf of homeland and Empire. Tradition held; rupture was averted. Social identity remained intact, and duty as "a romantic ideal that could bind the whole human race" still seemed credible.

At the same time, social activism did play a significant role in post-war domestic politics. The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, the rise of social reform movements in the 1920s and 1930s, and the Depression-era marches and demonstrations prove that at least some Canadians questioned the existing socio-economic structure and its institutions. In particular, many veterans, artists, and activists criticized the current social order and refused to sanitize the war or ignore its lessons, opting instead for realism, social change, and a "new faith and set of values."

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In his 2012 obituary for Paul Fussell, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt says about *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell's masterwork, that it was "a monumental study of World War I and how its horrors fostered a disillusioned modernist sensibility." "World War I's chief cultural product was irony,"

Lehmann-Haupt writes, citing Robert Hughes's observation that Western society has, since the First World War, been infused with a "sense of absurdity, disjuncture and polarization, the loathing of duly constituted authorities."

Irony derives from a recognition of the contrary nature of truth. Absurdity arises from a perceived human irrationality or existential meaninglessness, and scepticism springs from a lack of faith in authority. Though far from universal – not everyone sees existence as absurd, for example – irony, absurdity, and scepticism are deeply imprinted in our intellectual and popular cultures.

The historical source of irony, absurdity, and scepticism is the First World War. Fussell, summarizing Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, cites its author's conviction that the Great War was "the ultimate origin of the insane contemporary scene. It is where the irony and absurdity begin." Irony, the inversion of the conventional, became epidemic. "The undercurrent represented by irony during the war," Eksteins writes, "would become a floodtide in the postwar world." And absurdity? We take it for granted, in human affairs at least, and our appetite for the ridiculous, upside down, and bizarre is limitless.

As for scepticism, since 1914 the West has seen the erosion of faith in authority both religious and secular, with a corresponding ascendance of rationalism, agnosticism, atheism, and scientific empiricism. The open expression of doubt, uncertainty, and even nihilism is acceptable, and though religious affiliation is still common, rejection of the transcendent is mainstream. To reach this point, an entire "scale of values and beliefs" had to be sent packing, and the First World War did just that. The twentieth century, as Eksteins says, was "a period of deconstruction, of de-definition," and the Great War was the "single most significant event in that development." For modernism in general the war was a "psychological turning point." For Germany in particular, it was the moment when "the urge to create and the urge to destroy changed places."

In the defeated nations, social structures and the belief in progress fell apart. By winning the war, the victors saved their own "system of values and ideas and forms and shapes," but the losers felt the need to start over. It was in countries such as Germany, Austria, and Russia, therefore, that the most radical change occurred, though their reactions to the war did reach other nations. Eksteins notes, in fact, that the Weimar Republic, because of its "creativity, assertion, and vital questioning in the context of confusion," still influences us.

Just as the war caused the collapse of external, social frameworks, so its horror and absurdity weakened modernity's belief in social optimism, historical evolution, and the notion of a sensible, reliable creation:

*As the war's meaning began to be enveloped in a fog of existential questioning, the integrity of the 'real' world, the visible and ordered world, was undermined. As the war called into question the rational connections of the prewar world . . . the meaning of civilization as tangible achievement was assaulted, as was the nineteenth-century view that all history represented progress. And as the external world collapsed in ruins, the only redoubt of integrity became the individual personality.*

In the West, and especially in Europe, people found themselves freer but on their own. Social ideals yielded to self-expression, subjectivity, and personal preference, and belonging became more a matter of choice. The traditional hero gave way to "the celebrity, the expression of this self-assertion," and since self-assertion and self-sacrifice tend to run at cross-purposes, service lost ground to self-service.

Some of those in the vanguard of cultural change were ex-soldiers. The war had driven them within, away from social reality, and revealed a mad and murderous reality apparently meaningless and indifferent to them. They countered this with personal meaning and made internalization the hallmark of the European 1920s.

While still in the trenches, they had expressed:

*. . . their feeling of alienation, marginality, and, at the same time, novelty. That is, the idea that the world was in the throes of destruction . . . but was also in the process of renewal. In this latter process lay a reality of astounding implications: the soldier represented a creative force.*

The result was a new aesthetic based on doubt, irony and pity, upheaval, self-promotion, provocation, and social and individual disjointedness. The war's surreal devastation had, bit by bit, discredited rational explanation and justification. Now the truth became a matter of interpretation, individualism shed its social dimension, and reality seemed to exist not in shared, familiar ideas but one's imagination. So our modern consciousness was born, ironic, subjective, dynamic, and unbound:

*The war, despite its destruction or, indeed, owing to its pervasive horror, had become an evocative force, a stimulus not to social creativity but to personal imagination and inwardness, an avenue to a new and vital realm of activity.*

The future lay in trading the past's external certainties for a spirited if uncertain inner reality.

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Twenty years later – after the Jazz Age, bobbed hair, “The Waste Land,” *The Sun Also Rises*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Art Deco, “Gold Diggers of 1933,” Nanking, and Guernica – another generation went to war. For a while at least, there was little room for ironic distance or cynicism. Films such as “In Which We Serve,” the 1942 story about a British destroyer and her crew, remind us that in hard times there’s nothing absurd about the old conventions of respect, loyalty, service, and duty.

But all things pass away, even world wars. In August 1945, the 21-year-old Fussell, a traumatized veteran of the European Campaign, was in Germany waiting for transfer to the Pacific and the invasion of Japan. Decades later, he described how he and his comrades reacted when they heard that the atom bomb had ended it all and they wouldn’t have to fight any more: “. . . for all the practiced phlegm of our tough façades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all.”

There was a brief respite from dread. “The killing was all going to be over,” Fussell thought, “and peace was actually going to be the state of things.” But soon everyone knew about the death camps, and the world was introduced to a new circle of hell. Soon, too, there was the possibility of all-out nuclear warfare, and the fragility of international entente was exposed. There would be no real peace.

Soldiers once again returned to an uneasy post-war world, desperate for security. It took years for satire and irony to make a comeback, just as it did for the film and book industries to forgive the Germans even a little. Then, in 1961, Joseph Heller published *Catch-22*, and there’s a lot to be learned from it.

## **Joseph Heller and the Cold War**

*Paranoia strikes deep / Into your life it will creep.*

~ *Buffalo Springfield*, “*For What’s It’s Worth*,” 1966

The funny thing about *Catch-22*, Heller’s famous war novel, is that it’s not really about war at all. Not World War II anyway. The author did base his novel on his experience as a U.S. Army Air Forces

bombardier in Europe, and his narrative is set in the Mediterranean, where he served in 1944. Moreover, his protagonist, Yossarian, is also a USAAF bombardier, and the depiction of war's horror and the absurdity of military bureaucracy feels autobiographical and authentic. But this is a story, a fiction, and Heller used his past to satirize and condemn not the Second World War or the wartime military but what came after the war. Based on things he said much later, he didn't feel remorse about the war or his part in it. As for the military bureaucracy ridiculed in the novel, he said he'd never had a bad officer. Overall, his war was bizarre but valid, even enjoyable at first. He was young, and he was fighting the Nazis.

Nevertheless, *Catch-22* is about an airman determined not to die for his country. Yossarian will do whatever it takes to survive the hostility, indifference, and irrationality of a world gone crazy:

*Havermeyer was a lead bombardier who never missed. Yossarian was a lead bombardier who had been demoted because he no longer gave a damn whether he missed or not. He had decided to live forever or die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive.*

The critical moment in his war is the death of a fellow airman:

*He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.*

Before Snowden's death, Yossarian had been a patriot. "Christ," he says to another officer, "I earned that medal I got, no matter what their reasons for giving it to me. I've flown seventy goddamn combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger any more, but I am."

The outcome of the war is clear, but the dying isn't over and Yossarian wants out. The snag is that his squadron commanders keep raising the number of missions men have to fly before they can return to the States. Yossarian understands three things: first, the enemy wants to kill him; second, his own side is indifferent to his survival; and third, his desire to live (a sure sign of sanity) nixes any chance of a psychiatric discharge. That's the real Catch-22: "There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind."

As he grinds over and over against military and bureaucratic irrationality, incompetence, self-interest, and lunacy, his sanity becomes a liability. By the novel's end, he's had enough. He's off to Sweden, chucking it for a separate peace, an honourable discharge of his own design.

One of Yossarian's problems is the universe: it's absurd. "And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways. . . . There's nothing mysterious about it, He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us." More importantly, Yossarian's social institutions are absurd, though again this is really about Heller's quarrel with post-war America:

*Virtually none of the attitudes in the book – the suspicion and distrust of the officials in the government, the feelings of helplessness and victimization, the realization that most government agencies would lie – coincided with my experiences as a bombardier in World War II. The antiwar and antigovernment feelings in the book belong to the period following World War II: the Korean War, the cold war of the Fifties.*

There was the bomb – or, more accurately, the arsenal of bombs on both sides – the war in Korea, the McCarthy era, and, under it all, the proliferation of self-interest epitomized by the novel's Milo Minderbinder. Or so it seemed to Heller, writing in his spare time while working full-time in advertising.

Then, in 1961, after eight years of drafting, redrafting, and editing, the book was done. Simon & Schuster, Heller's U.S. publisher, threw itself into promoting its big new novel, making the most of early praise from literary figures such as S.J. Perelman. And sales were okay. Some critics loved the book, some hated it, and some were unsure. It sold extremely well in Britain. In the United States, sales were more modest. Then, bit by bit and largely by word of mouth, readership spread across North America, and the paperback edition took off. America had been waiting for *Catch-22*.

As Christopher Buckley says in his introduction to the novel's 50th anniversary edition:

*Joe Heller began work on his World War II novel around the time the Korean War was winding down and published it just as another American war, in Vietnam, was getting under way. . . . Catch-22's first readers were largely of the generation that went through World War II. For them, it provided a startlingly fresh take, a much-needed, much-delayed laugh at the terror and madness they endured.*

But those first readers were still catching up with the past. In the years after *Catch-22's* publication, there was an accelerating scepticism about America's current values, principles, and integrity. As the war in Vietnam dug deeper into the national psyche, the United States experienced something like Europe's



post-Versailles confusion and cynicism. For the Vietnam generation, as Buckley says, *Catch-22* “amounted to existential comfort and the knowledge that they were not alone.” And as Jonathan Eller writes:

*It was a book that captured the feelings of helplessness and horror generated by the darker side of the American dream at a time when the general reading public still expected fiction to reflect a positive view of contemporary America and its hallowed institutions.*

Literary fiction in the 1960s became increasingly critical of American society, with *Catch-22* part of a cultural assault on the nation’s alleged duplicity and hypocrisy. In what Heller later called the decade’s “new spirit of healthy irreverence,” his book eventually sold millions of copies at home. *Catch-22* had been waiting for America.

Seen from our twenty-first century, multinational, mega-corporate, and globalized present, *Catch-22*’s Lieutenant Milo Minderbinder is a miracle of literary prophecy. The squadron’s mess officer, he’s the ideal capitalist-entrepreneur, the man who knows no limits. Dedicated solely to profit, he manages a trading syndicate that thrives on war and includes a wide variety of members, some on the Allied side, some not. Milo isn’t vicious, but he has no soul and there’s no moral structure to his free market capitalism. At one point, he contracts with the Americans to bomb a bridge – he has planes at his disposal – and with the Germans to defend it with anti-aircraft artillery, also at his disposal. It’s too much for Yossarian:

*“Milo, a man in my tent was killed on that mission before he could even unpack his bags.”*

*“But I didn’t kill him.”*

*“You got a thousand dollars extra for it.”*

*“But I didn’t kill him. I wasn’t even there, I tell you. . . . Look, I didn’t start this war, Yossarian. . . . I’m just trying to put it on a businesslike basis. Is anything wrong with that? You know, a thousand dollars ain’t such a bad price for a medium bomber and a crew. If I can persuade the Germans to pay me a thousand dollars for every plane they shoot down, why shouldn’t I take it? . . . Sure, we’re at war with them. But the Germans are also members in good standing of the syndicate, and it’s my job to protect their rights as shareholders.”*

It’s global capitalism, privatization, and contracting out taken to an extreme. It comes with principles of a sort, but there’s no end to its hunger.

*Catch-22* feels contemporary. Like prophetic art of any kind, it seems more relevant as it ages, and maybe we understand it better as the world ages with it. It's as though our culture has grown into Heller's vision, his astute but exaggerated view of our cupidity. Then, too, *Catch-22* has a number of now familiar postmodern elements: anxiety, paranoia, irony, scepticism, absence of transcendent truth, anarchism, confusion, and distrust of authority. Served up in a collage-like, "disintegrated" form, it seems very *now*.

The book's elements of anxiety and distrust ensure its continued popularity. Suspicion of authority is never in short supply, and there's a sizeable literature of social disaffection. In fact, Heller points out that "the feelings of helplessness and persecution in *Catch-22*" were also present in novels written by Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut at the same time, and the sense of a malign *them* has informed much of our popular and literary culture since the early 1960s. "It is the anonymous 'they,' Heller writes, "the enigmatic 'they,' who are in charge. Who is 'they'? I don't know. Nobody knows. Not even 'they' themselves." Then he explains how his original *catch* grew into a *law*, taking on active agents, a *them*: "I began to expand each application of *Catch-22* to encompass more and more of the social system. *Catch-22* became a law: 'they' can do anything to us we can't stop 'them' from doing."

So there's us and there's them. They have power, and we have satire, black humour, an edgy vigilance, a subdued rage, worry, cynicism, stoicism, postmodern irony, and measured empathy. "Yossarian Lives!" said an anti-war slogan in the sixties. But the them is always there.

Yossarian goes to an army psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist says:

*"You've got a bad persecution complex. You think people are trying to harm you."*

*"People are trying to harm me."*

*"You see? You have no respect for excessive authority or obsolete traditions. You're dangerous and depraved, and you ought to be taken outside and shot!"*

*"Are you serious?"*

*"You're an enemy of the people!"*

The irony is unsubtle but funny. It's also chilling. The state decides who's an enemy of the people, and if the state insists on respect for excessive authority and obsolete traditions, so it goes.

The American critic John Aldridge said that mid-century writers like Heller, John Barth, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon created a "new kind of fiction that represented an abdication of traditional

realism." This new fiction used "the techniques of black humor, surrealism and grotesque metaphor to dramatize unreality, most often by making it seem even more unreal than it actually was." This was a matter of *exaggeration*, however, of dramatizing unreality rather than inventing it. The unreality was real.

*Catch-22* includes a long exchange between the young and naïve Lieutenant Nately and an old man who runs a Roman brothel. It's all about gullibility, mindless nationalism, outdated and simplistic notions of duty, and the sacrifice of the innocent. It's droll and deadly serious. "What is a country?" the old man asks, then answers his own question:

*"A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for."*

*"Anything worth living for," said Nately, "is worth dying for."*

*"And anything worth dying for," answered the sacrilegious old man, "is certainly worth living for."*

A true survivor, he tries to warn Nately:

*"They are going to kill you if you don't watch out, and I can see now that you are not going to watch out. Why don't you use some sense and try to be more like me? You might live to be a hundred and seven, too."*

*"Because it's better to die on one's feet than live on one's knees," Nately retorted with triumphant and lofty conviction. "I guess you've heard that saying before."*

*"Yes, I certainly have," mused the treacherous old man, smiling again. "But I'm afraid you have it backward. It is better to live on one's feet than die on one's knees. That is the way the saying goes."*

Nately, a very decent young man, has faith in a world that makes sense. "I don't believe anything you tell me," he says. "The only thing I do believe is that America is going to win this war." Cheerfully reconciled to his loss of faith, the "grubby, iniquitous old man" replies: "You put so much stock in winning wars. . . . The real trick lies in losing wars, in knowing which wars can be lost." The world has changed since Versailles, even since 1945. The truth is topsy-turvy, we're suspicious of authority, and our notions of duty and service reflect an increasingly edgy individualism.

## Kazuo Ishiguro and the Cold World

Two other novels, both by the British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, also mirror the way in which Western society changed in the second half of the twentieth century and notions of service and duty shifted. The first, *The Remains of the Day*, was published in 1989, the second, *Never Let Me Go*, in 2005.

*Remains* is narrated by Stevens, the butler at Darlington Hall, a great house in the south of England. It is 1956, but most of the novel focuses on Stevens's thirty-five years with Lord Darlington, and his memories of Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper at the Hall. The story is structured by Stevens's road trip to Cornwall, where Miss Kenton, now Mrs Benn, lives with her husband and daughter. On the road, Stevens recalls episodes from his life and reflects on concepts of the perfect butler and the nature of dignity, his chief concern. He recalls Lord Darlington's fine character but poor judgment, and he thinks about the meaning of duty and personal service. Driving home after seeing Miss Kenton, he stops for two nights in Weymouth, Dorset, and there the book ends.

Stevens visits Miss Kenton to convince her to return to Darlington Hall, now owned by Mr Farraday, a wealthy and likeable American. The Hall needs her, Stevens argues, and thus, as he sees it, his visit is professional rather than personal. In fact, he misses Miss Kenton, though he's unable to fully acknowledge this until the novel's end, and then only to himself.

The road relaxes him. The brief vacation is a rare break from the Hall and his duties. He talks with a series of working people – *his* people despite his posh manners – and as his memories erode his confidence, he softens. At first, his standards are impossibly high, and his prideful attachment to his service is unwavering. He spends a lot of time outlining the code of the butler and summarizing its history. According to this code, dignity, self-restraint, and loyalty trump everything, and that's the key to the novel.

Stevens believes that his generation of butlers was uniquely idealistic. For them, their employer's morality had been crucial. It was essential "to serve gentlemen who were, so to speak, furthering the progress of humanity." In order to make their contribution to a better world, eminent butlers must "serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted." A great butler must be "one who can point to his years of service and say that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman – and through the latter, to serving humanity."

Lord Darlington seems such a man. Aristocratic, unselfish, and honourable, he is a veteran of the Western Front and a keen participant in post-war international affairs. He is also, it turns out, foolish, credulous, and unworldly. In the same way that Stevens serves his employer with uncritical dedication, so Darlington gives his naïve support to Germany between the wars. In 1923, he says that he'd fought to preserve justice in the world. "As far as I understood, I wasn't taking part in a vendetta against the German race." Stevens remarks that his employer felt that "fair play had not been done at Versailles."

In the First World War, men's most idealistic and selfless qualities left them vulnerable to exploitation by civilian and military authorities. Now Darlington's sympathetic nature and good will make him useful to the wrong people, and similarly vulnerable. In time, his principled support of Germany plays into the hands of the Nazis, and he becomes their asset in Britain. His godson, young Mr Cardinal, isn't fooled by the Germans who visit the Hall in the 1930s. Lord Darlington, he tells Stevens, is a gentleman, "a true old English gentleman," but that's been his undoing: "The way they've used it, manipulated it, turned something fine and noble into something else – something they can use for their own foul ends? You must have seen it, Stevens."

Years earlier, an American named Lewis had mocked Darlington's political innocence. There's no longer a role, he'd said, for the amateur in international affairs: "All you decent, well-meaning gentlemen, have you any idea what sort of place the world is becoming all around you? The days when you could act out of your noble instincts are over." Shortly before the Second World War, Mr Cardinal echoes Lewis's sentiments: "It's a fact of life. Today's world is too foul a place for fine and noble instincts."

Attached to his role and convictions, Darlington will not wake up. He rejects Lewis's insistence that international affairs should be left to professionals:

*"I believe I have a good idea of what you mean by 'professionalism'. It appears to mean getting one's way by cheating and manipulating. It means ordering one's priorities according to greed and advantage rather than the desire to see goodness and justice prevail in the world."*

Many years later, Stevens, equally attached to his role and beliefs, tells Mr Cardinal that he has absolute faith in Lord Darlington's judgment. By then, German soldiers have entered the Rhineland, and, as Cardinal says, no one with good judgment could trust anything Hitler said.

It ends badly, of course. War is declared, and Darlington's apparent collaboration becomes public knowledge. Disgraced, he dies in the early 1950s, and the Hall is sold to Farraday.

As Stevens drives west, he reviews his former employer's actions and is troubled by one event in particular. In 1932, Darlington, influenced by a female member of Oswald Mosley's "blackshirts," is guilty of anti-Semitism. "There's the safety and well-being of my guests to consider," he says, as he instructs Stevens to dismiss two Jewish maids. Stevens does so, countering Miss Kenton's furious objections with: "we must not allow sentiment to creep into our judgement. . . . The fact is, the world of today is a very complicated and treacherous place. There are many things you and I are simply not in a position to understand concerning, say, the nature of Jewry. Whereas his lordship, I might venture, is somewhat better placed to judge what is for the best." It is a shameful episode. A year later Darlington realizes this, regrets what he did, and seeks to compensate the two young women.

But the harm is done. Darlington has behaved badly, Stevens has carried out his orders without protest, and Miss Kenton, after threatening to resign, has not. It's the beginning of the end of Darlington Hall.

The farther Stevens travels, the more the truth surfaces and the less sure he is about the value of his service. At first he is defensive. About the sacking of the maids: "my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal. Nevertheless, my duty in this instance was quite clear, and as I saw it, there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such personal doubts. It was a difficult task, but as such, one that demanded to be carried out with dignity."

His duty was straightforward. As he says, "a butler's duty is to provide good service," and he did what was necessary. This was not, he believes even now, an instance of mindless loyalty. It's simply that:

*. . . if a butler is to be of any worth to anything or anybody in life, there must surely come a time when he ceases his searching; a time when he must say to himself: 'This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable. I will therefore devote myself to serving him.'*

By this stage of the journey, Stevens is shaken enough to admit that he'd served a man of poor judgment, but not enough to recognize the tragedy of his own uncritical devotion:

*How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense that Lord Darlington's efforts were misguided, even foolish? Throughout the years I served him, it was he and he alone who weighed up evidence and judged it best to proceed in the way he did, while I simply confined myself, quite properly, to affairs within my own professional realm. . . . It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste – and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account.*

Later, however, Stevens recalls something Mr Cardinal had said to him, and his reply. Cardinal had asked whether he wasn't curious about Darlington's activities on behalf of the Reich, and he had replied rather stiffly that it wasn't his place "to display curiosity about such matters." "Ah," Cardinal had said, "I suppose you believe that to be loyalty."

That same evening in the mid-1930s – as Darlington hosts a meeting with the German Ambassador – two events occur. The first is Miss Kenton's desperate attempt to provoke Stevens into declaring his feelings for her by announcing that she plans to marry and move to the West Country. Stevens appears unmoved and offers his warmest congratulations. The other event, which closes the second-to-last chapter, is Stevens's realization that he has made it through a particularly difficult evening while maintaining his dignity throughout. Even his harsh and judgmental father, also a butler in his time, would have been proud of him. So removed is he from his feelings for Miss Kenton, and from her pain, that he can see the evening as the high point of his career and a summary of all he has achieved: "within the very room where I had just executed my duties, the most powerful gentlemen of Europe were conferring over the fate of our continent. Who would doubt at that moment that I had indeed come as close to the great hub of things as any butler could wish?"

This juxtaposition of Stevens's personal exaltation and Miss Kenton's tears – the victory of pride and emotional repression over love – is the spiritual low point of the novel. It takes place in the past, however, twenty years before Stevens sets out on his heart's journey to Cornwall.

Meeting Miss Kenton for tea, Stevens asks her to come back to Darlington Hall. She declines. Her place is with her husband, she says, though privately she wishes to return. In fact, she misses Stevens as much as he does her, but, like him, won't make this clear. Instead, she says: "there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful." Stevens is silent at first:

*I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking. Before long, however, I turned to her and said with a smile: "You're very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock. . . ."*

He leaves (“It was a great pleasure to see you again, Mrs Benn”), and the story ends with a long scene on the pier at Weymouth the next day. As the crowds wait for the pier’s lights to come on at dusk, Stevens shares a bench with a retired butler and confesses to this stranger that he’s starting to make mistakes in his work. They’re small mistakes, he says, but he’d never have made them in the past. Then he breaks down: “Goodness knows, I’ve tried and tried, but it’s no use. I’ve given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington.” And he weeps.

Darlington wasn’t a bad man, Stevens tells the retired butler:

*“He wasn’t a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he had made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?”*

The retired butler counsels Stevens not to look back so much, and though the sudden admission of his servility and failure is overwhelming, the result is release, acceptance, and the possibility of a very different pride:

*Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day. . . . Surely it is enough that the likes of you and I at least try to make our small contribution count for something true and worthy. And if some of us are prepared to sacrifice much in life in order to pursue such aspirations, surely that is in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment.*

The pier’s lights are switched on, and Stevens realizes that for the people around him this simple event reflects their pleasure in the final hours of the day. He observes a group of six or seven behind him, strangers until moments ago but now laughing together. “It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly.” He believes it has to do with their ability to banter, to relax in each other’s company by joshing, and he decides to improve his skills in this area. “Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at the whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in – particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth.”



The key to human warmth. This is not the same man who set out for Cornwall several days earlier. And to add to his anticipation of connecting with others, he senses that “bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform.” Thus there’s a second reason to dedicate himself to its skillful use. Perhaps, he muses in the book’s final lines, by the time Mr Farraday returns from his current trip to America, “I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.” There’s a cautious joy in Stevens as he’s drawn back to serving a man he has every reason to respect, and to the possibility of human warmth. There’s much to do. He has his duty (obligation), service (devotion), and something new: pleasure. It’s a comic ending. Stevens is still a bit of a fool, but he’s a kinder, wiser, and happier fool. This is a happy story, and a smart one.

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*Never Let Me Go*, published sixteen years after *The Remains of the Day*, is every bit as smart, but there’s nothing happy about it. Set in an alternative late 1990s England, it is narrated by a young woman named Kathy. She and her friends Ruth and Tommy grow up at a special boarding school at which there’s little serious study or contact with the outside world. Instead, students are encouraged by their teachers, known as guardians, to interact, play sports, produce art, and be healthy.

*Never Let Me Go* is tenderly sinister. Its depiction of the young is exquisite, and Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are lovingly drawn. As children, they and their friends are, within normal bounds, innocent and secure. As adults, they are sensitive and considerate. The novel’s sinister quality lies not in them but those who made them.

According to *Never’s* alternative or parallel history, post-1945 England made dramatic advances in medical science and genetic engineering. Unrestrained by moral debate or restrictive laws, medicine learned to defeat disease by sourcing fresh organs from healthy young clones supplied by government institutions. Since then, like soldiers in a war, clones have been sacrificed by a distant authority. Piece by piece, they make their “donations.” When they are used up after two, three, or four donations, they “complete.” They die.

Kathy and her friends learn the truth in stages. By their late teens, they know they have been sterilized and are destined to be donors. They don’t question the justice of this, or the validity of the donor

program. Their fate as organ sources isn't an issue. On the other hand, they're curious about the men and women they were cloned from – each student is unique – and at least some have questions about Hailsham, their school.

During their time at Hailsham, Miss Emily (the headmistress) and her staff stress the creation of visual art. Students are encouraged to produce piece after piece, year after year, and every once in a while a strange woman (“Madame”) appears from the outside, collects their work, and drives off with it. The students have no idea why, though they fantasize about the reasons.

Many years later, Kathy and Tommy learn the truth. By then, Ruth has completed, and Tommy has begun his donations. Kathy is his “carer” (a future donor assigned to support current donors), and she and Tommy find the now retired Miss Emily and her companion, Madame. Hailsham, Miss Emily explains, had been one of three schools in a progressive movement that favoured raising clones humanely. Hence the art: “We took away your art,” Miss Emily says, “because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all”:

*“ . . . we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones – or students, as we preferred to call you – existed only to supply medical science. In the early days after the war, that’s largely all you were to most people.”*

Miss Emily’s movement did make a difference, for a while. After the late 1970s, however, there was a decline in financial support for the schools, the public lost interest in their work, and the movement stalled, then died. Hailsham and the other two programs shut down, and that was that:

*“All around the country, at this very moment, there are students being reared in deplorable conditions, conditions you Hailsham students could hardly imagine. And now we’re no more, things will only get worse.”*

There will be no more humane experiments, Miss Emily explains, and donations will carry on as before.

Years earlier, watching a very young Kathy dance by herself, Madame had had a vision of the future: “I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world.” In Kathy she saw a little girl “holding to her breast the old kind world,” and it broke her heart. All that remains of Hailsham at the story’s end is the children’s art that Madame and Miss Emily have stored in their home. The harsh, cruel world has come.

Like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, the adult Kathy reviews the past and comes to terms with it, but it's her life with Ruth and Tommy that matters most: their affections, romances, jealousies, betrayals, and ultimate solidarity.

The three friends are very different. As a child and youth, Tommy has rages, but they flame out and seem merely part of his nature. Ruth, on the other hand, is mercurial and prickly and comes closest to challenging the system. "We all know it," she says at one point. "We're modelled from trash." Later, when their friend Chrissie dies after only her second donation: "I think it happens much more than they ever tell us."

There is anger in Ruth, and potential resistance, but even she stops short of rebelling. "I was pretty much ready when I became a donor," she tells Kathy and Tommy near the end. "It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" Is she sarcastic or bitter? Kathy isn't sure: "it was the sort of thing you hear donors say to each other all the time."

As for Kathy, she accepts life as it is. She's strong and kind, not passive or timid, but she takes things as they come. Responding to Ruth's remark about Chrissie's early death, she says: "There's no big conspiracy about it, . . . Sometimes it happens. It was really sad about Chrissie. But that's not common. They're really careful these days." And about Rodney, Chrissie's ex-boyfriend: "I've seen a lot of people in Rodney's position, . . . They do come to terms with it."

In any case, no one rises up or runs away. Towards the end, Tommy and Kathy do hope for a short-term "deferral" of donations based on their love for each other, but when they learn that deferrals are a myth, they simply accept what that means. It's not that their love is superficial. It's that compliance is a given. There is "a distressing dedication to the donor ethic," as one reviewer says, and the habit of resignation.

Tommy has one final rage, one last howling protest, and this time it's clearly against his destiny. Perhaps, Kathy suggests, he'd understood their fate from the start, better than the rest. Perhaps, he replies but leaves it at that. Earlier, he'd said: "I wasn't much good as a carer. . . . I think that's why the notice for my first came so early. I know it's not supposed to work that way, but I reckon that's what it was. Didn't mind really. I'm a pretty good donor, but I was a lousy carer." After his outburst, he's quiet again.

Kathy is caring and disciplined to the end. In the novel's last lines, she imagines Tommy approaching across a field. Perhaps he'll wave, she thinks, or call out, though she knows he's dead:

*The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.*

She will make her first donation by the end of the year, but she won't forget her friends: "The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them." She will discharge her duty as a donor, but she will never give up her fundamental service: a devotion to her friends. She will never let them go, or forget the old kind world that shaped them.

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There are different ways to interpret *Never*, and readers have labelled it many things: science fiction, speculative fiction, alternate history, thriller, horror story, coming of age narrative, dystopian or futuristic parable, and cautionary tale about cloning. Regardless of category or genre, it's about humanness, and it's a love story.

As Roger Ebert said, *Never* is about empathy and the ability to love. Like *Remains*, it's about human connection, making it and keeping it, and what it means to be emotionally whole. The students have no surnames or families but are raised by adults who care for them, and their intimacy, sensitivity, and awareness of personal mortality make them especially human. It isn't their art that validates them.

However, like *Remains* and *Catch-22*, *Never* is also about the willingness of authoritarian cultures to sacrifice others. In *Remains*, there's the dismissal of the Jewish maids and the Fascist/Nazi manipulation of Lord Darlington. In *Catch-22*, it's Cold War America's suspension of civil liberties to advance its own interests. And in *Never*, it's the piecemeal disposal of the disenfranchised on behalf of the entitled. With echoes of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, these books describe an unacceptable sacrifice washed down with macabre euphemism, lies, deceit, duplicity, and repression. In a sense, pre-1939 fascism, Cold War reactionary conservatism, and futuristic genetic elitism tell the same story.

Finally, these books remind us that service and duty can, if abused, underpin victimization. If in the First World War it was soldiers walking into machinegun fire, in *Remains* it's Stevens calmly dismissing the maids and betraying his love and integrity, and in *Never* it's Kathy preparing to die one organ at a time.

As for Yossarian, it's true that he deserts, but he's our post-modern hero/anti-hero, and for him the world's existential absurdity is boundless. His duty is to life, starting with his own, and his service is to himself and a saner reality. Sometimes, he might say, we serve best by facing the music, other times by demanding a new tune. ■

## Sources and supplementary material

(page 1:)

The epigraph is from the 50th anniversary edition of *Catch-22*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2011, p. 81. All quotes from *Catch-22* are from this edition.

Any number of stories and memoirs describe the fate of soldiers returning from the Great War. See, for example, Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," a short story published in 1925:

*By the time Krebs returned to his home town in Oklahoma the greeting of heroes was over. He came back much too late. . . . At first Krebs, who had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne did not want to talk about the war at all. Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it.*

To learn more about the difficulties facing Canadian veterans of the war in Afghanistan, see the website for Wounded Warriors Canada ([WWC](#)).

The source of the phrase "victors' peace conference" is Margaret MacMillan in a televised interview with Ben Wattenberg on PBS, May 2004.

See Modris Ekstein's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989) about the Treaty of Versailles. Apart from MacMillan's remark, all quotes in this section are from pp. 332-33 of *Rites of Spring*. Unless otherwise noted, passages on modernism, individualism, and art quoted elsewhere in this article are also from *Rites of Spring*, and I'm indebted to Ekstein's outstanding work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century European cultural change.

(page 2:)

In an appendix to his recent novel, *Dominion*, C.J. Sansom writes:

*After the Great War came the Treaty of Versailles, which glorified small-nation nationalism. New states sprang up from the wreckage of the old Empires, most of which promptly began discriminating against the new minorities within their borders, not least the Jews, and ended up as nationalist dictatorships. And in both large and small European countries nationalism gave birth to its monster children; fascism, based on the organized worship of the nation and Nazism, which worshipped not just nationality but race.*

About Fussell and the other cultural historians, see Jacqueline Hucker, "Vimy: A Monument for the Modern World," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, Vol. 33, Number 1, 2008, p. 45.

The source of the quote about fissure is Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's obituary for Fussell: "Paul Fussell, Literary Scholar and Critic, Is Dead at 88," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2012. Echoing the notion of fissure or rupture in history, James Parker refers to the era's "rupture in consciousness" in an article on G.K. Chesterton in the April 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*.

See Henry Porter, *The Guardian*, August 3, 2013, about 2014's centenary events: "Whether we are being chivvied into recalling the sacrifice for possibly dubious nationalistic reasons, it will be important because the First World War was the moment that humans began to realise the power of total destruction."

Eksteins refers to this period as "a new world dawning" after the old, nineteenth-century world had been "demolished" by the war. (*Rites of Spring*, p. 194.)

Again, most quotes in this section are from *Rites of Spring*: for example, those concerning societal melancholy (p. 333) and soldiers' values (especially pp. 251-52). However, the passages about "the content of duty and devoir" and soldiers withdrawing from social activity are from Eksteins's article, "When Death was Young . . . , Germany, Modernism, and the Great War," 1984.

**(page 3:)**

The quotes about "beauty of duty so nobly done" and "these phrases" are from p. 252 of *Rites of Spring*.

Angie Hobbs, a British philosopher, says about duty that it can connect the romantic ideal and the rational ideal of somebody like Kant. "If duty is the expression of universal human reason, then allegiance to duty will be both this rational ideal of a philosopher like Kant and this romantic ideal which

could bind the whole human race." Professor Hobbs was one of three guests on a 2003 BBC Radio broadcast on the subject of duty, and her remarks are drawn from that broadcast.

"A Taste of Ashes," an article about November 11, 1918, is the source of the Jay Winter quote. (See *History Today*, formerly *The Beaver*, November 1998.) One of the article's strengths is its insight into Adolf Hitler's post-war bitterness and his desire to avenge the suffering and alleged betrayal of his comrades. Winter quotes Hitler: "The shame of indignation and the disgrace of defeat burned my brow. . . . hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed." Further: "I, for my part, decided to go into politics."

I'd like to thank my friend James Middleton for his critical reading of these pages on the post-war era, and for his contribution to the paragraph on social activism in Canada. The quote about "a new faith and set of values" is his. On a related subject, he notes that for many Canadians the Vimy Memorial kept the war visible and meaningful. Further, the public's respect for Vimy suggests that while few non-veterans may have dwelt on the war, most didn't forget it either.

The source of Lehmann-Haupt's remarks is cited above.

**(pages 4-5:)**

The Robert Hughes quote is from the latter's *Time* magazine review of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, October 20, 1975.

John Lessingham writes that Fussell's book shows us how shocking the soldiers' experience was, "not only in its unheroic misery but also in the amount of dissimulation, stupidity, and sheer incompetence they encountered." He's referring to the First World War, of course, but his words might apply to any example of modern warfare's "industrialized horror and bureaucratic mendaciousness." See John Lessingham, "In Memoriam: Paul Fussell," *n+1 Magazine*, June 7, 2012.

Absurdity is the "ridiculously incongruous or unreasonable." Philosophically, it tends to reflect the view that "there is no order or value in human life or in the universe." It is "the condition or state in which humans exist in a meaningless, irrational universe wherein people's lives have no purpose or meaning." (Source: [free dictionary.com](http://free.diction.com).)

See Paul Fussell on Thomas Pynchon in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 329. Note Fussell's remark that "Irony is the attendant of hope and the fuel of hope is innocence."



John Lessingham on Fussell and irony: "The Great War's central insight is that 'every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected.' Its central image is the Virgin of Albert, a steepletop statue damaged by shellfire so that she appeared to be hurling the infant Christ into the desolation below." This image is reproduced on a postcard in *Soldier for his times*, p. 64.

The source of this remark about the postwar floodtide of irony is p. 294 of *Rites of Spring*.

These quotes from Eksteins have two sources: i) *Rites of Spring*, p. 2 ("scale of values and beliefs"; "single most significant event") and p. 279 ("fog of existential questioning"; "the soldier represented a creative force"), and ii) Eksteins's 2012 CBC Radio interview with Paul Kennedy ("de-definition"; "system of values and ideas").

The phrase "the urge to create and the urge to destroy" is from *Rites of Spring*, p. 427, while the remarks about preserving a system of values and Germany's Weimar Republic are from the interview. The Weimar Republic, created in 1919, was unable to resolve Germany's post-war problems and was overthrown by Hitler in 1933. Those unhappy with Weimar tended to see it, as Sansom says in *Dominion*, as an era of post-imperial decadence and disorder. Their answer: order and discipline.

Re "individual personality": for the United States, individualism was nothing new. In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville saw that it was fundamental to American society.

As for service losing ground to *self*-service, Bob Dylan says "you're gonna have to serve somebody, / It may be the devil or it may be the Lord." The self is not an option, he implies, and a century of culturally-endorsed self-service seems to bear this out. As Jacques Maritain put it, "we do not need a truth to serve us, we need a truth that we can serve."

About the veteran, Eksteins writes: "The soldier became then not just the harbinger but the very agent of the modern aesthetic, the progenitor of destruction but also the embodiment of the future. Any hope for that future resided exclusively in the individual imagination." (*Rites of Spring*, p. 282.) And about the impact of World War One: there were "its extraordinary convulsions . . . the doubt, the gradual destruction of a framework, of systems of meaning. Within that context, what is left is life itself, experience itself, perhaps the exhilaration of life itself." (Source: the Eksteins interview.)

John Lessingham refers to "ironic subjectivity" in his piece on Fussell, while the passage about "a new and vital realm of activity" appears on p. 284 of *Rites of Spring*.

(page 6:)

See Paul Fussell's *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays*, 1988. See also Joseph Heller's "I Am the Bombardier," *New York Times Magazine*, May 7, 1995: "The bomb dropped in August. I had been discharged in June. I remember where I was. I had been taken to the race track by a good friend of mine, and as we were coming out they were handing out newspapers – 'Atom Bomb, Atom Bomb.' Nobody knew what it was except it was a very big deal. I thought, *What a wonderful thing!*"

(page 7:)

Stephen E. Ambrose: "On the fiftieth anniversary of V.E. Day, I was with Joe Heller, a bombardier with the Twelfth Air Force, and the author of *Catch-22*. Heller told me, "I never had a bad officer. . . . Every single officer from when I went into the service to going over to Italy to flying the missions to when I got discharged, every one of them was good.'" (*The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s Over Germany, 1944-1945*, p. 151.)

See Sam Merrill's 1975 *Playboy* interview with Heller, reprinted in *Conversations with Joseph Heller*, 1993, p. 148. About the war: ". . . I saw it as a war of necessity. Everybody did. Young people today don't know what it's like to fight in a war that makes sense to anybody. And neither did the people in my parents' generation. World War One and the earlier wars in Europe were as nonsensical as Vietnam."

It may have been a war of necessity, but Heller saw the evil in it and the culpability of men on both sides. In the same interview, he recalls a low-altitude bomb-and-strafe mission carried out by members of his squadron: "They couldn't find any military targets, so they shot up everything that moved: women, children, animals. The men were in good spirits after that mission."

From Heller's "I Am the Bombardier," *New York Times Magazine*, May 7, 1995:

*Almost all our bombing missions were bridges. I didn't think about the people on the ground. I would guess very few military personnel or civilians were injured by our bombs. But I would also say that if we had been bombing cities I doubt if it would have bothered me. It would bother me now. I was an ignorant kid. I was a hero in a movie. I did not believe for a second that I could be injured. I did not really believe that anyone was being injured. Until Avignon [his thirty-seventh mission], the war was the most marvelous experience in my life. . . . for me and I think for many people looking back – it was wonderful. I'm telling you, the war was wonderful.*

Even after Avignon, and despite the fear he carried with him on every remaining mission, he was still relatively safe and insulated from combat. "Twenty-one years old," he wrote in "I Am the "Bombardier." "I had no idea what war was like until I read about the Vietnam War."

The *Free Online Dictionary* defines "Catch-22" as: "1a. A situation in which a desired outcome or solution is impossible to attain because of a set of inherently illogical rules or conditions; . . . 2. A situation or predicament characterized by absurdity or senselessness. 3. A contradictory or self-defeating course of action. 4. A tricky or disadvantageous condition; a catch."

Heller's definition ("There was only one catch . . .") is on p. 46 of the novel.

**(page 8:)**

In depicting Yossarian's desertion, Heller makes his hero's escape a brave and responsible act. Not only does Yossarian plan to rescue a young girl in Rome and take her to safety in Sweden, but by deserting he avoids betraying his comrades. His senior officers have given him a choice: an honourable discharge if he supports their raising the required number of missions, or a court martial if he refuses. Yossarian's desertion is proof, John W. Aldridge writes, that he "has managed to remain morally alive and able to take responsibility for his life in a totally irresponsible world." See "The Loony Horror of it All – *Catch-22* Turns 25," reprinted in the 50th anniversary edition, p. 511.

The quote about antiwar and antigovernment feelings is a short article by Heller entitled "Reeling in *Catch-22*." Originally published in *The Sixties* (edited by Lynda Rosen Obst), it is also appended to the 50th anniversary edition.

See also the interview with Sam Merrill, p. 160: "As I've said, *Catch-22* wasn't really about World War Two. It was about American society during the Cold War, during the Korean War, and about the possibility of a Vietnam."

In his introduction to the 50th anniversary edition, Christopher Buckley writes that *Catch-22* was an immediate bestseller in England. In the United States, it "never won a literary prize and never made the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list."

**(page 9:)**

See Jonathan R. Eller's "The Story of *Catch-22*," also appended to the 50th anniversary edition, about the novel and the darker side of the American dream.

Heller, from "Reeling in *Catch-22*": *Catch-22* came to the attention of college students at about the same time that the moral corruption of the Vietnam War became evident. The treatment of the military as corrupt, ridiculous and asinine could be applied literally to that war. And: There was a change in spirit, a new spirit of healthy irreverence. There was a general feeling that the platitudes of Americanism were horseshit. Number one, they didn't work. Number two, they weren't true. Number three, the people giving voice to them didn't believe them either.

In 1986, when *Catch* turned twenty-five, Aldridge wrote:

*In fact, many readers must have sensed that beneath the comic surfaces Mr. Heller was saying something outrageous, unforgivably outrageous, not just about the idiocy of war but about our whole way of life and the system of false values on which it is based. The horror he exposed was not confined to the battlefield or the bombing mission but permeated the entire labyrinthine structure of establishment power. . . . It was undoubtedly this recognition that the book was something far broader in scope than a mere indictment of war . . . that gave it such pertinence to readers who discovered it over the next decade. For with the seemingly eternal and mindless escalation of the war in Vietnam, history had at last caught up with the book and caused it to be more and more widely recognized as a deadly accurate metaphorical portrait of the nightmarish conditions in which the country appeared to be engulfed.*

The exchange between Milo Minderbinder and Yossarian is in Chapter 24. About Minderbinder and post-war America, see p. 150 in the Merrill interview: "I gave him a mental and moral simplicity that, to my mind, makes him a horrifyingly dangerous person because he lacks evil intent." His pathology, in other words, is sincere, his reach infinite.

**(pages 10-11:)**

Heller: "A general disintegration of belief took place then, and it affected *Catch-22* in that the form of the novel became almost disintegrated. *Catch-22* was a collage; if not in structure, then in the ideology of the novel itself." ("Reeling in *Catch-22*," p. 314 in *Obst.*)

*Catch-22*, Heller tells Sam Merrill, is more radical in form than content. "The morality is rather orthodox," Heller says, "almost medieval." See *Conversations with Joseph Heller*, p. 171.

Jonathan Eller: "The postmodern experimental structure was worthy of critical investigation, and the satire engaged students (and professors) who were skeptical of the postwar military establishment." See the 50th anniversary edition, p. 472.

Aldridge writes about *Catch-22* that "the comic fable that ends in horror has become more and more clearly a reflection of the altogether uncomic and horrifying realities of the world in which we live and hope to survive."

The quote about "feelings of helplessness and persecution in *Catch-22*" is from "Reeling in *Catch-22*," as are the references to "they" and "them."

The source of the Aldridge quote about a new kind of fiction is the 50th anniversary edition, p. 513.

**(page 12:)**

All quotes from *The Remains of the Day* are from the Lester & Orpen Dennys paperback, 1989.

The Merchant-Ivory film of *Remains* concludes with a tragically wistful, romantic scene in which Miss Kenton and her bus pull away, leaving Stevens standing in the rain, bereft. Compared to the *book's* conclusion, it's a bit of a letdown.

**(page 13:)**

See pp. 73-76 for Lord Darlington's views on Versailles.

In 2012, *The Guardian* published an article by Salman Rushdie entitled "Rereading The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro." In this piece, Rushdie writes that Lord Darlington "is destroyed by a personal code of ethics. His disapproval of the ungentlemanly harshness towards the Germans of the Treaty of Versailles is what propels him towards his collaborationist doom. Ideals, Ishiguro shows us, can corrupt as thoroughly as cynicism."

The crucial passages about Lord Darlington and Mr. Lewis are on pp. 85-87 and 101-03 of the novel.

For a dramatization of the transition from gentlemanly politics to pragmatism, see the 1943 British film “The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp.” Near the end, the German character Theo, an anti-Nazi veteran of the First World War, argues for a down-and-dirty response to Hitler’s evil: there must be no more playing by gentleman’s rules, and the Nazis must be defeated by any means necessary. Theo is by then a wholly sympathetic character, and the wartime British audience was meant to find his views persuasive.

**(page 14:)**

In the film version of *Remains*, the firing of the Jewish maids differs in at least one key detail. In the novel, there’s no reason to think Ruth and Sarah aren’t British, but their film counterparts, sisters Elsa and Irma, are German, with the implication that if they cannot find work elsewhere and together – they refuse to be separated – they may be sent home to their deaths. In both the book and the film, Darlington later regrets his actions, very deeply it seems, but the sacking remains ugly. See especially pp. 145-51.

**(page 15:)**

Stevens’s defensive remarks about loyalty and dignity are on pp. 199-201.

**(page 16:)**

In an interview with novelist Graham Swift, Ishiguro said: “I tend to be attracted to pre-war and postwar settings because I’m interested in this business of values and ideals being tested, and people having to face up to the notion that their ideals weren’t quite what they thought they were before the test came.”

In the same interview: “The butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power. Most of us aren’t given governments to run or coup d’etats to lead. We have to offer up the little services we have perfected to various people: to causes, to employers, to organizations, and hope for the best – that we approve of the way it gets used.

Also: "Stevens is obsessed with this thing that he calls dignity." As for his eventual distress and self-understanding: "It's the dignity of being human, of being honest. . . . there is something heroic about coming to terms with very painful truths about yourself." (*BOMB Magazine*, Fall 1989.)

In his *Guardian* article, Rushdie says about Stevens: "It was his father, also a butler, who epitomised this idea of greatness; yet it was just this notion which stood between father and son, breeding deep resentments and an inarticulacy of the emotions that destroyed their love." Fair enough, but then: "The real story here is that of a man destroyed by the ideas upon which he built his life." Further: "His whole life has been a foolish mistake, and his only defence against the horror of this knowledge is the same capacity for self-deception which has been his undoing." But Stevens hasn't been destroyed by his ideas, or by anything else. Self-deception and evasion have characterized his life, but they are done with by journey's end.

This, too, seems off the mark: "In this matter Stevens is an unreliable narrator, making excuses for his lordship – 'Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all' – but the reader is allowed to see more clearly than the butler, and can't make any such excuse." Darlington, it is true, has a naïve pliability, and delusion comes easily to him, as it does to Stevens, but he desperately wants to avert another war. That, and his short-lived association with Mosley's follower, make him gullible and incautious and, in the case of the Jewish maids, shamefully wrong. But that's all.

Rushdie also writes that it is Stevens's longing for the sort of professionalism personified by his Victorian father "that has wrecked his one chance of finding romantic love." But what if Stevens is drawn less to romance than devoted service? In any case, the novel's romantic conclusion, though sad, is far from tragic. Stevens and Miss Kenton learn that someone they love loves them. Stevens, particularly fortunate, recognizes at last the depth of his feelings for Miss Kenton and, above all, his need and capacity for connection.

And he does realize that his life has been a foolish mistake; hence his thoughts and feelings on the pier. Now, as he turns from past to future, he is undeceived and looks to the remains of his day with the will to be and to have something different. Rushdie's review and the *Merchant Ivory* film don't do justice to the story's final depth and subtlety.

**(page 17:)**

All quotes from *Never Let Me Go*, originally published in 2005, are from the Vintage Canada trade paperback edition, 2010.

Again, *Never Let Me Go* takes place in an alternative late-twentieth century Britain, but some aspects of that time and place are entirely familiar. Students listen to music cassettes, for example, and Walkmans are on the market.

**(page 18:)**

See especially pp. 260-65 for Miss Emily's summary of the movement, now a thing of the past:

*The world didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn't want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows. . . . in the end, as you know, we were obliged to close, and today there's hardly a trace left of the work we did. . . . All you'll find, as ever, are those vast government 'homes,' and even if they're somewhat better than they once were, let me tell you, my dears, you'd not sleep for a week if you saw what still goes on in some of those places.*

**(pages 20-21:)**

See, for example, "A sinister harvest," Theo Tait's review of *Never Let Me Go*, published in *The Telegraph*, March 13, 2005. Tait sees the novel as "a parable about mortality. The horribly indoctrinated voices of the Hailsham students who tell each other pathetic little stories to ward off the grisly truth about the future – they belong to us." Again, there are many ways to read this book.

See Roger Ebert's film review of "Never Let Me Go," September 22, 2010 (archived at [Ebert](#)).