

A century since American writer John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*, a novel of the First World War

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Three Soldiers*, the first celebrated novel by the prolific American novelist John Dos Passos (1896-1970). The writer is probably best known for his epic *U.S.A.*, a trilogy of novels experimental in form and highly critical of American capitalism and culture. *Three Soldiers* can be held up to *U.S.A.* and seen as the work of a younger Dos Passos, one who is still finding his novelist's voice, but the earlier novel is itself an accomplished work worthy of a reader's attention in 2021.

John Dos Passos was born in Chicago, one of "the class of '96," as F. Scott Fitzgerald referred to himself and his friends Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway (actually born in 1899). Dos Passos spent much of his childhood abroad and developed a restless taste for travel that he never lost. His father, a well-to-do lawyer and respected legal theorist, put Dos Passos through Harvard, where he wrote stories and articles for *The Monthly*.

A prolific writer, Dos Passos wrote novels, plays and nonfiction and was besides a serious visual artist whose paintings, like his fiction, were influenced by modernist experiments. More than any successful American writer of his time, Dos Passos trained his attention on the experience of the working class, particularly itinerant workers forced by circumstances and a resistance to authority to stay on the move.

Three Soldiers

It has been said of *Three Soldiers* that it provided the first honest literary portrayal of World War I to the American public. As such, it was both enthusiastically welcomed and reviled. The cantankerous critic and political writer H. L. Mencken wrote memorably about the novel's impact in its time:

Until *Three Soldiers* is forgotten and fancy achieves its inevitable victory over fact, no war story can be written in the United States without challenging comparison with it—and no story that is less meticulously true will stand up to it. At one blast it disposed of oceans of romance and blather. It changed the whole tone of American opinion about the war; it even changed the recollections of actual veterans of the war. They saw, no doubt, substantially what Dos Passos saw, but it took his bold realism to disentangle their recollections from the prevailing buncombe and sentimentality.

Mencken claims a great deal for the novel here, and certainly the "whole tone" of official American opinion was not transformed by *Three Soldiers*, since one reviewer for the *New York Times* noted that the dust jacket of the book was yellow, and another said he would have guessed it had been written by a "slacker" (someone who avoided registration for the draft). Jingoistic propaganda proliferated in the years immediately following the war, particularly in the wake of the Russian Revolution, pouring from the government and the media, with accusations of "pro-German" sentiment blurring into accusations of "pro-Bolshevik" sentiment.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of *Three Soldiers* initiated an unmistakable acceptance of, and ultimately a tradition of, anti-war, anti-militarist literature in the US. Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* would soon be followed by Willa Cather's Pulitzer-winning novel *One of Ours* (1923) and Hemingway's celebrated group of short stories *In Our Time* (1925), both books depicting the ravages of World War I on body and soul.

Notably, for all its gritty realism, and unlike that most famed First World War novel, German author Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), *Three Soldiers* spends almost no time—perhaps two pages—in the trenches. Rather, the action takes place in boot camp, in French villages near the front, in wine shops and brothels, on grueling marches, in a hospital, and in Paris after the war. For Dos Passos' descriptions of trench warfare, one can turn to his first novel, *One Man's Initiation—1917* (1920), which he wrote while working as an ambulance driver at the front.

In *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos follows the war experiences of an unlikely trio of army privates who nonetheless become friends of sorts by virtue of suffering under a common thumb, the military. Chrisfield hails from Indiana farm country and, while he can be gregarious, he carries a violent temper and is a vicious racist. Dan Fuselli, a second-generation American, is a store clerk from San Francisco. He views the military as a means of advancement in the world, and conducts himself according to one principle, the determination not to "get in bad" with his superiors.

John Andrews, from Virginia gentility by way of New York, is a piano student and composer who has joined up to escape his own inclinations and the feeling he must create music. He is "sick of revolt, of thought, of carrying his individuality like a banner above the turmoil" and seeks to bury himself in the undifferentiated, uniformed mass of the army. Dos Passos uses this plot device to set up within the character two poles, undirected freedom and surrender of will. Andrews soon realizes his mistake:

This was much better, to let everything go, to stamp out his maddening desire for music, to humble himself into the mud of common slavery. He was still tingling with sudden anger from the

officer's voice that morning: "Sergeant, who is this man?" The officer had stared in his face, as a man might stare at a piece of furniture.

Fuselli and Chrisfield allow Dos Passos to carry out his withering critique of the military and the war, though the two are not as closely drawn as Andrews and do not figure much in the second half of the novel, which is given over to Andrews' misadventures.

The latter develops, and hardens, over the course of the novel, though he retains a character flaw, his impetuousness, that determines his fate time and again. Dos Passos portrays Andrews with compassion but without sentimentality. In fact, the utter lack of sentimentality, whether about home, sexual and romantic relationships, or casualties of war distinguishes the novel as a work of art.

Sentimentality itself is held up to ridicule through the characters called "Y" men, representatives of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), who hover about the soldiers in camps and villages away from the front and show anti-German movies. They are government propaganda agents. After a swim, Andrews remarks that putting his uniform back on is "like voluntarily taking up filth and slavery again." He is overheard by a "Y" man who upbraids him, saying among other things, "Remember that your women folks, your sisters and sweethearts and mothers are praying for you at this instant."

Another quality that sets *Three Soldiers* apart as a mature work of fiction is the absence of a "mouthpiece" character, one who stands in for the author and provides his or her perspective on events. Andrews is an artist, and like Dos Passos he hails from the American upper middle class, but his recklessness as well as his undeveloped political orientation guide his actions and thoughts in directions Dos Passos did not pursue. Still more alien to the author is Andrews' ambivalence toward the war itself. However, by forgoing any author-surrogate, Dos Passos more objectively chronicles the world he sees, and the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions from the whole.

Three Soldiers is a raw look at the lives of men in war and is a book that deserves to be read today. It will surprise the modern reader with its freshness and, more importantly, will provoke a genuine emotional response even from readers already opposed to war and militarism. Finally, it serves as a wonderful introduction for reader new to Dos Passos, presenting as it does his characteristic contempt for authority and for the various forms of machinery under capitalism that trap and dehumanize the individual, his revulsion at violence and injustices great and small, and his exceptional artistry as a writer.

U.S.A.

The quality of objective observation at work in *Three Soldiers* characterizes the three novels of *U.S.A.* as well. In these novels, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936), Dos Passos refines the technique to potent effect. Though the narrative remains in the third-person, when we follow a character in these novels we are immersed in his or her world, language and consciousness, and that consciousness is never so unique and idiosyncratic that it represents only the solitary character, but instead stands as part of the consciousness of a class.

Here is a line about the part-time Wobbly (radical Industrial Workers of the World—IWW—member) Mac from *The 42nd Parallel*: "They were kind to him, and had a pretty daughter named Mona that he kinder fell in love with." And about Joe Williams from *1919*: "Back in town they didn't know just what to do. They wanted some drinks and a couple of

frails but they were afraid of getting tanked up and spending all their money." Contrast these with the more lyrical voice that narrates the middle class Eveline Hutchins, also from *1919*:

The house smelt of dry dusty coldness. No matter how much she cuddled against him she couldn't get to feel really warm. The same creaky carousel of faces, plans, scraps of talk kept going round and round in her head, keeping her from thinking consecutively, keeping her from going to sleep.

To read Dos Passos is almost always to read to the background noise of his restrained anger, but he was not without a sense of humor. The itinerant Doc Bingham, who travels the backwaters peddling pornographic books in *The 42nd Parallel*, is a classic American snake oil salesman, and his scenes are hilarious. There are also countless quieter moments of satire, as when J. Ward Moorehouse, an up-and-coming bounder, begins his day the morning after writing to his unfaithful, socialite wife Annabelle that he wants a divorce, and money:

Ward shaved, cleaned his teeth, washed his face and neck as best he could, parted his hair. His jaw and cheekbones were getting a square look that he admired. "Cleancut young executive," he said to himself as he fastened his collar and tied his necktie. It was Annabelle had taught him the trick of wearing a necktie the same color as his eyes. As he thought of her name a faint tactile memory of her lips troubled him, of the musky perfume she used. He brushed the thought aside, started to whistle, stopped for fear the other men dressing might think it peculiar and went and stood on the platform.

Dos Passos does all this without narrative intrusion, without explanation or apology. Nor are these characters simply bits of cultural commentary hung on a human frame. Dos Passos fully invests himself in his main characters, has compassion for them and imbues them with psychological and social complexity. While Dos Passos did not invent this immersion technique—often called "free indirect discourse"—it is possible that he was the first American author to apply it to such a socially diverse cast of characters. The cumulative effect of this narrative style, over the course of the trilogy, is panoramic and powerful.

Dos Passos developed other techniques for *U.S.A.* As he had in his excellent 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*, the author inserts fragments from newspapers, snatches of song lyrics and descriptions of film scenes in the novels, an acknowledgment of mass media's role in modern American life. In *U.S.A.*, he establishes formal sections, called "Newsreel," where these media elements provide context and thematic commentary for the main narrative sections, but can also stand independently, juxtaposing as they do the dead-serious news story—e.g., "U.S. AT WAR"—with the inane, the lighthearted and the sentimental, replicating the media effect that social critic Neil Postman would later label as "schizophrenic."

Dos Passos also intersperses the central narratives with sections called "The Camera Eye." In these autobiographical fragments, he provides vivid images and brief narratives, giving yet another perspective on modern American life. Finally, many narrative sections in *U.S.A.* are preceded by a brief impressionistic biography, almost prose poetry in style. These sections include treatments of labor leaders, politicians and artists, including Big Bill Haywood, John Reed, Theodore Roosevelt, Isadora Duncan, the Unknown Soldier and the one true villain of *U.S.A.*,

President Woodrow Wilson.

In these biographies we are able to see Dos Passos the man most clearly, through his admiration and his censure. Reed “was the last of the great race of war-correspondents” and “the best American writer of his time.” Of Roosevelt, “The Happy Warrior,” Dos Passos writes, “The American public was not kept in ignorance of the Colonel’s bravery. When the bullets sang, how he charged without his men up San Juan Hill ... how he shot a running Spaniard in the tail.”

Overall, *U.S.A.* covers approximately forty years of American history, from the end of the 19th century and the heady days of the formation of the IWW in 1905 through the years of Progressivism and pitched labor battles in *The 42nd Parallel*, up through the manipulated jingoism and state repression of the war years and their aftermath in 1919.

The 1920s of *The Big Money* are drawn with savage satire and are seen by Dos Passos as a decade of social climbing and labor defeats. Shortly after the executions of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927, in whose defense he had campaigned vigorously, Dos Passos gave a withering account of the US of the time, closing with a sort of funeral oration for the contemporary American labor movement:

The last rags of the old puritan standards in which good was white and bad was black went under in the war. In the ten years that have followed the American mind has settled back into a marsh of cheap cosmopolitanism and wisecracking, into a slow odorless putrescence. The protest that expressed itself in such movements as the I.W.W. and the Non-Partisan League has pretty well petered out.

The depth of *U.S.A.* lies in its complex conception of what the novelist-historian can and should record. In his “political biography,” *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.* (1972), Melvin Landsberg makes this important observation about the 12 main characters of the trilogy and their author:

The careers of most, to some extent all, of them help to explain the signal apathy of the middle class toward social reform and toward such seeming outrages as the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. None of the twelve characters is shown suffering real economic privation. American society was thriving enough before the depression to allow them all to become reasonably comfortable, and Dos Passos was not concerned primarily with describing a physical class struggle; he was attempting to describe the process by which Americans develop a point of view toward events.

Though one could argue that Landsberg sets the bar pretty high for “economic privation,” as a number of the characters must often scramble for food or go without, nevertheless his observation about the theme of the fabrication of public opinion in *U.S.A.* is a valuable one. Consciousness, like speech, in Dos Passos is always as much a matter of social and political construction as it is individual expression. Characters think, converse, curse, fear and aspire according to their talents, which are almost always quite average, and according to the mental material they are afforded by their social class and by the culture at large.

Perhaps the most apt description of the *U.S.A.* trilogy was penned by Dos Passos himself, in a brief preface to the single-volume publication of the novels:

U.S.A. is the slice of a continent. U.S.A. is a group of holding companies, some aggregations of trade unions, a set of laws bound in calf, a radio network, a chain of moving picture theatres, a column of stock quotations rubbed out and written in by a Western Union boy on a blackboard, a public-library full of old newspapers and dogeared history books with protests scrawled on the margins in pencil. U.S.A. is the world’s greatest river valley fringed with mountains and hills, U.S.A. is a set of bigmouthed officials with too many bank accounts. U.S.A. is a lot of men buried in their uniforms in Arlington Cemetery. U.S.A. is the letters at the end of an address when you are away from home. But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people.

Something of the current assessment of Dos Passos can be gleaned from a mostly positive 2019 *New Yorker* article penned by writer Matt Hanson, “What John Dos Passos’s ‘1919’ Got Right About 2019.” Hanson finds similarity between Dos Passos’ 1919 and contemporary America in that they both harbor “revolutionary” sentiments. Taking Hanson’s article as a whole, however, it becomes apparent that the sort of “revolution” he sees developing in 2019 is of the mildly reformist, pro-capitalist Bernie Sanders sort, a far cry from the programs of the Wobblies and the Bolsheviks who appear in 1919. And a far cry from the actual, simmering working class mood of the present.

Revealing more than he intends, Hanson gives voice to some of the problems of contemporary American fiction and culture when he claims to spot the “limitations” of Dos Passos’ work:

Dos Passos’s Balzacian ambition was to paint in detail on a wide social canvas. He succeeded only to a point. His hardboiled tone is one limitation: many readers will only be so interested in the fates of grungy, inarticulate men named Mac. And there are few people of color in the novels—a serious flaw in their grand design.”

It cedes no ground to contemporary identity politics to acknowledge that Dos Passos could have included African Americans among his main characters, though had he done so, however successfully, contemporary identity politicians would then grouse that as a white man he was out of his depth and out of his “lane.” One cannot bow to such critics. More to the point is that African Americans do appear, and speak, in *U.S.A.* in realistic ways, as do Jewish Americans, Italian immigrants, Mexicans and others.

As for the readers, perhaps like Hanson, who have limited patience for the grungy and inarticulate in fiction, their tastes can hardly decide the “success” of a “wide social canvas.” And while it is not inappropriate to compare the ambitious *U.S.A.* with the realist works of French novelist Honoré de Balzac, it is certain that Balzac would not have hesitated for a moment to follow the life of a character like Mac. In fact, in reading Dos Passos another French novelist comes readily to mind—Émile Zola. One wonders whether Hanson would fault Zola’s novel *Germinal* (1885) for spending too much time among coal miners or his *L’Assommoir* (1877) for consorting with impoverished alcoholics.

The last half of Dos Passos’ life, sadly, was dominated by his turn to the political right. The starting point for that humiliating and ignoble descent came in 1937, while the novelist was in Spain with Hemingway to report on the civil war. Dos Passos was rightly revolted and incensed at the Stalinist murder of his friend and Spanish translator Jose Robles. However, not every writer drew right-wing conclusions from the events, including George Orwell, whose *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is an indictment of Stalinist crimes in Spain from the left.

One of Dos Passos’ last important acts as a left-wing intellectual, in 1936, was to participate in the work of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. This committee spawned the Dewey Commission, headed by philosopher John Dewey, which in 1937

investigated the charges that had been made against Trotsky at the notorious Moscow Trials and which, after conducting seven days of hearings, found Trotsky to be innocent of all charges and the Moscow Trials to have been “frame-ups.”

Dos Passos was hardly the only American intellectual to trudge a rightward path in the late 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, he was merely one of the first. The Stalinist betrayals proved indispensable ideologically for “democratic” imperialism. Lumping Marxism with Stalinism, Dos Passos became a virulent anticommunist, to the point that by 1964 he supported the presidential candidacy of right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater. Along the way, of course, the writer’s turn in the direction of the worst enemies of humanity meant the utter drying up of his artistic inspiration. No one reads anything he wrote after *U.S.A.* .

Despite his ultimate political trajectory, Dos Passos must be remembered, and read. In brief, we desperately need writers like (early) Dos Passos today, and like Balzac and Zola, writers who unflinchingly depict and object to real human suffering and its actual social and political sources, and who depict the full palette of human experience throughout the social strata.



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