

An Interview with Jennifer Orth-Veillon, Curator of the WWI Centennial Blog, by Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Jennifer, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

We are all huge fans of the WWrite blog, which features posts from writers investigating a variety of aspects of the events and legacy of the First World War. Since 2016, you've had close to 100 contributions on topics such as the portrayal and care of wounded veterans and their rehabilitation; German battlefield cemeteries; writer-soldiers of the War; and more. It's truly a feat and, taken as a whole, a remarkably intelligent way to explore the effects of WWI on art, literature, citizens, and the public imagination.

How did you get the idea to start the [WWrite blog](#), and how did you go about it?

Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Over a glass of Beaujolais wine. Seriously. In 2015, for family medical reasons, I packed up my life in the US and moved with my French husband and small daughter to a small village, Cognac, in the wine-making region of the Beaujolais, located in southeastern France not far from Lyon. Prior to the move, I held a 3-year-long postdoctoral fellowship in communication and literature at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta where I initiated the first student veteran writing group.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon

During these three years, I also taught a class on war literature and veteran memoirs. The students began by studying the literature of WWI as it was one of the first major conflicts that happened on foreign soil. For the returning soldiers, this meant an even greater gap to forge between the civilian community and their war experience. WWI also marked a break with traditional war narratives. Before WWI, these acceptable narratives communicated a sense of patriotism, triumph, and noble sacrifice. The strong soldier fought bravely and didn't complain. The weak soldier was a coward and a criminal. While patriotism, triumph, and heroic sacrifice are certainly important aspects of the combat experience, they do not paint a complete portrait of the long-lasting effects of war on soldiers, on families, and on the community. It could be said that WWI writing, for the first time in history, was responsible for exposing the severity, variety, and complexity of war wounds to the public. Hemingway's sparse prose and Wilfred Owen's grotesque images and irony did something revolutionary.

And why did it take WWI to do this? It inevitably had to do with the unprecedented elements this war introduced to an

unsuspecting world—the unbreakable nationalistic alliances formed by powerful empires, the misery of inch-by-inch trench warfare, masses of soldiers suffering deep psychological damage (“shell shock”), new weapon technology that disfigured the human body beyond recognition and razed entire cities in seconds, entire populations wiped out not only by war, but also by the Spanish flu epidemic that swept the continents. In combat, Russia, France, the British Empire, Germany, and Austria lost close to a million soldiers each and their wounded nearly doubled that number. America officially entered only in 1917 but lost around 53,000 soldiers in combat during just seven months in 1918. The Vietnam War serves as an interesting point of comparison—this conflict lasted fourteen years and the combat dead totaled around 47,000. In addition, WWI-era’s Spanish flu epidemic cost Americans another lost 63,000 lives by Armistice.

My class at Georgia Tech also read memoirs and war literature through the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, including works by Seth Brady Tucker, Kayla Williams, Brian Castner, and Brian Turner. I was fortunate that these authors were so accessible – Seth Brady Tucker and Brian Castner both had Skype sessions with my class, which was fantastic! And, after we finished the reading, the class, for their final project, had to write a multimedia memoir on a veteran from Georgia Tech or from the Atlanta community. When the students asked Tucker and Castner about their writing influences, both immediately mentioned the writing of WWI for many of the reasons I discussed above. Seth Brady Tucker went as far to say that, while studying Wilfred Owen in an Iraqi foxhole, he learned to both read and write poetry (Incidentally, his post for WWrite is entitled [“Discovering WWI Poetry in an Iraqi Foxhole”](#)). In addition, many of the contemporary veterans who became subjects for my students’ memoirs cited WWI literature in their interviews.

I left the US, but I knew I couldn’t leave my work there entirely behind. I know that living in a golden-stone medieval

village in the middle of French vineyards sound like a dream to any American, but the reality was that moving to France was professionally and personally a new start for me. And I wasn't in Paris. It's one thing for people living in this beautiful, rural region to encounter tourists. It's altogether another matter if someone from the outside wants to come in and be part of the community. The Beaujolais is full of families who have lived there for generations and finding ways to integrate was an isolating challenge. Yet I did find traces of my previous life. I would spend many days driving from village to village looking for work and writer/artistic communities. I didn't find either. However, each village's, each town's center features a monument to the WWI dead.



Beaujolais war monument in the village of Saint Julien, with the names of the dead on the side. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

What I learned was that, even if the monument was small, the place's loss was enormous. I would often get out of my car and count the number of dead and then go to the village municipality to see what the population count was in 1914-1918. One village lost 9% of its population. Another lost almost all of its young men. November 11th isn't Veteran's Day but Armistice Day – a national holiday for commemorating WWI only.



WWI monument in the village of Sainte Paule in the Beaujolais.
Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Once, after a car accident, I had to go to the police station

to finish filing the report. While waiting, someone called to report they had found an unexploded WWI shell while digging a pool in their back yard. After the police officer said he would send someone over and hung up, he looked at me and said "happens all the time." It's worth mentioning that no WWI battle took place in the Beaujolais region. This anecdote illustrates how central the Great War is in the French memory and imagination.

Which is why what I discovered over my glass of Beaujolais was so startling. I was in the town of Vaux-en-Beaujolais, otherwise known as Clochemerle, the setting for a famous French satirical film written by [Gabriel Chevallier](#). Each village in the Beaujolais makes its own wine and has a central wine bar/cellar for tasting it.



A painting of Vaux-en-Beaujolais by Gabriel Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

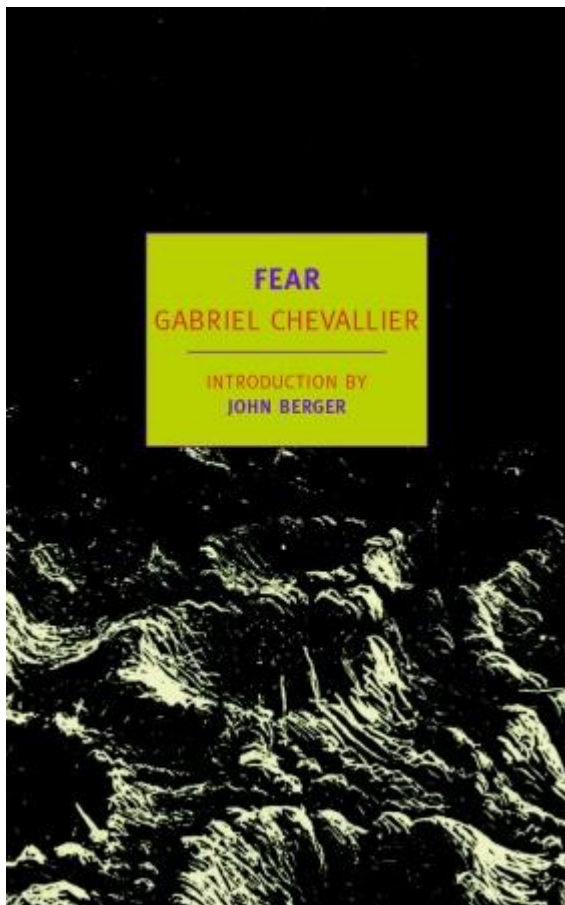
I was chatting with the barman pouring me the wine about possible translation work for the town's tourist brochure when he asked me about my work in the US. I started to tell him about the veteran class [at Georgia Tech], thinking that it would have no relevance to his world and that he would listen because he felt sorry for my loneliness. However, he went to the door of the bar and asked me to follow him. Glass in hand, we went next door, which turned out to be a Gabriel Chevallier museum.



The entrance to the Chevallier museum in Vaux-en-Beaujolais, France. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

A part of the small museum was dedicated to the famous *Clochemerle*, but a larger section featured Chevallier's WWI experience and his novel, *La Peur*, translated as *Fear*. As I learned through the collections of drawing Chevallier did during the war and the pages from the manuscript, *Fear* was

nothing like the satirical *Clochemerle*. It has nothing to do with winemaking, socioeconomic class, or religion; it was a book that spared nothing as it described the ghastly details of the ways men were killed and maimed during Trench warfare. It was published in 1930, but like many works of art that criticized the Great War in France and elsewhere, it was censored. Today, *Fear* represents all that we know well about WWI found in books like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Guns of Steel*- it was a senseless, barbaric massacre.



As it was the only thing that resembled my literary work in the US, I visited the village, the museum, and the bar several times after that. No one was ever looking at Gabriel Chevallier and that's when I realized that, in the middle of a huge national narrative about WWI, holes existed and were ignored. Amidst the monuments, the parades, and the days off, a real discussion of the Great War and the damage it did to France was missing. Everyone knows about the monuments. No one knows that Gabriel Chevallier wrote anything other than

Clochemerle.



Self-portrait of Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the theme I found in so much of the war literature I studied with my classes. Veterans from every past or present war we studied – the celebrated icons of war– felt neglected

by the public narrative. This did not stop with WWI. In fact, these same veterans, including contemporary ones like Tucker and Castner, had even expressed that this phenomenon was first brought to our attention by WWI writers like Owen and Hemingway. I realized that today's war writers owed something like a debt to WWI writing and, with the imminent Centennial, I wanted to explore that idea. I contacted the United States World War One Centennial Commission with my ideas. At the time, they had no substantive information about WWI literature although I found such sites elsewhere. Looking not just at WWI literature, but at how WWI can continue to shape literature, writing, and thought today seemed original. They accepted my proposal and I started work in April of 2016. The first blog post went in January 2017. And it's been going ever since.

AW: Where did your personal interest in WWI begin?

JOV: WWI has always been both a personal and professional interest for me. I realized WWI had more importance than the few pages about alliances in my history textbook when I started working on my first novel, which is based on a lifelong friendship between my grandfather, a WWII battalion surgeon, and a concentration camp prisoner he liberated, a Dutch artist. I read the 1,000+ letters my grandparents wrote each while he was gone and one struck me as very important. It was a letter from August 1945, a few months after VE day in Europe. With his war over, he finally had the space to digest the horrible scenes from combat and he had terrible crying spells and nightmares. That's when he told my grandmother that he finally understood why one of his close relatives, who had served in WWI, was always "crying at nothing." Before that, he had considered this relative weak and unmanly. I knew that to understand WWII, I need to better understand WWI. That's why I jumped at the chance to be TA for a study abroad summer class on WWI and literature taught by James Madison University English professor Mark Facknitz, my former mentor. I was living in Paris at the time working on a Master's Degree at

the French University on WWII and Holocaust literature. Concentrated on Paris and the Nazi Occupation, I had never explored WWI in a deep way. With Mark and about 15 students and other TAs, we traveled in vans across the WWI battlefields and memorials in France, Belgium, and England. We read literature and essays and then applied the ideas about cultural memory and war narratives to the different public memory sites – the American cemetery at Belleauwood, the French ossuary at Douaumont in Verdun, Kathe Kollowtitz's famous statue "The Grieving Parents" in a German cemetery in Flanders. I did this for two summers and came to realize that WWI was present everywhere. It's end was one of the reasons for the turmoil in the Middle East today, it advanced feminist movements, shed new light on racial issues, and shaped many US federal programs today. I believe that to grasp any geopolitical issue today, you have to dial back to WWI to fully understand it.

AW: I know that no one can pick favorites, but I'm curious which contributions or posts surprised you the most, gave you new information or made you see something from a wholly new angle.

JOV: That's like asking which child you love most! I have valued, loved, and learned so much from every single blog post and its author. That's what's so great about the blog – not only the variety of different kinds of posts, but the incredible quality of the writing. I have never been disappointed by a post and each time I get a new one, I feel so lucky to have discovered this author and their work. I guess that before the blog, I felt like a fair amount of knowledge about trench warfare, the events of combat, the major battles, the perils of nationalism, the poetry, the literature, the culture of commemoration. However, I knew much less about the role women, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants played. And, sadly, I came to learn how much they had been forgotten. Chag Lowry's post on his

graphic novel about Native Americans, [Soldiers Unknown](#), Tracy Crow's post about female [Marine Sergeant Leila Lebrand](#), Peter Molin on [Aline Kilmer](#), Joyce Kilmer's wife, [Keith Gandal](#) on the treatment of African Americans after the war, and [Lorie Vanchena's](#) post about German immigrant poetry provide a few examples. I also have a new perspective about WWI in other countries, even in enemy countries through Ruth Edgett's short story about Canada, ["Hill 145,"](#), Andria Williams' (your!) post on the British ["Black Poppies"](#), Michael Carson on [Victor Shklovsky](#) and the Russian Revolution, [Mark Facknitz](#) on German POWs in Japan, and [Benjamin Busch's](#) post about finding a British WWI cemetery in Iraq. From an ideological perspective, I was struck by Elliot Ackerman's post on Ernst Junger's [Storm of Steel](#). Through Junger, Ackerman argues that we live in society that pushes us to thrive on violence rather than mourn war and hate death. But again, these just come to mind at the moment. If I had space and time, I would list every post as one of my favorites. Every post has given me new information and angles.

AW: What has been the biggest challenge in curating the WWrite blog?

JOV: I've had two major challenges. The first is the technical side of the blog and issues of design. I'm not a coding expert and I have to make everything fit the platform requirements of the WWICC site. I think it is much more sophisticated than I am. Formatting takes an incredibly long time. I've spent an hour on getting a picture inserted, margins adjusted, etc. But, I think this is an issue that many artists have to confront today. The digital medium is necessary but requires extra training and patience. The second is convincing writers that they are, in fact, influenced by WWI even if they don't think they are. Sometimes I'll contact a writer and, even if they are interested by the project, they say no because they don't know anything about WWI. I beg to differ! Everyone is touched by this war in some way. It just takes a little

digging. For example, I met an actor/writer in Atlanta named Darryl Dillard. We talked about the project and he basically said, good luck! But later he came back to me because he realized that African American WWI soldiers faced horrible racism, similar to what they faced on stage at the time.

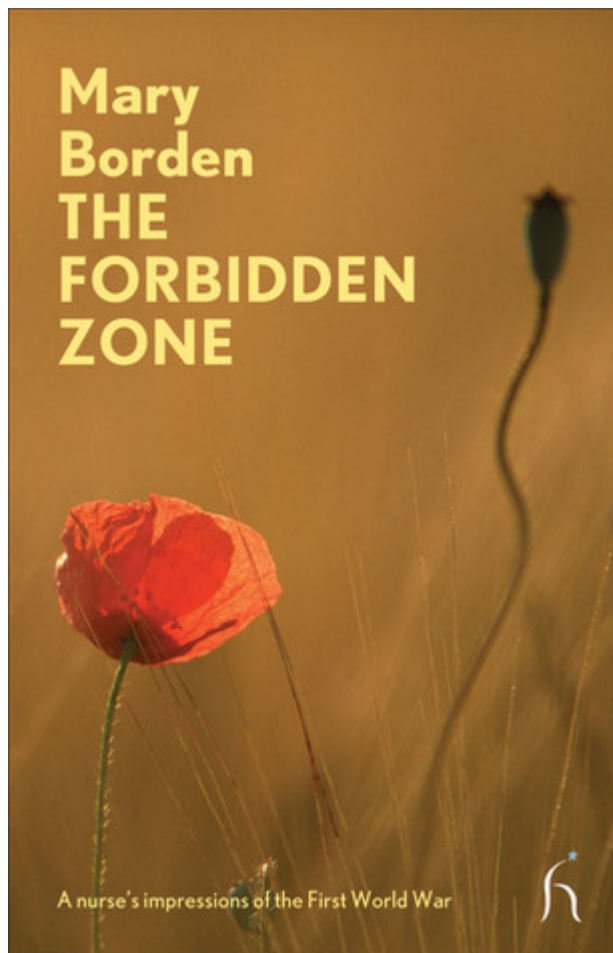
AW: Woodrow Wilson famously (after H.G. Wells) called WWI “the war to end all wars.” How do you find the study of this war significant in our modern approach to conflict? Are there any particular lessons you think humanity stands to learn, or does WWI paint only a bleak picture in terms of the way history repeats itself?

JOV: I don’t know if history is repeating itself or it’s just the present asserting itself against things that haven’t changed but should have throughout history – like nationalism, economic inequality, class inequality, gender oppression, emasculation, misogyny, racial oppression, using technology to kill masses of people – these things at the heart of WWI’s tragedy haven’t gone away. They are still present and still cause harm. So, yes, it’s a very bleak picture.

However, I do believe that it’s not irreparable as long as we can take action by engaging in a fight to make these issues better. Remembering and commemorating war is not enough. As the French say, we need *engagement*.

AW: What is your favorite piece of art or literature to have come out of World War One?

JOV: Once again, picking favorites is hard. I think the work that has stood out for me most recently is Mary Borden’s *The Forbidden Zone*, which was, of course, censored because it was considered too ghastly and graphic. As a nurse, she wrote this surreal memoir about the war during a period when most war memoirs were written as conventional autobiographies.



Using images and other aesthetic strategies, she seems to show that conventional language wasn't enough to capture WWI combat. Conventional autobiography cannot push the limits of human experience the way war can. I admire her battle to challenge us with language, to show that there are parts of war that are unimaginable, that don't fit into proper punctuation or sentence structure. The work is indeed ghastly, but it is so much more that I come up against my own limits of expression when I try to describe it to anyone. And, it's in that incapacity to describe that I know her writing comes from where no one can go and survive intact – no man's land, the space between the trenches. She uses language to take on that space. It's a battle.

Adrian Bonenberger: [Brest-Litovsk: Eastern Europe's Forgotten Father](#)

Michael Carson, ["The October Revolution, Russian Occupation of Persia: WWI Soldier Viktor Shklovsky's Sentimental Memoirs"](#)

Rachel Kambury, ["War Without Allegory: WWI, Tolkien, and The Lord of the Rings"](#)

Andria Williams, ["Black Poppies: Writing About Britain's Black Servicemen"](#)