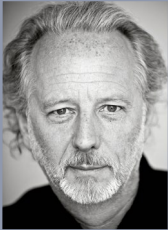


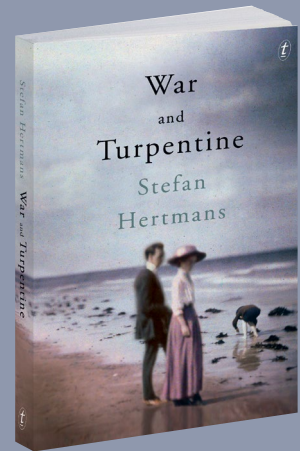
War and Turpentine



Stefan Hertmans

ISBN 9781925240207
FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

www.textpublishing.com.au/book-clubs



Praise for *War and Turpentine*

'With *War and Turpentine* Stefan Hertmans has written one of the most moving books of the year.'
De Standaard

'*War and Turpentine* is a masterfully written account of a dramatic life, a piece of Ghent family history and a beautiful tribute to Hertmans' grandfather, who remained mysterious for so long. It's also probably the best of the books that will be published over the coming five years about the generation of the Great War.' De Tijd

About Stefan Hertmans

Born in 1951, Stefan Hertmans has published novels, short-story collections, essays and poetry. In 1995 he was awarded the three-yearly Flemish poetry prize. He has also received two nominations for the VSB Poetry Prize. His most recent novel, *The Hidden Tissue*, received unanimous praise.

A reader's introduction to *War and Turpentine*

Recovering from a war wound in Liverpool during the First World War, Flemish soldier Urbain Martien finds a church fresco his father painted years before. Seeing the mural painted by the man he loved and admired affects him hugely: 'It may even have fated me to become the man I am today, wavering between a full, difficult life and the quiet consolations of painting' (190).

War and Turpentine itself centres around Urbain's full, difficult life and his love of art and painting. War and poverty were defining features of that life, marking his body and his mind, but so too was love: love for his mother; his grandson; his lost true love; and in a complicated way for her sister, who became his wife.

Of course, we don't know if Urbain Martien himself actually wrote those words about his fate and identity in his notebooks, or whether they are his grandson's words. Hertmans has used those notebooks, which Urbain wrote in for seventeen years, as the basis for this book, and doesn't tell us how closely he followed the originals. Just as Urbain made copies of the works of the great masters and added in his own truths, Hertmans is open about having to rediscover his grandfather's story in his own way (15).

He adopts Urbain's own voice for the middle section about his life as a soldier in the trenches of Flanders. The horrors may be familiar from books or films we have read or seen before—'scenes of killing rats with your bare hands and roasting them over a fire in the night, the cries of wounded comrades, fumbling with rolls of barbed wire in the mud as your hands bleed, the rattle of machine-gun fire, the bursting of shrapnel shells, and the eruptions of soil and torn-up limbs' (14). But through Hertmans' skillful retelling, we experience them anew.

Questions for discussion

1. The author writes about being unsure how to write his grandfather's story. Do you think he chose the 'right' way?
2. Why does Hertmans choose to retell his grandfather's account of the war in the first person? What right does an author have to reinterpret and retell someone else's story? How much artistic license does an author have? Does Hertmans have more of a right and license because he is the character's grandson? Hertmans believes his grandfather asked him to describe his life by entrusting his notebooks to him. Do you agree?

3. Discuss Hertmans' description of 'the authentic glow that sometimes lies hidden in a copy' (267). You might also like to discuss Hertmans' reflection that 'the truth in life often lies buried in places we do not associate with authenticity' (291). How do these quotes illuminate this book itself? Is *War and Turpentine* a novel, non-fiction or something else?
4. Hertmans writes of his grandfather's life having been 'deformed' (11) by his experiences. Yet Hertmans' affection and respect for his grandfather are obvious and there is no suggestion that his character was deformed—rather the opposite. What do you think Hertmans means here by 'deformed'?
5. In the trenches, trying to maintain discipline among his men, Urbain sometimes thinks: 'How far I have strayed from what I once hoped to become' (198). What kind of humanity can soldiers maintain?
6. The contrast between the kind of soldier Urbain was taught to be in military school and the kind of soldier he is forced to become in the trenches is stark. 'We had been taught a strict code of military honour, ethics and warcraft' (179). But can there be any kind of 'moral' soldiering?
7. Do you see Urbain as a war hero? Why or why not?
8. Can you understand Urbain's continued faith after the horrors he has experienced?
9. There have been so many books written about war in general and the First World War in particular. Can anything new be said? What new perspectives on war did this book give you?
10. Standing in the seaside town his grandfather visited, Hertmans wonders how much sense we—the younger generations—can make of Europe's great catastrophes today (52). What do you think? Is there any sense to be made?
11. Hertmans writes of the huge changes that shook the world in the years from Urbain's birth to his death. How many of these changes do we see through *War and Turpentine*? How large is the canvas?
12. Other than being a 'quiet consolation', what functions does art serve in Urbain's life?
13. Hertmans' strong connection with his grandfather is obvious. Early in the novel he writes: 'What is it that connects us to our grandparents?' (16). What do you think? Is there a unique connection between grandparents and grandchildren?
14. Urbain's love of painting came from his father, and he teaches his grandson how to draw and paint. What other kinds of inheritances does Urbain pass on? What kind of inheritances have you got from your family?
15. Yet Hertmans also defies his grandfather in his politics. Is it equally inevitable that we turn away from our inheritances too?