The Westport Library...

Discussion Guide
Book Summary

Craiglockhart War Hospital, Scotland, 1917, and army psychiatrist William Rivers is treating shell-shocked soldiers. Under his care are the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, as well as mute Billy Prior, who is only able to communicate by means of pencil and paper. Rivers’s job is to make the men in his charge healthy enough to fight. Yet the closer he gets to mending his patients’ minds the harder becomes every decision to send them back to the horrors of the front. Pat Barker’s Regeneration is the classic exploration of how the traumas of war brutalised a generation of young men.

Regeneration is Pat Barker’s classic, Booker-nominated novel of World War I and trauma. This is the first novel in Pat Barker’s Man Booker Prize–winning Regeneration Trilogy. The third book in the series, Ghost Road, won Barker the prize in 1995.

https://books.google.com/books/about/Regeneration.html?id=YIJOGCzq87QC
Discussion Questions

Source: Sparknotes.com and Madison Public Library

1. What do you make of the title Regeneration?

2. Is Regeneration an anti-war novel? Why or why not?

3. Barker is obviously interested in the issue of emasculation How do the characters address issues of emasculation caused by the war? Rivers, for one, comments on the shared experience of women as homemakers in peacetime (bored, confined, powerless) and men in the trenches, waiting, in wartime. Are there other places in the novel where this is addressed?

4. Describe the role of fathers and mothers (and father and mother figures) in the novel. How do they help or undermine the healing of the patients?

5. How is Owen portrayed in the novel? In what ways is he like and unlike Sassoon?

6. Is Prior’s relationship with Sarah romantic? Can it be described as love? How does the war affect it?

7. Which characters change throughout the course of the novel, and which remain static? What are the larger implications for this personal growth or stagnation?

8. Are you aware that some of the characters in this novel are based on real people? How does that effect your reading (if it does)?

9. Rivers and Yealland are very different kinds of doctors—both in demeanor and in medical philosophy. Are either or both doing their ”duty”?

10. Now almost 20 years old, Pat Barker’s Regeneration remains read and recommended—surely on its way to a classic, if not already considered one. What sets this novel apart? Theme? Style? Characters? Place and time? All of that?

http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/sites/default/files/bookclubkit/discussions/barker_regeneration.pdf
Author Biography

Pat Barker

Born
in Thornaby-on-Tees, Yorkshire, The United Kingdom
May 08, 1943

Awards

- 2000 CBE
- 1996 Booksellers' Association Author of the Year Award
- 1995 Booker Prize for Fiction
- 1994 Northern Electric Special Arts Prize
- 1993 Guardian Fiction Prize
- 1983 Fawcett Society Book Prize

She was educated at the London School of Economics, where she read International History, and at Durham University. She taught History and Politics until 1982. She began to write in her mid-twenties and was encouraged to pursue her career as a writer by the novelist Angela Carter. Her early novels dealt with the harsh lives of working-class women living in the north of England. Her first book, Union Street (1982) won the Fawcett Society Book Prize, while her second, Blow Your House Down (1984), was adapted for the stage by Sarah Daniels in 1994. The Century's Daughter (re-published as Liza’s England in 1996) was published in 1986, followed by The Man Who Wasn't There in 1989.

In 1983 she was named as one of the 20 'Best Young British Novelists' in a promotion run by the Book Marketing Council and Granta magazine. Her trilogy of novels about the First World War, which began with Regeneration in 1991, was partly inspired by her grandfather’s experiences fighting in the trenches in France. Regeneration was made into a film in 1997 starring Jonathan Pryce and James Wilby. The Eye in the Door (1993), the second novel in the trilogy, won the Guardian Fiction Prize, and The Ghost Road (1995), the final novel in the series, won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Another World (1998), although set in contemporary Newcastle, is overshadowed by the memories of an old man who fought in the First World War.

https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/pat-barker
Book Reviews

Review 1: KIRKUS REVIEW

In this fact/fiction hybrid, Barker (Union Street, 1983, etc.) turns from the struggle for survival of northern England working-class folk to the struggle back to sanity by British officers unhinged by WW I trench warfare. Craiglockhart War Hospital, a grim psychiatric facility outside Edinburgh, is the setting. The framework is the arrival of Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart in the summer of 1917, and his discharge back to France in November. Sassoon is treated by the eminent neurologist (and Army captain) William Rivers, whose job is to restore his damaged warriors to fighting condition. Sassoon is a relatively easy assignment. Despite his public statement protesting the war, Sassoon is no pacifist; this complex poet feels at home in the Army and is an exceptionally courageous officer, beloved by his men, to whom he feels a blood-debt that can be paid only by his return. For all the sparring between Sassoon and Rivers, only a hair separates them, for the latter is also a man of enormous integrity, profoundly troubled by the horrors his patients must endure. And it is these horrors (not the clipped exchanges of Sassoon and Rivers) that linger in the mind: Burns's vomiting nightmares caused by a mouthful of decomposing German flesh; Prior's being rendered mute after handling a human eye. At the center is Rivers, a model therapist, whose unstinting support may give even the wretched Burns a chance at a normal life. Barker has also provided some workmanlike off-base romance for Prior, her one developed fictional character; but the heart of the work, where the big fish swim, is Rivers's consciousness, his insights into front-line behavior enriched by his anthropological straining. Don't look here for the dramatic sweep of a war novel; instead, you get a scrupulously fair reconstruction of Craiglockhart, plus a moving empathy for both doctors and patients. The extent of that empathy earns Barker's work a place on the shelf of WW I literature.

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https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/pat-barker/regeneration/
Among Damaged Men
By SAMUEL HYNES

Up to now, Pat Barker has been a classic example of a working-class realistic novelist. Her territory has been the bleak industrial towns of the Yorkshire coast where she grew up, her characters the depressed poor of those towns, particularly the women. In "Union Street," "Blow Your House Down" and "The Century's Daughter" she has written about these people with a harsh sympathy that is troubling and compelling: the life of a poor housewife there or a whore or a woman driven to be both must surely be like that, and the world of shabby pubs, boarded-up terrace houses and urban wastelands where such women exist must be as she describes it. To my mind her fourth novel, "The Man Who Wasn't There," is less successful.

"Regeneration" is different from those books in many ways. Its time is World War I; its location is mainly Scotland; its characters are nearly all men -- British Army officers, some of them historical figures; and its central subject is the classic male theme of war and manhood. To cross gender, class, geographical and historical lines all at once strikes me as a courageous and chancy thing for any writer to do. And to write fiction about real people who have left their own accounts of their lives is surely to gamble against the odds.

The novel is essentially the story of two men and their effects on each other. Both are in the army, and this is a war story though it takes place far from the battlefields. In July 1917, Second Lieut. Siegfried Sassoon, Military Cross, recommended for Distinguished Service Order, 3d Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, resigned his part in the war. In a letter to his commanding officer, he wrote: "I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust." It was, he said, an act of willful defiance of military authority.

SASSOON (1886-1967) was not just any disillusioned young officer: he was a war hero, with wounds and decorations to prove it, and he had impressive social and literary connections, including Bloomsbury pacifist-intellectuals like Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morrell, who saw to it that his protest letter was published in The Times of London and distributed among members of Parliament. Faced with this embarrassing situation -- a renegade officer who was too visible to ignore and too heroic to court-martial -- the army hit upon a solution that the Soviet Union would later also find useful: Sassoon was declared to have suffered a nervous
breakdown and he was sent to Craiglockhart, a hospital for shellshocked officers near Edinburgh.

At Craiglockhart, Sassoon had a bit of good luck: he became the patient of Capt. W. H. R. Rivers (1864-1922), a distinguished Cambridge scientist who had come to the practice of psychiatry by way of medicine, anthropology and neurology. Rivers was both learned and up-to-date: he knew the work of Freud and he was quick to see the value of psychoanalysis. But he was also independent minded: he believed that the causes of his officer-patients' neuroses were not to be found in their childhoods nor in their sex lives, but in the traumas of their war experiences. Concerning the war he was an Englishman of his class and generation (Rivers was 53 in 1917): he considered it a necessary war that should be fought to a victory, though he was shocked by the horror stories that his patients told him.

Sassoon spent four months under Rivers's care -- playing golf, writing fiercely antiwar poems and talking with his doctor. At the end of that time he returned to active duty, evidently convinced that it was right to do so. The story of those four months in "Dottyville," as Sassoon called Craiglockhart, has been told in various places: by Sassoon himself in his "Sherston's Progress" and "Diaries 1915-1918," by Robert Graves in "Goodbye to All That" and by Rivers in his "Conflict and Dream." As far as I know Ms. Barker is the first novelist to tell it.

Her version begins with Sassoon's letter of resignation and ends with Rivers's last annotation in his patient's file: "Nov. 26, 1917. Discharged to duty." Within these historical brackets a number of stories are told, some historical, some not. One tells how the army's Medical Corps dealt with a new problem in military medicine that it was unprepared either to understand or to treat -- the large number of officers and men who broke down under fire.

Were they all cowards? Were they "shellshocked" by the concussions of artillery fire? Or were they perhaps simply the victims of the terrible psychic conflict that modern war imposed, between the instinct for self-preservation and the destructive imperatives of combat? And how should they be treated? With moral preachments and shame? With electric shock treatment? Or with psychotherapy? Ms. Barker shows all of these options being tried (her shock-treatment scene is brilliantly harrowing).

Another narrative drawn from life is the relationship that develops between Sassoon and Rivers. As the two men talk together in the novel they grow fond of each other (as they did in life), and a mutual transformation occurs. Sassoon adopts the older man as a surrogate father and eventually comes to share his view that there is no alternative to returning to the war; Rivers accepts his paternal role and feels the conflict within himself intensified between his nurturing role and his military duty to send his patients back to the war.
Ms. Barker has populated her Craiglockhart with other patients: Burns, who can't eat; Anderson, a surgeon who can't operate; Prior, who won't speak. And, in a few brief appearances, Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), the finest of the English war poets and a case of genuine shell shock. Owen had twice been blown about by exploding shells and his nerves were gone, though his commanding officer thought him a coward and Owen seems to have half agreed.

These damaged men fill the hospital. To regenerate them, Rivers must help them to confront the inhumanity of the war they have experienced, and to find ways of being human within it. For Rivers, the clearest way to humanity is through fathering. "Fathering," he thinks, "like mothering, takes many forms beyond the biological. Rivers had often been touched by the way in which young men, some of them not yet 20, spoke about feeling like fathers to their men." If you are a father to your men, then your place is with them, whatever you may think about the war.

"Regeneration" is historically accurate on this point: young officers from Craiglockhart who returned to the trenches did think about their fathering roles there. "I am only here to look after some men," Sassoon wrote in his diary in France in 1918; and Owen said much the same thing in a letter: "I came out in order to help these boys." To be a father is to be a man: but not as the army understands manhood.

The novel doesn't end with that trench fathering, though, but with Rivers's note closing his Sassoon file. Why there, when the rest of the historical story is so dramatic and moving? Why not follow Sassoon to the front, where he fought again until he was wounded by one of his own men and was evacuated to England? Why not take up the story of Owen, ordered back to France to fight in the final assault, and killed in action a week before the Armistice?

Because, Ms. Barker would no doubt reply, her interest was in Dottyville, not in France. For her themes -- war and madness, war and manhood -- the final military gestures of her characters are not important; what matters is how their minds were damaged by war, and how some recovered. Still, there is a narrative cost in stopping where she does, short of the story's natural closure. Craiglockhart was by its nature not a place of ending, but a middle state in a cycle. Men went there and were treated and left, and the war went on. The story didn't end on Nov. 26, 1917, and it is a mistake, I think, that the book does.

"Regeneration" is an antiwar war novel, in a tradition that is by now an established one, though it tells a part of the whole story of war that is not often told -- how war may batter and break men's minds -- and so makes the madness of war more than a metaphor, and more awful. That in itself is reason enough to read it. But the novel also belongs to another tradition, the
tradition of literary realism. Ms. Barker is a writer who is content to confront a cruel reality without polemics, without even visible anger and without evident artifice.

This novel, like her others, is testimony to the persistent vitality of that kind of writing. Fashions change, theories emerge and fade, but the realistic writer goes on believing that plain writing, energized by the named things of the world, can make imagined places actual and open other lives to the responsive reader, and that by living those lives through words a reader might be changed. Pat Barker must believe that, or she wouldn't write as she does. I believe it, too.

THE SCARS OF THE GRANDFATHER

"World War I was the first subject I ever wanted to write about," Pat Barker confided. "When I was 11, I wrote a poem about it. My grandfather had been bayoneted in the war and he used to get stripped to the waist to wash at the kitchen sink before going out in the evening and I would see the wounds. He didn't speak about it until he was an old man.

"I wanted an angle not done before," the author of "Regeneration" said in a telephone interview from her home in Durham, England. "I encountered the figure of Rivers, the doctor, through my husband, who is a neurologist and familiar with his experiments on nerve regeneration. Others knew him as an anthropologist. It was this business of connecting these roles with his work as a psychologist in 1917. Rivers is intended to be the central consciousness in the book, not Sassoon." She thinks Siegfried Sassoon was "tremendously heroic" but today we accept -- almost too easily -- that he was right in his pacifist views about the war, whereas W. H. R. Rivers's pressure was very modern: to make soldiers well so they could return to the trenches.

The year Rivers spent at Craiglockhart War Hospital "changed him enormously," she said. "It's a very gloomy, claustrophobic place and relationships with the patients were very intense. He'd been a man very objectively rational, someone who found it very difficult to integrate his emotions with the rest of his life, very much a product of his Victorian and Edwardian education. He learned to integrate his nurturing side. I don't like to call it feminine," she noted with some irony, "but what you have really is a sense of mothering the men, not fathering."

-- LYNN KARPEN

http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/16/specials/barker-regeneration.html
Review 3: THE GUARDIAN

Regeneration by Pat Barker
By John Mullan
Friday 24 August 2012

Why put real people in a novel? Pat Barker’s Regeneration features among its leading characters two famous historical figures: the war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. In the novel they meet, as they did in life, at Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh. The novel’s pivotal character is also a real person, the anthropologist turned psychiatrist William Rivers, who is treating both men. The writer Robert Graves, a friend of Sassoon, and other doctors who dealt with shell shock during the first world war also appear. The most painful episode in the whole novel is not set in the trenches but in the “electrical room” of a London hospital, where Rivers watches Dr Lewis Yealland administering frequent and agonising electrical shocks to a patient who has been made mute by his experiences at the front. The terrified soldier must utter words to get the torture to stop. An author’s note at the end of the novel assures us that Dr Yealland existed and that he detailed his ghastly methods in his own book.

The patients in the novel are, we might say, half-invented. Their names are certainly fictitious, but Barker appears to have based their histories on cases recorded by Rivers in a posthumously published book. Not only is Rivers the central character, he has provided the information on which Barker has based several of her other characters. The reader’s awareness of this gives these characters, glimpsed in passing as Rivers makes his rounds of Craiglockhart, a haunting life. Each of them is – was – as much a real person as the two great war poets, though they have long been lost among Rivers’s case studies. Forgotten victims, they return from the past.

For a novelist, the use of such personages is restrictive as much as it is fruitful. Barker, who lists her main historical sources at the end of her book, has been narratively scrupulous in her reinvention of these people. They can do nothing that is not historically verifiable. Owen’s meeting with Sassoon at Craiglockhart is interesting enough, but the novelist cannot extend their friendship beyond what we know. The most powerful evidence of their rapport is the manuscript of Owen’s poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, which is covered with amendments in Sassoon’s handwriting. Barker makes out of this an intense dialogue between the two men in which Sassoon – the more confident of the two – pushes Owen to find the “better” words. Our understanding of the first world war has been shaped by these two men and their poetry. By bringing them to life in her novel, it feels as if Barker is taking on a necessary challenge.
It is not only in dialogue that the novelist makes fiction out of carefully researched fact. In her narrative, she takes her readers into the minds of these characters. The fictionalisation of William Rivers and the inhabiting of his thoughts is the key to the novel. Humane and psychologically perceptive, he is the novelist’s representative. This is not just because of his insight, but also because of his distance from the horrifying experiences of his own patients.

He recovers the experience of warfare from the soldiers he treats, but knows nothing of it at first hand. He is teaching his men to remember, but he approaches their memories as a foreigner, guiltily wishing that he had been able to fight. Disconcertingly, though he treats his patients with something close to tenderness, he is not some anti-war hero with whom the contemporary reader can easily identify. He believes that "the war must be fought to a finish, for the sake of the succeeding generations".

The psychiatrist has been a favoured character for novels before this one, leading the reader into the hidden stories of those whom he or she treats. Barker slips some of Rivers’s theories about psychological trauma into her narrative, without either endorsement or satire. Some of the arguments that pass through his head sound convincing, while others seem suspect. Believing that "prolonged strain, immobility and helplessness" were more likely to cause men to "break down" than "the sudden shocks or bizarre horrors" that his patients themselves used to explain their condition, for instance, he muses that this must also explain the prevalence of "hysterical disorders" in women in peacetime.

Not all the characters are real people. Billy Prior is the most important invented character in Regeneration (and in the two subsequent volumes of the trilogy) and is given attributes that galvanise the fiction. He is socially and sexually ambiguous. Though he is an officer (for only officers get to be treated at Craiglockhart) he comes from a working-class background. He is an interloper, angrily observing the snobbery and smugness of the officer class. Having recreated a world rather than inventing it, the novelist needs licence to see it from an angle that no amount of historical research could provide. Billy Prior gives her that angle.

John Mullan is professor of English at University College London.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/24/book-club-pat-barker-regeneration
Author Interviews

Interview 1:
Interview with Pat Barker, author of the Regeneration Trilogy

Posted in April 28, 2017 ~ 11:47 By Ann McKinstry Mico | Center for Writing Excellence, Montclair State University Blog

Ann Mico: Your Regeneration Trilogy consists of three novels about World War I. Were you always interested in the topic and, if so, what was the first book that you read on the subject?

Pat Barker: Yes, I have always been passionate about World War I; oddly, it was the poetry that first moved me—Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon—not the great fiction, such as Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms or Ford Madox Ford’s No More Parades.

AM: Were you initially familiar with the Great War because of a relative’s involvement?

PB: Yes. My grandfather led a company that fought at the Argonne and suffered thereafter from shellshock—what we would today call PTSD.

AM: As your interest increased, did you travel around the Somme battlefields?

PB: Yes, I visited all the sites and museums in the Amiens area and even drove up to Belgium to visit Passchendaele.

AM: Did the graveyards overwhelm you?

PB: Completely. I could hardly grasp the number of gravestones.

AM: When I am visiting the graves, I always think of Rudyard Kipling, his role as the head of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the appalling irony that his son lost his life in France.

PB: I wept often on those trips.

AM: What made you think of the theme of shell shock, or, as Elizabeth Samet calls it in her book about teaching literature at West Point, the “soldier’s heart”?

PB: Of course, it was partially my grandfather’s troubles, but my interest was larger than that: I was absorbed in medicine and read some of the case studies of Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, the psychiatrist at Craig Lockhart War Hospital.
AM: Your including historical characters like Rivers, Sassoon, and Owen in your novels strikes me as a brilliant move.

PB: I became obsessed with the topic of shell shock and the fact that some doctors treated with disdain the soldiers returning from the front with nervous disorders and called the men “cowards” to their faces.

AM: Appalling. And the wives! Think of Rebecca West’s The Return of the Soldier and the horrid way his wife treated him, as unmanly and a loser . . .

PB: . . . and the extraordinary bravery of the men, the officers particularly, who were the first to be killed going over the top.

AM: Your using that last phrase reminds me of the many poignant poems, fiction, and memoirs about that culminating moment.

PB: Yes. I think Edmund Blunden’s memoir, Undertones of War, is the best at describing what it was like to lead one’s men over the top.

AM: What was the most challenging aspect of recreating the characters, so to speak, and giving them dialogue?

PB: I was sensitive to not distorting the characters in personal as well as untruthful ways.

AM: Are you referring to the homosexual allusions in several of the books?

PB: Yes, that issue, of course, and also reimagining the inner life of the great Rivers.

AM: He was stunningly intellectual, honest, and caring, which characteristics must have been daunting.

PB: Very—and also trying to portray the real Sassoon on the throwing-away-his-medal gesture and actually invoking his belief and determination that the war had to stop.

AM: Thank you so much for talking to me. I am so disappointed that we are out of time. Many questions linger . . .

PB: . . . another time will present itself. War will always be with us . . .

https://blogs.montclair.edu/cwe/meet-our-bloggers/
Interview 2:
Foyles: Questions & Answers with Pat Barker

Although you have written about other subjects, World War I is the one you return to again and again - this is the fifth time. What is it that so fascinates you?

The First World War has been called the British Iliad and I think there’s a lot of truth in this. It was a period of tremendous shock comparable to 9/11 or Pearl Harbour in the US and that loss of innocence played a huge part in making us what we are today. During that war, too, sex roles and the relationship between the classes were questioned and that makes it an exciting time to write about. In particular the concept of masculinity which had been generally accepted in the Victorian era was tested to breaking point on the battlefields of the Somme and Ypres.

You have written about poets and the war, and here and in Life Class about artists and the war. It seems a cruel irony that a war which they hated gave these people their subject but either took their lives or somehow rendered them redundant once the war was over?

The war did give particular poets and artists a voice and a vision and those who survived found their best work associated with experiences that most people were trying to forget! But this was a passing phase. Today the words of Wilfred Owen and the landscapes of Paul Nash are frequently used to express the pity of war and its devastation of the natural world - and not merely the war they fought in. The language they found seems to have become universal and is equally applicable to the conflicts of the present day.

Your grandfather and stepfather both fought in World War I. How did their experiences inform your writing?

Neither of them spoke about the war. But my grandfather had sustained a horrific bayonet wound which I saw every week when he got stripped off at the kitchen sink for a wash before he went for his night out at the British Legion. My stepfather had been gassed. He was disabled and never worked in all the time I knew him. So there were wounds and there was silence and that silence invited imaginative exploration. Also, of course, the war which had ended decades before was still a potent force in their lives, and in the lives of their relatives. The past wasn’t over. It wasn’t even the past.

After her brother Toby’s death, Elinor paints endless landscapes whose focal point is always somehow his shadowy, barely seen figure, his absence. Do you think speaking, painting or writing about the trauma of war is therapeutic?
It can be, given time. A lot of our attempts to deal with traumatic experience revolve around the discovery of a language - in Elinor's case a visual language - in which to describe it. Anything is better than the wordless unease of dreams and nightmares.

But initially this attempt to voice trauma is likely to make it worse - sometimes very much worse. And there is no guarantee that the attempt to communicate the experience to other people who have not themselves suffered it will work. So if the attempt makes you feel worse and doesn't necessarily help other people to understand, it's not surprising that many men retreated into silence.

How do you combine your historical and fictional material? How nerve-wracking is it putting words into the mouths of well-known figures for which there might not be any specific source material?

Fictional characters are constructed rather differently in a work where real characters play a leading role. In Regeneration Billy Prior is designed to challenge Rivers not merely by what he says but by the sort of person he is.

Is it nerve-wracking putting speech into the mouths of real characters? It's certainly different from writing about fictional characters. You have an obligation to be fair to them and not misrepresent their views. Apart from that, I think fiction is written in an almost trance like state - at least during the first draft. If you became too self-conscious about what you were doing you wouldn't be able to do it at all.

Homosexuality and sexual taboos are parallel traumas to the war in your book. How do they intersect with the war?

The war produced a weakening of sexual taboos in some areas. Knowledge of contraceptive techniques probably became more widespread. But there was also a great increase in paranoid thinking, as often happens when a society is under external threat. Homosexuals were one of the groups who were believed to be a sort of fifth column. Perhaps too the adulation of wartime comradeship, of love between men, raised the spectre of the other sort of love between men - the one that daren't speak its name.

They weren't the only group that fell under suspicion. Shopkeepers with foreign names often had their windows broken. Even dachshunds were attacked!

Henry Tonks, who was both a surgeon and head of the Slade School of Art, has the macabre job of drawing the various physical injuries of the soldiers who came to Queen Mary's hospital in Sidcup for treatment. Have these ever been made public? How much of their experience would the general public have seen or heard at the time?
Henry Tonks's drawings of disfigured soldiers are now being shown in public for the first time. There was an exhibition of some of them in my home town Durham quite recently.

People were aware of facial injuries just as they were of amputated limbs. But integrating the disfigured into society again seems to have been more of a problem. The road between Queen's hospital, and the village of Sidcup had blue painted benches for patients to sit on, and the colour warned passers by that they were likely to see something shocking if they looked that way. One convalescent home in the neighbourhood was asked by the local residents to keep the patients indoors because the sight of them was too upsetting. But many local people behaved with great kindness and the majority of men eventually adjusted to their changed appearance.

Kit Neville, who sustained terrible facial injuries in the war, returns to an old haunt, the Cafe Royal, wearing a face mask that acts as both a literal and metaphorical 'cordon sanitaire' around him. Would this have been the experience of many of the returning soldiers, even those without such horrific injuries?

Very many men felt alienated from normal life while they were at home on leave - which included sick leave. They resented healthy men in reserved occupations many of whom they considered to be shirkers and they hated the fact that some people were making money out of the war, in effect profiting from the suffering of others. For some men it was are relief to go back.

The themes of trauma, survival and community permeate all your novels, including those with contemporary settings. Are they always the starting point for you?

I always start with characters rather than with themes which emerge from the telling of the story, but I agree that surviving trauma is a frequent situation for my characters. At least they do survive and often with a sense of humour and a zest for life intact.

http://www.foyles.co.uk/pat-barker
Interview 3: Pat Barker Interview: ‘I’m edgy, but not dead pigeon sort of edgy’
By Alex Clark, The Guardian
Saturday 29 August 2015

Pat Barker returns from being photographed having encountered, en route, a dead pigeon. Wouldn’t it have been better, she jokes, if Martin Amis had been there instead of her? I see what she means: Amis’s writing, and certainly the persona that has been created for him, more obviously lend themselves to such a macabre prop. But, alas, “there the poor photographer was, stuck with me. I think I’m fairly edgy, but not dead pigeon sort of edgy”. It’s not true, of course. Not only do stricken pigeons actually feature in her new novel, Noonday – their wings ablaze during the so-called second great fire of London at the height of the blitz – but her work returns over and again to notably painful and complex subjects. Ranging widely, her books require her to confront and convey violence both personal and military, the morality of war, class and sexual conflict and the nature of psychopathy. In her early novels she focused on the day-to-day lives of working-class women in the north-east of England, making a debut so striking with Union Street (1982) that she was included on Granta’s inaugural selection of the Best of Young British Novelists (she was photographed alongside, among other luminaries, one M Amis). In 1991 she began her epic Regeneration trilogy, which concluded in 1995 with the Booker prizewinning The Ghost Road; and, in Border Crossing and Double Vision, she explored both the internal life of and society’s response to a child who kills.

It has often been remarked that Barker is a novelist who regularly reinvents herself, and now she is once again going into brand-new territory. The writer responsible for one of recent decades’ most subtle and powerful fictional depictions of the first world war is setting her sights on the second world war. Noonday is the conclusion of the trilogy that began in 2007 with Life Class and continued in 2012 with Toby’s Room; but while in the first two instalments, Barker’s protagonists, artists Paul Tarrant, Kit Neville and Elinor Brooke, found their youthful vigour and ambition hijacked by events in France and Belgium, now they are middle-aged, and the battle they face is far closer to home.
Why did she do it? If she wanted to write a trilogy, why end it by fast-forwarding 23 years? Well, she answers, she wanted to show the way in which men of Tarrant and Neville’s generation found the second world war far more shocking than those who had never experienced combat: “I just thought what a terrible thing it must have been for men who had fought in the first world war to see a toddler wearing a gas mask, because gas was so much a part of their experience ... And to have gas cots, as there were for babies; I think what that generation felt very often was a bewilderment, and a sense of complete failure, because they had won the war, ostensibly they’d done everything anyone could possibly do, and yet here they were facing in many ways an even worse menace.”

A key element in the two previous novels was their female lead Elinor’s relationship with her brother, Toby, killed at the front in ambiguous circumstances. It animated Elinor’s anti-war stance, and her belief that artists, and indeed women, who are not allowed to participate in the decision-making should turn their faces away from combat. In the opening pages of Noonday, she stands in the hallway of her familial home, contemplating Toby’s portrait, reflecting on “how guilty they all felt, then and now. Especially now, when another generation of young men was dying. We dropped the catch, she thought. Our generation.”

But, as Barker explains, Elinor’s position becomes even more complicated: “Of course the home front is in fact the combat zone. Paul says, ‘People didn’t take their wives to the trenches’, and Elinor says, ‘No, but the trenches didn’t run through the family living room’. As she drives her ambulance around the blitzed streets, “she accepts that, in some sense, this is her war, her city is being attacked”.

Noonday revisits many of Barker’s abiding preoccupations and fictional hallmarks: echoing Regeneration’s Billy Prior and Border Crossing’s Danny Williams, there is a lost boy, Kenny, who is both abandoned and let down by many of the adults around him, but who is also manipulative, crafty, occasionally unscrupulous (rescued by Paul, he later insinuates inappropriate behaviour on the adult’s behalf in order to ensure his return to his mother: “I rather admire it,” says Barker. “A real survivor’s instinct.”). There is also the interrogation of
art’s usefulness, or otherwise, when the nation is in extremis, and concomitant questions of propaganda and censorship. And there is the intensively researched but also keenly felt sense of place.

This time, that place was London. “It was very strange,” says Barker, who was born and bred on Teesside and, apart from three years at the London School of Economics in the 1960s, has never strayed far from it. “When I finished this book, I realised that I love London. But when I come out of King’s Cross station, it’s either the tube or the taxi rank, both are utterly horrible, and I experience London as a great big traffic jam. I just think, I want out of here as fast as I possibly can. And yet, unmistakably on the page, there is a love of London. It surprised me. It took me a long time to realise it, now it’s the third book.”

It is, admittedly, the capital city of the past – indeed, she laughs, “perhaps I like London in ruins” – and one significantly altered by the very subject she is writing about; walking the streets, she says, was inevitably frustrating, because the heavier the bombardment, “the less there is there when you go back”. But that fed into another perspective, the idea of London as a haunted place. Much of the time, Barker is a determinedly unshowy writer – “I just couldn’t write in an adorned way,” she insists, “to me that would feel insincere” – but in all her books, her restrained prose will suddenly be punctured by an arresting, and often uncanny, image. In Noonday comes the idea of “London’s dead gurgling up through the drains”, the juxtaposition of the desperate, threatened citizens of the second world war with those of a far older era. As Barker explains it: “There’s this feeling that if it’s total blackout, and you’re in a city where you don’t know the people you’re walking past anyway, how would you know if you encountered a ghost? You couldn’t possibly know. There’s nothing that would tell you.”

I ask her whether this is specifically a way of connecting conflicts past and present, of making a continuum of this type of experience. Does she feel, when she writes about the soldiers of the first or second world war, that she is somehow writing about other combatants, and other times?
“I think so. And I think it became easier to do it in this book. You have to write about the particular war, but you’re always in a sense writing about all wars, however many differences there are. Paul thinks, these men could be back home from Dunkirk, or they could be stragglers from Boudicca’s army. From the point of view of the common soldier, one cock-up is the same as another.”

Ghosts and war: not a bad prism through which to approach Barker’s work, nor to understand its strangely hypnotic power. She has told, in the past, the story of her grandfather’s bayonet wound; how habitually seeing it as he washed in the kitchen sink prior to nights out at the British Legion lodged in her imagination, perhaps particularly because something so redolent of damage and pain had been absorbed into everyday domestic life. But that man was her grandmother’s second husband; the first, who died at 49 and whom she never knew, also had a story to tell.

It comes out as we talk about Noonday’s Bertha Mason, a medium to whom Paul finds himself reluctantly drawn, and who is partly based on Helen Duncan, who was convicted and imprisoned as a witch in 1944 because she revealed that a British ship had been sunk with all hands, even though no official announcement had been made (later, the information was found to have been leaked, and the sailor’s hatband that Duncan produced as evidence to be a fake). Mason is a compelling character, a grotesque with a terrible past who, says Barker, arrived rather suddenly: “there she was, rabbiting on, you couldn’t shut her up. Oh dear! She was very startling.” Such a takeover, she explains, was unprecedented, and the kind of thing she normally associates with “people who are more, what shall I say to be kind, wiffly-waffly about writing novels”. But this time, it was undeniable: “She was infuriating, because – it’s never happened to me before – she thought it was her book. She wasn’t an entirely benevolent presence. Not in the least, in fact.”

Barker’s grandfather does not sound much like Mason. He was, she says, a very bright man with little outlet for his intelligence; in poor health for much of his life, he had left school early and was “more or less permanently unemployed”. But he did have his life as a medium –
including “a very boring spirit guide. He was an Indian chief. A lot of them are Indian chiefs.” He also did faith healing, which involved him taking on the symptoms of the person he was attempting to cure. “It was very much a working-class religion, but it was also very much something that women did. Partly because of the total passivity of it: you’re just going into a trance and the dead speak through you, so if the medium was ignorant and educated and illiterate, it didn’t really matter.”

In her work and in conversation, Barker is brilliantly astute and articulate on how class issues are part of the warp and weft of British society, and how they have had an impact on historical events. After all, she explains, “the greatest mediums would have famous novelists, cabinet ministers, all kinds of people coming to them for consultations, listening to not very well-educated women talk – well, in no other circumstances did that happen. It was actually a kind of empowerment.”

As, of course, war itself could be. Barker recalls her mother, Moyra, who was a Wren stationed in Dunfermline, talking enthusiastically about the war: “She absolutely adored it from beginning to end – well, she adored it until I arrived. It was the best time of her life; it was dynamic, she joined the forces, she left home. She was with large numbers of women, many of them from different walks of society, so it was a kind of education for her. She believed absolutely in what we were fighting for, as the vast majority of people did, of course. She just had a thoroughly good time.”

But there is a lot behind that “until I arrived”. Amid the dancing with Polish officers, and encountering a lesbian for the first time, Barker’s mother became pregnant, giving birth to her daughter in 1943. Barker never knew who her father was and, she says, honestly doesn’t believe that her mother “had any real memory of who he was, or anything about him”. She and her mother lived with her mother’s parents in Thornaby-on-Tees, but when Moyra married, Barker, then seven, remained with her grandparents. Eventually, Moyra had five children: two stepchildren, two children with her husband, and Barker. But, says the novelist, “sometimes
she counted her natural children and said three, sometimes she said two. And that was strange.”

However, she says, “It’s awfully easy to talk about it in a way that implies self-pity, but I don’t feel like that. I think it’s an interesting situation, to have half your genetic inheritance completely missing.” The only thing that bothers her, she maintains, is the “inconvenience” of not knowing enough about her medical history. “Otherwise I think it’s a sense of freedom, which may be illusory, but I think it increases your ability to invent yourself.”

When her mother died, about 20 years ago, Barker realised that any chance of that missing information coming to light had gone forever. “I expected to feel upset about that, and I didn’t, I felt relieved. I thought, right, that’s over. That door is closed forever now, and I can get on and be me.” Her mother, she thinks, had felt a great degree of shame about her first child’s birth, and had never managed to rid herself of it because, later in life, she became a Jehovah’s Witness, “so it went on being a very sinful act, whereas for most people, of course, it was nothing. There was no moving into what the 60s, 70s and 80s did for women.”

Did Barker herself ever carry any of that shame? “To a degree, yes, in the 50s I did, but unlike my mother, I sort of left it behind,” she replies. “I suppose it did shape my life negatively, but not in a way that stopped me being happily married, or having a career, or bringing up my own children. So if you regard those as signs of normality, it didn’t have that much negative impact. And also, of course, if your parents don’t fuck you up, what are you going to write about?”

She started writing stories as a child; success in the 11-plus meant that her educational opportunities were not curtailed as those of previous generations had been. After school, she journeyed south to read international history at the LSE, and then returned north to Durham, where she gained a diploma in education, and thereafter became a teacher of history and politics.
She wasn’t published until she was nearly 40; by then she had had children and married (in that order: she and her husband, David, a zoologist 20 years her senior, had had to wait to marry until 1978, when he had become divorced; their children John and Anna, also a writer and now her first reader, were born in 1970 and 1974 respectively). Her creative breakthrough – she had written novels and discarded them – came on an Arvon course taught by Angela Carter, although publication was still some way off. But what Carter did for her, Barker remembers, “was to say that what I was doing about working-class women was interesting and that I should go on doing it. So she did not so much teach as give me faith in my own voice. The best teaching is to recognise the voice and encourage it, and gently discourage attempts to be somebody else. And Angela was a very, very good teacher.”

On the course, Barker wrote a short story about two women which was set during a miners’ strike; it was to become part of the ending of Union Street, which opened with the rape of an 11-year-old girl and followed the lives of several women over the course of a few months. The book was published by Carmen Callil at Virago Press, which had been founded nearly a decade previously, and was followed by two others, Blow Your House Down (1984) and The Century’s Daughter (1986; reprinted in 1996 as Liza’s England). It is tempting to see the books not only as a trilogy-of-sorts, but also as part of a discrete period in Barker’s career, at the end of which she moved to the entirely different territory of the war, and from describing women’s lives to men’s.

Barker does not see that creative trajectory in quite such neat terms. For a start, the novels have much more in common with one another than you might imagine: “I think if you look at Mason in Nooonsday, she could be on Union Street,” she says, and she’s absolutely right. And not only was there a book in between her early work and the Regeneration trilogy – 1989’s The Man Who Wasn’t There, which has as its protagonist a 12-year-old boy who imagines for his absent father a heroic wartime career – but there was a degree of necessity at play. “It’s much more blended than people think it is,” she explains. “I do think there was this kind of artificial thing that happened at the beginning because I was published by Virago and if you write for Virago you have to foreground women’s experiences. And I think after Union Street and Blow
Your House Down, I would have moved on to representing both sexes much earlier and much more easily, in a sense. So I think that was a slightly distorting effect.” Was she aware of it at the time? “I was getting very restless towards the end.”

She concedes that she went “to the other extreme, and wrote about men in an all-male institution”. But in Regeneration, The Eye in the Door and The Ghost Road, she created a body of work that treated war in an unfamiliar way, mingling the real historical figures of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and the psychiatrist William Rivers with the extraordinary figure of Prior, a bisexual working-class soldier who, when we first meet him, is suffering from shell shock and, as a consequence, elective muteness. She is drawn, she says, to “the almost sociopathic character, who is never quite sociopathic – Danny Williams is the closest to being absolutely abnormal. But Prior has a code of morals; it’s not the same as anybody else’s, but he’s got one.” Prior – in common with the medium Mason and other of her characters – also reflects her interest in dissociated states; fugue-like mental episodes often caused by deeply repressed trauma, but also, in the case of writing, for example, capable of provoking creativity.

The trilogy gave Barker an enormous profile and a major prize; the Booker, she says, “changes the landscape totally, in ways which are marvellous, but also seem quite threatening at times. It’s a sort of ‘follow that’ feeling, which is very strange, a very exposed feeling. It takes time to get used to it.” After “following that” with three very different books, she embarked on another trilogy, this time bringing in a prominent female character and creating a memorable, and indeed fleetingly incestuous, brother-sister relationship. Once again, a real figure is mixed among her fictional creations: her characters start life as students at the Slade School of Art, where they are taught by Henry Tonks, artist and surgeon, who later makes drawings of servicemen with severe facial injuries before and after their treatment; Kit Neville is one of them. In Noonday, Kenneth Clark makes an (albeit small) appearance.

There were five years between the publication of Life Class and Toby’s Room, primarily because Barker spent two years caring for her husband before his death in 2009. It has been, she says, with characteristic understatedness, “a very much bombarded trilogy”. Given the
relationship between Toby and Elinor (the title Toby’s Room, as Hermione Lee pointed out when she reviewed it, echoes Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room, also a memorial to a dead brother), the trilogy would always have been suffused with grief; but Barker agrees that her own bereavement gave it an extra dimension.

“You use the experiences you have. It wasn’t the first grief in my life; it was the deepest so far – let’s hope nothing else awaits,” she says. “I find the whole stages of grief thing quite interesting, because nobody talks about stages of falling in love, for example, or things like that, and I think it’s a way of people distancing themselves, taming the experience, which is actually an experience that can’t be tamed. It's one of these things that strips the flesh off your bones, and that is the truth about it. There aren’t any neat stages, and there is nothing that can be identified as recovery, either, although obviously you learn to live with it, and through it, and differently because of it. But certainly, as soon as people talk about recovery, I just think, ‘Ah, it hasn’t happened to you yet.’”

When I ask her whether she is sure that the trilogy is really over (some characters’ stories are finished, others not so) she gives an agonised cry and then laughs. “Oh, don’t say that!” She thinks that her first foray into the second world war will probably also be her last. But would she write another trilogy? She shakes her head. “It’s a bit like dog ownership. You know you’re too old to start another. A part of you thinks, ‘well it’s sad in one way’, but no, it isn’t really.” Yes, I remark, but then people do continue to get dogs, don’t they, even when they’re not sure they should; they can’t help themselves. “Well, they do,” she replies, “I mean, you can rehome them, but I don’t know what you would do with two books of a trilogy. Nobody could actually write the third for you.”

No, she says, it’ll be standalone novels from now on, and maybe even quite short ones: “I think I deserve a novella after all that … I’ve put the hours in.” For her next book, she’s going to write about the slave girl whom Achilles and Agamemnon argue about in the first section of The Iliad, which she describes as “an extremely realistic account of warfare and what happens to men in warfare”. “I’ve got her voice,” she says. “I want to try to tell as much of the story as I can
in her voice, through her eyes.” It will be set in the period, rather than transposed to another and is, she agrees, “a huge departure”. Does it feel at all frightening? “Not frightening, no. It’s so different from what I’ve been doing before ... ”

I note that she has never written about a contemporary conflict, and she answers that she thinks it would be too difficult to acquire both the in-depth knowledge and the necessary distance to write fiction. “I was once invited by William Deedes [the editor of the Daily Telegraph] to go to Somalia and write about that, along with a lot of other writers,” she recalls. She didn’t go. “If you think about what we could actually have written about it, we’d have been writing about a lot of novelists going to Somalia. That would be all we could actually understand.”

She is always on the alert for the kind of highly polished “fake-work” that it can be all too easy to write; material that looks “respectable” on the screen, but is quite dead. After all, she says, “there are uncomfortable resemblances between novelists and mediums. One of them, of course, is that sometimes it’s genuine and sometimes it’s fake. And the trouble is that once you’ve got the techniques, you can produce a fantastic fake.”

For all its ambiguities, and for its lack of didacticism, her work has a clear moral imperative. Does she think, therefore, that it’s important? “I think you need the delusion at least that it’s important,” she replies. “Why else would you do it? Sitting in a room, dressed like Orphan Annie, tearing your hair out, it’s not intrinsically appealing. So you do need the delusion that it’s important. But I certainly don’t think novels change the world – nor even tiny little fragments of the world. On the other hand, it is important to tell the truth. And, oddly enough, I do believe the truth is instantly recognisable.”

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/20/pat-barker-trilogy-noonday-interview