



After the War: A Story that Needed Telling

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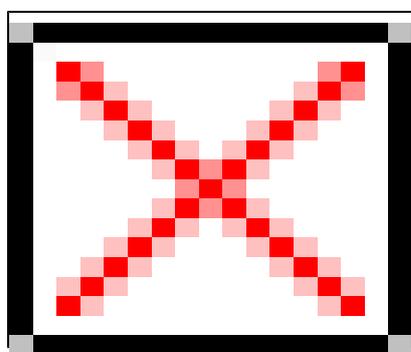
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A Story that Needed Telling: Tom Palmer talks to **Clare Zinkin** about his new book **After the War**



Tom Palmer knew that writing his latest book, **After the War**, would be a challenge, but it was only when I spoke to him the week it went to print, that he could admit how draining the experience had been:

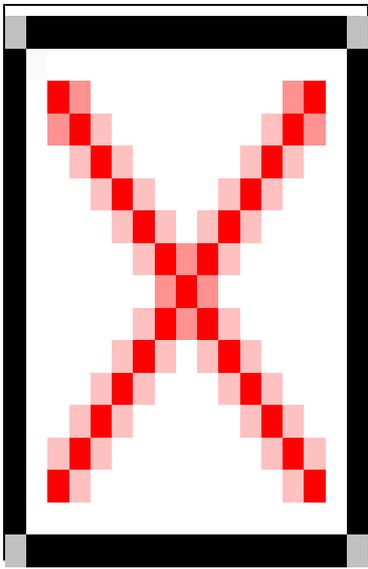
?I was hammered at the end. Shattered. But it was worth it, and it needed doing.?

After the War tells the true story of the Windermere boys, a group of over 300 refugee children who survived the concentration camps of WWII and were relocated to Cumbria. Palmer gives a voice to three characters - Yossi, and his friends Leo and Mordechai, who are haunted by the terrible events they experienced, but try to find hope for the future in the beautiful surroundings of Windermere.

Palmer didn't think he could achieve the task of writing about Holocaust survivors, explaining that it was his wife's idea after she heard a BBC Radio 4 programme about the **Lake District Holocaust Project (LDHP)**; ?along with my editor, I had two strong persuasive people giving me the confidence to do it.?

Palmer's initial research showed how traumatic the Holocaust survivors' experiences were, and under the guidance of Trevor Avery at the **LDHP**, Palmer began to see the importance of writing the story, and the responsibility of getting it right:

?How could I possibly imagine putting myself in the position of a child in Auschwitz and seeing all those things they saw? But having Trevor and the children of survivors read and okay it, was hugely important.?



Truth is imperative when writing about the Holocaust:

“Every scene, every detail had to have a historical source. There were one or two big scenes I deleted because Trevor told me there was no memory that I could link them to, nobody had actually said those things happened. And although plausible, that wasn’t enough.”

With some survivors still alive, there is a living memory of the history, but Palmer said that almost made his story harder to write:

“I think the further back you go, the easier. I’ve written Iron Age stories and you can pretty much do what you want with the period.”

There was also the issue of presenting distressing detail in a way that could move and yet not traumatise Palmer’s readership of 8-12-year olds. So, as he always does with his books, he tested it during the writing process.

“I went with Trevor Avery to Grasmere School, and we asked the children what they thought. The book made a massive impression on them. They didn’t want melodrama. They wanted to know exactly what happened and why. They wanted to know what a Death March was, why there were ghettos, what happened to children, and not to shy away from it. The look on their faces when they were asking for the bare truth made me realise that it was my duty to give them that.”

“Talking to Trevor Avery, and the Windermere boys themselves was so important, but so is talking to the reader.”

Palmer uses this method with all his historical fiction, researching and immersing himself in the period and then testing early drafts on his readership. For **D-Day Dog**, he accompanied a school trip to Normandy:

“Children are very honest. They comment where the story is boring, and they pick up on certain details or characters, and you can use that to make the story rich for that age group.”

This time he travelled to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt, and will use his experiences for his educational school visits. He was particularly affected by seeing the vibrant thriving culture that used to exist in the Jewish quarters of cities such as Krakow:

“There are several wonderful Jewish quarters all over Europe, and many are now empty, and the raw emotion of that catches you off guard. Going there is important. It gives the background of seeing what *was* there – glimmers of the voices in poetry, music, pictures. These all help to frame a narrative.”

One particular piece of research for **After the War** was a photograph on the **LDHP** website of three boys with their arms around each other, one of whom was wearing a pilot’s hat:

?That was the starting point for my characters. I based them on three survivors I met and watched video footage of, and then I changed the names and brought in dozens of other experiences and made my three composite characters.?

In fiction, children can experience events through the characters' eyes, and not at a removed distance. By accessing the story, they can learn historical fact:

?They're much more likely to engage emotionally, to feel empathy, and therefore understand the facts of the period, through a character.?

The book is incredibly moving, at times bringing the reader to tears, both in sorrow for what's passed, but also in hope for the future.

Palmer's own connection with reading started with sport, a topic which often appears in his fiction. One scene in **After the War** features a football game, and encapsulates a particularly difficult incident in the survivors' lives, but also shows the influence on the boys of sports coach Jock Lawrence.

?My Mum encouraged me to read using football in newspapers and magazines, building up my reading stamina. I hated reading as a kid, but I'd read every page of Ceefax to do with sport.?

Reluctant readers today have many more opportunities than waiting for the slow flip of the Ceefax pages, one of which is the Conkers range of Barrington Stoke books that **After the War** belongs to (books for 8-12-year olds featuring dyslexia-friendly font in a super-readable format for all readers, reluctant or fluent).

After the War follows Palmer's best-selling and award-winning **Armistice Runner** and **D-Day Dog**. It may have been Palmer's hardest writing experience yet, but when we spoke, he was already compiling a notebook with his next lot of research.

?That's how it starts, an accumulation of research, and then you sort of strike upon something.?

After the War will certainly strike a chord ? it's devastatingly moving and massively important, and crucially, fantastically accessible.

Clare Zinkin is a children's book consultant, writer and editor.

After the War is published by Barrington Stoke, 978-1781129487, £6.99 pbk

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