



Voices from the Past: Tom Palmer on writing the Great War

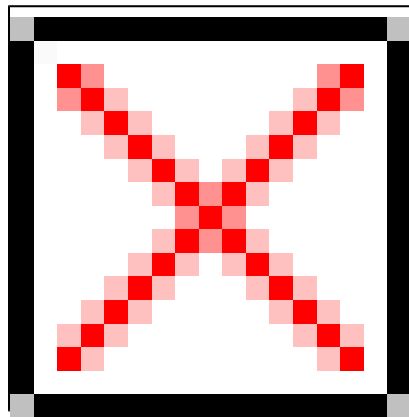
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The author of **Armistice Runner** on creating his new book



As the commemorations for the anniversary of World War One come to an end with national events to mark the Armistice, the conflict remains a rich source of material for writers. **Tom Palmer** has written a series of books about the war for Barrington Stoke, and his latest, **Armistice Runner** links tragic events of one hundred years ago with contemporary concerns. Tom answers questions on the book for **Books for Keeps**.

Why do you think World War One holds such particular fascination for young people?

I can't speak for all young people. But I think it's because it is so hard for people today to imagine what it must have been like to fight in trenches in mud and ice with bombs and bullets flying around. How would *we* cope doing that? I think it's questions like that that make us fascinated.

Do you feel when writing that you have a particular responsibility in how you present the war to readers

Yes, I do. If I am writing about people who did their duty for this country I feel I have a duty to them to tell their story properly. Or at least to try to. So I do a lot of research into the people, places and events to make sure I don't get it too wrong. When I read good stories set in World War One the stories make me care about people who lived ? and died ? 100 years ago. I think that's what it's about: being moved enough to care.

What would you say is the most important sense or idea of World War One that you want young readers to get from your books?

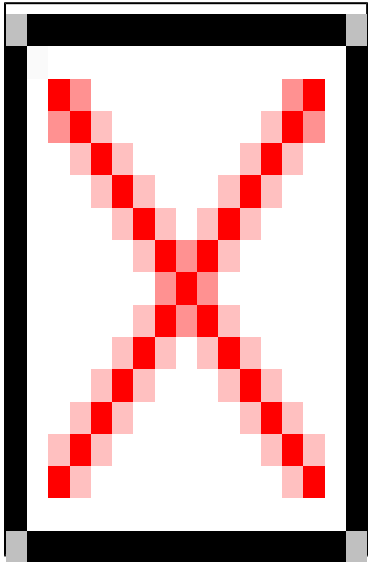
The bottom line is that we should understand the past so that we don't make the same mistakes in the future. And fiction helps us do that by making us care about those people.

Why is important that children understand the past?

It's very important. Take Brexit. What happens when countries change their relationships with each other can be like tectonic plates moving under the earth. It's dangerous. The more we can remember what went wrong before, the less

likely we are to allow it to happen again. In theory.

Armistice Runner features scenes set in the trenches, with a central characters employed as a runner, taking



messages between positions. He is also a fell runner, something that probably hasn't changed much in the intervening years. What kind of research did you do for the book?

I read and listened to interviews with men who fought in World War One, especially trench runners. The Imperial War Museum has some amazing resources in the museum and online to help with this. I also read about fell running. And I went running up and down the hills of Cumbria and in the fields of France where my characters ran.

Can you tell us more about Fell Runner Ernest Dalzell, the real life inspiration for your character Ernest Darby?

He was a game keeper from Cumbria. From about 1910 he won most of the major fell races, climbing and descending steep hills at an astonishing pace. He regularly cycled 50 miles to a race, ran, then cycled home. His records lasted 67 years after his death: he was that fast. He went to fight in World War One and was killed, his body never found. He is remembered at the Arras Memorial. There's [a film of me](#) [3] at his memorial.

Are there other real people whose lives influenced the story?

My daughter and her fell running friends helped me create the world of children's fell racing. And my wife's gran, who suffered dementia influenced the character of Lily's gran. I think it is really important to base characters on real people if you can. For me it makes the characters more realistic. Saying that? Lily and Gran are fictional: they are not my daughter or my gran-in-law, just inspired by them.

That's another strand to the book, Alzheimer's Disease. Why did you choose to include that?

I remember when my wife's gran was forgetting where she was and who I was, for instance. It was very sad. But, as her short-term memories faded, deeper memories came to the surface and she'd remember entire fifty-line poems she'd learned in school eighty years before. In the book, I wanted Gran's memories of her own grandad fell racing to be awoken by her granddaughter fell racing.

Armistice Runner is written for Barrington Stoke and therefore particularly suitable for reluctant readers.oes this affect your writing? What techniques do you use to make it readable for all?

To be honest, I just write as usual. After the kind of edit you would get from any publisher, Barrington Stoke make tweaks to some of the sentence structures and paragraphs to make the book more accessible. Part of the work Barrington Stoke do in making books more readable is in how the page is designed and in the printing.

Are you planning to write more about World War One?

I have no plans at the moment, but the First World War has millions of still-untold stories, so it's likely. Even though it is 100 years since it ended, I still think writers will write about it for generations to come.

Armistice Runner by Tom Palmer, illustrated by Tom Clohosy Cole, is published by Barrington Stoke, 978-1781128251, £6.99 pbk

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