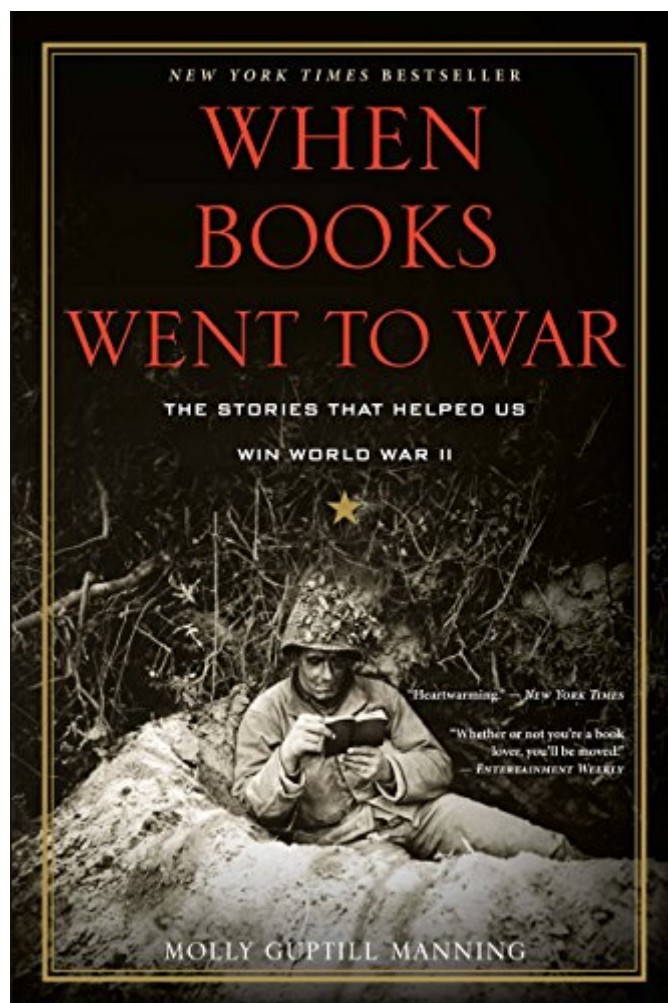


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When Books Went To War: The Stories That Helped Us Win World War II



Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Heartwarming. • " New York Times • Whether or not you're a book lover, you'll be moved. • " Entertainment Weekly • A readable, accessible addition to World War II literature [and] a book that will be enjoyed by lovers of books about books. • " Boston Globe • Four stars [out of four] . . . A cultural history that does much to explain modern America. • " USA Today When America entered World War II in 1941, we faced an enemy that had banned and burned 100 million books. Outraged librarians launched a campaign to send free books to American troops and gathered 20 million hardcover donations. In 1943, the War Department and the publishing industry stepped in with an extraordinary program: 120 million small, lightweight paperbacks for troops to carry in their pockets and rucksacks in every theater of war. These Armed Services Editions were beloved by the troops and are still fondly remembered today. Soldiers read them while waiting to land at Normandy, in hellish trenches in the midst of battles in the Pacific, in field hospitals, and on long bombing flights. They helped rescue *The Great Gatsby* from obscurity and made Betty Smith, author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, into a national icon. *When Books Went to War* is the inspiring story of the Armed Services Editions, and a treasure for history buffs and book lovers alike. • A thoroughly engaging, enlightening, and often uplifting account . . . I was enthralled and moved. • " Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*

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Customer Reviews

I don't usually read this kind of book, to be honest. My ideal reading is under a palm tree and something trashy with great characters and a world that draws me in. However, something about this subject caught my eye. Perhaps it was the fact that my father fought in WW II and I still remember his trunk in the attic, filled with clothes, canteens, and yes, books. And the photo on the cover of a soldier reading with rapt attention on top of a fox hole drew me in -- what DID they do before iPhones and the internet to pass the time? This was an era where at the beginning of the war, according to the book, they didn't even have proper uniforms and tents, much less books and magazines to read, something that today I'm guessing would be taken for granted. "Book are weapons in the war of ideas" was the slogan of a council formed in March 1942 with the objective of "exploring how books could serve the nation during the war" and that is a fundamental theme of this book, from the first chapter which describes the Nazi book burnings in Germany (and the American response) to the final chapter that speaks of the importance of reading to the service men's re-entry into society post-war and interest in furthering their education based in part on their love of reading acquired during the war. Also interesting was the way the program evolved from book donation drives for soldiers (which resulted in a lot of books on cooking and knitting going to the troops) to then a custom-printed campaign of books and magazines to provide exactly what the soldiers were wanting to read, not just what people were willing to donate.

When I haunted Goodwill bookstores as a kid in the mid-60s I would occasionally come across flimsy odd-shaped paperbacks that were marked as Armed Services Editions (ASEs). I bought them up because they were cheap, and because their very oddity made them attractive. But I knew little of how they came to be and of their impact on the men and on the culture. I did know that while Germany banned and burned books, the US distributed books both to servicemen and, later, to European civilians who were starved for reading material. Now I know the whole story, thanks to this book. Molly Manning traces the history of the program, how much the men loved the books, and some of the strange politics that sprang up around the program, and the long-term influence of getting hundreds of thousands of men to read for pleasure on our culture. You think partisan infighting and stupid legislation is a modern thing? Check out the story of how Republican senators,

hoping to keep servicemen from voting to reelect Roosevelt, passed a law prohibiting any kind of political references in the books. Pretty much everything, including course material for Army training, includes some kind of political reference. The ASE program staff interpreted the law strictly, which finally embarrassed Taft and his buddies enough so they adjusted the law. Servicemen and their families did not take lightly to being told that the very men fighting for freedom could not be trusted to judge ideas freely for themselves. There are lots of appealing anecdotes - did you know that A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was the most popular of all the books? Tough guys in foxholes wrote by the hundreds to author Betty Smith to thank her.

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