

1. War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning by Chris Hedges

This is one of the best books on the topic of war that I have ever read. Mr. Hedges has a B.A. in English Literature from Colgate University and a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School. He was a war correspondence for the New York Times for many years.

Drawing from his experiences in numerous war zones, he assembles this masterpiece on the philosophy, psychology, and, most importantly, the reality of war.

The following are some quotations from the book:

“Patriotism, often a thinly veiled form of collective self-worship, celebrates our goodness, our ideals, and our mercy and bemoans the perfidiousness of those who hate us.” [p. 10]

“[War] reduces and at times erases the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious.” [p. 45]

“But just as the oppressors engage in selective memory and myth, so do the victims, building unassailable monuments to their own suffering. It becomes impossible to examine, to dispute, or to criticize the myths that have grown up around past suffering of nearly all in war. Each side creates its own narrative. Neither is fully true.” [p. 81]

Companion read: On War by Chris Hedges

2. Granta 96: War Zones (ed. Ian Jack)

Granta is a literary magazine in a book form. It comes out four times a year and it is one of my favorite magazines. I'd anticipated *Granta 96* and it did not disappoint.

From the *Granta*'s website [<http://www.granta.com/back-issues/96>],

“War will never be a thing of the past. We only hope so. The slaughter of 1914-18 was not, after all, 'the war to end all wars' and who now believes that the invasion of Iraq was the first step to peace in the Middle East? Wars change their nature, but states and people continue to pursue the ancient aims of conquest, security, justice and revenge....”

In this issue, as with other issues of *Granta*, there is a photo essay. This one is a series of military buildings in remote parts of Russia. There is also in this issue a powerful but haunting essay ‘*Victory in Lebanon*’ is about the lives of ordinary citizens in Lebanon during the war this summer. Further, an excerpt from the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak gives one the sound and smell of the market in Istanbul. Though not technically a war story, it illustrates the tension when different ideas crash together. The last entry entitled ‘*Like an Episode of L.A. Law*’ is an excerpt from A. M. Homes’s latest book *The Mistress’s Daughter*.

Companion read: *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak

3. **The Face of War** by Martha Gellhorn

This book was first published in 1959 but I read the updated edition published in 1986. Although Gellhorn was probably best known as the third wife of Ernest Hemingway, she was an excellent war correspondent on her own right. She and Hemingway traveled and reported from China in 1941. A recent book Hemingway on the China Front alleged he was working as a spy for the CIA during that trip. In one of the chapters of another of Gellhorn's books, Travels With Myself and Another, she chronicles the trip she took with Hemingway except she never mentions his name.

The Face of War is a collection of essays and reports that Gellhorn filed while she covered the wars from Spain, Finland, Java, Vietnam, the Middle East, and Central America.

Like any conflicts, some of the conflicts are complex but Gellhorn definitely captures the horror of wars. Her reports cover some of the lesser-known areas of conflicts during WWII such as Java and Finland.

Companion read: Travels With Myself and Another by Martha Gellhorn.

4. **A Peace to end All Peace -- The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East** by David Fromkin

Many of the conflicts in the Middle East today could be attributed to some of the ill-considered decisions that were made during the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire (~1914-1922).

This book, not a thin volume, chronicles the fall of the Ottoman Empire and how the modern Middle East was remapped after WWI. The book covers many colourful characters during this part of the history (Lord Kitchener, Talaat, Churchill, T. E. Lawrence, King Hussein, Saud, Woodrow Wilson and Ben-Gurion) and many important battles (Gallipoli, Balkans, Azerbaijan, Boer, and Russian Revolution).

This book was able to fill an important gap in the timeline of recent history for me.

Company read:

Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World by Margaret MacMillan.

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom by T. E. Lawrence (a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia)

5. The Places in between by Rory Stewart

In early 2002, Rory Stewart proclaimed that he was the first tourist in post-Taliban's Afghanistan. A few years previous to that, he had already walked across Iran, Pakistan and India and Nepal but had to skip Afghanistan because he wasn't allowed in. So, after the fall of the Taliban, armed with a number of letter of introductions, Stewart set off to walk from Herat (western Afghanistan) to Kabul through the mountains.

This book is a wonderful first-hand account of the people of Afghanistan. As Stewart arrives at each village, he introduces himself as a traveller from a distant county (I am not American, he has to repeat many times) asking for food, drink, and a place to stay. There are vivid descriptions of lives in the villages that are miles away from the notion of global conflict.

I find Stewart a bit pushy as he demands the hospitality of strangers. However, he should get some allowance since he was walking at least 20 miles a day and he was shot at several times.

If you want to learn more about the ordinary lives of the Afghani, this is a very good book.

Companion read:

The Punishment of Virtue by Sarah Chayes [This is the book I'm reading now]

6. Chasing the Dragon: Into the Heart of the Golden Triangle by Christopher R. Cox

This is a different kind of travel book. It will take you to a different world and it also illustrates why the war on drugs may not be a winnable war.

The Golden Triangle is a lawless region where Myanmar (Burma), Laos and Thailand meet. It is one of the biggest opium producers of the world. This region also plays a role in the history of the formation of the Peoples Republic of China. Back in 1949, when the Nationalist Chinese government moved from mainland China to Taiwan, it left a sizable group of soldiers in Burma; and with the backing of CIA, it maintained a guerilla presence in that area waiting for an opportunity to return to mainland China. Unfortunately, in order to fund the operation, they began to grow opium and manufacture heroin. One of the biggest clients is the United States.

In this book, Mr Cox, a reporter from Boston Herald, travels there in order to tack down and interview Khun Sa, the drug warlord who built himself a jungle empire on drug profits. This journey to the jungle is full of high adventure.

Khun Sa, who was named by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) as one of the top drug lords of the world in the 1990s, used the struggle for independence for a modern

Shan State (there is no more talk of returning to China as the off springs of the original Chinese have fully integrated with the locals) as the reason for the opium trade.

In January 1996, Khun Sa surrendered to the Burmese government and is currently alive, owning a number of businesses in Rangoon, Myanmar. It was reported that he made a deal with the Myanmar's dictator so that he would be extradited to the USA to face drug smuggling charges.

It took Mr. Cox several years and a number of trips, on his own expense, to the Golden Triangle to research for this book. Unfortunately for Mr. Cox, the book was released at the same time as the infamous O. J. Simpson's car chase on the highway. The interview with the king of drug lord got very little press time.

Additional recommendations: [Books I have read long time ago on the topic of war]

7. **The Year of Living Dangerously by C. J. Koch**

This is one of my all time favorite novels and it is set in Indonesia during the 1960s when the country was caught in a power struggle between Sukarno (the founding president) and Suharto (a major general). When the dust was settled, between 500,000 and one million people, most were members of PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) were killed.

One of the novel's theme is the tension between the rich and the poor; the first world and the third world.

8. **55 Days: The Fall of Saigon by Alan Dawson**

Based on a personal account by the author, this book chronicles the 55 days leading up to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. One of the iconic images from the war was the last Americans in Vietnam scrambling to climb aboard a helicopter on the roof of the C.I.A. The book contains many sad and remarkable stories. It reinforces the notion that in a time of crisis, you can usually find physical courage but not moral courage.

Companion read: The Ten Thousand Day War – Vietnam: 1945 – 1975 by Michael Maclear

9. **Sophie's Choice by William Styron**

The author of this tragic novel suffered from a serious depression several years after the publishing of this book. Although the novel might not be the cause, this tragic novel could put anyone into a depressed mood.

For anyone who doubts the existence of evil, the novel would probably convince you otherwise. It is dark, disturbing but realistic.

Companion read:

Stones from the River by Ursula Hegi

All Quiet on the Western Front by:

10. **Night by Elie Wiesel**

Because of, or despite Oprah's recommendation, this is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the physiological and physical torture of the concentration camp. Only years later was the author able to speak about the unspeakable that occurred to him during his internment years ago. There may be a good reason why many soldiers refuse to talk about their experience in war because of what they had to do, in order to survive.

Companion read:

Dawn by Ellie Wiesel

Accident by Ellie Wiesel