



# In the Trenches

A powerful war poem teaches history—and humility

by Patrick Hicks, from Florida Review

“When did it end?”

My students examine their copies of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* while, outside, a snowplow rumbles up the street and then beeps as it backs up. I let it do another lap before I say anything.

“What do we know about World War I?”

A student in the back, the one who wears a wool cap to hide his bedhead, raises his hand and mentions the name Franz Ferdinand. “He was the archduke who got shot in Sarajevo. That’s why the war started, right?”

Later in the semester I’ll learn that a popular band has named itself after this historical personality, but for now I’m nodding with enthusiasm. I’m delighted that one of them knows something—anything—about World War I. This

war shaped the 20th century. It introduced us to flame-throwers, the tank, aerial combat, and more skeletons than the heart will ever allow us to count. It almost single-handedly made modernism the prevailing artistic movement of the day. And yet, in the United States, we don’t think about this war, perhaps because we are drawn to sequels that promise something that is bigger and better than the original. Maybe it has something to do with our late entry into the war or with how little American blood was shed in the trenches? Whatever the reason, as a story, it doesn’t hold us captive like World War II. I suspect that for most of my students the Great War is nothing more than Snoopy flying into battle on top of his doghouse, his guns blazing away at

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