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VATE CONFERENCE 2010

Jubilaeus, Iobzaios, Jubilare, To shout for joy

AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL FICTION, MARRYING HISTORY AND ENGLISH

Jacqueline Dinan

Fiction, has over the decades, married the learning between English and History by entertaining the reader en route a journey into the realities of past events, issues, people and places. Such historical fact provides a foundation for the themes that are threaded throughout a novel's imaginary plot.

Akin to award-winning classics such as *My Brother Jack* and *Fly Away Peter*, *A Woman's War* is a work of Australian historical fiction that explores our nation's reaction to war. It is exceptional to read non-fiction wrapped in a fictional cover and in this instance, the perspective is even more unique — that of a mother.

In her presentation at VATE's Jubilee Conference, author Jacqueline Dinan provided a synopsis of the research undertaken to provide the historical foundation to the story, *A Woman's War*.

This included:

- A glimpse into life of inner-working class Melbourne; family, footy and factory production;
- The tucked-away village of Pozières in Northern France that today is the watch-keeper of our war dead;
- How the war challenged and advanced the lives of women;
- Photos and perspectives of the political agitators who fuelled the conscription debate; and
- The rallies, events and employment movements that broke ground.

The other focus of her presentation was the themes that *A Woman's War* provides so simplistically. For practicality, Jacqueline explored these themes in comparison with those presented in *My Brother Jack* and the binary opposites of *Fly Away Peter*.

A WOMAN'S WAR IN RESPECT TO THE BINARY OPPOSITES OF FLY AWAY PETER (BY DAVID MALOUF)

PEACE VS DESTRUCTION

Both novels contrast peace and destruction. In *Fly Away Peter*, there are the visualisations of the

peaceful swamp and farmland versus the noise, horror and stench of battlefield. In *A Woman's War*, the tranquillity and respite of Rosie's kitchen is literally 'miles away' from the dreadfulness expressed in letters from 'The Front'.

NATURE VS UNNATURALNESS

Natural urges, exhibited by animals and people, are exemplified in both novels. For the main character in *Fly Away Peter*, Jim Saddler, the natural occurrence of bird migration, tides and the moon, conflict with the invasion of machinery on the battlefield. In *A Woman's War*, the natural urge and force of maternal instinct is demonstrated in how women yearn to love, protect and care, distinct to many historical accounts of men fighting over land and politics.

INNOCENCE VS EXPERIENCE

In both books, the innocence that Australians held as they stepped to the line, participating in their first war as a nation is demonstrated. Innocence demands experience and experience erodes innocence. Jim seems to have led a rather sheltered existence, yet he becomes more 'worldly' as he learns about interacting with people. In *A Woman's War*, Rosie's boys flourish on meeting new mates and are recipients of the discipline regime of the army. When she visits them at the training camps, seeing them in their uniforms, they seem far more grown up.

MEN VS WOMEN — GENDER ROLES

During WWI, as seen in both novels, it was only men who enlisted as soldiers. Women operated as nurses, Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) and Red Cross volunteers. On the home front the roles and responsibilities for women had to change. Many had to commence employment for the first time or change the nature of the work they did. They moved into roles traditionally granted to men — teaching, clerical work and banking. Women also worked in factories maintaining production of items required by the war effort. Some women also

had to run a family business or farm, both during and after the war. Others were busy giving birth and raising children by themselves and maintaining community connectivity.

INDIVIDUALITY VS GROUP 'MATESHIP'

In *Fly Away Peter*, Jim is over-awed by the transitional nature of birds migrating in flocks. In comparison, there are scores of men swayed by the relentless pull of 'mateship', who enlist and 'go over the top' as a group. This is evident in both works of Australian historical war fiction.

STATUS QUO VS CHALLENGE

Both *Fly Away Peter* and *A Woman's War*, highlight how life requires a journey and the quest for achievement, despite the risks. During the Great War, men from Australia embarked to foreign lands that many would not have otherwise had the means to visit. The migration of the birds demonstrates how they too adventure against the hazards as they fly to foreign lands. Rosie identifies that her boys need to 'spread their wings', but queries that their first trip abroad need be to a battlefield. She too challenges herself on her own home front journey, by re-entering the work force and contributing to the collective voice at a peace rally.

A WOMAN'S WAR IN RESPECT TO THE THEMES OF MY BROTHER JACK (BY GEORGE JOHNSTON)

BROTHERHOOD AND MATESHIP

In *My Brother Jack*, David and his older brother Jack have diverse natures and interests and their individual responses to the outbreak of war are very different. Jack eagerly asks David to use his influence to get him enlisted, but David does not go out of his way to do a favour for his brother. In comparison, the brothers in *A Woman's War*, Albert and Tom, grow up

inseparably, then enlist and fight together. Though twins, they are boys with dissimilar personalities; however; they still blend as great mates as well as brothers.

FUNCTIONALITY OF FAMILIES

The father in *My Brother Jack*, personally suffers dreadful ramifications from WWI. As a result, David and Jack grow up in a house where alcohol and violence is evident and love is devoid. David later has difficulty loving others. Albert and Tom are reared with open communication and have a close relationship with their parents and other people, such as neighbours. Their father supports their enlistment. We also see the characters in *A Woman's War* look out for each other during difficult times.

WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASS

In *My Brother Jack*, the father is a tram-driver and in *A Woman's War*, the father is a factory worker. The simplistic lives of both families are indicative of the working class of that era. Despite his origins, David takes a different path and is educated as a journalist and acquires an 'office job', transpiring himself into the 'middle-class'. In *A Woman's War*, the setting of the suburb Collingwood, where poverty was apparent, allows for comparisons to the more-affluent suburb of Kew on the hills above. A female character finds domestic employment in a house in Kew and reports of luxuries such as gas mains to the copper.

JACQUELINE DINAN co-authored *A Woman's War* with her husband, John Dinan. To supplement the social study application of *A Woman's War*, Jacqueline has produced comprehensive Teacher's Notes to aid the English or History teaching professional.