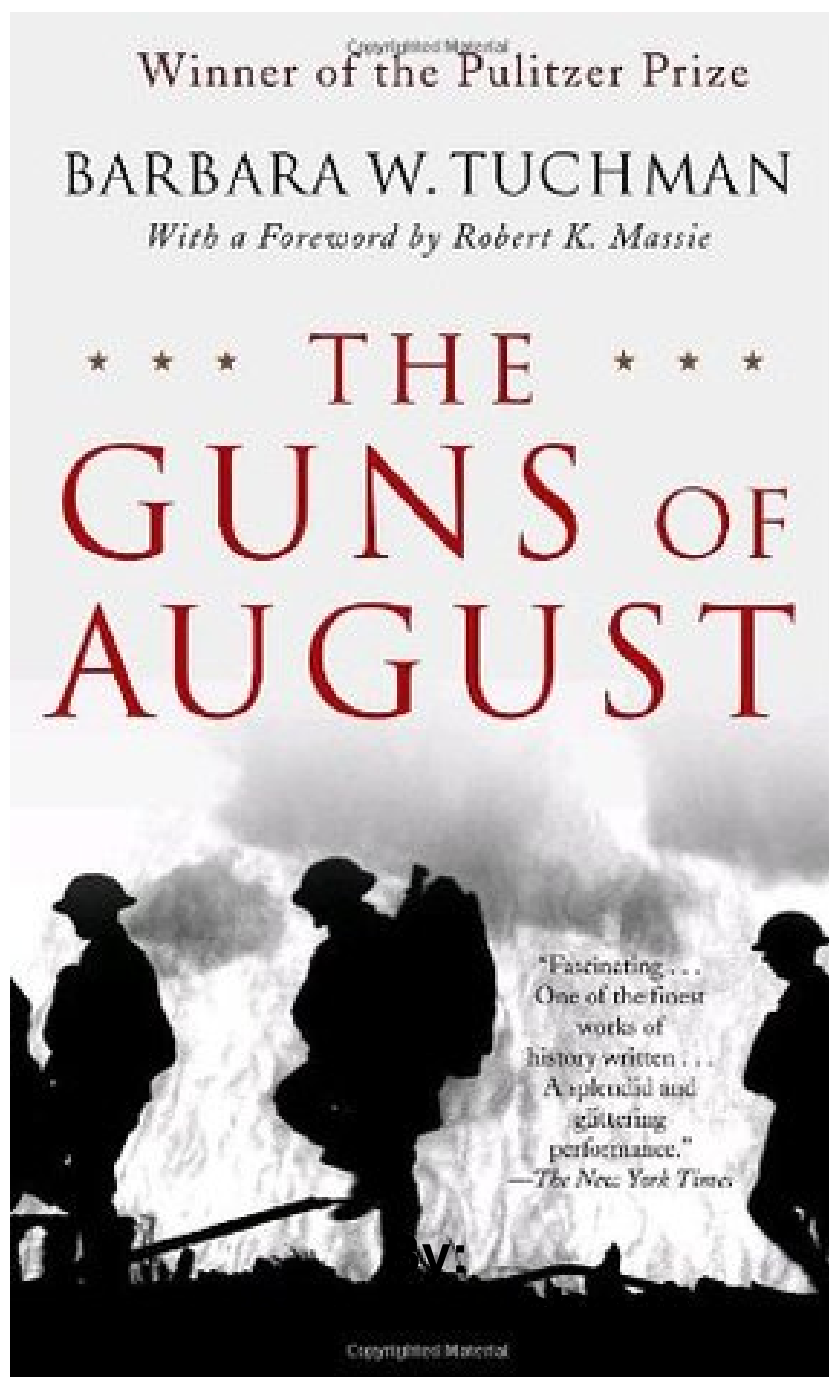

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What people Say:

Kalliope

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As many years separate Tuchman's book from the events she discusses as years separate us from the time its publication: about half a century.

Those two lots of five decades each may explain two different reactions

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Those two lots of five decades each may explain two different reactions. On the one hand Tuchman's choosing as her premise the accountability of Germany and her (sole?) responsibility for the horror of the war, and on the other hand our wider questioning and possibly a more skeptical reception of her views.

Matt

Let's start with a couple items.

First, there is nothing left to be said about Barbara Tuchman's

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Second, that is not going to stop me.

is not only the most famous book written about World War I, it is one of the most famous history books on any topic whatsoever. It won the Pulitzer, became a bestseller, was name-checked by politicians, and still provides a tidy sum to Tuchman's heirs and designees. Even today, if you do a general search for "World War I" on

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Lilo

"The Guns of August" is the first book I read about the Great War or, as I knew it, World War One. "The Guns of August" is also the first substantial information I obtained about this war.

I was born in Germany, in 1939. My family, then containing of my parents, my biological maternal grandmother, and my adoptive maternal grandmother (my biological grand-aunt), talked very little about WWI, probably because WWII was raging, food as well as all other supplies were scarce, and we were surrounded b

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When I went to school/college, history education stopped before 1900. Teachers shied away from recent history. It was too touchy a subject. I never even saw related books in bookstores or libraries. For these reasons, I was totally ignorant of European 20th century history. Once I joined Goodreads

and discovered Amazon, I started to devour non-fiction books about the Third Reich, WWII, and the Holocaust, and I am still not finished reading about this era. Yet when August 2014 arrived, I thought it appropriate to read, at least, one book about WWI. So I read "The Guns of August".

This book had me in shock. My family members had disliked Kaiser Wilhelm II and had mentioned more than once that he had been rather stupid. However, nothing had me prepared for what I read in "The Guns of August". I had not had a clue that he had been a warmonger with zero regard for human lives. Neither had I had a clue that his chancellor and his generals had not been any better. I had known these prototypes of rigid, narrow-minded Germans (you can still find some today), yet to find a German emperor and the politicians and generals surrounding him not only caricatures of dislikable Germans but also evil warmongers and indifferent about human suffering is something I have not been able to get over, six weeks after finishing reading the book.

Yes, most politicians and generals of the other countries who would get involved were not exactly saints either. Yes, the German armies were more functional than the rather dysfunctional French, British, and Russian armies. What more is there to say? I came away with great admiration for the King of Belgium, who seemed to be the only head of state of participating countries who was totally innocent, who cared about human lives, and whose decisions were guided by wisdom and common sense. What utterly surprised me was the incompetence of the French leadership and its lack of organization. Any business owner would go bankrupt in no time being as dysfunctional as the French war machine, not even to speak of the Russians, whose incompetence would have been a joke, had it not cost so many lives. Yet whatever I read, my thoughts returned to Kaiser Wilhelm II and his generals, especially general Moltke. How can anyone plan and start a war with so little reason and with total disregard for human lives? How can anyone send millions of young men to their deaths without a solid cause? "Was Wilhelm II the main culprit? I would say so. And to think that he was not hanged as a war criminal (along with a bunch of his generals), but comfortably retired! This makes my blood boil.

I know I should say something about the superb writing style of Barbara Tuchman, her ironic wits, and the thoroughly researched contents of the book. So I'll try. Yes, the book is superbly written, even though I, occasionally, found it going a bit too much into military details for readers with no military background and I also had trouble with a number of tapeworm sentences which remained unclear to me. (A few more commas would have helped.) This is why I rated the book only 4 stars. It just didn't make it to the full 5 stars on my scale. Yet if the system allowed for it, I would have given 4 1/2 stars.

Oh, I almost forgot: My adoptive grandfather (my biological grand-aunt's husband) was drafted as a reserve officer, a captain, into the Bavarian army. He fought in the Vosges. He returned uninjured, after the war. I still have two carved walking sticks he brought back from the Vosges as souvenirs. Yet this is all I know about my adoptive grandfather's engagement in WWI, other than that he and his wife (my grand-aunt) adopted my mother when the war broke out. This was for financial reasons. Had my mother's uncle been killed in the war, my mother, as his adopted daughter, would have received an orphan's pension. This would have enabled my mother's aunt, had she been widowed, to keep up her lifestyle, which would have meant continuing to employ

her sister, my biological grandmother, as her cook and what we would call nowadays "household manager". (My mother's biological father had died, at age 42, before the war, while only being engaged to my grandmother. He had been an atheist, and my great-grandmother, a devoted Catholic, had forbidden the marriage.) I do not remember my adopted grandfather. He died in 1940, when I was a baby. I only know him from photographs and from tales of my family members. I was told that he had been a good man, kind and compassionate. So I am sure that he was not the prototype of a German officer, such as those described in "The Guns of August".

I know this is not much of a review, but this is all I could think about when reading this book that shook me in my bones.

Paul Bryant

Well, how d'you do, Private Willie McBride, First Class - do you mind if I sit down down here by your graveside? It's so nice to rest for awhile in the warm summer sun... I've been walking all day and I'm nearly done in. Well. So, Willie - I see by your gravestone you were only nineteen when you joined the glorious fallen. 1916 - a long time ago now. Well I hope you died quick and I hope you died clean. But Private Willie McBride, it could have been slow and obscene. Let's not think of that. And

Well, how d'you do, Private Willie McBride, First Class - do you mind if I sit down down here by your graveside? It's so nice to rest for awhile in the warm summer sun... I've been walking all day and I'm nearly done in. Well. So, Willie - I see by your gravestone you were only nineteen when you joined the glorious fallen. 1916 - a long time ago now. Well I hope you died quick and I hope you died clean. But Private Willie McBride, it could have been slow and obscene. Let's not think of that. And did you leave a wife or a sweetheart behind? In some faithful heart is your memory enshrined? And, though you died back in 1916, to that loyal heart you'd be forever nineteen. Or some bollocks like that. That's what they say, isn't it. Sorry to have to tell you but you're probably a stranger, without even a name, peering out from some forgotten glass pane, in an old photograph, in a drawer, torn and tattered and stained, or fading to yellow in a brown leather frame. Well, take a look around now. It's a beautiful day. The sun's shining down on these green fields of France. Feel that, Willie? No, I suppose you don't. The warm wind blows gently, and look, the red poppies are dancing just like they're supposed to. The trenches have all gone, all ploughed under. It's a lovely place now. There's no gas and no barbed wire, no guns firing now. But I suppose here in this graveyard it's still No Man's Land - see how many white crosses there are - well, I couldn't count them all. But at least you're not alone, Willie, eh? There was umpteen thousands like you. But you know I can't help but wonder now, Private Willie McBride, First Class - do all those who lie here know why they died? I mean, did you really believe that your war would end wars? Because that's what they said. You'll remember that. Because, you know, the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame, the killing, the dying, it was all done in vain, Willie. It all happened again. And again, and again, and again, and

again. Anyway, that's enough from me. I'll bid you good day. I've got another five miles to go. Thanks for your time.

(with many apologies to Eric Bogle and his great song The Green Fields of France)

Diane

This is an impressive work on the buildup to World War I and the first month of fighting. I wanted to read this book after a re-read of

, to better understand the war. I've heard

described as one of the best books about WWI ever written, and while I haven't read enough to testify to that, I do think it was an interesting and insightful work, and I'd recommend it to history buffs.

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I listened to

on audio, and I enjoyed the narration by Nadia May. My one frustration with this book is that Tuchman had so many countries to cover -- the French, Germans, British, Russians and even Belgians were included -- that sometimes Tuchman would be relating a long story, and by the end I'd be confused about which government she had been talking about. This problem probably would have been eased had I been reading in print, where it's easier to flip back a few pages and be reminded about the context. Frequently I had to hit rewind to try and catch up with the narrative.