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Libby Murphy, *The Art of Survival: France and the Great War Picaresque*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016. 304 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-21751-3.

Review by Alison S. Fell, University of Leeds.

Unlike the Resistance fighters of the Second World War, who are cast as active heroes, First World War soldiers and civilians are usually represented more passively in French culture, as the sufferers rather than as the perpetrators of violence. Many of the most well-known French novels and films about the war, whether dating from the 1930s, such as Jean Giono's *Le Grand Troupeau* (1931) and Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937), or from the more recent revival of interest in the conflict, such as Sébastien Japrisot's best-selling novel *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (1991) or Christian Carion's 2005 film *Joyeux Noël*, largely subscribe to a view of the war as futile and immoral slaughter. As Leonard Smith argues, the decades following the Armistice produced a consensus around a dominant cultural narrative that depicted the war as a tragedy and those involved as its victims.^[1] Equally, films and novels are inflected by ideological concerns about the war's longer-term legacies on international and individual relations, and the war is thereby understood as a tragedy on an individual, national, and global scale.

However, for many of the men and women living through it, the war was viewed not so much as a tragic epic but as a disorienting and sometimes mundane daily struggle for survival in a hostile environment. Libby Murphy's book focuses on French novels, cartoons, films and newspaper articles that were produced either during or immediately after the war. Their authors therefore lack the longer-term vision or broader ideological interpretative frameworks that come with hindsight. Rather, the war years produced "an ambivalent form of patriotism that was staunchly antimilitarist, but not yet pacifist, highly individualistic but nationalist at the same time" (p. xv). The common thread she finds to connect her corpus of French cultural responses to war is the picaresque, which, she contends, "was uniquely appropriate for describing the kind of world the trenches represented—a world that is so violent, so chaotic, and so radically governed by chance that the only pattern of experience that makes any sense is that of basic, animal survival" (p. xiv). Within this disordered world, "the *picaro* is a protagonist with a long literary past who can serve as a model for how to scratch and scramble just to stay alive" (p. xiv). This mode of storytelling was most appropriate to the French context because it lies "between satire and comedy" (p. 12) and thereby "opens a middle ground between coercion and consent" (p. 9), neither dismissing the necessity of fighting the war nor ascribing to it lofty or idealist notions of nationalist grandeur.

Murphy interprets the picaresque broadly, defining it as "an anti-type to chivalric romance and its culture of heroism" (p. 2)—a type of war writing that is akin in some respects to Stendhal's influential depiction of Fabrice's experience of the battle of Waterloo as chaotic and contingent in *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), a literary precursor that Pierre Schoentjes also sees as central to the fiction of the First World War.^[2] *Picaros* in the First World War are not always the individualistic wanderers facing an

uncertain world that are characteristic of the Spanish roots of the genre; Murphy also sees the fraternal bands of soldiers in combat novels as further examples of the picaresque. In this context, relationships with others are interpreted as one of the coping or survival strategies forged by trench-dwelling *picaros* who have been alienated from civilian life (p. 23).

She begins in her opening chapter by exploring the key characteristics of a picaresque trench narrative, and situates her analysis in relation to pre-existing scholarship on First World War writing, particularly the works of Leonard Smith, Martin Hurcombe, Paul Fussell and Evelyn Cobley.^[3] In so doing, she makes a lucid and convincing case for the importance of the picaresque as a literary mode that was adopted (and adapted) by a broad range of First World War writers, artists and journalists. The following seven chapters offer thematic and comparative analyses of novels, sketches, cartoons and films, examining not only French examples (the novelists Henri Barbusse, Roland Dorgelès and Pierre Chaine, journalist Georges de la Fouchardière, and the illustrators Francisque Poulbot and Gus Bofa), but also placing them in a comparative framework by including Czech novelist Jaroslav Hašek, British cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather, and the films of Charlie Chaplin.

Chapter two explores the importance in French war writing of *le système débrouille* or *système D*, the French term for finding ways of getting by through resourceful improvisation, which often borders on the illegal, thereby avoiding the pitfalls and headaches of more “official” systems. She finds examples of this in the humorous images and sketches of the illustrated press, particularly *La Baïonnette*, as well as in trench novels, which regularly feature plundering *poilus* relying on their wits to feed, clothe, and equip themselves. The ability to *se démerder* (get out of the shit) becomes most morally ambiguous when it involves ways of getting out of the combat zone, as alongside these depictions of a comic avoidance of duty lie the ever-present attacks on the *embusqué* or shirker.

The moral ambiguity of the world of the soldier-*picaresque* is also central to chapter three, which considers satirical journalism and the phenomenon of *bourrage de crâne*, the “skull stuffing” or facile clichés of nationalist journalism that were singled out for attack by newspapers such as *Le Canard enchaîné*. The main focus of the chapter is one of *Le Canard*'s most important contributors, Georges de la Fouchardière, whose mock-adventure story *Scipion Pégoulade* (1916) features a fake soldier hero whose mishaps expose the hypocrisy and illusions of wartime discourses in a manner reminiscent of Jean Cocteau's *Thomas l'imposteur* (1923). While *Le Canard enchaîné*, as a political and cultural phenomenon, has already been adroitly analysed by Allen Douglas,^[4] here Murphy makes the important point that, like his main target Maurice Barrès, La Fouchardière was another “armchair patriot writing from the comfort of the home front,” and that they were both “propagandists writing in support of a certain idea of France” (p. 76). She places La Fouchardière in a broader European framework in chapter four, in which she compares his literary creation of Bicard to that of Švejk in Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (1923).

Arguing that the picaresque tradition had always engaged with the “affinity between humans and animals,” chapter five turns to the use of animal characters in First World War combat writing, focusing in particular on Pierre Chaine's *Les Mémoires d'un rat* (1917), which chronicles life on the Western Front from the perspective of a trench rat, “the consummate survivor” (p. 125). Chapter six moves from the literary to the visual and compares French cartoonist Francisque Poulbot's “artful dodger”-like street-children, embodying “resourcefulness, rebelliousness and courage” (p. 161), with Bruce Bairnsfather's “Old Bill,” who equally shows resourcefulness and black humour in his predicament as a front-line trench-fighter stuck in an “ole.” In contrast to these survivors, chapter seven considers the darker tones of graphic artist Gus Bofa's drawings, which depict the soldier suffering from war-induced depression or *le cafard*, alongside the *loustic* (wag or joker). Murphy's definition of the *picaresque* also encompasses then, at least to some extent, the alienated, disillusioned or brutalized soldier such as the protagonist of Léon Werth's *Clavel Soldat* (1919), who became a familiar literary character in 1920s war writing.

The final chapter considers Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp and Charlot characters in the light of French Great War picaresque writing. Chaplin's films were popular and influential in France, and Murphy claims that this "was because his comedy resonated strongly with the picaresque ethos that was so pronounced during the war" (p. 200). This chapter is as much a study of the reception of Chaplin's films as their content, and contains fascinating insights about their impact on the French public imagination.

As Murphy acknowledges in chapter one, the picaresque was not the only literary mode that French writers, journalists and artists reached for in their attempts to represent the war. Christian—and particularly Catholic—ideas about sacrifice and martyrdom, nationalist evocations of *la terre* and *le sang*, and apocalyptic visions of the Western Front that echoed the landscapes of nineteenth-century naturalist novels were also apparent in French wartime cultural and literary production. Even traditional models of heroism survived to a limited extent, such as the evocations of pilots as the "knights of the air." However, this book makes a convincing case for the importance of the *picaresque* as a mode of cultural production during the war years—especially when it is broadly interpreted as the attempts of the ordinary man to survive in a hostile and confusing world. Although this is a topic that has been touched on by other critics, this book is the first to consider it as a far-reaching cultural phenomenon that crossed both genres and national borders.[5] Another key strength of the volume is the broader comparative framework and the consideration of more canonical texts, such as Barbusse's *Le Feu*, alongside lesser-known examples. Engaging and vivid, with a strong grasp of the broader historical, political, and cultural contexts in which these works were produced, this is an original and important contribution to the cultural history of France during the First World War that deserves a wide readership.

NOTES

[1] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[2] Pierre Schoentjes, *Fictions de la Grande Guerre: Variations littéraires sur 14-18* (Paris: Éditions classiques Garnier, 2009).

[3] Smith, *The Embattled Self*; Martin Hurcombe, *Novelists in Conflict: Ideology and the Absurd in the French combat novel of the Great War* (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2004); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Evelyn M. Cobley, *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

[4] Allen Douglas, *War, Memory and the Politics of Humor: the Canard Enchaîné and World War I* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2002).

[5] See, for example, Nicolas Bianchi, "Loustics, balourds et picaros. Regards sur le personnage comique romanesque de 14-18," in Toby Garfitt and Nicolas Bianchi eds., *Writing the Great War/Comment écrire la Grande Guerre* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 252-75.

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