

careers waiting for all of us; the armistice interfered with our annual sports day, and the man who came home without his legs came to tea. We also got a thrill of pleasure out of reading about the German atrocities; and once, towards the end of the last war we were badly frightened. There was a chance of our father's having to go. He was near the age limit, but he had to fill in a paper saying whether he'd be willing to go or not. We never said anything to each other but we were frightened. We were frightened too that our father would say on the paper that he wasn't willing to go. That was a worse fear. We were frightened in case we should find out that our father was frightened.

Of course the grown-ups were affected by the last war in lots of different ways. A lot of them, I know, actually did go to the war. But my uncles who were farmers were simply made. They gave a certain amount of money and land to the patriotic fund, and in 1920 they sold out and retired.

THE LAST WAR

When the last war began I was in Standard IV. We used to write compositions on the war. We weren't bothered over the retreat from Mons, we said it was strategy. All except one boy. He said the Germans were getting the best of it, and we made his life a misery for weeks afterwards. Some of our teachers told us that we were born just at the right time. Such a lot of young men were being killed, and there'd be great careers waiting for all of us.

When the last war ended I was at the High School. We got the news of the armistice on our annual sports day. We all hated having to leave off our sports to go and take part in a demonstration held outside the Post Office. The mayor made a speech, and it bored us to death.

A man from our town came home from the last war without his legs. My mother wasn't satisfied until she made him come to tea. He came, and he answered all our questions; and except for answering our questions he didn't have anything to say. We asked him how many Huns he killed, and what it was like in the trenches. For tea we had cold boiled chicken, with lovely pieces of jelly sticking to it, and fruit salad and cream, and cake with filling nearly an inch thick. Of course we had had things like that for tea right through the war. My mother kept on pressing our hero to eat. Do have some more fruit salad, she said. Oh, *won't you!*

That was how the last war affected us children. We wrote compositions about it, and believed there'd be great

SARGESON, Frank and THE LAST WAR

IN BRIEF

Frank Sargeson (1903-1982) was born in Hamilton, trained as a solicitor and worked in Europe for several years before settling near Takapuna, where he remained for the rest of his life. He published forty stories between 1936 and 1954, and in these years he dominated New Zealand short fiction. More than any other writer, Sargeson captured working-class New Zealand vernacular, the society that gave rise to it and much of its inner spirit. He was also an important mentor to younger writers, as evidenced in the collection he edited in 1945, *Speaking for Ourselves*. Sargeson remains a major figure for his achievement and influence in New Zealand fiction.

HIS STYLE

An economic delineation of character, minimalist narration, and an understanding of the tight range of idiomatic vocabulary and syntax appropriate to his characters.

The stories, showing some indebtedness to Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway, are frequently wry sketches or ostensible yarns about apparently undistinguished characters and minor occurrences. The background, explicit or implied, is New Zealand in the years between the two World Wars, and particularly the 1930s Depression, against which the characters are depicted as itinerant labourers or unemployed men, seldom happily married and frequently without any apparent family connection.

The stories drew praise for their social realism and austere economy of language, appropriate to the apparently unimaginative principal characters who were often the semi-articulate narrators and chroniclers of the events. The narrators' starkly limited point of view characterises a view of the world that dare not admit openly the emptiness and loneliness that is immanent. This was accepted as true of the limited, puritanical, emotionally sterile world of the New Zealand working-class male, isolated by gender, economic status and emotional incapacity, relying on the unspoken expectations of 'mateship' for some partial fulfilment that more often than not proved elusive. More than any other works before them, Sargeson's stories captured working-class New Zealand vernacular, the society that gave rise to it and much of its inner spirit.

Frank Sargeson was undoubtedly the most important New Zealand writer of short fiction in the years following the death of [Katherine Mansfield](#). Like her, his reputation helped promote the recognition of New Zealand writing beyond the country's shores. Unlike her, he wrote his major works during a lifetime's residence in New Zealand.

THE LAST WAR

Overview

A short story, no information given about the date of publication,
Easy understanding : simple vocabulary and syntax, no rhetorical devices
first-person narrative, no names given, a feeling of anonymous setting as no clues given as regards the place except being an English country as references to "tea, boiled chicken and pieces of jelly"..
Limited viewpoint

Time : “1920”, “the last war”, “the armistice”, “the trenches”, “German atrocities”. It occurs during World War I

Characters : “I”, “classmates”, “the mayor”, “my mother”, “Huns”, “ a man” etc..

Topic : tips given about how people and especially schoolboys experienced WWI and the impact on their daily life and their way of thinking.

Detailed comprehension

-“I” as being the writer : so the story as memories of how the 1914-1918 period affected him. He act as a chronicler of events through an economy of language appropriate to the characters.

-Realism depicted through lines 7-9 “Such a lot....all of us”, lines 15-17 “A man from....to tea”, lines 43-46 “But my uncles...retired” (social realism).

-Daily routine pointed out as school work with “composition on the war” (L.2), “our annual sports day” (L.11)..

-Focus on his father: lines 33-40 who may be seen as a coward, “we were frightened.. willing to go”.. ---- - - Repetition of “frightened” which means fearing the father would go to the war and could be killed or the father as being considered as a coward.

-2 groups of people: the Young (children) and the Grown-ups.

- Soldiers considered as heroes: need from the community to learn about the war. Lines 17-26 : everyone wants to talk to “our hero” (L.24-25). Through his testimony and the fact that he is mutilated (“without his legs” L.16), the war comes true.

-some dialogue, lines 25-26 “Do have...you!”. Economy of language from the characters which may illustrate the gap between the soldier’s war experience and the mother’s focus on food. “Won’t you!” (L.26) may imply that the hero does not feel at ease, feeling of loneliness...

Conclusion

Actually, the writer excludes any falsity and tells about this dreadful time in a honest way. **On the one hand**, the children’s feelings about it (lines 27-33) and **on the other hand**, the adults’ behaviour..

“Of course” (L.23 and L.41) show the limits of the characters ‘understanding of the forces that move them.

Indeed, as readers, we could think the characters are heartless as the atrocities of the war did not really affect them, far from the trenches and war restrictions (food, moving etc.),. They live in an isolate environment and their way of life has not really changed. **However**, their sensitivity is present.

Viewpoint

Personally, I have enjoyed reading this short story. It clearly illustrates how people far away from the battle fields could have experienced the war at that time. It may sound careless, heartless, insensitive but that is reality. The War was true to them when one of their families was committed to it or when the soldiers came back to their homeland. They paid tribute to them!

Additional information

The next literary work to be studied is “an indiscreet Journey” by Katherine Mansfield. We will have some courses about this writer and her work when we are in New Zealand next September!