

Remembering Remembrance Day

Two tales that focus on the turmoil of war

Suspended Sentences

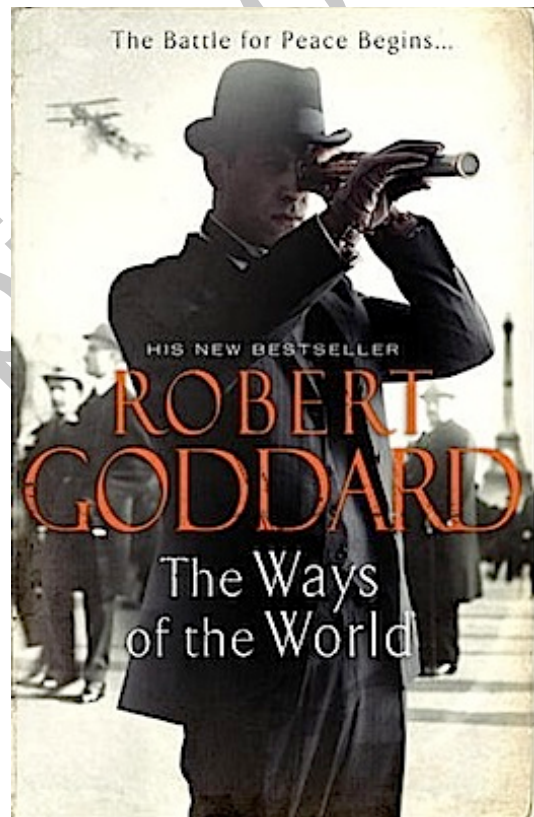
by Jim Napier

There are many themes competing for our attention during Remembrance day, including the memories of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, the immense suffering experienced on all sides and on all fronts, and not least, the futility of it all, as the ultimate fallacy of force replacing reason is elevated to the level of national and even international policy. But British author Robert Goddard focuses on a very different aspect of the dynamics of war that is often ignored: the power vacuum that emerges in the immediate aftermath of war, and the violence that can erupt when calculating opportunists move to fill that vacuum. His theme makes for compelling reading, both insightful and entertaining.

Robert Goddard,
The Ways of the World
(Bantam Press, August 2013)

Paris, 1919: in the wake of the Armistice of World War I, the victors gather in Paris to carve out not only a New Europe, but a New World. Each nation has its own

agenda, and while the official delegates meet at conference tables and in anterooms to decide



the fates of millions, others, less official, try to map out their own individual destinies in a rapidly-changing world. The gamut ranges from ex-soldiers looking for a new beginning, aware that their skills are no longer in demand, to the amoral henchmen of the defeated

powers, looking for new ways to employ their dark skills. Some turn to the black market, where their talents can serve them well; but others have larger, more ambitious aims, and satisfying them can bring into jeopardy the very peace that the conference-members are seeking to establish.

Ex-RFC pilot "Max" Maxted is in Surrey, busy making his own post-war plans to start up a flying school in England with Sam Twentyman, his wartime mechanic and friend, when he receives a life-changing telephone call from his mother: his father has been killed in Paris. A former diplomat, Sir Henry Maxted had been attached to the British delegation as one of many experts laboring in the background, and Lady Maxted charges Max and his elder brother Ashley with arranging for Sir Henry's body to be returned to England for burial. She is also apprehensive about the circumstances of her husband's death, and charges her sons with safeguarding the family's good name.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Max finds good reason to question his father's reputation. Sir Henry had apparently fallen to his death from the rooftop of a building in Montparnasse, a dissolute district of Paris. The apartment that gave on to the roof belonged to a young

woman with a chequered past, with whom Sir Henry evidently had a close personal relationship. Moreover, Max learns that his father had been recently reclaiming valuable family treasures on loan to a museum with the intent of selling them. To what end, and what other family assets might have been compromised? On the face of it, Sir Henry was involved in an affair, both tawdry and personal in scope. But before long Max discovers that the full story spills over onto the international stage, with ramifications that could affect the direction and success of the Peace Conference itself.

Informed by the author's understanding of history, and grounded in a strong sense of place and time, *The Ways of the World* is an literate, original, and sweeping tale, utterly believable in its depiction of the machinations of post-war Europe, and the conflicts, both national and personal, that defined those troubled times. More a traditional puzzle mystery than an action thriller, it's deliberate pace may not resonate with some readers; but *The Ways of the World* is an excellent read in which the author skillfully explores an ambitious theme – the murky world of global politics set against one man's search for truth.

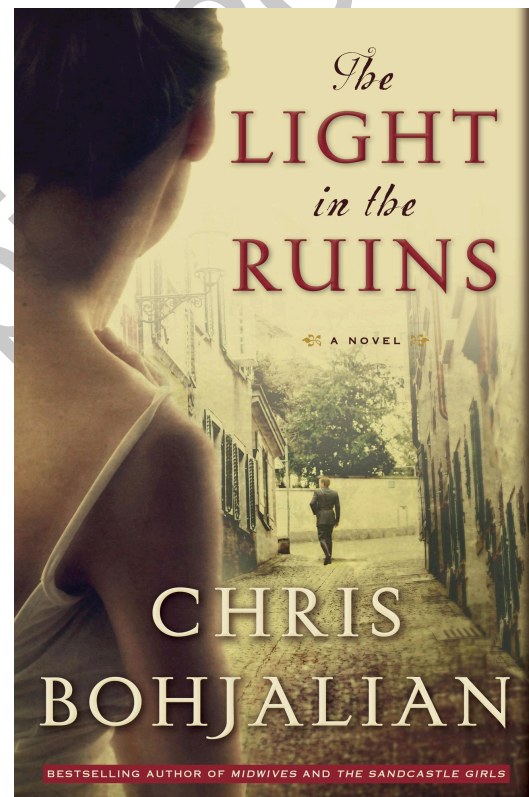
**Chris Bohjalian,
The Light in the Ruins
(Doubleday, July 2013)**

North Americans have been fortunate in mostly avoiding wars fought on our home ground. There have been isolated events, to be sure (the American Civil War comes to mind), but we have not endured attacks involving large numbers of foreign troops and battlegrounds in our own back yards. As a result, our perceptions of war tend to focus on two fronts: the front lines (“Over There”) and the home front — the wartime experiences of family members left behind, or those working in military industries.

There is a third front, however, that Europeans — and others — would immediately recognise: the dilemma faced by those in occupied territories, coping with the challenges of living under martial law, and subject to the actions (and sometimes the whims) of their occupiers. In *The Light in the Ruins* author Chris Bohjalian explores this nuanced world, in which civilians find themselves trying to come to terms with events they cannot control, but where their actions can literally make a difference between life and death. It is a world of constantly shifting ground and subtle shades of grey, giving rise to a question that fortunately most of us will never

have to face: what should I do now, at this moment, in this situation, in order to best protect the ones I love?

Italy, 1943: the hills nearby Siena shelter the aristocratic Rosati family on their estate, known as the Villa Chimera. But while some members remain at home, others have been caught up in the European conflict: Marco, an engineer working in Sicily, is pre-



paring the beaches against an expected Allied invasion, while Vittore, an archeologist, is safe in Florence, hoping to secure the treasures of the Uffizi against the collateral damage of war. Of the grown children of the Marchese, only Cristina, the youngest of the

three, remains at the villa to help her sister-in-law tend her and Marco's children. But as the war moves toward its climax Italy finds itself in a state of chaos, the population splintered between supporters of the Fascist government, partisan rebels, and those who seek a way to accommodate the demands of their German and Italian masters.

Twelve years later a killer will stalk the Rosati family, avenging a crime real or imagined, committed during the war, and centering on events that took place at the Villa Chimera. Serafina Bettini, a detective with a homicide unit of the Italian Police, will struggle to

understand the events that have lead to a series of brutal slayings, and to prevent the killer from striking again; and in the process she will be forced to relive her own past during those turbulent times.

The Light in the Ruins is an atmospheric historical thriller that skillfully explores the conflicting tensions of an occupied people, and uses a converging plot line to bring the action to a compelling climax. In a finely crafted tale the author adroitly mines the turmoil of war in all of its day-to-day unpredictability both to entertain and to ask the reader, what would you have done?

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and the *Montreal Review of Books*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

