

# Old Soldiers

*Passing from the scene, they gave so much*

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*Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

Each year they are fewer in number. The veterans who survived the Second World War are mostly in their eighties now, many in their nineties, and are quickly passing from the scene. Each day literally thousands of old soldiers die, and in a few short years — the reckoning is by 2020 — nearly all will have gone, and perhaps, tragically, we will cease thinking about the global conflict they were caught up in, and the many sacrifices they made on our behalf.

The numbers are mind-numbing. World War II was quite simply the deadliest military conflict in history. Total Allied deaths included over 400,000 American troops, while Canada lost over 45,000 of its fighting forces, and the UK nearly half a million soldiers and civilians. Poland lost nearly 6 million souls — over 16% of its population. Russia and Eastern Europe counted nearly 27 million dead. In all, over 60 million people were killed. With post-war political maps redrawn, and whole families (and in some cases entire communities) wiped off the face of the earth, it is not overstating things to say that the course of world history was forever changed as a result of the Second World War.

Not all wars, of course, are praiseworthy. More recent generations are accustomed to think of war as often self-aggrandizing actions, fought simply to gain resources or territory, or to impose one group's political or ethnic or religious beliefs upon others; and to some extent that was true also of

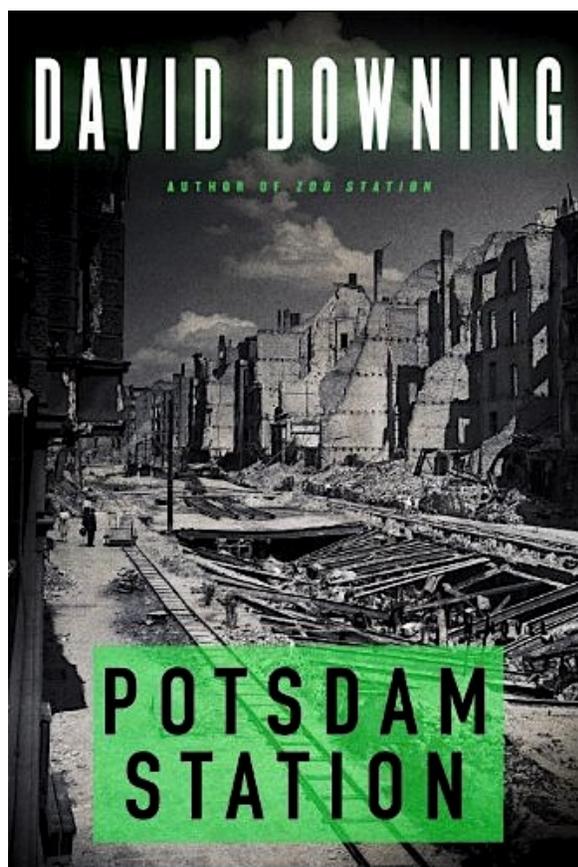
World War II. Yet to reduce that conflict to such facile terms is to distort history, and to do our veterans a disservice. For many the conflict was to preserve a way of life, one that cherished freedom and democracy and respected diversity, from disappearing from the world stage. There can be little doubt that if Hitler had prevailed many ethnic groups would have disappeared altogether, and fear and oppression would have dominated our daily life.

Here, then, are two novels that take us back to those dark days when few people on Earth were untouched by the conflict. No portrayals of larger-than-life heroes here, nor warmed-over accounts of familiar battles; these original tales serve to remind us of the many small acts of sacrifice and bravery that distinguished ordinary soldiers and their families, caught up in the maelstrom of a world gone mad.

**David Downing**  
*Potsdam Station*  
(Soho Crime, 2010)

Berlin, April 1945: four years earlier American journalist John Russell had escaped from Germany, but at the cost of leaving his girlfriend and their teenage son behind. Now he's back, advancing with the Russian Army in a desperate attempt to find them. Ominously his son, Paul, is stationed on the Eastern Front, with what remains of the German Army. John has no news of the fate of his son or his lover. To gain access to the city he makes a deal with the devil: he

will use his local knowledge to guide a small team of Russians to the remains of a scientific research centre to recover information they very much want. As he picks his way through the debris and destruction he is acutely aware that once they get the information, he is of no further value to them. Like everyone else caught up in the war it is for John a race against time, with danger lurking on both sides of the conflict as Berlin crumbles before their eyes.



*Potsdam Station* transcends its status as merely another action/suspense tale in the author's ability to depict, with chilling accuracy, the nightmare existence of a people who recognize that their own defeat is imminent, and are caught between the desire to survive and the lockstep logic of the German war machine, which refuses to acknowledge impending disaster and to show compassion for its own citizens. The fourth novel in an impressive series,

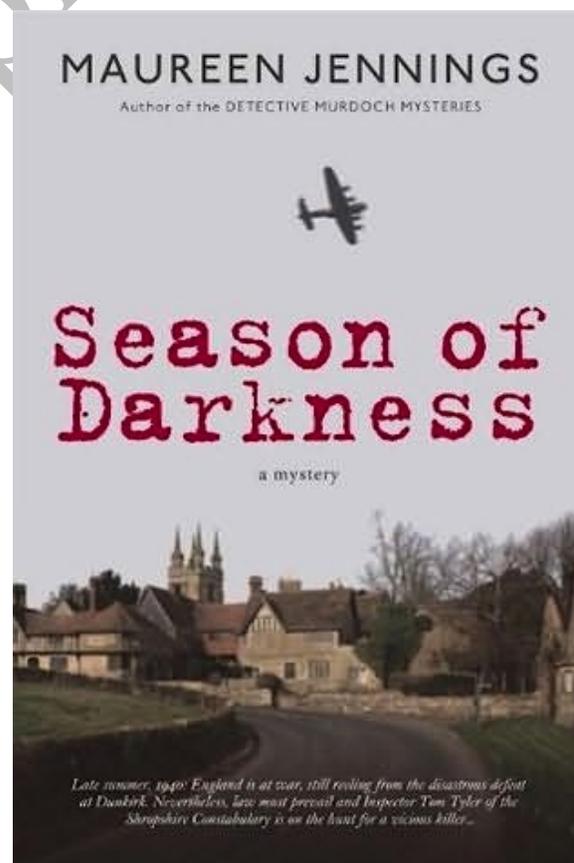
*Potsdam Station* reveals a side of the war unfamiliar to most Western readers, and will earn its author many new fans.

**Maureen Jennings**

***Season of Darkness***

(McClelland & Stewart, 2011)

Canadian novelist Maureen Jennings takes us to an internment camp in Shropshire, England in the summer of 1940, where the murder of a local girl provides the backdrop for an original and insightful tale of Germans living in England and caught up in the shifting fortunes of history. Interred as a matter of security because they are German nationals, they form anything but a homogenous whole. Some are German patriots, anxious to do what they can for the Nazi cause; but others are German Jews who struggle to understand why they have been imprisoned. And yet others harbour secrets that go beyond the war.



Tom Tyler, the sole Detective Inspector in the tiny village of Whitchurch, struggles to solve the girl's death while confronting his son's apparent detachment from the recent events at Dunkirk, and to reconcile his own feelings for his wife and for an old flame who has recently appeared on the scene, and who has ties to the men at the internment camp.

A captivating puzzle tale, well told, with Jennings' trademark attention to historical detail, *Season of Darkness* will introduce many readers to a side of war too rarely revealed.

There are, of course many fine works, both fiction and non-fiction, dealing with the Second World War. On the fiction front I especially recommend the *Berlin Noir* trilogy by Philip Kerr, who focuses on the dilemmas faced by German soldiers and civilians on their own home front. In the non-fiction category the list is huge; but books that must be mentioned include Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, Felicity Goodall, *Voices From the Home Front*, Sandra Koa Wing, *Mass Observation: Britain in the Second World War*, Richard J. Aldrich, *Witness to War*, and Ben Wicks, *Nell's War: Remembering the Blitz*. Among Canadian sources are Fred Cederberg's *The Long Road Home*, John Nadler's *A Perfect Hell*, and Stephen Kimber's *Sailors Slackers, and Blind Pigs*.

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