The Wars     Timothy Findley

WW1(1914-1918), The Great War or The War to End All Wars, is seen as a dividing point between the old world order dominated economically, politically and culturally by Western Europe and the new world order dominated by American business, industry, warfare, music, film and culture.

Fought primarily in France and Belgium with the English and French troops fighting the Germans and Italians, it was characterized by trench warfare, with both armies separated by only a few feet of ground and fighting back and forth over those same few feet. The antiquated use of cavalry was a huge romantic blunder in the mud fields of Flanders and represents the end of a heroic and gentlemanly style of fighting. This was rendered obsolete by the guns, munitions and material of the first modern, mechanized war, a fact driven home by Findley with his ruthless statistics of enormous death and destruction.

The Wars presents to us graphically the cataclysmic effects of the most terrible war to date in history, the hundreds of thousand dead largely due to the efficiencies of new military technologies. The story is a coming of age novel, where a youth confronts the truths of adult, ethical behaviour. These include cultural hypocrisy, the failure of religious thought, the loss of nature as a
spiritual home and the high costs of a personal freedom which can only be had by escaping corrupt social, religious and economic values.

Robert Ross is the son of a wealthy Canadian industrialist, a man who fails his wife and children in many typical ways. His wife has settled for a secure materialistic marriage, an empty and meaningless spiritual life, for which she gradually loses her sanity. Robert leaves his Rosedale existence in an attempt to ‘light out for the territories’ (Huck Finn) and after encountering the shocks of experience: the sadism of training camp, the brutal first horse incident, the death of his beloved free spirit poet boy/man Harris, the English aristocracy and their snobbish, blind, coddled, elitist, decayed life, enduring trench warfare with other terrified and brutal and insane comrades. In an act of questionable heroics, he essentially suicides on the battlefield of France.

The story weaves together many thematic threads: family and peer group demands versus the needs of the developing self, the hidden social and sexual agendas of families and their silences, man’s deteriorating relationship with nature (seen thru Edwina’s rabbits, the coyote on the prairie, Rodwell’s sketch book, the horse killing, the lone dog, the bird song in the trenches that saves their lives and Robert’s heroism with the horses); the yearning spirit’s refusal to conform to the dictates of conventional sexual, social
and warmongering hatred of life; materialism against spirituality, acceptance by peers versus self expression, racism and religious divides, class wars and, in particular, homosexuality, the ‘love that dares not speak its name’.

The epigram in the front of the book is 2400 years old, from the Greek tragedian, Euripides, and is about what is immortal: life itself: “never that which is shall die’ a close echo of the words in The Great Gatsby about ideal love as an “imperishable dream”. It is also an echo of the unreality of the man made world. The ideal world of compassion, bravery, honour, concern for others cannot be trashed by the ongoing sordidness of reality. Love will bind us together: love of the natural world, love of the best and bravest among us, including the love which dare not speak its name.

For a current expression of this sentiment listen to David Usher’s song ”Love will Save the Day”. For the original and best expose of the mindlessness of The Great War see Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front.

Study Qs
Why is the title of the book plural? Are there other wars than military ones referred too?
On page 103 there is a long quotation about behaviour. Is it a good guide to action in life? If not, why not?
According to Bates what is the greatest terror of war?
Why is Robert the only human in Rodmell’s sketch book?
What is the meaning of the last paragraph at the end of Chapter 4? What is the meaning of Juliet’s inscription on the gravestone?

How is Robert alienated from his family? Is it the same way Juliet is? What are the gender differences in their struggles?
Why kill Rowena’s rabbits?
Is Robert a hero? Why or why not?
Why the war statistics throughout?

Why are the photographs central to the truths Findley is trying to show us here?
“Nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing of it’ Explain significance to novel themes.

Why does the book end with a female archivist and ‘the researcher’ in the dusty bowels of a museum reading room? What is the significance of the final paragraph?

“Clarify who you are thru your response to when you live”.
What is it to be human in the novel?

How would you describe the wide use of different narrative voices in the book?
What makes us side with Robert because of this?
How do we view him differently than if he told his own story?
How does the omniscient narrator, the researcher, function in the story?

How are themes woven together thru symbols in the story? Robert as part of the animal/native clan?