



Not So Quiet...

Helen Zenna Smith , Jane Marcus (Afterword)

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"It is such fun out here, and of course I'm loving every minute of it" ... tell them that all the ideals and beliefs you ever had have crashed about your gun-deafened ears... and they will reply on pale mauve deckle-edged paper calling you a silly hysterical little girl."

These are the thoughts of Helen Smith, one of "England's Splendid Daughters", an ambulance driver at the French front. Working all hours of the day and night, witness to the terrible wreckage of war, her firsthand experience contrasts sharply with her altruistic expectations. And one of her most painful realisations is that those like her parents, who preen themselves on visions of glory, have no concept of the devastation she lives with and no wish for their illusions to be shaken.

Not So Quiet... Details

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From Reader Review Not So Quiet... for online ebook

Bee (Heart Full of Books) says

A thoroughly depressing yet apt end. I still loved it though!

Ashleigh (a frolic through fiction) says

Rated 3.5 stars

Jack Deighton says

This is a novel about the experience of being a VAD ambulance driver during the Great War, something less than a cushy existence as it turns out. Not only are the volunteers exposed to the sufferings and mutilations, the deaths and quick funerals, of the soldiers, itself enough to scar for life, but their living conditions are appalling, their deprivations extreme. Starved of sleep, given execrable food – even the orderlies say they would not put up with the slop they are fed – lousy, harshly punished for minor transgressions by a martinet of a commandant. To them also falls the duty of keeping their ambulances clean, inside and out, on pain of failing the daily inspection; a task messy, grim and odorous as well as onerous. Only their camaraderie keeps them going – which is again a parallel with the soldiery they had enlisted to aid.

There is, too, the same mutual incomprehension between the VADs and their relatives at home as was experienced by the soldiers, the all but necessity of shielding the ignorant from the truths of war – partly due to the risk of being dismissed as cowardly, or a shirker. “A war to end war my mother writes. Never. In twenty years it will repeat itself. And twenty years after that. As long as we breed women like my mother and Mrs Evans-Mawnington.”

Not so Quiet.... would have been a worthwhile endeavour on its own but its genesis bears comment. The author (whose real name was Evadne Price) was approached to write something called *All's Quaint on the Western Front* as by Erica Remarks, a parody of Erich Maria Remarque's world famous novel *Im Westen nichts Neues*. As she thought this was an appalling concept (how could anyone not think so?) she resolved to write a book on women's war experience, hence the novel's subtitle *Stepdaughters of War*, basing it on the memories of a wartime ambulance driver, Winifred Constance Young. *Not so Quiet* mirrors many aspects of Remarque's book but with more emphasis on daily routine. In this regard the ending is an apt echo, slipping out of the otherwise first person narration to provide a third person perspective on the effect on the soul of relentless exposure to suffering and death.

While it covers some of the same ground as did Vera Britain's *Testament of Youth* there is more here of the details of VAD existence. This is certainly not a cheery book but it is a worthwhile one and is not in any way diminished by comparison with Remarque.

Alex Trafton says

Fascinating look into the lives of women ambulance drivers in The Great War. Reflecting the war, this story is designed to strip any romanticism from wars, with harrowing details, disillusion, and a bleak ending. Patriotism is ridiculed. No worthy cause. No redemption.

Martin says

This is the first WWI novel I have read, which might be part of the reason why I found it so incredible. I was incredibly moved by the book. It brought to life--in my imagination--the utter horror of the Great War in a way that I have never experienced before. It is utterly inadequate to read about facts and numbers, military movements and negotiations, dates and treaties, in a textbook. It chills me greatly to imagine that the events in this book actually happened, people actually suffered--men and women my age, sent off to this unimaginable war a century ago. It almost sickens me the distance--in time, in experience, in consequences, in everything--that separates me from those people.

Katrina says

This is a must read for anyone interested in World War 1.

<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2018/0...>

Lars says

An emotionally meaningful journey into the numbness and shellshock that typified many veterans from the Great War, even ambulance drivers like the narrator. Fictionalized from her own experiences, Smith delivers the anti-war punch not focused so much on the futility and horror of war but mostly on those who promoted the war: the proud parents who were more pleased that their son was decorated with a Victoria Cross than upset that he returned home either maimed or in a wooden box. A powerful journey into one woman's experience.

Louise says

fantastic book

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Due to odd circumstances, I did not get to read *All Quiet on the Western Front* in eighth grade. I'll make up for it one day. And I'll read that novel that Metallica based their MTV=hitvideo "One" upon. But then too I'll add this one, *Not So Quiet*, to that very same queue (no particular placement), on the strength of the following excerpt provided by gr's own BURIED Modernist Expert, Jonathan ::

<http://www.feministpress.org/sites/de...>

Jenny Prigg says

This is a book I have read time and time again over the years and portrays the lives of young women who became ambulance drivers in the horrors of the First World War ..

Marie says

I've already had to write a 7 page analytical book review of Not So Quiet so i'll keep this a short review and post my intro to the paper lol. One of the better WWI books I've had to read for school and I always appreciate reading things from the female perspective - three cheers for the rise of feminism and equality!

World War One revolutionized how war was fought. Trench warfare was introduced, and with it new war weapons like airplanes, tanks, machine guns, and poison gas that caused mass carnage that killed almost fourteen million people and injured seven million more. Into the midst of this chaos the narrator of the book Not so Quiet was thrust. The narrator, Helen Zenna Smith, was a young 20 year old upper class woman who was a volunteer ambulance driver on the French front. Her and her five comrades operated ambulances to pick up soldiers and bring them to hospitals right behind the front. Helen Smith describes in graphic detail the morbid, depressing work that her job entails while managing to retain a slight sense of vicious sarcasm that shows her inner strength. Smith has to fight against her family's blind patriotism when she refuses to return to the war because her mother and aunt view not fighting in the war an almost treasonous act. Women who volunteered were called "England's Splendid Daughters" and told that they are just "doing their bit" so Smith choosing not to participate in the war shows how pacifism started to emerge during this time. The writing of this book was a feminist contrast to the popular WWI book, All Quiet on the Western Front and it highlights the sisterhood of Smith and her comrades while focusing on the female perspective on the war. Not so Quiet details the unrelenting British nationalism that was present by those at home while describing the horrors those on the front encountered daily, all the while promoting the feminist ideas that women are equal to men and are equally important to history.

Jonathan says

a masterful piece of work - essential reading for anyone interesting in getting away from the traditional WW1 narrative. Her prose is lightning sharp and the content powerful and moving.

From about halfway through

How smoothly she runs, this great lumbering blot. How slowly. To look at her you'd never think it possible to run an ambulance of this size so slowly.....

Crawl, crawl, crawl.

Did I hear a scream from inside? I must fix my mind on something...What? I know – my coming-out dance. My first grown-up dance frock, a shining frock of sequins and white georgette, high-wasted down to my toes....*Did I hear a scream?....* Made over a petticoat...*don't let them start screaming...*a petticoat of satin. Satin slippers to match, not tiny – my feet were always largish; so were my hands...*Was that a scream from*

inside?....Such a trouble Mother had getting white gloves my size to go up above the elbow...Was it a scream?....My hair up for the first time....oh, God a scream this time.... my hair up in little rolls at the back....another scream – the madman has started, the madman has started. I was afraid of him. He'll start them all screaming....Thirty-one little rolls like fat little sausages. A professional hairdresser came in and did them – took nearly two hours to do them while Trix and Mother watched, and Sarah came in to peep. Don't let him start the others; don't let him start the others.... Thirty-one little sausages of hair, piled one on top of the other, and all the hair my own too, copied from a picture post card of Phyllis Dare or Lily Elsie. Now, which one was it?... The shell-shocked man has joined in. The madman has set the shell-shocked man howling like a mad dog...Lily Elsie, I think it was....What are they doing to one another in there?

“Let me out. Let me out.”

The madman is calling that. Lily Elsie, I think it was. Lily Elsie...

“Stop screaming. You're not the only one going through bloody hell.”

A different voice that one. That must be one of the sitters.... Satin slippers with buckles on the toes – little pear buckles shaped like a crescent. Aunt Helen or Trix gave me those.

“Shut up screaming, or I'll knock hell out of you with my crutch, you bastard. Shut up screaming.”

What was that crash? They're fighting inside. They're fighting inside....Scream,scream,scream....

“I'm dying. Oh Jesus, he's murdered me. I'm dying”.

What are they doing? Are they murdering one another in there? I ought to stop the ambulance; I ought to get out and see. I ought to stop them...I ought. A driver the other night stopped her ambulance, and a man had gone mad and was beating a helpless stretcher case about the head. But she overpowered him and strapped him down again. Tosh, that was. But Tosh is brave. I couldn't do it. I must go on.

They are all screaming now. Moaning and shrieking and howling like wild animals....All alone with an ambulance of raving men miles from anywhere in the pitch blackness,....raving madmen yelling and screaming. I shall go mad myself.....

Go and see...go and see....go and see.

Vicki says

Another to really resonate in my A levels, and got me back into reading again a few years ago when I just hadn't bothered for a while (uni and stuff), despite the content. Hard hitting, scathing, and painful real talk.

Steelwhisper says

This book was first published in 1930, originally planned as being a spoof on Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* from the point of view of a woman. Written under the pen name Helen Zenna Smith by Evadne Price, an Australian journalist, these are the novelised war diaries of Winnifred Young, a British ambulance driver.

This is a masterpiece, no less.

Don't expect heroic VADs, even more heroic soldiers, stiff British lips and glory. Don't even expect the lately so favoured "neutralised" point of view by modern-day historians hell-bent on making the Great War more common and more palatable, so we can cheerfully once again send lots of troops to their deaths and to do their killing. No, here you get it served hot, hard, harsh, cynical like hell itself and with a language which will grip your heart, after it broke bones and rent flesh to get at that muscle. Yes, this book is very dark and no, there is not even a fragment of relief to be had when it ends.

Imagine a girl on the driver's seat of a truck, out in the open, cold night, in winter, with some dazed impaired soldier at her side, straight in from the trenches, and 6 stretchers and further wounded and shellshocked men in the back, with one of them screaming his head off in pain, and she wishes he would die, right now, because he is bound to set off all the mad and shellshocked among her passengers, while she has to listen to them killing each other back in the van. Just imagine.

Foremost this is a very realistic look at aspects of the Great War which don't generally get much notice, such as that there were women serving as ambulance drivers, but also at how the people at home reacted to what was taking place, at why so many veterans never talked about their experiences, what the carnage engendered and what it killed in the minds and hearts of participants, how values got completely destroyed and what mattered and what didn't anymore matter to these people.

That's something I find particularly fascinating about this book, because so many later efforts blithely interpret that for the veterans. This here is instead a look straight into the minds of them. You get to see what was taking place behind all those masks they wore for the outside world to see. What is more, you get to understand why they inevitably wore and had to wear masks behind which they hid their true thoughts.

I'll rank this right along with George Atkinson's A Soldier's Diary , which also managed to drive home that these people were far from untouched by what they experienced. If something truly pervades those early memoirs, then it is the fear of being known to be afraid. In an interview a war veteran stated:

"You were not frightened going forward," said Ralph Langley, "it was when you stopped. But you were afraid to show fear. It's difficult to explain how hard you became."

This went for these women as well. Often to their detriment and it leads directly to the refusal of truly dealing with what took place right after the war, something today so many people believe is sign of them exaggerating a lot at a later stage, while right afterwards they allegedly were matter-of-fact and normal about everything:

"In the 1920s and 1930s, I didn't think about it," said Ralph Langley. "Now I think about it. Just over the last few years." David Watson, who had seen almost all the worst episodes of the war, said: "It was another world within you. ... I never discussed it with anyone from 1918 until 1979. It was useless to tell people at home. They couldn't understand."

It's been distasteful for a long time now for me to be reading recent evaluations of memoirs and the Great War by people reinterpreting what they refused to grasp. Not So Quiet...: Stepdaughters of War actually makes me understand the mindset behind these revisions of history, it's shown in it's infant stage with all

those disbelieving people at home, as well as within the mindset of such as the B.F. (a fellow driver of "Nellie"), and it can be read quite directly in the responses of veterans like those I cited above. However, understanding doesn't mean condoning or liking.

Which is why this book is such a masterpiece. Some learn something new, others finally understand, and others yet are forced to look into a mirror.

Joe says

This book is remarkable, easily one of the best books I have ever read. It is fast paced, thrilling, and incredibly engaging. This book follows a group of upper class British women driving ambulances in France during World War I, all told from the POV of one character.

The protagonist has amazing insights into her world, puts a mirror up to (then) contemporary British society, and is one of the most profound looks into the demoralizing natures of war. It was incredibly difficult to read, seeing the carnage and watching the dynamic shifts in the protagonist.

A truly remarkable read. If you are squeamish there are quite some graphic images, but it only adds to the horror of one of the world's worst conflicts. The fact that this is not more popular is a shame, I feel it should be a standard alongside All Quiet on the Western Front.

Heather Campos says

I sort of stumbled my way through the first 100 pages of this book. I really wanted to like it. And then I did.

This book was written in the 1930's by Helen Zenna Smith as she recounted the time she served as a VAD for the Army. Working 15 hour days in the snow (ambulances only had covers on the wagon part, not the driver section), eating spoiled food, sleeping an average of 3 hours a night and being terrified was a part of daily life for these women. These englishwomen who actually PAID to serve on the "front lines" of war. It was considered shameful to be a kitchen helper as you weren't really "doing your part" to help fight the war.

After I got used to the lingo and the type of writing I really enjoyed this book. It was heartbreaking. completely heartbreaking, and I can't wait to read it again.

Like I said in my review of the Birth House by Ami McKay, I enjoy books about women in this time period. I am seriously obsessed with women's history. And I am seriously lacking in that history, as are most people because we don't learn about women's history in American high schools. which is super unfortunate because there is a wealth of it, and so much of what we have today was made possible by women.

Paul says

We are all aware of the Great War novels: "All Quiet on the Western Front", "Goodbye to All That", trilogy's by Pat Barker and Siegfried Sassoon. This novel should also be on the list as it stands comparison to all of those above.

Helen Smith was the pen name of Evadne Price, who turned her hand to many things over a very long career;

she married a German actor, a British soldier and an Australian writer. She turned her hand to romantic novels and writing a column on Astrology, to burlesque before the Great War, to journalism, a writer of plays and screenplays, a broadcaster; she was also the first female journalist to enter Belsen.

The story of how this novel came about is also interesting; Smith was commissioned to write a response to "All Quiet on the Western Front". It was supposed to be a parody, but on reading the original she decided to write a proper war novel. She settled on the topic on the women ambulance drivers because she borrowed Winifred Young's diaries and based her writing on those. The whole novel was written very quickly. It was the first of five novels in a series which covered dealing with the war wounded, eugenics, the fate of destitute women and post-war decadence.

It is a powerful and direct novel which pulls no punches. It is dialogue driven and shows all the horrors of war from the point of view of a group of female ambulance drivers. It portrays awful conditions, too little sleep, very poor food, authoritarian leadership, danger from bombs, conveying severely wounded men from the front (some of whom die in the ambulances). It shows that PTSD is not just confined to men from the front. There is a distinct contrast between the conditions the women suffer as ambulance drivers and the feelings of the family at home. The disconnect is very marked. Families proud of what their daughters are doing for the war effort and the country and the feelings of the narrator and her comrades:

"all the ideals and beliefs you ever had have crashed about your gun-deafened ears -- you don't believe in God or them or the infallibility of England or anything but bloody war and wounds and foul smells and smutty stories and smoke and bombs and lice and filth and noise, noise, noise -- you live in a world of cold sick fear, a dirty world of darkness and despair -- you want to crawl ignominiously home away from these painful writhing things that once were men, these shattered, tortured faces that dumbly demand what it's all about in Christ's name .."

And a longer quote which underlines the disconnect as Smith speaks in her mind to her mother and her mother's friend;

"Look closely, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, and you shall see what you shall see. Those trays each contain something that was once a whole man... the heroes who have done their bit for King and country... the heroes who marched blithely thorough the streets of London Town singing, 'Tipperary,' while you cheered and waved your flags hysterically. They are not singing now, you will observe. Shut your ears, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, lest their groans and heartrending cries linger as long in your memory as in the memory of the daughter you sent to help win the War.

See the stretcher bearers lifting the trays one by one, slotting them deftly into my ambulance. Out of the way quickly, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington — lift your silken skirts aside... a man is spewing blood, the moving has upset him, finished him... He will die on the way to hospital if he doesn't die before the ambulance is loaded. I know... All this is old history to me. Sorry this has happened. It isn't pretty to see a hero spewing up his life's blood in public, is it? Much more romantic to see him in the picture papers being awarded the V.C., even if he is minus a limb or two. A most unfortunate occurrence!

That man strapped down? That raving, blaspheming creature screaming filthy words, you don't know the meaning of... words your daughter uses in everyday conversation, a habit she has contracted from vulgar contact of this kind. Oh, merely gone mad, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington. He may have seen a headless body running on and on, with blood spurting from its trunk. The crackle of the frost-stiff dead men packing the duck-boards watertight may have gradually undermined his reasons. There are many things the sitters tell me on our long night rides that could have done this.

No, not shell-shock. The shell-shock cases take it more quietly as a rule, unless they are suddenly startled. Let me find you an example. Ah, the man they are bringing out now. The one staring straight ahead at nothing... twitching, twitching, twitching, each limb working in a different direction, like a Jumping Jack worked by a jerking string. Look at him, both of you. Bloody awful, isn't it, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington? That's shell-shock. If you dropped your handbag on the platform, he would start to rave as madly as the other. What? You won't try the experiment? You can't watch him? Why not? Why not? I have to, every night. Why the hell can't you do it for once? Damn your eyes.

Forgive me, Mother and Mrs, Evan-Mawnington. That was not the kind of language a nicely brought up young lady from Wimbledon Common uses. I forget myself. We will begin again.

See the man they are fitting into the bottom slot. He is coughing badly. No, not pneumonia. Not tuberculosis. Nothing so picturesque. Gently, gently, stretcher-bearers... he is about done. He is coughing up clots of pinky-green filth. Only his lungs, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington. He is coughing well to-night. That is gas. You've heard of gas. Haven't you? It burns and shrivels the lungs to... to the mess you see on the ambulance floor there. He's about the age of Bertie, Mother. Not unlike Bertie, either, with his gentle brown eyes and fair curly hair. Bertie would look up pleading like that in between coughing up his lungs... The son you have so generously given to the War.

Cough, cough, little fair-haired boy. Perhaps somewhere your mother is thinking of you... boasting of the life she has so nobly given... the life you thought was your own, but which is hers to squander as she thinks fit. 'My boy is not a slacker, thank God.' Cough away, little boy, cough away. What does it matter, providing your mother doesn't have to face the shame of her son's cowardice?"

The novel portrays Smith's alienation on her return to England and her family's incomprehension when she refuses to return. The attitudes to sexual relations were shocking at the time, but there is a sense of little mattering. It is meant to be a popular novel, using colloquialism and slang (it succeeds in this) rather than a masterpiece. It is an effective and powerful war novel written from a different perspective, but still underlining the horror and futility of war and the bonds it binds between those involved.

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

I am told, by a possibly unreliable source, that the author set out to write a parody of All's Quiet on the Western Front but instead wrote a serious work based on the war diaries of a female ambulance driver. I could believe that if a writer were confronted with source material like that that portrayed here, he would feel compelled to tell the story--straight up. This is some grueling (and gruesome) stuff.

I don't doubt it's 99% true, simply because I don't think anyone could make this up. I'd forgotten the cruelty of this first big war--poison gas, bombs, tanks and trench warfare. She describes dropping off stretchers of men with the most inoperable of injuries, and thankfully, doesn't have the knowledge of just how badly they would end up being treated at the makeshift hospitals of her time. But I do--or at least can imagine it.

Every time you hear a person attempt to glorify war, you should slap them across the face with this book. Or if it's a politician, with a tire iron.

Ali says

Not so Quiet

The latest book in the LibraryThing Great War theme read has turned out to be a novel that packs quite a punch, a searing denunciation of the realities of war. As the introduction to my 1988 VMC edition by Barbara Hardy explains its authorship is complex. Helen Zenna Smith is a pseudonym for Evadne Price, the first person narrator of the story is also a Helen Z Smith (Smithy to her colleagues in France, Nell or Nellie at home). Evadne Price was a journalist who was asked to write a parody of Eric Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front. Revolted by the idea of such a work, Price instead committed herself to writing a serious woman's war story. It was a task she undertook out of feelings of pacifism, in praise of the women who sacrificed their health and wellbeing to the horrors of domestic slavery, and ambulance driving at the French

front. Price didn't want to merely invent war stories, she was able to use the first hand experiences of a former ambulance driver in France, Winifred Constance Young; whose family like that of the fictional Helen Smith had been proud of their daughter's wartime service but unable to face up to its harsh and uncomfortable realities. Evadne Price's novel gave Winifred Constance Young the chance she wanted to tell her story.

Not so Quiet is told in a very personal, first person narrative, and it is no wonder that upon its publication many people thought it was a memoir. It was a book that was to divide people too, as many simply refused to believe in its contents, but nevertheless it became a best seller and won the author the Prix Severigne as "the novel most calculated to promote international peace."

As the novel opens the reader is thrust right into the harsh world of an enormous ambulance station on the French Front, its winter, the food is uneatable and hours of work ridiculously gruelling. The women ambulance drivers are all women of gentle birth – for some reason the only women considered to do this work – the experiences of war, living cheek by jowl with other women, scrubbing out their own ambulances of gangrene and vomit, their gentle ways are soon coarsened. Lice, and limited hot water, leading some women to go as far as cutting off their long hair, shrugging off the thoughts of horror struck parents at home. The words ambulance driver don't in any way adequately describe the work these women undertake, driving several casualties at a time, men hideously injured, screaming, vomiting, bleeding as the drivers try to negotiate their way from the receiving station to one of thirteen hospitals, number thirteen the furthest out and therefore the one dreaded, along pitch black uneven roads, and back again. After which the women had to get to cleaning and maintaining their own vehicles to an enormously high standard, before heading back out to do it all again.

"I am the last ambulance home ... which means no hot cocoa. My luck has been dead out this convoy. The others struck it fairly easy, but I started off badly. I got Number Thirteen Hospital at the station gate – not only the farthest out of camp, but the one on top of the hill with a rough, detestable, badly-winding road, dotted with irregular heaps of snow-covered stones hard enough to negotiate by daylight, but hell to drive up at the crawl with a load of wounded on a pitch black night in a hurricane of wind, ... when the slightest jar may mean death to a man inside. We all loathe driving Number Thirteen, and an audible sigh of relief always goes up from a driver when the sergeant on duty gives her any other number."

Living and working alongside Smithy are: Tosh; daughter of an Earl, cynical and foul mouthed, tougher than many, she's the first to sacrifice her hair, The B.F a rather ridiculous figure, she somehow retains her pre-war refinement, the law abiding Etta Potato, the vilified Skinny, the daughter of a big wig at the war office and The Bug, a tiny weak silent girl. Everyone must have their nicknames, including the Commandant – nicknamed Mrs Bitch – and she really is. Like so many strong capable women who ran organisations during the war, the Commandant is a harsh unyielding figure, dishing out punishments for the minutest of mistakes, refusing to believe in the necessity of sleep, criticising, hectoring and bullying, she is universally loathed, her reputation travelling far and wide.

For me the most stinging rebuke in this novel is dished out to the so called armchair pacifists who back in England, boasted of their children at the front, cajoled and gently bullied their offspring to sacrifice their youth and their health to the war effort – to "doing their bit." Back in England Smithy's mother sits on committees helping to encourage others to volunteer and competes with Mrs Evans-Mawington whose son Roy, Smithy's childhood playmate is at the front, but who has no daughters to sacrifice, and so Smithy's mother wins on that score.

"Her soul died that night under a radiant silver moon in the spring of 1918 on the side of a blood-spattered trench. Around her lay the mangled dead and the dying. Her body was untouched, her heart beat calmly, the blood coursed as ever through her veins. But looking deep into those emotionless eyes one wondered if they had suffered much before the soul had left them. Her face held an expression of resignation, as though she had ceased to hope that the end might come."

This is no glorification of war, there are no heroes in the accepted sense – (only there are of course) these are people who write lies home, telling how much they are enjoying being a part of it all – getting stuck in, - because to do otherwise is unthinkable. Terrified, disgusted and only wanting to get home, Smithy is soon passionately against war – she has no noble ideas of sacrifice, she just wants it to end. Not so Quiet is a dark

novel, there is no light relief, it contains too much that is real and cruel and pointless. Evadne Price wrote a brilliant novel, that exposes the truths of women at the front in WW1, and the dangers and horrors they faced, despite the darkness it is hugely readable, and the voices of those women resonate still.

Angie Fehl says

4.5 Stars

Originally published in 1930, *Not So Quiet* is one of those faux memoir style epistolary novels describing the experiences of World War 1 ambulance driver Helen Smith, aka "Smithy". Her story opens in 1915 as she serves in France with a group of other female ambulance drivers. This group includes ringleader Toshington ("Tosh"), a bold, tomboyish redhead; "The BF" or Bettina Fisher, boy-crazy and all about the luxe life; Etta Potter, aka "Etta Potato" who is the team's resident sunshiney optimist, hardly ever bothered by anything except lost hairpins; Skinner or "Skinny", who seems to have a chronic nervousness as well as an overall unhealthy look to her, her skin often appears a tad jaundiced and she seems to be battling something that today might be identified as IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome), so the other ladies sometimes joke that if she's not at her ambulance she's probably in the nearest latrine. Then there's "The Bug", as they call her. Helen describes her as "tiny, wiry, tragic-eyed and dark, with a bitter mouth" -- bitter mouth as in appearance, not speech. Helen also points out that The Bug almost never speaks, giving her a mysterious quality that Helen thinks makes the woman the most interesting of their bunch.

All the women bond over their common dislike of their boss, The Commandant, another female ambulance driver whose job it is to oversee / manage the rest of the crew. Problem is, she has a bit of a superiority complex, leading the ladies to give her an expletive-decorated nickname. The nickname is earned though, through what feels like the Commandant's cruel insistence on keeping the women constantly over-worked with almost non-stop busy work in between ambulance runs, allowing nearly no time for sleep, and having their meals made up mostly of outdated or spoiled food. If someone gets sick or injured, the Commandant pays little attention to it unless it looks like it might require a hospitalization, claiming that illness or injury not requiring hospitalization is "mere female affectation" (remember, this is a female spouting this!)

The novel is essentially just a detailed day to day account of what women in this job might have experienced. Some passages are just of life around camp, while others talk about the politics and common opinions of the day that these women were up against, as well as Helen's observances of the horrors of war -- the physical and mental injuries military personnel endured while their families back home lauded them for "doing their part" for the war effort, making these men and women almost god-like without really understanding the traumas they were faced with on a daily basis. Though a novelization, I found Helen's thoughts to be important food for thought that still holds relevance when considering the sacrifices of service members of today's military. The novel itself is written in an easy to understand journaling voice and is based on the journals of an actual female ambulance driver.

Helen Z. Smith is actually the pen name for Australian writer Evadne Price. Price happened to meet ambulance driver Winifred Young who had journaled her experiences throughout World War 1. Smith was granted access to the journals, holing herself up for six weeks to read all of them and was inspired to write this novel as a result. Also influencing Price's words were the real life memories of her husband, who was held as a Japanese POW for 2 years, and the war classic *All Quiet On The Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (*Not So Quiet* was written as a sort of female response to that novel). Price's novel was originally

serialized in the British newspaper The People (originating in 1881, the paper is still in circulation but is now called The Sunday People) where she worked as a wartime journalist. After being published as a novel, France awarded Not So Quiet with the Prix Severigne award, touting it as "the novel most calculated to promote international peace." It ended up becoming the first of a quintet under the Helen Smith name. {I tried to look up the other titles but had no luck finding any copies of any of the others, but will list them below for anyone interested.}

This book didn't necessarily have me from page one... it was more like one of those novels where I found myself a good chunk of the way through before realizing how invested I had become. I found each member of the ambulance team unique and entertaining to get to know and all the different struggles each woman faced stirred my empathy in different ways. While at times it can be grim -- and even graphic, in parts -- I think this novel would especially appeal to modern day military and EMS workers. Helen's descriptions of having to clean out the back of the ambulances each day, especially! The resonating message throughout is that while war can sometimes be a necessary evil on the path to eventual peace, it's not something to be glorified. As the saying goes, "there are no real winners." Losses are felt on both sides of the equation. This novel brings that reality home.

The other titles in this book's series (if you're able to find copies):

#2 Women of the Aftermath (**heads up, if you get a copy of the Feminist Press edition(pictured above) of Not So Quiet, there's a spoiler for book 2 in the afterword notes)

#3 Shadow Women

#4 Luxury Ladies

#5 They Lived With Me
