

Tom

Christie Moore

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Tom is a fictionalized account of Christie Moore's grandfather. It focuses on his experiences as a British soldier in World War I and how the war reverberates throughout his life.

The fact that tragic battlefield experiences plague many veterans for decades is not necessarily a compelling trope for a novel unless, in the hands of a skilled writer, there is much more to the story. In *Tom*, neither is the case, which is too bad because Moore shows a bit of promise on the page.

This is Moore's first book, and her epilogue explains that, having little more to go on than relatives' accounts and family records of dates, she elected to "surmise" the rest of the the story. What she might have done instead, is to imagine, as novelists do.

Tom, a postman in pre-World War I London, is a gifted amateur musician beloved in local pubs for his piano playing. He goes to war, gets gassed, survives, returns to a changed England, struggles to (and can't) keep his job, struggles to (and can't) gain traction as a professional musician, loses loved ones, and has a few kids. Along the way, we learn too little about what's going on inside Tom's mind and heart. While the author is clearly sympathetic to his malaise, Tom comes across as self-absorbed, thoughtless, and morose. Disjointed scenes, desultory dialogue, and jarring jumps in time and place do not help the situation.

To her credit, Moore displays a more firm hand and competent touch with the action in the battle sequences; and her epistolary segments, though few, have an authentic and wistful tone. Tom's later dreams and flashbacks are energized by finer symbolism, metaphor and more active prose than the rest of the book. Yet those positives are all outweighed by plotless predictability, poor pacing, and abrupt transitions that skip important developments in Tom's life in favor of mundane, repetitively boring details. The author also shows a near complete disregard for proper grammar, proofreading, punctuation, and verb/noun agreement, and indulges in pointless tense shifts and play-by-play scene set-ups that read like amateur stage directions.

The brightest spot occurs very near the end of the book, when Tom is finally able to look back on his wartime experiences and how they affected his life with a more highly developed perspective than he seemed to have earlier in the book.

Tom may have a limited audience among Brits who remember similar stories of World War I gas attacks told by their own grandfathers or great-grandfathers.

LISA ROMEO (October 5, 2012)

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