

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

146

Volume 146

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Pat Barker

1943-

(Full name Patricia Barker) English novelist.

The following entry presents an overview of Barker's career through 1999. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 32 and 94.

INTRODUCTION

Barker is a highly acclaimed English novelist whose work is praised for its direct prose, insightful depictions of working-class life, and sensitive evocation of historical figures and events. Her earlier works focused primarily on the lives of working-class English women, earning Barker the label of a "feminist writer" from several critics. Barker's later novels eschewed the often reductive term of "woman novelist" by addressing themes and issues dealing with the front lines of battle in World War I. The works in Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* and her subsequent novels have helped further refine and expand her thematic range.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barker was born to working-class parents in Thornaby-on-Tees, England, in 1943. She attended the London School of Economics and Political Science, earning a B.S. degree in 1965. She taught for several years while writing unpublished works about the middle-class environment that her education, profession, and marriage had provided her. After attending a writing class taught by English novelist and short story writer Angela Carter, Barker was inspired and encouraged to write about the milieu in which she was raised. Barker has won several literary awards, including the Booker Prize for her novel *The Ghost Road* (1995).

MAJOR WORKS

Barker's early novels center on the lives of working-class women in England, a segment of the population often ignored by male writers. *Union Street* (1982) traces the lives of seven female characters who range in age from young girlhood to elderly. The book examines the individual hardships they face living in a factory community. *Blow Your House Down* (1984) also centers on the collective experience of women, focusing on several prostitutes as they struggle against economic deprivation and violence. *The Century's Daughter* (1986) relates the life story of Liza Jarrett Wright in a portrayal of the difficult living conditions in northeast England from the turn of the twentieth



century through the 1980s. Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* explores the social and psychological forces behind World War I, as well as dealing with issues related to the then-rigid English class system. *Regeneration* (1991) focuses on the relationship between two historical figures—Siegfried Sassoon, poet, war hero, and eventual pacifist, and Dr. William Rivers, an anthropologist, neurologist, and Sassoon's psychologist, who became famous for his work on the treatment of the wartime medical condition known as "shell shock." The novel studies the internal conflict that Rivers experiences when he is forced to return patients to the front lines who have moral objections to war. In *The Eye in the Door* (1993), Dr. Rivers treats Major Billy Prior, who is struggling to expose enemies of the state within the Ministry of Munitions. Prior inadvertently causes the arrest of a childhood friend by exposing his homosexuality. This act fills Prior with feelings of hypocrisy, knowing that he is bisexual himself. Major Prior returns to combat in *The Ghost Road*, the concluding volume of the trilogy. The narrative jumps between Dr. Rivers's therapeutic work and his musings on his past experiences as an

anthropologist among Melanesian head-hunters in the South Pacific, and Major Prior's life on the front lines of battle. These events take place as both the war and the novel move toward their conclusion at the battle at Sambre-Oise Canal in 1918. *Another World* (1999) focuses on two families and the internal strife that exists in each. Nick and Fran are recently married divorcees who each have a child from their previous marriages. Nick is neglecting his responsibilities at home because he is trying to support his dying grandfather, Geordie, who reminisces about World War I and the loss of his brother in the trenches. During renovation of their house, Nick and Fran discover a family portrait of the Fanshawes, previous owners of the house who also encountered family tragedies including bitter sibling rivalries and murder. The plot moves between Nick and Fran's domestic turmoils, the sordid history of the Fanshawes, and Geordie's traumatic remembrances of the war. *Border Crossing* (2001) explores the relationship between Danny, a troubled ex-convict who is released from prison for a murder he committed at age ten, and Tom, the therapist who testified at Danny's trial that the boy was cognizant of his actions. The two coincidentally meet and Tom becomes Danny's therapist.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although lauded for her portrayal of working-class women in her early novels, Barker has disdained being labeled a "feminist" writer. Her subsequent work earned her praise for her ability to describe the human condition and set forth her strong convictions on a variety of issues ranging from class conditions in England to the unjust nature of trench warfare. Gail Caldwell stated, "Defying most of the unspoken conventions of literary chic, the British novelist Pat Barker writes old-fashioned modernist novels full of lean prose and courageous convictions." A majority of reviewers agree that Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* is her most accomplished work to date. Critics have commended Barker's ability to represent the male psyche, particularly during her descriptions of World War I soldiers' most intimate and emotional experiences. Critics have also praised Barker's ability to tell stories from multiple perspectives. Barker's extended research and her blending of historical fact with fiction have won the acclaim of several reviewers. However, Lavinia Greenlaw disagreed, stating, "The attempt to animate these personalities is hampered by the reader's prior knowledge and preconceptions, while passing allusions to a renowned pacifist or psychotic also read, irritatingly, as shorthand for what a writer should try more originally to evoke." Some critics have complained that Barker over-explains in her *Regeneration Trilogy* and does not trust her readers to draw their own conclusions. A few critics found the section focusing on Dr. Rivers's time in Melanesia in *The Ghost Road* unnecessary and not as strong as the central narrative. Although Barker was commended for the versatility in her later novels, the books met with a lukewarm overall response. Stylistically, Barker has been consistently praised throughout her career for the spareness of her prose, her realism, and her lack of senti-

mentality. Brooke Allen asserts "Pat Barker is capable of getting across a powerful message with the absolute minimum of rhetoric, one of the rarest gifts a writer can be blessed with."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Union Street (novel) 1982
Blow Your House Down (novel) 1984
The Century's Daughter (novel) 1986
The Man Who Wasn't There (novel) 1989
**Regeneration* (novel) 1991
**The Eye in the Door* (novel) 1993
**The Ghost Road* (novel) 1995
The Regeneration Trilogy (three-novel series) 1996
Another World (novel) 1999
Border Crossing (novel) 2001

*These novels constitute "The Regeneration Trilogy," focusing on World War I.

CRITICISM

Judy Cooke (review date 10 September 1993)

SOURCE: A review of *The Eye in the Door*, in *New Statesman and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 269, September 10, 1993, pp. 40-1.

[In the following review, Cooke lauds Barker's *The Eye in the Door* as an even stronger novel than *Regeneration*.]

Pat Barker's sequel to her much-praised *Regeneration* [titled *The Eye in the Door*,] is shockingly good: as powerful an indictment of the first world war as the earlier novel, and further reaching in its analysis of the social and psychological forces that created and sustained the catastrophe.

The fact that real people—Siegfried Sassoon, the psychologist William Rivers—are introduced alongside fictional characters may suggest that the book sets out to convince by a process of historical reconstruction. This is not its method; rather, a sequence of bizarre events and surreal images jolts our imagination into a nightmare world, relived under hypnosis by Major Prior, Barker's protagonist. He remembers the accusing eyeball held momentarily in his palm when a soldier under his command is blown to bits. He shrinks from the painted eye surrounding the spyhole in the door of a prison cell and from

the prisoner's accusation ("Whose side are you on?"), since she is Beattie Roper, the woman who helped to bring him up.

Now working for the Ministry of Munitions, Prior has a duty to pursue enemies of the state. In the panicky spring of 1918, the enemies are seen to be pacifists, socialists and homosexuals. Beattie is a pacifist on hunger strike. Her daughter, Hettie, protects Patrick MacDowell, wanted for starting strikes in munitions factories. These are Prior's childhood friends. They know him as the bright boy with ambitions reaching far beyond the back streets of Salford. Since he is only "a temporary gentleman," alienated from his fellow officers by class as he is from his ferociously unhappy parents by temperament, there seems no one with an absolute claim upon his loyalties.

Like the double agents in le Carre and Greene, Prior feels that his self-betrayal almost necessitates a subsequent betrayal of others. His bisexuality, vividly expressed in his friendship with another shell-shocked officer, Charles Manning, makes the job of persecuting homosexuals especially repugnant—yet his own protest is a silent one.

Pat Barker compares the historical figure of Robert Ross, attacked by Lord Alfred Douglas during a short-lived scandal, with that of the fictional Major Manning, terrified of blackmail. Her recreation of the 1918 production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, at which both men are present, is a triumph.

Who is to blame for Prior's emptiness, his treachery? Like Dr Rivers, the dedicated healer, he is sympathetic up to a point. But Rivers encourages Sassoon to return to the trenches and Prior, suffering increasingly from bouts of amnesia, "fugue states," has, knowingly or not, betrayed MacDowell. His only defence is one of inheritance. "I was born two years ago. In a shell-hole in France. I have no father." It won't do.

Eva Hoffman (essay date 26 November 1995)

SOURCE: "The Super Bowl of Fiction," in *New York Times Book Review*, November 26, 1995, p. 35.

[In the following essay, Hoffman describes the scene at the 1995 Booker Prize award ceremony at which Barker's *The Ghost Road* wins.]

On the evening of Nov. 7, the keeper of the Guild-hall, the magnificent Gothic building where the Booker Prize ceremonies are taking place, is mostly worried about security. In acknowledgment of Salman Rushdie's presence, he nervously confesses, 16 armed guards have been hired; and it must be said that the small phalanx of alert-looking men carrying walkie-talkies adds an element of extraliterary suspense to the atmosphere. Others in the black-tie crowd may have extraliterary worries as well, if they've put their money down on one of the authorial racers. At this last lap

of the race, Britain's leading bookies have billed *The Moor's Last Sigh*, by Mr. Rushdie, as the "hottest Booker favorite ever," with *The Ghost Road*, by Pat Barker, close behind.

George Walden, the chairman of this year's Booker Jury, is worried about the state of British culture. Mr. Walden, a Conservative M. P., delivers a darkly ironic speech, peppered with literate quotations, in which he contends that "the tyranny of ordinariness" reigns in Britain with a universally dampening hand.

Sir Michael Came, the outgoing chairman of Booker P. L. C., the company that sponsors the award, says a few understated words in defense of the Booker's importance and its integrity. His successor speaks with wistful gravity about the company's successful transition from a colonial to a modern company, specializing in food distribution and catering, poultry breeding and fish processing (fish fingers are specifically mentioned).

In the meantime, television crews are in evidence—the evening's proceedings are broadcast live on BBC—and in an adjoining room literary pundits are discussing on camera the finalists' merits and chances.

One gropes for an American analogy to the Booker. The confluence of celebrity, culture and commerce, of high-mindedness and cheerful tackiness, of coziness, dignity and self-deprecation that characterizes the Booker institution is ineffably, peculiarly, contemporary British. But there is also in the mix an element of intense spectator interest, equaled in America only by the Super Bowl. For several months each year, Booker watching becomes something of a national sport—and the stakes in the game are high. First awarded in 1969, the Booker quickly gained a reputation as the most important prize for English-language fiction. The critical cachet of the Booker is enormous, not to speak of the cachet of cash. The award itself carries a prize of £20,000, and winning books have gone on to sell as many as 300,000 copies.

And yet, when after dinner the announcement of this year's winner comes, it is greeted in a strangely subdued way. The recipient is Pat Barker, for the third part of her highly acclaimed trilogy about World War I. *The Ghost Road* is a tough, vivid meditation on the physical and psychic wounds incurred by men in battle—a critically unexceptionable choice and, in fact, one that meets with wide approval. Why, then, the mood of slight uncertainty in the air? Ms. Barker herself makes a terse acceptance speech, and later some skeptical comments about prizes.

The Booker has met with criticism in recent years for making choices that were unpopular or eccentric. This year, skepticism arose more from perplexity than disapproval, from a nagging sense of arbitrariness. *The Moor's Last Sigh*—a narratively manic, verbally hyperenergetic, comical, fantastical, roiling multicultural mulch of a novel of India—would also have been a commendable winner.

Why one book rather than the other? What were the judges' criteria for judgment? What was this year's Booker all about?

One thing it may have been about was good behavior, which may be where the perplexity first began. If scandal and polemic are to prizes what music is to love, then this year was a bit undernourished, especially by Booker standards. There were no irate judges walking out on the panel, as one did in 1991 because he disapproved of all the short-listed books. No writers scorning the prize on ideological grounds, as John Berger did in 1972, when he won for his novel *G* and declared he would donate half the money to the Black Panthers. No women's publishing cooperative coming from New Zealand and chanting in Maori, as happened in 1985, when the Maori writer Keri Hulme won the prize, and when her book *The Bone People* went on to become known in Booker lore as the least-read winner so far.

And no Great Scandals like those of last year, when embarrassment piled upon imbroglia. First, early in the season, one of the judges tried to recommend a novel to his fellow panelists without mentioning that its author happened to be his wife. Then John Bayley, the chairman, expressed in print his general dislike of contemporary fiction. Almost as soon as the award ceremonies were over, one of the judges declared that she was horrified by her colleagues' choice, which was *How Late It Was, How Late*, a novel by James Kelman written in Glaswegian dialect. The title, as it happened, was prophetic, since the judges kept changing their minds on their favorite until the very last minute.

Nothing of the sort happened this year. With the memories of these goings-on still fresh in their minds, the jurors seemed determined to be above reproach. In interviews, they alluded to reining in their passions and trying to achieve sufficient consensus to safeguard against disaffection and breaking ranks.

Irreproachability, however, can have its own pitfalls, and as soon as the five finalists were announced in September—one fewer than the customary six—the panel was in effect accused of playing it safe. *The Independent* described the selection as “militantly uncontroversial” and questioned the wisdom of curtailing the list in a year that saw the publication of novels by such prominent writers as Kazuo Ishiguro, John Berger, Penelope Fitzgerald and John Banville, among others. Several newspapers singled out the omission of *The Information*, by Martin Amis, which had been considered a sure contender. *The Times* made the exclusion front-page news.

Booker panelists hastened to respond that there were several novels that had some judges' enthusiasm, but none that recruited majority support. As for the books that did get through the sieve, one discernible thing they had in common was a kind of blokeishness. Sensitive blokeishness, to be exact. Among the feats of Ms. Barker's novel

is her ability to imagine her way into male sexuality, and to extend her sympathies fully to masculine trouble and pain. And part of Mr. Rushdie's achievement in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is to reimagine power relations between men and women in interesting ways, and to invent a convincingly larger-than-life female character, seen in the novel from the point of view of her multiply scarred son. The three other books on the short-list also feature chastened men. *In Every Face I Meet*, by Justin Cartwright, a wry comedy about male friendship and race relations in London, among other matters, gives us a congenially befuddled protagonist, who despite best intentions, or perhaps because of them, gets into terrible trouble and sees his best buddy killed. *Morality Play*, by Barry Unsworth, is a poetically written historical novel set in medieval times, about a priest who joins a troupe of actors and through staging a theater drama learns about the vexed complexities of good, evil, power and injustice in the real world. And finally, *The Riders*, by Tim Winton, a young Australian writer, follows the disturbing adventures of a man who has been deserted by his wife and who, in the course of pursuing her with his young daughter, learns how to heal and be healed by his child.

Is this, then, the season of the sensitive male, after so many seasons of insensitive ones? Or was the Booker panel practicing the newest form of political correctness? The jurors would certainly disavow such thoughts. In interviews and on other occasions, several members of the panel expressly disclaimed considerations of political correctness—especially of the currently correct kind. Ruth Rendell, the crime novelist, who served on the panel, said the authors' sex figured so little in their deliberations that the panelists noticed they had given the prize to a woman only after their decision was made. Indeed, they seemed keen to avoid all extraliterary criteria. They said they wanted novels that were readable, enjoyable, witty; they talked about well-constructed narrative.

This, too, may have been an attempt at purity, or a kind of critical innocence. But it may also raise a question: What does one want from fiction now? Marina Warner, a former Booker judge and short-listed author, says that the prize has served to bring attention to fiction in Britain in a period that saw an extraordinary efflorescence of innovative and cosmopolitan writing. It may be that after so much appreciation of experiment and extravagance, simplicity is becoming the last refuge of sophisticated minds. Oddly enough, only Mr. Walden, the one nonprofessional critic on the panel, referred to notions of literary ambition and worried about the “little England” mentality, in literature as in other things.

Well, pity the poor Booker judges, who at least implicitly have to answer such questions. This year they had to slog through 141 novels, a task that can surely addle the best critical minds. In the days right before the award announcement, they spoke with engagement and eloquence about their struggles of conscience and taste. After various swings of the pendulum, this year they took the middle

road. But prizes are always exercises in arbitrariness, and it is the judges who really can't win.

Gail Caldwell (review date 3 December 1995)

SOURCE: A review of *The Ghost Road*, in *Boston Globe*, December 3, 1995, p. 72.

[In the following review, Caldwell complains that the Melanesian section of Barker's *The Ghost Road* is not as compelling as the rest of the novel.]

Defying most of the unspoken conventions of literary chic, the British novelist Pat Barker writes old-fashioned modernist novels full of lean prose and courageous convictions. She knows, like poets and generals, that the most hideous truths about civilization are best captured with a direct hit. Her last three novels—*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and now *The Ghost Road*—compose a trilogy set in England and France during the First World War; most of her characters are drawn from history, though these are hardly what I would call historical novels. Like Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Barker's trilogy plumbs the past (and honors it) to create something fiercely imaginative—history becomes the dark signature, often the starlight, by which we see the story.

The result is something rich and deceptively simple, for the legacy of each of these works—what lingers in the heart once they're over—is the moral questions Barker presents and bravely doesn't answer. Centering her story in *Regeneration* upon the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who protested the war, and his medical psychologist, Dr. William Rivers, Barker outlined one of the cruelest dilemmas of war: If a soldier objects to killing his fellow man, must his doctor—who's supposed to save lives, not offer them up—send him back to battle with a stamp of sanity? *The Eye in the Door* refocused Barker's story onto Lt. Billy Prior, a good working-class fellow who dropped his aitches and yet made officer—and tried to mask his attraction for men unless it behooved him to do otherwise. As with her previous works (*Union Street*, *The Century's Daughter*), Barker casts each of these stories within the prisms of class and gender; she knows cold the barbed-wire rules and ironies of the British class system, and her deep empathic grasp of war is only heightened by her comprehension of its sexual distinctions and undertones.

Last month Barker was honored for her efforts with the coveted Booker Prize for *The Ghost Road*; she had been a rumored contender for each of her three novels in the past several years, and so this award—England's biggest literary sweepstakes—must be seen as something of a cumulative gesture. And while each of the novels stands alone, it is hard to imagine reading them one without the other. For one thing, *Regeneration* allows us to fall in love with this immaculately realized panoply of characters, particularly Dr. Rivers, who is the moral referee and conscience of the

novels. *The Eye in the Door* accomplishes the same job with Billy Prior, whose shift from shell-shocked patient to brittle, precarious survivor is an extraordinary achievement in character development. *The Ghost Road* concentrates its story on the shared but now diverging narratives of these two men, with Rivers returning to his past and Prior—God help them both—returning to the front in France.

Rivers, of course, has had to watch Prior go back to the line, against his personal judgment if not his medical one: The man has a history of asthma and a subjection to trauma—this is his fourth return to battle—that would land him a desk job in a minute. But Prior, hardly a romantic patriot, feels as drawn back to the front as water headed downstream. He is half-embarrassed by this calling, which he knows is no mere feat or lure of biology, however preordained it may feel. Mindful of where both his well-being and his loyalty lie, the lieutenant makes his last stop before leaving England a visit to Rivers.

Who, it might be noted, is still trying to save damaged men from the apparitions and realities of the war they've been fighting—ever-conscious that his power to heal depends upon knowing his own frailties. We have a glimpse here into Rivers' less than ideal boyhood, though Barker always manages to present such scar-torn truths as ordinary backstreets, rather than singular trips to hell. More metaphorically bound to Prior's war than Rivers' youth is his stint as anthropologist a decade earlier on Eddystone Island, in Melanesia. Intentionally barefoot and humble, Rivers lived there with a colleague among a waning population of former headhunters, where he tried to set aside his own Western biases to understand how the culture functioned. And didn't: Ever since headhunting was outlawed on Eddystone by the British gatekeepers, the islanders had witnessed a plummeting birth rate and a malaise-ridden community.

But that bitter legacy isn't meant to imply that war is inevitable, or even that men live in order to die—*The Ghost Road* is hardly so facile to stop at such an analogue. More complex and germane to both cultures are the less apparent parallels: the fear that drives you beyond logic and sometimes into heroism; the potential sadism present in the most tender authority. And the reasons, beyond blood and roses, that men fight, argued about far into the night. "You say we kill the Beast," chides the poet Wilfred Owen (who also has a part in the trilogy) to an angry patriot. "I say we fight because men lost their bearings in the night."

The Ghost Road often speaks in such simple poetry, deep as rain and full of old truths that never seem to grow less true. Its failing, to my mind, is in its large attention to the Melanesian section of the novel. Not that the old wise man, Njiru, isn't a compelling force, or that Barker doesn't justify the shadow play between the two cultures. Rivers' experience on Eddystone is supposed to blow open our perspective on the universality of war, its secret glories and taboos, and that it does. But cross-cutting in any novel

sets up an inevitable dilemma: what to do when one story is better than the other. I've grown so fond of Prior over the course of three novels that I felt churlish every time the story pulled me away from his private drama—and the larger tragedy we can feel from the opening pages of the novel, which is the culmination of slaughter and courage on the front in France, in fall 1918. Or, as Prior says in his journal, quiet as stone: "We move forward tonight."

Barker's grasp of the war and what it did to England culminates in the storming of the Sambre-Oise canal, but she gets hold of every less dramatic detail on the way there: the yellow skin of the munitions workers, the halfhearted love pacts between the abandoned and the doomed, the no man's land of any seasoned soldier between irony and grief. For Prior knows—and Rivers has spent a lifetime knowing—that there are some war memories too anguished for tears and far too dangerous for rage. In these hugely human novels, of which *Regeneration* may yet be the most wise, Barker has touched the center of an entire war by reaching for the exquisitely singular: the last letter home, the soldier's face blown away an hour before dusk. And still the candles are lit in vigil, and the generals send their charges back again.

Merle Rubin (review date 18 December 1995)

SOURCE: "The Great War and All Its Scars," in *Wall Street Journal*, Vol. CLXXVI, No. 118, December 18, 1995.

[In the following review, Rubin cites the strengths and weaknesses of Barker's writing in *The Ghost Road*.]

History is full of lessons; the problem lies in recognizing which past precepts best apply to present circumstances. If the Vietnam War provided an argument for isolationists and World War II inspiration for interventionists, then World War I, begun in a burst of military overconfidence, managed to transform many patriotic soldiers into impassioned pacifists.

The Great War, as it was called, produced a significant body of antiwar literature, much of which transcended the scope of mere protest writing, from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* to the powerful poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

Owen and Sassoon are featured characters in Pat Barker's widely praised trilogy of World War I novels. A writer whose previous fiction dealt with the lives of working-class women in the north of England, Ms. Barker has managed to research and imagine her way into the hearts and minds of young men raised in the belief that it was sweet and fitting to die for one's country, then plunged into the unimagined horrors of machine guns, mustard gas and trench warfare.

The Ghost Road, winner of this year's Booker Prize, completes the story begun in *Regeneration* (1992) and continued in *The Eye in the Door* (1993). The action unfolds over the last 18 months of the war, on the homefront and the battlefield, involving a fascinating cast of characters, some based on real-life personages.

Regeneration introduces Sassoon, a decorated officer who in July 1917 stuns his superiors by declaring his opposition to the war. Thanks to the efforts of his fellow officer and fellow poet Robert Graves, but against his own wishes, Sassoon escapes court-martial by being sent to a hospital in Scotland to be treated for a "nervous breakdown." There he is attended by Dr. William Rivers, a humane, self-critical psychiatrist well aware of the grim ironies of his own job—restoring men temporarily unhinged by the horrors of war back to a state of mind where they feel ready to reimmerge themselves in pointless slaughter. *Regeneration* also introduces the soldier-poet Wilfred Owen and a man he will later return to the battlefield with, Lt. Billy Prior, a character (one presumes) of Ms. Barker's own creation.

An upwardly mobile lad of working-class origins who has acquired an impressive degree of polish, Billy proves a challenging patient with a disquieting habit of attempting to analyze his analyst. Resourceful, self-protective, attractive to both sexes, Billy disconcerts many people simply because they find it hard to classify him, sexually or socially. In the trilogy's second novel, *The Eye in the Door*, Billy comes center stage, reassigned to London as a domestic intelligence agent. His mental stability and his conscience are severely tested as he works behind the scenes to investigate the truth behind an innocent pacifist's conviction for treason and as he witnesses the public hysteria unleashed by a deranged man's claim that the war is being lost by 47,000 British homosexuals in thrall to Germany.

In *The Ghost Road*, Billy Prior and Wilfred Owen return to the battlefield. Like Sassoon, they are strangely eager to return to a war they no longer believe in: The sight of civilian complacency, mindless chauvinism, rampant xenophobia and resurgent homophobia sickens these soldiers, who have endured the harsh realities of war and who have come to feel a profound tenderness, in some cases sexual, for their comrades-in-arms.

Sharing the spotlight with Prior in *The Ghost Road* is his former physician, Dr. Rivers, now transferred to a hospital in London and suffering from an attack of Spanish influenza. Dr. Rivers, another of the real-life figures whom Ms. Barker painstakingly evokes, spent time before the war on an anthropological expedition studying the beliefs and rituals of South Seas island headhunters. Now, as he broods over the still-vivid details of his encounters with that nearly extinct tribe, he is struck by the strange parallels between his culture and theirs, and shaken by his realization that "their view of *his* society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs." Like his soldier-patients, Dr. Rivers experiences a disorienting sensation of "free-fall," as old assumptions and beliefs collapse all around.