

A Dog's Gift Author's Afterword

This is a work of fiction. All characters are fictional. The Durand home village of Bouresches is real, though everything told about it is fictionalized. The interiors of American Red Cross Military Hospital One, Barton Wines, the church, and Henri's apartment are fictional.

One goal in writing this novel is to take the English-speaking world inside France at the end of World War One. I attempt to show some of the hardships that French refugees suffered, especially the plight of French children and teens. My treatment of this is not meant to be comprehensive. This is a novel, not a treatise on the subject.

French law in 1918 didn't include adoption as far as I could determine. The people taking in the hundreds of thousands of French war orphans could do one of several things. Temporary guardianship was available pending full guardianship hearings. Guardianship typically involved a family council where at least two family members met with a justice of the peace or other magistrate in the jurisdiction where the children lived. France enacted a new category called "Wards of the Nation" in the summer of 1918. This included a living stipend and legal status for the children. Widows could apply for this even when their children were still living with them. These Wards were classified as orphans in some statistics. Thus, the number of true orphans, where both parents were dead, seems unclear to me. The number of French children orphaned by the war was between 200,000 and a million, depending on how one defines "orphan".

Dogs did many jobs during WWI. The term "therapy dog" is modern. I found occasional mention of using dogs in this capacity in that era, but no specifics. Of course, those of us who have lived with dogs know that time spent with our dogs can be therapeutic. I believe that understanding goes back before the invention of terms like "psychology", "psychotherapy", "group therapy", and "post-traumatic stress disorder/syndrome". Thus, I didn't think it was too much of a reach to have Henri bring Abby into his groups.

I didn't focus much attention on research into group therapy in WWI for several reasons. Psychotherapy was a new and not universally accepted field in medicine. However, combat veterans have probably met in small groups to "chew the fat" as long as war has existed. Admitting to having any psychological problem was not usually acceptable among combat veterans, especially when commissioned officers were in the room. I stretched things to create Henri's groups, none of which I can prove existed at the time.

Two of the dogs who shared my life form the basis for the character Abby. Shadow was a Shetland Sheepdog with an intuitive understanding of which of my sons needed him for comfort. Abby was a Border Collie who showed me the ways of her breed. The obsession with a ball and the peculiar form of 'fetch' shown in the novel are based on her. I tried not to get overly anthropomorphic in my Abby chapters, though some degree of that is inherent in writing a canine character's point of view. Now, let me tell you something important: I'm a dog boy. When Abby joined our lives, I read Patricia McConnell's *The Education of Will* and Barbara Sykes' *Understanding Border Collies* to help me understand this fascinating breed. Hugo is based on every Lab I've known, including Willow and Ruger; Bruno is based on Duke and Luna.

I do not name the village where Bernard and Elisabeth lived. I had first imagined it to be Vierzy, which is shown on the map at the beginning of the book. However, I know nothing about the specifics of that town's recovery history. I fashioned the nameless village into a sort of "every town" to better represent events that took place throughout the wide swath of northern France recovering from the devastation of World War One.

I relied on several sources for information about the process of French recovery from the war. The main one was Hugh Clout's *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France*, published in 1996. Here are a few facts from that source. The zone of devastation stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel. It included 24,915 square miles, 12,884 of which were occupied by Germany from 1914 to 1918. This is an area rich in coal, agriculture, and manufacturing. The nearest city to our mythical village was Soissons, where 83% of built structures were damaged or destroyed in the Battle of Soissons between July 18 - 22, 1918. The term "commune" was used to describe the French administrative districts around towns and villages. The zone of combat included 4726 communes, of which 423 were undamaged; 1,349 damaged like the mythical village in this novel; 1,334 sustained over 50% damage; and 620 were destroyed. Those listed as "destroyed" were wiped off the earth. Imagine the effect on the civilians whose homes, farms, shops, churches, and businesses were destroyed. Where did they go? How did they cope? How did they rebuild? Where did the money and help come from?

The debris of war, including the dead, littering the battle zones took years to clear. Many of the dead were blown to pieces by artillery. Many were buried as "unknown". France interred recovered bones of the "unknowns" in ossuaries. One can only imagine the horror of battle zones like the ones shown in this novel. Engineering troops and prisoners of war shoveled broken gear and non-human debris into shell holes that were filled by men with shovels or bulldozers. Farmers still harvest old gear and bones when they plow their fields today. Artillery cratered the fields and forests in the battle zones. Between 10-30% of the millions of artillery and gas shells shot during the war failed to detonate on impact, many buried beneath the ground. The removal of those continues to this day. One can drive along the back roads in rural northern France and see unexploded ordnance pulled by farmers out of their fields along the roadsides. It is not clear how many farmers died or were wounded when shells from this "iron harvest" exploded.

The dead were not just the millions of humans who died in battle. Livestock losses included: 834,933 cattle; 375,393 equines; 890,794 sheep and goats; and 331,656 pigs. Imagine the stench and the horror of this to the children seeing it.

I wrote this novel in English for an English-speaking audience. I am American and do not speak, write, or read French. As such, the dialogue and grammar in this novel are in English. I didn't pretend to use French grammatical construction. French and English are different enough that to do so would result in awkward English and an insult to the French language, for which I have great respect. I love France and the French people, and hope that French readers will accept my humble apology for anything I got wrong.