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TITLE INFORMATION

OUR DESPERATE HOUR
Novels of the Great War
John F. Andrews
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BOOK REVIEW

An unlikely soldier in World War I searches for his son on the Western Front in Andrews' historical novel.

Forty-six-year-old Major Albert "Ab" Johnson, a newspaperman from Butte, Montana, recently rejoined the Army to serve his country in the Great War. He wasn't expecting to fight, of course—he thought he was taking a safe supply job in Tours—but he's just been summoned to Paris, where his fluency in French is needed to aid in gathering medical supplies for the scrambling American divisions on the front. Ab has barely reached the city before a German shell explodes the cafe in which he's sitting, leaving a ringing in his ears. Ab hopes his proximity to the line might allow him to reconcile with his son Jack Johnson, who bucked family tradition by joining the Marines instead of the Army (and from whom Ab became estranged after making some anti-Marine remarks). Ab isn't the only one acclimating to life in the combat zone: Arrogant surgeon Arthur Beck of the Navy Medical Corps, gung-ho Marine Carl Larsen, and hospital apprentice Lyle McCormack are all figuring out what exactly is expected of them in this bloody place. Little do they know, they are all headed toward the Battle of Belleau Wood, where a new chapter of Marine Corps mythology will be forged and Ab might (or might not) find redemption. Andrews captures the pain of war in muscular prose, as here when Ab speeds a bleeding soldier to an aid station: "The motorcycle bounces along the road as I race from Lucy to La Voie. I hope I don't lose any teeth. The wounded private riding in the sidecar moans with each jolt. I'm too busy steering around the worst holes to groan with him." Andrews clearly knows the time period—and particularly the era's medical practices—but he largely eschews the usual tragedy of WWI narratives in favor of a more palatable adventure tale. This is one for the war buffs, and particularly those who enjoy Marine Corps lore.

An immersive war novel that manages not to become overly depressing.

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