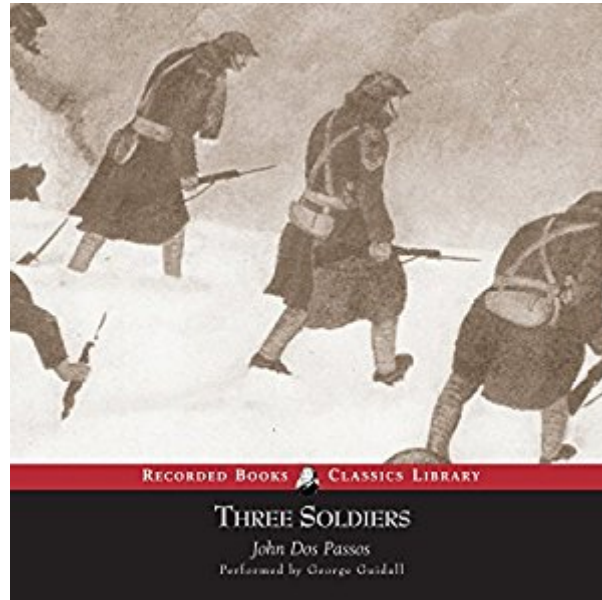




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Three Soldiers



Synopsis

When John Dos Passos published this book in 1921, its explosive portrait of World War I shocked America. Instead of glorifying the Great War, he shows three men caught in a military machine that is as dangerous for them as the foreign terrain and the enemies they fight. Fuselli leaves San Francisco for the front lines in France, anxious to move up the military ladder of success. Chrisfield, a farm boy from Indiana, feels himself swept along as he marches in a sea of other soldiers. And Andrews, a classical musician, searches for a sense of direction and meaning as he joins the ranks. Each will be swallowed up and changed forever by a vast, faceless automaton-the Army. Based on Dos Passos' own experiences as an ambulance driver in Europe during World War I, *Three Soldiers* is honored as a classic antiwar novel. Sweeping in its scope and drama, it is riveting historical fiction. Veteran narrator George Guidall's reading conveys all the conflicts and emotions that bombard the three recruits.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I probably shouldn't have read this after the great and mighty USA trilogy since anything else he did only pales to that great work but this is a fine, if little known work from a great writer. As people who have read the USA trilogy know, Dos Passos absolutely hated WWI and everything it stood for and here he got to take out his anger on a few targets. While not as focused as *1919* was, he shows his feelings with a deft touch and a depth of feeling that was rarely seen in war novels, his characters aren't all brilliant, the only really three dimensional one is Andrews but they depict a cross section of American life and through their adventures he shows what his firm belief was: that the machine of

the army sucked the spirit out of someone and turned them nearly into a automaton. And without focused on the gory battles, he shows the horror of the war in a way that few writers have. Definitely a book that needs to be looked at again and should be ranked with *The Naked and the Dead*, and *Red Badge of Courage* (among others).

Dos Passos's attempt to expose the reader to the plight of the common American enlisted man in WWI rarely manages to achieve the impact one suspects he must have been seeking. It's not about the horrors of battle at all--the three soldiers of the title encounter no real fighting, and half the book takes place after the armistice. Rather, the book is about the horrors inflicted on the minds and spirits of men by the military machine and its inhuman procedures. Dos Passos does this by bludgeoning the reader with the endless drudgery of the soldiers' existence as they meet in boot camp and make their way to France. His three soldiers are clearly meant to cut across the strata of American society: Italian-American San Franciscan, Midwestern farm boy, Harvard-educated pianist, and he clearly shows how they all get ground down and reduced to nothing by the army. In doing so, the book becomes more of an anti-war, pro-personal freedom manifesto than it is a story with a plot. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, it just isn't done very delicately and thus makes for a rather tedious read. In the end, it's clear why this is considered a rather minor work by an American great.

To read this novel as a war novel is a mistake. World War I is merely the canvas upon which Dos Passos paints his story. If individuals have a responsibility to their government, what responsibility does that same individual have to his/her own conscience? "Three Soldiers" attempts to answer this question. As with most great works of literature, the story can be read on two levels. At the surface you have the stories of three men with different desires of who and what they want to be. There is a theme of Socialism and anti-war here as well. It's a good story at the surface level. What makes this novel great, however, is that there is an underlying message here, wrought with symbolism. It's the study of the awakening of the individual and the choices he (John Andrews) makes. It's a study of moral courage in the face of insurmountable odds. John Andrews (the central character) initially joins the army out of a sense of duty, then begins to recognize how he has been stripped of all who he was and has begun to conform to the "machine" of society. Disgusted, he takes his first tentative steps back toward who he really is at heart. The moment of epiphany comes when, after having been wounded and waking up in a make-shift hospital surrounded by busts of great men of the past, he decides that he must make his stand to change the world in what ever way he can just like the

men represented in the busts above him did. His choices eventually drive him to desert the army while in Paris. The real choice comes near the end of the novel when he is presented the opportunity to return to the army with no consequence to his prior desertion. (I won't ruin the ending for you!) There is a strong element of socialist propaganda in the novel. I am no more a socialist than I am a horse, but the reader should remember that this novel was written before the failings of socialism were widely known. It was a much more idealistic time and the evils and harshness of socialism had yet to be realized. The socialist element of the novel need not deter the reader from the true message: the courage and triumph of individual freedom.

The Signet Classic publication of John Dos Passos' brilliant anti-war novel provides us access to another significant account of the Great War and the writings of this 'lost generation' novelist. Although first released over seventy-six years ago, the novel's timeless message relating the effects of war and military life on the psyches of three young men is as relative today as in 1921. Dos Passos' indictment of the war and America's role in it, contrasts starkly with the crusade like image of the War presented to the American people. The novel accurately reflects the diversity of a conscript army embodied in the three soldiers; a first generation Italian-American from San Francisco, an Indiana farm boy and an east coast Harvard man. Each enters the service with confidence in the role they would play in this clash between good and evil. The transformation of these young men carries through until the end of the war. Although, they all survive there is little left of their former selves. The brilliance of the language and the depth of feeling demonstrated by the author will captivate the reader. This novel rightly belongs alongside Cumming's *The Enormous Room*, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*

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