

## The Creative Launcher

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### ***The War Beyond Ruin* by Gemma Liviero: A Novel about Atrocities of War**

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#### **Abstract**

War causes physical exertion and suffering. The soldiers and the people have to make themselves indifferent to these otherwise they would be destroyed. There is always uncertainty in war. Chance also plays an important role in war as it makes everything more uncertain. The whole course of events is interfered by it. War is a matter of determination and courage. *The War Beyond Ruin* is Liviero's war based fiction. It is a lyrical writing and unusual story. Though a war novel, this is not typical World-War-II-era novel. It's beautiful and gritty historical fiction combined with mystery and suspense and completely unique characters who live through hard times. The ending is life-affirming and fills with hope. It is all about the misery and complexity of life during and after WW II in Germany and Italy.

**Keywords-** War, Atrocity, Destruction, Debris

In war, there is always destruction and loss and this varies from one side to another. Both sides never reveal the truth about the losses and damages caused by war. Truth is always withheld from the public; otherwise it will be a shock for nations to know. One war always leads to another in a cyclic never-ending progression and creates new problems which might be more acute and severe than the old ones. War does not resolve issues but worsens and complicates them further. It acts more sophisticated with the passage of time endangering the mankind and life on this universe.<sup>1</sup>

Between September 1943 and April 1945, 60,000–70,000 Allied and 38,805–150,660 German soldiers died in Italy. The number of Allied casualties was about 320,000 and the

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German figure (excluding those involved in the final surrender) was over 330,000. Fascist Italy, prior to its collapse, suffered about 200,000 casualties, mostly POWs taken in the Allied invasion of Sicily, including more than 40,000 killed or missing. Over 150,000 Italian civilians died, as did 35,828 anti-fascist partisans and some 35,000 troops of the Italian Social Republic. On the Western Front of World War II, Italy was the most costly campaign in terms of casualties suffered by infantry forces of both sides, during bitter small-scale fighting around strong points at the Winter Line, the Anzio beachhead and the Gothic Line.

The war novel is a novel in which history is given importance. It is not only an artistic phenomenon but a historical phenomenon. The war novel is more important as a historical phenomenon than as an artistic achievement. In variety of ways, writers responded to the war with their pervasive sense of nihilism and their withdrawal from society and politics reflect about the culture of the Forties.

The plot of the novel *The War Beyond Ruin* starts in 1945 when Italian soldier traveling through war devastated Germany meets an orphaned boy. August 1945. As Stefano, an Italian POW, heads toward home across war-ravaged Germany, he encounters a young child beside his dead mother. Unable to leave him to an unknown fate, Stefano takes the boy with him, finding refuge in a seemingly abandoned house in secluded woodland. They take a night shelter in an abandoned house by the river. Present and former German occupants of this house are the other main protagonists. There is a big mystery covering their past that reader is eager to see unveiled. The past of little boy and Italian soldier are also not known. It was a very interesting beginning to a great story. All the questions are answered and all loose ends nicely wrapped up at the very satisfactory ending.

The story is delivered in short chapters that are told from different points of view of multiple protagonists and constantly jump in time from past to present. It feels almost as author could not decide if she is writing a suspense book or a great historical novel about atrocities of war. The action was often too slow to make it a good suspense. On the other hand, every time the reader starts submerging in individual life stories or dramatic war events he is jerked out and transferred to different timeframe or a different person in the next

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chapter. As a result one must appreciate some fragments but the book does not pull the readers in the way he hopes it will.

In the aftermath of devastating events leads to questionable actions. *The Road Beyond Ruin* is a larger than life historical novel. It is a bit difficult in the beginning due to the format. Each chapter is designated to a lead character and skips back within 10-15 years to provide back story. It's clearly marked but still a bit jarring as it happens every few pages. It took 6-8 chapters to get the hang of it. One of the characters writes letters to her dad that were sometimes lengthy and in script.

This story is character and dialogue driven, which is a wonderful thing. With so much detail given about each character, you will know them intimately and the dialogue is quick moving, (except for the clunky Russo/English), that the 400+ pages flow swiftly along. The prose is fine, but minimal for a book of this length. There is a minimal amount of suggestive content with no gratuitous language or violence. The emotions and tension of each character are intense and resonate loudly. The story has different shades of emotions.

The war has ended and these folks are trying to put their lives back together. Who should they trust? Can they trust each other? Why are they in this town when clearly they belong elsewhere? Are you who you say you are? Did you do this or not? So many questions how do we find the truth? Curiosity, kindness and cold blooded conjuring; these are the essence of taking *The Road Beyond Ruin*.

Germany's surrender to the Allies in May 1945 ended World War II, but Europe's suffering is scarcely abated. Stefano, a scarred Italian soldier held in Germany as a prisoner of war, is set free, but Berlin is far from home, and Germany's roads and railways are smashed to rubble. Stefano sets out on foot, surviving on scant rations given him by his liberators, when he discovers a dead woman and infant, and a four-year-old boy temporarily shocked into muteness. The lad clings to Stefano, and they take shelter in a pair of secluded houses.

The buildings appear abandoned, but Stefano is wakened by his shelter's owner, Erich, a former German soldier. Erich invites the refugees to stay, and Stefano meets his neighbors – war-traumatized Georg, and his nurse-wife, Rosalind. The reticent Rosalind thaws when Stefano repairs her home but evades further questions about her cousin Monique

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when Stefano asks about the photograph of a young woman hanging on the wall. Then he discovers a packet of Monique's letters hidden in Erich's attic, and is drawn irresistibly into a mysterious drama connecting these four people.

Australian author Gemma Liviero brings these intriguing persons together in her marvelous historical novel, *The Road Beyond Ruin*. It's an elegant literary striptease, in which lucky readers learn that each character keeps a secret, and then another, and another. They reveal the secret keep coming until you reluctantly turn the final pages, and close the cover with a satisfied sigh.

Stefano is an Italian POW who is trying to navigate his way home in the postwar climate. He stumbles upon a little boy clinging to his deceased mother and despite wanting to leave him behind, takes him along on his journey. They come upon an empty house and take residence, meeting neighbors Rosalind and Georg.

Erich, a former SS officer, returns to his old home to find Stefano and the boy there. He invites them to stay until they can get home but Stefano is hesitant. The characters get to know one another and the timeline bumps back and forth between present tense and exploring their past lives. One day, Stefano notices a photo on Rosalind's Wall of Monique, her mysterious cousin who went missing during the war. As they continue to get to know each other, secrets unravel and a truth emerges, which may prevent Stefano from ever escaping.

The book is little slow in the beginning and each chapter is told from a different character's perspective, which can be confusing in the beginning. The drama definitely picks up in the back third of the book where there are many twists and turns. The ending was a little disappointing. This is an interesting premise of a story told after the war. Through the use of flashbacks the reader gets to experience what the characters endured during the war without being overly explicit. This story was a creative new take on a WWII tale. It is seen that the war novel has a kind of split personality. On one hand it is driven to a savage attack because the perceived reality falls short of the democratic and humane ideal, and on the other hand it feels compelled to praise the democratic virtues and the United States. To put it precisely war leads to the total corruption of man. Man can never conquer his enemy because the enemy is within him, in his intellectual and appetitive failure. The wages of war are death and lead directly to the collapse of humanity. So the novelist sees war as incomprehensible and

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meaningless. It is fought by troops whose commanders are opportunistic, incompetent, pompous and cowardly. Because of war there comes cohesion in the whole civilization that prevents man from finding him being true to himself. In some successful war novels, the army is pictured as an institution that fakes everything. It forces men into hypocrisy because they cannot live up to the military code. Its officers are ambitious only for self-aggrandizement for promotion and prestige. They are generally weak and unintelligent. They are without principle through their official duty is to disseminate democratic propaganda. The army robs all men of life. They are dead because the army deprives them of will. They must be blank and inhuman. Those who act alive or human are of no use. Decent human gestures are impossible in the army. In short, the army brings out the worst in everybody. The pessimism of frustrated democratic idealism often seems masochistic in the war novel. Some writers seemed to fasten themselves over the failures of men in the armed forces to behave like decent Americans who harboured prejudices against black men or foreigners and who saw to it that everyone had an equal chance. To these writers it is a matter of shocked revelation that those who wield power in the army, behave like fascist gangsters or petty grafters, and others write from a deeper initial cynicism about America.

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