

Study Notes for The Good Son

These notes are intended for teachers or parents wanting to give context when looking at the book with children. They open up the possibility to revisit the pictures from a more historical, educational point of view.

Art or photography teachers may be interested in the section below about the process used to create the book.

Page 6 – Home by Christmas?

Both the French and German governments expected the war to last no more than a few months and that it would be over by Christmas 1914. They were not prepared to provide millions of men with winter clothes. The soldiers had to spend the harsh winter outdoors in the same uniform they wore during summer.

Page 7 – The Refugees

All across Europe, women and children were left behind when all the men went to war. When the Germans invaded Belgium and the north of France in 1914, these women and children were forced to flee with only what they could carry. They were now refugees, forced to shelter where ever they could – sometimes living outside in the snow.

Page 19 – The Call to Arms

In August 1914 there was a call for “general mobilisation”. This was the act of assembling and readying 3,5 million French men for war. Local policemen had the task of announcing the news to the villages in the countryside. An alarm was sounded in the form of church bells ringing and posters were put up on the walls of all the towns, calling on men to present themselves to their allocated units to do their duty for their country.

Page 24-25 – Propaganda

Both sides of the conflict used propaganda to shape and influence people’s opinions at home and abroad. Using pamphlets, posters, cartoons and illustrated news carrying drawings or photographs, they told stories designed to make people fear the enemy. Once fearful, the public would go along with the idea that the war was justified and that they should support the extermination of the enemy.

Read more about this re-creation of newspaper propaganda [here](#).



Page 29-30 – Early airplanes

This plane is called a Bleriot, named after the man who built it. It was one of the early form of planes used in the war. Despite being unarmed and only used for reconnaissance, they played a pivotal role by feeding back information for artillery strikes and recording troop movements.

Page 30-32 – The Red Pants

The bold and colourful uniform of the French soldier reflected a proud and fierce “all-out attack” mentality. The French believed that a rushing, determined infantry charge could overcome even the most deeply entrenched enemy. To stop the advance of the German army, the “red pants” soldiers hurled themselves across open fields toward the enemy. They were simply mowed down by storms of bullets and shrapnel fire.

Page 38 – The Zouaves

The Zouaves were part of the French Army of Africa. The North Africans regiments were comprised of tough and ferocious tribesmen from Algeria and Morocco lead by French officers. Brilliant and brave, dressed in their colourful and exotic uniforms, these French Colonial troops had established a terrifying reputation with the enemy (they were averse to taking prisoners), and Germans moving into a new sector always enquired nervously “Are there any Africans opposite?”.

Page 46 – Pierre and his father

Pierre is looking at a portrait of his father who fought and died during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. France went enthusiastically to war in 1914 to take revenge after the shameful defeat of 1870. Wars always create more wars ...

Page 63 – Sending a letter

Pierre does not know if his letter will reach his Mother because the High Command had put postal censorship in place. The authorities did not want the country to know what was really happening on the frontline. As the war dragged on, the authorities realised that letters and postcards were essential to maintain the morale of the troops. While always censored, more than 4 billion were delivered by the postal service. This represents more than 5 million letters and parcels per day throughout the 4 years of the war.

Page 64 – Hungry and thirsty soldiers

Can you imagine millions of men and horses suddenly on the move through the countryside? As they were always moving, it was nearly impossible to get enough basic supplies to them. The shops were closed, the farms destroyed. It was extremely difficult for the soldiers to live off the land. The summer of 1914 was particularly hot. Finding drinking water was an important job!

Page 68 – Exhausted soldiers

French, English and German soldiers walked on average 45 kms per day, marching day and night for weeks on end, with rarely more than 4 hours sleep. They carried between 30 and 40 kilos of equipment, they slept on the ground and had very little access to food and water.

Page 69 – The Picklehaube

At the beginning of the war, the German helmet was called a “Picklehaube” or spiked helmet. They took the spike off their helmets when they started to live in trenches as it made them obvious and easy targets for the enemy snipers.

Page 75 – Prisoners of War

Being taken prisoner was a way for these German soldiers to have a better chance of survival. They might be sent to work on farms or in factories to replace the French workers who were now all soldiers. They were sure they would not have to go into battle again...

Page 95 – Executions

Between 1914 and 1918 the French Army executed nearly 1,000 of its own soldiers. The vast majority were not executed during the mutinies of 1917 but during the first year of the war, between September 1914 and October 1915. Of all the nations involved in the Great War, Australia was the only country not to execute its own men, having only sent voluntary soldiers to the front in Europe.



The Process

Contrary to traditional methods of storytelling in which a story is first imagined, written and then brought to life with actors, animation, CGI or drawings, we decided to make a story from pre-existing material; models and miniatures available at hobby shops around the world. That way it felt as if the “little soldiers” themselves were telling us their stories. The story was drawn from them instead of them being used to suit the purpose of a pre-written story.

Overcoming the restrictions and limitations associated with creating and telling a story in such an unusual way has been the first creative challenge of this process. A second challenge was how we could bring emotion to our very stiff and expressionless little plastic men. How to create an eerie reality that would take the viewer beyond their plastic edges to feel and share with them the terrible array of emotions they experience.

The credit for overcoming this challenge goes to the emotional power of the photography. The use of framing, depth of field, the decision to only use natural light at different times of day, and the very important stage of grading all helped us not only to capture an emotion with each image but also create an overall feel for the story. Minimal digital editing was used to add real life details to some images, such as skies or smoke.

This book has been created by following a process similar to that used in filmmaking. But in miniature...