Study Guide

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Contents

The Wars — an Overview
WHO’S WHO?
Timothy Findley
Canada and WW1 — 100 Years Later
Life in the trenches
CANADA’S SOLDIERS
Designing War on stage
Poetry of War
Further Reading
Conversation Starters
The Wars: an Overview

Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* was originally published as a novel in 1977. The novel won the Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction.

In 2007, the stage version—adapted by Dennis Garnhum—premiered at Theatre Calgary. The play was co-produced by The Playhouse Theatre Company in Vancouver BC, and performed there in the same year.

Director’s Perspective:

“Forty years ago Tiff (as we were to call him) wrote this courageous story of a young Canadian going off to war. As I began writing the adaptation, I was drawn to the eloquent way in which Tiff reminds us of the cost of war and all the pain that it causes. As I continued to write, my focus turned to the idea of heroism. Our protagonist Robert Ross encounters more unspeakable events than any of us should ever experience: both during his time fighting in the war and at home. We all face many wars throughout our lives. It is how we move through them that this play wishes to consider.

I’ve never met a person who loved this country more than Timothy Findley. Through all of his successes and early travels he could have settled anywhere. He chose Canada. This November marks the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, a conflict that brought Canada closer to being an independent nation. Hearing from Timothy Findley in this adaptation of his work seems like an appropriate way to honour our Canadian soldiers—past, present, and future—who live to defend our freedom.”
## WHO’S WHO?

### Cast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Captain Taffler</td>
<td>Christopher Bautista</td>
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<td>Rowena</td>
<td>Georgina Beaty</td>
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<td>Mr. Ross</td>
<td>Kevin Bundy</td>
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<td>Ella</td>
<td>Jenni Burke</td>
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<td>Private Regis</td>
<td>Frank Chung</td>
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<td>Robert Ross</td>
<td>Alex Furber</td>
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<td>Marian</td>
<td>Katherine Gauthier</td>
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<td>Captain Leather</td>
<td>Omar Alex Khan</td>
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<td>Private Purchas</td>
<td>Jeff Lillico</td>
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<td>Private Cote</td>
<td>Danik McAfee</td>
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<td>Mrs. Ross</td>
<td>Jan Alexandra Smith</td>
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<td>Private Levitt</td>
<td>Braeden Soltys</td>
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<td>Sergeant Rodwell</td>
<td>Edmund Stapleton</td>
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<td>Sergeant Steward</td>
<td>Marcel Stewart</td>
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<td>Lady Barbara d’Orsey</td>
<td>Shannon Taylor</td>
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<td>Private Harris</td>
<td>John Wamsley</td>
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### Crew

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<th>Role</th>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Dennis Garnhum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set Designer</td>
<td>Allan Stichbury</td>
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<td>Costume Designer</td>
<td>Christina Poddubiuk</td>
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<td>Lighting Designer</td>
<td>Bonnie Beecher</td>
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<td>Composer &amp; Sound Designer</td>
<td>Richard Feren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage Manager</td>
<td>Kathryn Davies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Stage Manager</td>
<td>Suzanne McArthur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apprentice Stage Manager</td>
<td>Lore Green</td>
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Timothy Findley

Interactive biography — this biography has been annotated with questions. Research your answers, and ask your own questions to extend your knowledge!

“All I hope is they’ll remember we were human beings” — Rodwell, *The Wars*

Timothy Findley — known as “Tiff” to friends — was a giant in the Canadian artistic scene who achieved recognition as a performer, playwright, and novelist. Born in Toronto in 1930, Findley’s origins are much like those of *The Wars* character Robert Ross. Like Ross, Findley grew up in the wealthy Toronto neighbourhood of Rosedale. Having survived serious childhood illnesses in his early years, at 16 years old Findley decided to leave school to pursue a career in ballet. When his dance ambitions were ended by a bad back, Findley turned to another mode of performance: acting. He appeared in the Stratford Festival’s first season in 1953, where he met Tyrone Guthrie and Alec Guinness. Those connections led to further theatre work for Tiff — eventually, he appeared in Thornton Wilder’s *The Matchmaker* alongside Ruth Gordon.

Indeed, it was Wilder and Gordon who set Findley on a literary path: in an attempt to settle an argument about whether or not young people were overly pessimistic, Findley wrote a short story. Rather than convincing them of his point, the work proved that writing was Findley’s destined path, and the pair insisted that he pursue writing more seriously. However, his love of the theatre never left him, and in one interview, he describes this passion: “Part of the excitement of the live theatre is taking that chance. No matter how long a play has run, or how
many different productions it has been given, there is this marvellous feeling of the daring of being there. What can go wrong? What can go right? What magic can happen?”

Findley began his writing career by working on scripts for the CBC and by writing two novels *The Last of the Crazy People* and *The Butterfly Plague*, both of which were met with tepid success. In 1974, Findley became the National Arts Centre’s first Playwright in Residence. His third novel was *The Wars*, published in 1977, and it proved to be his breakthrough success, becoming a bestseller and winning Findley the Governor General’s Award for Fiction.

While Findley has said that he knew he was gay from early adolescence, he was briefly married to Janet Reid. Tiff spent much of his life with his partner, William Whitehead, who was an acclaimed CBC documentary writer, and penned over 100 episodes of *The Nature of Things*. Whitehead also helped managed Findley’s career, often typing out manuscripts, answering mail, and assisting with research. The pair split their time between their homes in southern France and in Canada—for a time, they lived at Stone Orchard farm in Cannington, Ontario, and later in life, they moved to Stratford, Ontario.

*The Wars* is an introduction to Findley’s works. You may be interested in reading some of Timothy Findley’s other works—is there anything else he’s written that you’ve read already?

Over the course of his career, Findley had an immense impact on the Canadian literary and artistic world: he published 12 novels, two short story collections, four plays, two memoirs, and won every major Canadian literary award. He experimented with genre, often mixing and blending styles across a single work. Ultimately, Findley’s life and his writings demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the pains of modern life, and a deep understanding of the darkest corners of the human experience. As a writer, he is renowned for his ability to render scenes of immense pain with care and complexity; as a person, he is often remembered for his curiosity and generous nature.

Have you ever experienced this feeling at a live performance? Where was it and what happened?

What other authors have won this award? For which books?
2018 marks the end of the WWI centenary — a global commemoration that will conclude on November 11th, spanning from one hundred years after the outbreak of the war to the anniversary of armistice.

What do we remember when we look back on this time? Over the past century, WWI has been recognized as a significant moment in the development of Canada’s national identity. How we memorialize this war — one that represents the nation’s entrance onto the world stage and the establishment of independence from Britain — shapes Canada’s future. Shifting our outlook on the past allows us to invite new perspectives on what it means to be Canadian in the present.

When Canada entered WWI, it didn’t do so with a declaration of war. Canada’s participation was obligated by its colonial connection to Britain. By and large, Canadians supported the war at first. As Sir Wilfred Laurier put it, “it is our duty to let Great Britain know and to let the friends and foes of Great Britain know that there is in Canada but one mind and one heart that all Canadians are behind the Mother County.” By the end of the war in 1918, Canada was no longer viewed as a mere colony, earning the right to independent representation at the Paris Peace Conference, signing peace treaties as an independent entity, and joining the League of Nations.
There were several factors that led to this shift in identity. A nation of only 8 million people at the time, Canada sent 650,000 citizens into the conflict — a substantial percentage. Of those sent, 66,000 died and another 172,000 were wounded. Canada’s sacrifice in pursuit of global peace was considerable. Canadian soldiers proved to be crucial to several of the war’s major developments. Canadian soldiers were on the front lines during one of the first gas attacks in Ypres, as well as at the forefront of victory at Vimy Ridge, now a patriotic symbol of Canada’s contributions to the war effort.

WWI thus became one of the foundations and symbols of Canada’s national identity, based on a perceived shared and unifying past. However, this past is not absolute: many stories and individuals sit on the borders of or outside this traditional national image. For example, in recent years, efforts have been made by authors, artists, and historians to better recognize the contributions of First Nations soldiers. Likewise, *The Wars* emphasizes that the Canadian war experience is different for every soldier by foregrounding the stories of individuals. In 2018, *The Wars* calls on us to continue our thinking about Canada’s role in those same terms — as a collection of people and their unique narratives, rather than as a singular experience. Doing so allows us to reconsider the image of Canada that emerged by viewing Canadian identity and experience through a multifaceted lens.
Life in the Trenches

Wartime Routine

Dawn — Stand To
Since dawn was the usual time for an enemy attack, soldiers would begin their day standing guard at their front line trenches. If there was no attack, they would gather for inspections, breakfast, and their rum ration.

Daytime — Work
During the day, soldiers would work on chores, such as repairs. This work would take place low to the ground, to keep oneself safe from any sniper fire. Soldiers would also have some leisure time, where they could write letters, read, or play games.

Nighttime — Over the Top
The night was a dangerous time for soldiers—they’d climb over the edge of their trench into No Man’s Land to make repairs, dig new trenches, or in some cases, patrol for enemies or perform raids on enemy trenches.
Shellshock

“The air. The air. Can’t breathe.” — Private Levitt

In The Wars, we see Private Levitt suffering from shellshock, a common but misunderstood illness experienced by soldiers. The term was used broadly to define those soldiers who broke down as a result of the strain of war. Symptoms included physical tics, crying, fear, anxiety, paralysis, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, nightmares, and dissociation. At the time, the condition was poorly understood, and doctors believed that the symptoms were the result of physical damage to the brain and nervous system incurred when shells exploded. Often, soldiers and doctors treated this condition as a symptom of poor moral character and fortitude. Approximately 10,000 Canadians were treated for shellshock, and treatments ranged from talk therapy to electroshock treatments. We now understand that shellshock was a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a mental illness that can occur after a person is exposed to a traumatic experience.

In their own words...

“Private Arthur Hubbard wrote this letter to his mother on July 7, 1916, while in the hospital suffering from shell shock. Shortly after the war he took his own life. Shell shock was cited as a contributing factor.

“The hospital is constantly got [sic] new soldiers coming in suffering from nervous exhaustion and shell shock too so I’m not the only one, the doctor said it is an injury to the nerves and told me to rest and they are putting in place electric shock treatment. All the nurses are very sympathetic but sometimes when they think we can’t hear them they call us all weak and say we are cowards. I’m not suffering as much as most, a young gentleman has been learning to walk again yet he still wants to get back to the frontline. Yes, I am returning to the frontline soon so that’s why I took this opportunity to write... One time I was in serious danger I was almost completely paralysed with fear. I was sitting with Taylor (a fellow soldier) on the fire-step of a trench during an intense bombardment, when it seemed certain that we must be killed at any moment. Shots fired around us; each moment threatened to be the last. I was conscious of biting the fabric on my top to prevent my teeth from chattering. If I had been alone on that occasion I believe that I would be dead now; it was the presence of others that saved me.”

In the Grand Theatre’s production of *The Wars*, you’ll see a diverse company of performers on stage. Canada’s soldiers in WW1 included people of colour, Indigenous and First Nations people, as well as those from Asian Canadian communities. Members of these groups faced racial discrimination during recruitment, and following their service; nonetheless, these individuals made significant contributions to Canada’s war effort.

When war broke out in 1914, many Canadians were eager to volunteer, and the Canadian Army was selective about who was allowed to enlist, and the roles they were assigned. As a result, many visible minorities were rejected when they applied to enlist.

However, as the war went on, and causalities grew, the Canadian army began to change its strategy. At first, they allowed battalions to be formed comprised only of soldiers from a specific racial group, such as the “Nova Scotia No. 2 Construction Battalion.”
(Coloured)”. By September 1916, causalities overseas had become significant, and the Canadian Army became more open in its recruiting strategy.

For many soldiers, entering the Canadian Expeditionary Force meant a chance at greater recognition on a national scale: for instance, Japanese-Canadians were not permitted to vote, and Indigenous Canadians were required to give up their official status as Indigenous peoples in order to do so. Many members of these groups felt that by joining the war effort and contributing alongside other Canadians, they could overcome these disadvantages and achieve more equality for their communities.

Unfortunately, these changes were slow to come—it was not until 1948 that Canada decided that denying an individual the right to vote based on their race was unlawful, and it was not until 1960 that Indigenous Canadians were permitted to vote without giving up their status. Similarly, other benefits were offered that were not extended to Indigenous veterans; land and business grants, as well as loans were provided to most Canadian veterans, but Indigenous soldiers reported being refused these post-war forms of assistance.

Poetry was a popular form of art during WW1—typically short in length, poems allowed soldiers to communicate their experience to those at home in a concise manner. For our production of *The Wars*, we’re continuing the tradition of using poetry to understand the experience of war by commissioning London Poet Laureate Tom Cull to write a poem inspired by the play.

**Spotlight: The Wars — by Tom Cull**

“Nothing is harder, now in this present time, than staring down despair. But stare it down we must.”
— Timothy Findley

What survives

mud and liquid fire
cannon, gun, bayonet
chlorine gas and barbed wire
howling men and horses
slaughtered in no man’s land
crater graves glutted
sucking rotted bodies
into the muck?

*The Space between the perceiver and the thing perceived can be closed with a shout of recognition. One form of a shout is a shot.*

What survives

Robert Ross and his horses?
Rowena and her rabbits?
Rodwell and his caged rescues:
hedgehog, toad, bird?

*We are the ocean—walking on land. Go in peace. And sing with the whales.*
A story we’d rather not know;  
the ending a pandemonium  
but the letter posted home:

*Make your prayers against despair.*  
*We survive in one another.*

The toad survives—  
carried away from the front  
released under a hedge  
it buries itself in mud  
so far down  
in the ground.

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**Inspiring, connecting, and fostering community pride and belonging**

**What is the poet laureate?**

The Poet Laureate is an ambassador for poetry and literary arts within London as well as London’s literary representative beyond the city. The Poet Laureate inspires emerging artists to further the poetic aspects of their crafts, raises the profile of the arts among Londoners in general, and contributes to a unique sense of identity and belonging in our city.

The Poet Laureate is selected by a jury (administered by the London Arts Council) based on literary achievement, contribution toward London’s literary arts, and active community participation. The program gives the Poet Laureate opportunities to engage the city through participation in public readings, civic functions, and collaborative initiatives and through the creation of a legacy project that is unique to the Laureate’s work and to the life of our city.
WW1 Poets

You’re probably familiar with John McRae’s famous “In Flanders Fields”; below are some examples from other well-known WW1 poets.

Siegfried Sassoon

Survivors

No doubt they’ll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they’re ‘longing to go out again,’—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They’ll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they’ll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter’d all their pride...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Craiglockart. October, 1917.

The Rear-Guard

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes and too vague to know;
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper’s arm a tug.
“I’m looking for headquarters.” No reply.
“God blast your neck!” (For days he’d had no sleep.)
“Get up and guide me through this stinking place.”
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard of ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn’s ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
At last, with sweat and horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

(Hindenburg Line, April 1917)

Wilfrid Owen

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime. —
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
*Pro patria mori.*

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richer than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now...”

**Discussion:**
How are these poems similar to or different from John McRae’s “In Flanders Fields”? What message is “In Flanders Fields” trying to express? What stories do each of the above poems tell?

Which words in these poems create strong images in your mind? Circle them. What types of words are they, and what do they illustrate?

Remember that these poems were written during the war: what do you think their effect would’ve been on those who read them at the time? What would fellow soldiers think? What would those at home think? How would they have been received then, versus how we read and understand them now?
Designing War on Stage

Students: you are now theatre directors working on a play about a war of your choice.

How will you represent that war on stage?

Project: in teams of 2 or 3 people, pitch a design concept for dramatizing one aspect of a war of your choice.

Steps:
- Research wars, and decide which conflict your play will focus on
- Research other representation of that war—in novels, poetry, art, film, or theatre
- Brainstorm how your play will represent a war, using the considerations listed below

Considerations:
- Your play cannot do physical harm to anyone onstage or in the audience.
- You can use all aspects of stagecraft (lighting, sound, set design, costumes, props, choreography, mime, movement, etc.) to represent aspects of the war
- You can draw inspiration from other plays about war

Discussion:
- What is different about how you represent in the theatre, versus writing about it in a book or making a film?
- What were some of the challenges you encountered in creating your design concept?
- What do we learn about war when we see it represented in an artistic form? How is the experience different from learning about historical fact?
Generals Die in Bed. Charles Yale Harrison, 1930. “[This] landmark novel was one of the first to shatter the world’s illusion that war is a glorious endeavour. Instead, this chilling first-hand account brought readers face to face with the brutal, ugly realities of life in the trenches. Often compared to All Quiet on the Western Front and A Farewell to Arms, Generals Die in Bed was described by the New York Times as “a burning, breathing, historic document.” With veterans of WWI no longer here to tell their tales, this book stands as a lasting monument to the horror of war.” – Chapters Indigo

The Sojourn. Alan Cumyn, 2003. “Young Ramsey Crome is a Canadian private mired in the trenches of the First World War. Knee deep in mud, surrounded by exploding shells and dying friends, he’s certain he will be blown to bits at any moment. Instead, he receives a miraculous gift: 10 days of precious leave time – one last chance to taste the civilian life before the big upcoming offensive. .. Not knowing if or when he’ll ever return, the young soldier embarks on a rapid-fire tour of London, from its theatres and museums to its bars and back alleys. At the same time, he finds himself falling into an uncertain yet urgent romance, even as the end of his leave period looms.” – Quill & Quire

A Long Long Way. Sebastian Barry, 2006. “One of the most vivid and realised characters of recent fiction, Willie Dunne is the innocent hero of Sebastian Barry’s highly acclaimed novel. Leaving Dublin to fight for the Allied cause as a member of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, he finds himself caught between the war playing out on foreign fields and that festering at home, waiting to erupt with the Easter Rising.” – Faber & Faber
Other War Novels:

**Catch-22.** Joseph Heller, 1961. “Joseph Heller’s masterpiece about a bomber squadron in the Second World War’s Italian theatre features a gallery of magnificently strange characters seething with comic energy. The malingering hero, Yossarian, is endlessly inventive in his schemes to save his skin from the horrible chances of war, and his story is studded with incidents and devices (including the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade and the hilariously sinister bureaucratic rule that gives the book its title) that propel the narrative in a headlong satiric rush.” – Penguin Random House

**Slaughterhouse Five.** Kurt Vonnegut, 1969. “Centering on the infamous World War II firebombing of Dresden, the novel is the result of what Vonnegut describes as a twenty-three-year struggle to write a book about what he himself witnessed as an American POW. It combines science fiction, autobiography, humor, historical fiction, and satire in an account of the life of Billy Pilgrim, a barber’s son turned draftee turned optometrist turned alien abductee. Billy Pilgrim’s odyssey reflects the mythic journey of our own fractured lives as we search for meaning in what we fear most.” – Penguin Random House

**The Things They Carried.** Tim O’Brien, 1990. “They carried malaria tablets, love letters, 28-pound mine detectors, dope, illustrated Bibles, each other. And if they made it home alive, they carried unrelenting images of a nightmarish war that history is only beginning to absorb. Since its first publication, *The Things They Carried* has become an unparalleled Vietnam testament, a classic work of American literature, and a profound study of men at war that illuminates the capacity, and the limits, of the human heart and soul.” – Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
Findley chose to title his novel *The Wars* specifically so that it would refer not only to WW1, but all of the wars that individuals face in their lives. What “wars” do you see at work in the play? How are they represented? How do they influence or intersect with the characters’ experience of WW1?

How do you understand Robert Ross’s actions at the climax of the play? Is he a hero? Has he gone mad? Why do you think he makes the choices that he does?

Have you read or seen other examples of soldiers’ experiences during WW1? How does *The Wars* compare? Are the experiences represented in this play similar to or different from those you’ve seen in the past? How?

Many WW1 stories focus on what happens at the front and in the trenches. What was the experience of war like back at home? What do you imagine day-to-day life involved in Canada during WW1? How does *The Wars* represent how characters experience the war from afar?