

December 31, 2006

What Is It Good For?

To the Editor:

Christoph Niemann's cover illustration for the [Book Review of Dec. 17](#) — an issue devoted largely to books on war — shows what appear to be computer-generated, schematic silhouettes of men holding swords and shields in martial formation, about to be rained down upon by a swarm of schematic red arrows. It's a strong design. The reviews follow in an almost martial fashion, like a grisly parade — the "Aeneid," "War by Other Means," "Before the Next Attack," "War Made New," "Dangerous Nation," and so on. Then, jarringly and almost dead center — so to speak — comes the Children's Books section, whose sweet lead reviews are about "The 39 Apartments of Ludwig van [Beethoven](#)" and "Once Upon a Banana." There are also on these two pages — whose context makes them, in all their hope and innocence, seem targeted, like those guys on the cover — reviews of "The Snow Globe Family," "Winter Song" and "Christmas Tree Farm." At this time of year, especially, you don't need to call in a semiotician to understand the sad implications of this juxtaposition. It says, This is how far we are from how we started out. Inadvertently or otherwise, the Book Review not only reviewed books but spoke volumes yesterday.

Daniel Menaker

New York

The writer is executive editor in chief of the Random House Publishing Group.

To the Editor:

I certainly appreciated the Dec. 17 Book Review — the emphasis on military history and current events focusing on the military was of great interest to me. I am an officer serving in the Army in Germany, and although I have many print and digital libraries at my disposal, it is nice to see that The New York Times is seeking to educate the general population on military issues.

Too often, the American public falls prey to a steady diet of Internet, TV and tabloid journalism. The first two certainly have their place in a fast-moving world, but the lack of attention to considered, scholarly works leaves our public at a distinct disadvantage in an information-driven world. This is especially problematic during wartime, when public perception and attitude is one of the greatest predictors of victory.

I also appreciated the broad range of books you presented — they seem to offer a nonpartisan and critical view of war and the military in general.

I will be sure to forward this list to my librarian colleagues (yes, the military routinely employs librarians to educate its troops) and suggest some of the books for our book clubs (yes, there are many in the military who crave a good read).

I would also like to call your readers' attention to Operation Paperback, a grass-roots organization that sends used books to troops. Its Web site is www.operationpaperback.org.

Marie-Michelle Strah

Germany

To the Editor:

An issue devoted to books on war? Well, O.K., but does it have to appear just a week before Christmas?

Howard Schranz

New York

To the Editor:

How is it that "the best and the brightest" of American leaders repeatedly spill blood so foolishly? In significant part, it is because policy makers have not learned the lessons of history. The Book Review's editors should do their part to correct this deficiency by planning an issue devoted to books about peace — an endeavor for which the season of peace on earth might provide inspiration.

Carl T. Bogus

Bristol, R.I.

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