ABSTRACT

TAYLOR BROCK. Writing WWII: Literary Representation, Collective Memory, and the Twenty-First-Century Author (Under the direction of Dr. Catherine Mainland and Dr. Laura Severin)

War is and will always remain a significant subject of literary engagement. As a "means of making the past accessible to the collective imagination” (Erll 33), war literature can be used to explore conflicts past and connect them to the present. Constructing imagined narratives about wars not experienced, however, particularly the Second World War, does pose certain risks, exploitation and the appropriation of trauma among them. As neither soldier nor survivor, the twenty-first-century author interested in World War II as a literary subject can only access it through modes of memory—historical archives, memoirs, monuments, cultural representations, and the like—and thus faces the limitations of a selective and incomplete collective memory. Examining three recent fictional engagements with WWII—*All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) by Anthony Doerr, *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan, and *HHhH* (2010) by Laurent Binet—this essay considers the obstacles these authors face and proffers one possible solution: that authentic and ethical literary representations are possible insofar as they draw attention to both the difficulty of accurate representation and the instability of collective memory. Thinking critically about these representations is imperative because, as “mediators of memory” (Lamberti 13), works of war literature can and do contribute to public perception and collective memory. As aids to remembrance, fictional expressions of the WWII experience bear social, political, and ethical responsibility. Appropriate representations like *HHhH* and *Atonement* commemorate while reminding the reader of historical blindspots, encouraging a nuanced view of the past that safeguards against elitism—a belief that we are beyond the historical problems that plagued our ancestors—and urges the adoption of a humble, multi-perspectived approach, not just to the past, but also to the present moment.