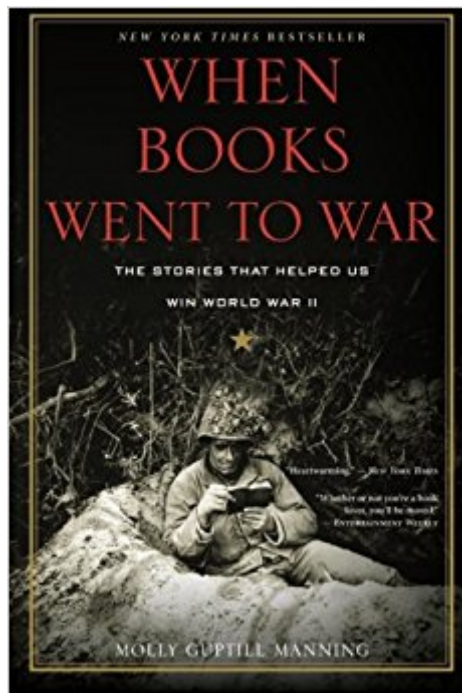




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# When Books Went To War: The Stories That Helped Us Win World War II



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER “Heartwarming.” • New York Times  
“Whether or not you’re a book lover, you’ll be moved.” •  
Entertainment Weekly “A readable, accessible addition to World War II literature [and] a  
book that will be enjoyed by lovers of books about books.” • Boston Globe  
“Four stars [out of four] . . . A cultural history that does much to explain modern  
America.” • “When America entered World War II in 1941, we faced  
an enemy that had banned and burned 100 million books. Outraged librarians launched a campaign  
to send free books to American troops and gathered 20 million hardcover donations. In 1943,  
the War Department and the publishing industry stepped in with an extraordinary program: 120  
million small, lightweight paperbacks for troops to carry in their pockets and rucksacks in every  
theater of war. These Armed Services Editions were beloved by the troops and are still fondly  
remembered today. Soldiers read them while waiting to land at Normandy, in hellish trenches in the  
midst of battles in the Pacific, in field hospitals, and on long bombing flights. They helped  
rescue *The Great Gatsby* from obscurity and made Betty Smith, author of *A Tree  
Grows in Brooklyn*, into a national icon. *When Books Went to War* is the inspiring story  
of the Armed Services Editions, and a treasure for history buffs and book lovers alike. “A  
thoroughly engaging, enlightening, and often uplifting account . . . I was enthralled and  
moved.” • Tim O’Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*

## Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; Reprint edition (October 27, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544570405

ISBN-13: 978-0544570405

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 206 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #42,705 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in Books > Literature &  
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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of the Month, December 2014: The image of the Berlin book burning in May of 1933 is a common photo in history books. What's less common is how books became a strategy to undermine the Nazi propaganda that had been proving surprisingly effective throughout Europe. While re-telling the history of the war, Manning threads through the impact that books had in fighting the Nazis, providing a narrative of their influence on the war that has previously been left out of most history books. Book lovers and history buffs should enjoy this new perspective. — Amy Huff

"When Books Went to War is a thoroughly engaging, enlightening, and often uplifting account of America's counterattack against Nazi Germany's wholesale burning of books. During World War II, the U.S. government, along with librarians and publishers, dispatched millions of books to American GIs, sailors, and flyers, using the written word itself as a powerful reply to tyranny, thought control, absolutism, and a perverse ideology. I was enthralled and moved." — Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried* "Intriguing . . . A fresh perspective on the trials of war and the power of books." -- Kirkus Reviews "Well written, carefully researched, and drawing upon primary sources and news articles, this book brings to life a little-known part of World War II culture. VERDICT: Highly readable and extremely appealing, this book is perfect for any bibliophile or historians interested in the stories from the home front." -- Library Journal "Delightful...Engrossing...Manning's entertaining account will have readers nostalgic for that seemingly distant era when books were high priority." -- Publishers

Weekly — "[A] crisply written and compelling new history of America's effort to comfort and inspire its soldiers with good books . . . Manning's When Books Went to War is both a tribute to the civilizing influence of books and a careful account of what it took a lot of effort to ensure that U.S. fighting men had the right stuff to read. . . Manning's portrait of this seemingly prosaic slice of the war effort is more than colorful; it's also a cultural history that does much to explain modern America." — USA Today.com "Whether or not you're a book lover, you'll be moved by the impeccably researched tale. Manning not only illuminates a dusty slice of WWII history that most of us know nothing about but also reminds us, in the digital era of movies and TV, just how powerfully literature once figured in people's lives. Grade: A." -- Entertainment Weekly

I don't usually read this kind of book, to be honest. My ideal reading is under a palm tree and something trashy with great characters and a world that draws me in. However, something about

this subject caught my eye. Perhaps it was the fact that my father fought in WW II and I still remember his trunk in the attic, filled with clothes, canteens, and yes, books. And the photo on the cover of a soldier reading with rapt attention on top of a fox hole drew me in -- what DID they do before iPhones and the internet to pass the time? This was an era where at the beginning of the war, according to the book, they didn't even have proper uniforms and tents, much less books and magazines to read, something that today I'm guessing would be taken for granted."Book are weapons in the war of ideas" was the slogan of a council formed in March 1942 with the objective of "exploring how books could serve the nation during the war" and that is a fundamental theme of this book, from the first chapter which describes the Nazi book burnings in Germany (and the American response) to the final chapter that speaks of the importance of reading to the service men's re-entry into society post-war and interest in furthering their education based in part on their love of reading acquired during the war. Also interesting was the way the program evolved from book donation drives for soldiers (which resulted in a lot of books on cooking and knitting going to the troops) to then a custom-printed campaign of books and magazines to provide exactly what the soldiers were wanting to read, not just what people were willing to donate. When this book is at its best, it's quoting or relating stories from soldiers at the time such as one soldier quoted: "I want to thank you profoundly, for myself, and more importantly, [for] the men here in this godforsaken part of the globe. We fry by day and freeze by night. What are doing near the Persian Gulf... no one knows. All we have...for recreation is a ping-pong set - with one paddle only." (Yes, Persian Gulf, guess we were there back then, too)... he then recounts reading a book with his buddies at a campfire and how the men "howled" with laughter and how they rationed out a story per evening, which they all looked forward to. When this book is not at its best, there are passages where the author gets a little lost in names and organizations and who did what when, but frankly these are the minority and I think she felt a real responsibility to document this often-neglected topic for posterity and include the details. There is a robust appendix of notes and also a list of the books that were in the Armed Services Editions (ASE's). There's also a list in the appendix of the books that the Nazi's banned. It looks like this book is being released for the holidays and I think it would be an amazing gift for a service person to gain some insight into the men and women who came before, the conditions they dealt with and the bravery that they also exhibited. It made me reflect on the importance of books: "As Hitler waged total war, American fought back not just with men and bullets, but with books. Despite the many advances in modern warfare....books proved to be one of the most formidable weapons of them all." An entertaining, informative read that I blazed through in 24 hours. No, this book won't be made into a movie, but it really brought that time and place alive for me. Highly

recommended, hope you will enjoy it as much as I did.

When I haunted Goodwill bookstores as a kid in the mid-60s I would occasionally come across flimsy odd-shaped paperbacks that were marked as Armed Services Editions (ASEs). I bought them up because they were cheap, and because their very oddity made them attractive. But I knew little of how they came to be and of their impact on the men and on the culture. I did know that while Germany banned and burned books, the US distributed books both to servicemen and, later, to European civilians who were starved for reading material. Now I know the whole story, thanks to this book. Molly Manning traces the history of the program, how much the men loved the books, and some of the strange politics that sprang up around the program, and the long-term influence of getting hundreds of thousands of men to read for pleasure on our culture. You think partisan infighting and stupid legislation is a modern thing? Check out the story of how Republican senators, hoping to keep servicemen from voting to reelect Roosevelt, passed a law prohibiting any kind of political references in the books. Pretty much everything, including course material for Army training, includes some kind of political reference. The ASE program staff interpreted the law strictly, which finally embarrassed Taft and his buddies enough so they adjusted the law. Servicemen and their families did not take lightly to being told that the very men fighting for freedom could not be trusted to judge ideas freely for themselves. There are lots of appealing anecdotes - did you know that *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was the most popular of all the books? Tough guys in foxholes wrote by the hundreds to author Betty Smith to thank her. Did you know that when men had to jettison items from their packs to save weight, they never dropped the books? Finally, the love of reading fostered by the books was instrumental in widening the GI Bill so that many more vets could go to college, which is one of the foundations of America's 20th century prosperity. Manning includes two telling appendices: a list of authors banned by the Germans, and a list of all the ASEs, by series. A fair number of authors appear on both lists. The list of ASEs proves how broad the selection was and throws light on the culture of the time. Classics, humor, essays, now-forgotten popular authors, many baseball and boxing books (no football books), and even a few science and mathematics books show up. Not dumbed down in any way. Could we say the same now, if there were a similar program? The best kind of cultural history; interesting, illuminating, sufficiently researched, relevant to the present, and well-written. If you love books, read this one. If you're interested in World War II, read this. If you want to remember a time when Americans worked together for a common goal, read this.

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