

THE  
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE  
TO SEBASTIAN FAULK'S



# BIRDSONG

“The Connell Guides are brief, attractive,  
erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by David Isaacs*

*The  
Connell Short Guide  
to  
Sebastian Faulks's*

---

# Birdsong

---

*by  
David Isaacs*

# Contents

Introduction	1
A summary of the plot	2
War	4
Love	21
Birth	40
Why is the novel called <i>Birdsong</i> ?	44
.....	
<i>Ten facts about World War One</i>	30
<i>The gardens</i>	34
<i>A short chronology</i>	49
<i>Sebastian Faulks on fiction, life and love</i>	51
<i>Further reading</i>	53

# Introduction

People love *Birdsong*. To date, it has sold more than three million copies. Countless stage adaptations have been made; in 2012 it was turned into a two-part BBC series starring Eddie Redmayne and Clémence Poésy; a Hollywood film, starring Nicholas Hoult, is currently in production. It scores highly in lists of the nation's favourite books. (It came 13th in the BBC's Big Read in 2003, for example.) And it has barely had a bad word written about it; some critics even think it only just stops short of perfection. "So powerful is this recreated past," wrote Sue Gee in *The Times*, "that you long to call *Birdsong* perfect." "*Birdsong* is not a perfect novel," Simon Schama wrote in the *New Yorker*, "just a great one."

But its subject matter is tough. The First World War was a catastrophe beyond the scale of anything that Europe had seen before: 37 million casualties, 16 million deaths, and historians still can't agree on why it was fought, why so many men were sent to their deaths in such abysmal conditions. Words like "unimaginable" and "unspeakable" are commonly used to describe this war – as if the only adequate way to speak of its horror is to acknowledge the lack of an adequate way to speak of it – and yet, in *Birdsong*, Sebastian Faulks imagined it, spoke of it, and did so in a way that millions of people have taken to their hearts.

## A summary of the plot

*Birdsong* has seven main parts, spanning three different time periods. In Part One, set in 1910, Stephen Wraysford, a hot-blooded and enigmatic young Englishman, is on a research trip to France, staying with the rich Azaire family in the town of Amiens. René Azaire is a snobbish factory owner involved in the textile industry and Stephen has been sent to him to learn about the French manufacturing process. He falls in love with Azaire's beautiful young wife, Isabelle and they run away together; Isabelle, guilt-ridden and secretly pregnant, returns to Amiens, and Stephen, devastated by her desertion, ends up staying in France.

Part Two jumps to 1916: a team of men is digging a tunnel underneath no man's land during the First World War. Faulks introduces us to a hardly known aspect of the combat, the war that was fought underground in narrow, airless tunnels. We follow one of the tunnelers, Jack Firebrace. Jack is castigated by an officer for falling asleep on duty – and soon we learn that the officer is Stephen. We meet Stephen's friend Michael Weir, and his immediate superior, Captain Gray. The section ends with a harrowing description of the Battle of the Somme.

In Part Three we are suddenly in 1978, following a businesswoman called Elizabeth Benson. She turns out to be Stephen's

granddaughter, but knows very little about him. After reading a newspaper article commemorating the war, and discovering Stephen's wartime diaries in her mother's attic, she resolves to find out more.

In Part Four we're back in the war, in 1917. Stephen, by chance, sees Isabelle's sister Jeanne in a bar, and asks her how Isabelle is. Jeanne takes Stephen to her. She is having an affair with a German soldier; she and Stephen say goodbye and will not see each other again. Later, we learn that Stephen and Jeanne married after the war.

In Part Five, we are back with Elizabeth, who is now interviewing the few survivors of the war she can find who knew Stephen – including Captain Gray, now an old man.

Part Six takes us back to 1918 and culminates with Stephen and Jack Firebrace trapped underground for days after a German attack on the tunnels. The perspective shifts to that of a Jewish German soldier named Levi, who rescues Stephen, though Jack has died. When Stephen emerges from underground, the war is over; he and Levi embrace, and become friends.

In Part Seven Elizabeth learns that Isabelle was her grandmother, not Jeanne as she had previously thought. In the final chapter, she gives birth to a boy, whom she names after Jack Firebrace's dead son, John.

# War

In the introduction to the novel's tenth anniversary edition, Faulks writes: "The major theme... was this: how far can you go? What are the limits of humanity?" For Faulks, the war was, above all, extreme; its scale and brutality marked something new. *Birdsong* explores what happens to a human being, and his or her sense of self, when pushed to such extremity; at what point, it asks, do you stop being human?

The centerpiece is an unflinching reimagining of the Battle of the Somme. This was when the war pushed hardest at the limits of human experience, when it reached new extremes. A minor character, Arthur Shaw, feels this as he watches it unfold:

*Shaw stood with his mouth open. He was unmoved by violence, hardened to the mutilation he had seen and inflicted, but what he was watching here was something of a different order. (229)*

So extreme is it, in fact, that the division's priest, Horrocks, "pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him. His old reflex still persisting, he fell to his knees, but he did not pray" (230). God is dead; religion, belief – the systems that give meaning to human life, that sustain an individual's sense of self – are here reduced to a "persisting reflex". "Nothing was divine any more,"

Stephen thinks, "everything was profane" (230).

Stephen is frightened, as he prepares to go over the top, not by what might happen to his body – his "particles of flesh" (219) – but by what might happen to his sense of self:

*He felt no fear for his blood and muscle and bone, but the size of what had begun, the number of them now beneath the terrible crashing of the sky was starting to pull at the mooring of his self-control. (219)*

"Self-control" here refers to the structures people erect to hold their ideas of themselves in place. He is frightened that at a point of such extremity - he thinks: "This was the worst; nothing had been like this" (219) - those structures will collapse. When we next see him, a year later, all his character – everything that made him 'Stephen' rather than simply "blood and muscle and bone" – seems to have drained from him:

*His eyes had always been dark, but now they seemed shrunk. There was no light in them. His voice, which had once reverberated with meanings and nuances, with temper and emotions held in check, was now alternately toneless or barking. He seemed a man removed to some new existence where he was dug in and fortified by his lack of natural feeling or response. (334)*

This is the cost of war, the limit of humanity. The slaughter is seen through Stephen's eyes with what John Mullan calls "numbed precision".

Faulks is not an historian, but the novel does, subtly, suggest how such a disaster might have been allowed to happen. The first 100 or so pages, which tell Stephen and Isabelle's story, contain a couple of clues. On the surface, this love story seems to have little in it that might indicate any causes of the First World War. But there is a subplot whose relevance to the novel is, at first glance, easy to miss.

The men who work in Azaire's factory are on strike; their working conditions are poor, their wages low, and they are in danger of losing their jobs to new machines that can do the work better and faster. Azaire has strikingly little compassion for them. "What these strikers need," he says,

*"is for someone to call their bluff. I'm not prepared to see my business stagnate because of the gross demands of a few idle men. Some owner has to have the strength to stand up to them and sack the whole lot." (13)*

Later, when an elected representative tries to negotiate with him, Stephen is shocked by how little Azaire even pretends to care:

*Stephen was surprised by the simplicity of Azaire's*

*assault. He made no pretense that the work force had anything to gain from the new arrangements or that they would make up in some other way for what they were clearly being asked to forgo. (21)*

(Note, here, Faulks's use of the word "assault", the language of battle: a foreshadowing of things to come.) And when he learns that Isabelle has been secretly giving food to strikers' families, Azaire's response – a mixture of horror and incomprehension; he brands her actions "selfish" (94) – is telling. The right response to these workers' suffering, the novel suggests, is Isabelle's: compassion and charity. The ruling class, however, of which Azaire is here a representative, is just not capable of seeing members of the working class as human beings worthy of compassion.

In *Birdsong's* second section, on the eve of the Battle of the Somme, Azaire is long forgotten. But he has a counterpart, another member of the ruling class: Colonel Barclay. Barclay, a minor character who appears in only a few pages, is significant. He is more interested in what's for dinner than the fate of his men: when Stephen and his superior, Captain Gray, suggest that the Somme offensive might not be such a good idea, Barclay responds dismissively – "I've never come across two such faint-hearts" (211) – before adding: "Now let's go and have lunch." Even in his rallying speech to the soldiers before the push, he measures their

imagined success in gastronomical terms; at its climax he yells (referring to a part of France under German occupation): “I believe we shall take dinner in Bapaume” (216). We know Barclay’s type; we’ve met someone like him before.

In 1916 the British Army, barring the officer class, was drawn almost entirely from the working classes. Back in England, workers – who, like those in Azaire’s factory, were widely on strike – were sold the idea of fighting the war as a great adventure. (It would be “over by Christmas” they were told in 1914.) In his book *World War One: A Short History*, the historian Norman Stone describes how “British volunteers, in millions, had abandoned the boredom of life in industrial towns for the supposed glamour of a soldier’s existence”. The soldiers were, in other words, sold a lie and nearly a million working-class men were sent without hesitation to their deaths. Though it is never directly addressed in the novel, Faulks allows us to trace a line from Azaire’s indifference to his workers’ suffering to Barclay’s gung-ho dismissal of Stephen and Gray’s anxieties, and draw our own conclusions: Barclay, and the officer class he represents, so Faulks is implying, saw the lives of the working classes as dispensable.\*

An army is an institution, and in institutions, as Stephen thinks of the orphanage in which he grew up, people are “reduced to numbers, to ranks of nameless people who were not valued in the eyes



*A still taken from the 1916 propaganda film The Battle of the Somme, made before the actual battle to depict trench warfare. It played to packed cinemas to boost morale*

of another individual” (104). (Once again, the relevance of this idea to the war sections of the novel is signaled by the military language: in this case, the word ranks.) Faulks captures the extent to which the soldiers were “reduced... to ranks of nameless people” and denied their individuality in his memorable descriptions, such as this one, of

\* This is the subject of many of Siegfried Sassoon’s poems, such as this deceptively jolly rhyme, “The General”:

‘GOOD-MORNING; good-morning!’ the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ‘em dead,  
And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
‘He’s a cheery old card,’ grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

the Somme:

*Stephen... could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense, deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale. (226)*

The men are all the same: “primitive dolls” – unfeeling puppets – who are easily replaceable. Their efforts are futile (“walking into a gale”) and their death makes no noise (“with a silent flap of arms”). It is as if they are nothing more than toy soldiers: Jack Firebrace thinks: “They were men who could each have had a history but, in the shadow of what awaited them, were interchangeable” (144). If, instead of their attitude of indifference to individual working-class lives, an attitude which Barclay represents, the officers had been able to see each soldier as an individual human being with his own history – which is what the novel seeks to do – the carnage would never have been allowed to happen.

Barclay is also representative of something else: the old world. Or, to be more exact: the old world’s ignorance of a new, emerging world. Norman Stone describes the clash of old and new that was such a significant part of this war:

In four years, the world went from 1870 to 1940.  
In 1914, cavalry cantered off to stirring music, the

Austrian Prince Clary-Aldringen wore the uniform he had put on for a gala at Buckingham Palace, and early illustrations of the war show clumps of infantry charging with bayonets, as shrapnel explodes overhead. It is 1870. Fortresses were readied for prolonged sieges, medical services were still quite primitive, and severely wounded men were likely to die. By 1918, matters had become very different, and French generals had already devised a new method of warfare, in which tanks, infantry and aircraft collaborated, in the manner of the German Blitzkrieg (‘lightning war’) of 1940. Cavalry regiments became museum-pieces, and fortresses, relics... Medicine made greater progress in these four years than at any time before or after: by 1918, only 1 per cent of wounded men died.

He concludes: “No war has ever begun with such a fundamental misunderstanding of its nature.” This misunderstanding, for Faulks, is another factor that made the Somme possible. This was not a war that could be fought in the old way; this was a war of machines. Barclay just doesn’t see it.

The technological advances were many but most iconic is the early use of machine guns. Stephen understands what Barclay doesn’t:

*At first he thought the war could be fought and*