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# VALENTINE JOE BY REBECCA STEVENS

## SYNOPSIS

When fifteen-year-old Rose visits Belgium, she can feel the deep scars left there by the Great War. But when she hears the sound of marching late at night, she does not expect to see the ghosts of the past from her window ...

Rose's granddad takes her on a trip to Ypres, Belgium to visit the graves of those who died in the Great War. It's the day before Valentine's Day, but Rose can sense the shattered old city beneath the chocolate-box new. And it seems that it can sense her too. When she goes up to her room that night, she hears the sound of marching feet and glimpses from her window a young soldier on his way to the front line ...

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*Can we ever imagine life for ordinary 'Joes' in the chaos and confusion of the First World War trenches? Well, here in this moving, heartbreaking and warm story Rebecca Stevens does just that - she takes a modern young girl back to meet the boy (and his dog) whose grave survives as the symbol of the youngest soldier to die in those dark days. They learn a lot together - but more importantly they help each other to come to terms with what's happening in both their worlds - when death becomes part of everyday life!*

*Sorry, I couldn't help crying. IT MUST NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN!*

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**



## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Rebecca Stevens has always been highly creative. She has worked as an actor, a stand-up comedian and a script writer for children's television, writing for shows such as 'Mr Bean' and 'Postman Pat'. *Valentine Joe* is her first solo book project.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Rebecca Stevens' own family story was her inspiration. Her grandfather Freddie was a headstrong London boy, who ran away at 15 to join Scottish regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders. The collection of letters he sent from the front remain in Stevens' possession today. Stevens has always been creative; she has worked as an actor, a stand-up comedian, and a scriptwriter for children's television. *Valentine Joe* first came to the attention of Chicken House publisher, Barry Cunningham, as a script for a radio play. Rebecca Stevens lives in Brighton with her family.

## THE FACTS AND INSPIRATION BEHIND THE FICTION

Valentine Joe Strudwick was one of the youngest soldiers known to have been killed in action in World War One. He was born in Dorking, Surrey, where he went to St Paul's School before joining up in 1914 when he was fourteen years old. After training he was sent to the Front where his two best friends were killed and he was gassed. He was sent back to England to recover and then back to the Front on the Ypres Salient where he was killed in January, 1916. He was fifteen.

Rebecca Stevens became interested in the underage soldiers of World War One when she inherited a tatty folder of letters which had been written by her grandfather, Fred Thompson. Fred was a middle-class boy who was brought up in Peckham Rye and Dulwich and went to Haberdashers' Askes School in New Cross Gate. When war broke out, Fred, like Joe, lied about his age in order to take part and in 1915 at the age of sixteen, he joined the Seaforth Highlanders and was sent to their training base in Cromarty. He wrote home several times a week and



someone (his poor, worried mother?) typed out and carefully preserved every single letter.

Unlike Joe, Fred survived the war. He was lucky enough to catch pneumonia in the Highlands and was sent home by an army doctor who discovered his true age. A year later, when he was old enough, he joined the Artists' Rifles and then volunteered as a pilot in the newly formed Royal Flying Corps, which later became the RAF. He was initially stationed in Newmarket, then in France, from where he flew bombing missions over occupied France and Belgium. After the Armistice, he went with his squadron to Germany as part of the Army of Occupation.

The letters that Fred (or 'Tommy' as his friends called him, shortening his surname) wrote home are warm, funny and cheerful, displaying a touchingly close relationship between himself, his parents and his younger sister and brother. He describes in detail his training, his fellow recruits, his flying missions, the food, the French and the football.

Aside from his letters, Rebecca has many photos of Fred's time in the RFC and the RAF, as well as his leather flying helmet, his wings and the teddy bear that accompanied him on every 'show', attached to the front of his plane. She is also the proud owner of a very strange piece of hall furniture, half seat, half umbrella stand, that was made out of the propeller of his 'bus'.

## **APRIL 1915, SCOTLAND**

*"Please send another cucumber. I like jam tarts especially home made ones. I am in excellent health but a painful appetite.*

*P.S. Ain't it a blinking awful war?"*

**FRED THOMPSON**



# THEMES

- Friendship
- Destiny
- War
- Grief
- Family

# WRITING STYLE

*Valentine Joe* is part romance, part ghost story, told uniquely through the eyes of a modern schoolgirl. It is based on the true story of 15-year-old Valentine Joe Strudwick, the youngest soldier to die in World War One (whose grave is one of the most visited on the Western Front). It is predominantly set in the city of Leper/Ypres in Belgium, and the novel depicts the city in its current guise as well as its appearance during the First World War. There is strong emphasis on the development of friendships, and thematically the book discusses morality in war and dealing with grief. 15 chapters, 154 pages, age 10+.

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## *1: Photographing the Past*

On page 30, Rose takes a picture of the square outside her hotel room window. However, she notices that the photograph she has taken is not of the square as it looks from her window today, but as it would have looked during the First World War. Using this moment as inspiration, pupils could be tasked with researching the history of a particular part of their own city or town – choosing a specific moment in history to focus on. They could be encouraged to research how people in this area would have looked and behaved, and what jobs they might have done. Also, they could think about how the buildings might have been used for different purposes.



Ultimately, pupils should create an imaginary photographic image (using whatever artistic techniques and materials available to them) that depicts an area of their city or town at a specific moment in history. This image should be as detailed as possible, revealing as much about that time period as possible. Ideally, this image should be contrasted with a photograph of the same area taken recently. This could lead into class discussions about the changes that have taken place over time, and whether these changes are for better or for worse.

## ***2: Ghost Sightings***

Ghost stories are often told from the perspective of the people being haunted, with the ghost coming and going throughout the story. *Valentine Joe* on the other hand, reverses this perspective – with the story being told from the perspective of the ghost (Rose). Pupils could be tasked with turning passages of the novel into a more conventional ghost story; namely sightings of Rose from the perspective of the Tommies who encounter her. For example, the wounded soldier who sees Rose on the train (taking her to be an angel) could tell his story; or one of Joe's friends in the trenches waiting to go 'over the top' could recount his sighting of Rose. Pupils could be encouraged to think about how a ghost might appear and disappear in these situations. Would the characters see a fully formed person, a typically blurry ghost-like image, or might they only see the effects of the ghost's actions? Further to this, it would be interesting to see how the characters react to seeing the ghost. Is it friendly or threatening? Pupils writing about the same event might depict the ghost in very different ways, and this would provide a reason for pupils to share their work with the rest of the class.

## ***3: Propaganda Posters***

The zeal with which some of the Tommies enlisted to fight in the war is arguably as a result of the propaganda that encouraged men to 'do their bit' for their country. Indeed, viewed from a modern standpoint, some of the First World War propaganda appears very manipulative. Nevertheless, it was this propaganda (often recruiting posters) that led to some very young men, such as Joe, signing up. Pupils could be introduced to the propaganda



that was prevalent at the time, and conduct a research project in this area. This can be developed upon with pupils being tasked to come up with their own propaganda posters targeting their peers, encouraging them to join the army and fight for their country. Pupils will need to think carefully about the techniques they might employ to get people to enlist. What should these posters say? How will the design of these posters impact upon the effectiveness of the propaganda? Once these posters have been designed, pupils could provide feedback, explaining which aspects in the posters would be most likely to encourage them to sign up.

#### **4: Cause and Effect**

Arguably, *Valentine Joe* ends tragically with the death of Joe himself. Rose tries to convince Joe not to return to the Front Line after being gassed, but is unable to change his mind, and he is killed going over the top. While Rose tries her best to prevent this from happening, she seems powerless to stop Joe from meeting his fate. Indeed, if she had been successful in stopping Joe from returning to Belgium, the final events of the novel would have been very different. That said, if Joe had not died in the war, it is extremely unlikely Rose would have met him in the first place. *Valentine Joe* is very much a novel that explores the idea of cause and effect, encouraging the reader to question “what if this had happened differently?” Joe needs to become the youngest soldier to die in the war in order for Rose to get to know about him in the first place. With this in mind, pupils could plot different endings for the novel; breaking from the published text at a specific point, creating a parallel universe in which the action is played out. They will need to think about cause and effect in doing this: how one action affects the narrative, and how this, in turn, will cause new events to take place. Pupils could compare their alternative endings, explaining how one action affects another. It would be interesting to see just how far these alternative endings veer away from the original text.

#### **5: Important Events**

The way in which Rose jumps between some of the key events in Joe’s life is abrupt and confusing (especially for Rose). However, in doing this, we get to see both what it might be like for a ghost as they flit from one



place and time to another, and what it might have been like to actually experience one of the most significant historical events. In a similar way, pupils could think about what it would be like to be a ghost that jumps haphazardly through space and time, in and out of other notable historical events. Pupils could devise short dramatic scenes or tableaux that depict these random (but famous) events, with one pupil acting as the ghost jumping from one scene to the next (interacting with it in some way), and the others playing roles in the variety of scenes the ghost encounters (the moon landing, or the French Revolution for example). These pupils should do their best to clearly demonstrate to the other pupils in the class what events the ghost encounters. Ultimately, it would be down to the observing pupils to work out what events they are witnessing. This would be both a test of the observing pupils' knowledge of history, and the performing pupils' ability to depict the events in a clear and informative way.

#### ***6: Text Message to Nowhere***

Still trying to come to terms with her father's death, Rose regularly sends text messages to his phone. Clearly she is not expecting to receive a reply, but the process is still a comforting one for her. By sending these texts, Rose is keeping the line of communication open between her father and herself, despite her conversations remaining completely one-sided. However, if the messages Rose sends to her father were to be collected together, we may well be able to pick out a narrative thread – the details she includes helping us to understand the wider story of her life. In the same way, pupils could create a story told solely through one-sided text messages. Understandably, it would be impossible for every detail of the story to be told, but this would arguably make the story a more intriguing read. By being forced to write from one point of view, and in short bursts (as with text messages), pupils will need to concentrate on imbedding clues in their writing that would help suggest what happens as a result of these messages being sent. Once completed, pupils could discuss just how little writing is needed in order to create a comprehensive and entertaining narrative.





# WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In chapter 12, do you think Rose is right to tell the wounded soldier on the train that he'll be alright (even though he clearly won't be alright)? Why do you think this?
2. Why do you think Joe insists he must fight on for Fred and Tonk? What do you think about his argument? Is he right or wrong?
3. Why does Rose come to the conclusion that she cannot rewrite history? What does she mean? Are there historical events you would like to change? Which, and why?
4. Do you think *Valentine Joe* is a sad book or a happy book?

