

# Educational Association

## War & Turpentine

A Lecture by Dr. Richard Moore

Berwick Voluntary Centre

7th December 2018, 10 am to 1 pm



The session will be devoted to one book which has the power to move and involve while providing an important sociological document. It tells the story of Urbain Martien born in 1891 to a poor, working-class family in Ghent and inheriting the passion for painting of a father who painted church murals and died of tuberculosis in his early 40s. Urbain then worked in an iron foundry as a boy before going to military school for four years. The centre of his story is his 1<sup>st</sup> World War experience, the amazing thing being that it was only 50 years later after the death of his wife, Gabrielle that he started to write about them. His recollections filled up more than 600 pages in three notebooks, which he bequeathed to his grandson Stefan Hertmans, one of the great living Flemish poets. Urbain died in 1981 and

**PTO**

Hertmans did not look at the notebooks until nearly 30 years later, when the imminent centenary of the first world war brought back memories. *War and Turpentine* is the astonishing result of Hertmans' reckoning with his grandfather's diaries. It is a homage : a book that lies at the crossroads of novel, biography, autobiography and history, with inset essays, meditations, and pictures.

The book is divided into three unequal sections, the longest one comprising Urbain's experiences in the war, and in our session we shall relate it to some music and poems of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. However, it is important to note that we are led up to it through the first part, a masterly evocation of the life of the European provincial poor, a world now lost to us irrevocably. Hertmans himself is a character, or voice, in this section, telling us about his memories of Urbain, of tussling with the notebooks and how to confront the painful truth he had both to recover and let go. He visits the places of his grandfather's childhood years and intensely imagines life as it must have been for Urbain a century ago. There are deeply evocative pages on Urbain's father going about his craft, a stomach-churning section on Urbain's visit to a gelatine factory and a Dickensian account of the dangerous work in the iron foundry. Through it all, Hertmans muses on the threads of connection – and the ruptures - between the present and the past.

In the final section, Hertmans reappears to narrate the six decades of Urbain's postwar life. There is a sad secret at the heart of his loveless marriage to Gabrielle that we shall discuss at any appropriate point. The only consolation left to Urbain in the long tail of his life appears to have been painting, and Hertmans writes about this with both passion and delicacy. The combination of lowly humility with artistic dedication makes a poignant mix and the book as a whole reveals the humanity and even the greatness at the heart of little things.

The cost of the lecture is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

If you supply us with your personal data (name, address or email), we will hold this in accordance with our privacy policy, available [here](#) or by request to BEA, 7 Ravensdowne, Berwick-upon-Tweed TD15 1HX.

To book online, [please click here](#)

To book by mail, please fill in the booking form below, and mail to BEA, 7 Ravensdowne, Berwick-upon-Tweed TD15 1HX along with a cheque in favour of BEA.

If you have any queries, please email [berwickea@gmail.com](mailto:berwickea@gmail.com) or phone Cian McHugh on 01289 303254

---

Name

Address

Tel No

Email

Cheque enclosed £

(*War & Turpentine*)