



## Lord of the Nutcracker Men (Readers Circle)

By Iain Lawrence

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### Lord of the Nutcracker Men (Readers Circle) By Iain Lawrence

Ten-year-old Johnny eagerly plays at war with the army of nutcracker soldiers his toymaker father whittles for him. He demolishes imaginary foes. But in 1914 Germany looms as the real enemy of Europe, and all too soon Johnny's father is swept up in the war to end all wars. He proudly enlists with his British countrymen to fight at the front in France. The war, though, is nothing like what any soldier or person at home expected.

The letters that arrive from Johnny's dad reveal the ugly realities of combat — and the soldiers he carves and encloses begin to bear its scars. Still, Johnny adds these soldiers to his armies of Huns, Tommies, and Frenchmen, engaging them in furious fights. But when these games seem to foretell his dad's real battles, Johnny thinks he possesses godlike powers over his wooden men. He fears he controls his father's fate, the lives of all the soldiers in no-man's land, and the outcome of the war itself.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

War idealistic, brutal, awe inspiring, numbing, jingoistic and ultimately heartbreaking is the central theme of this thoughtful and thought-provoking novel. The Great War has begun, and Johnny watches his kindly toymaker father turn against the German shopkeepers and neighbors in the family's London community. Soon after his father joins the army and travels to France to fight, Johnny is sent to live with his curmudgeonly Auntie Ivy in a small town on the south coast of England. Most chapters begin with a letter from Johnny's father, and from these the boy (and readers) derive an increasingly complex and horrifying vision of life in the trenches. Accompanying each letter, and providing vivid illustration of the events described in the missive, is a wooden soldier carved by Johnny's father, which the boy adds to the ranks of his toy army. As the weeks go by, Johnny entertains himself by staging vast battles with this army, until in a series of scenes that unflinchingly convey a child's conflicting feelings of omnipotence and vulnerability he grows to fear that his play is somehow magically affecting his father's life at the front and, indeed, the entire war. His father's account of the Christmas Truce of 1914 and Johnny's own role in reuniting a grieving family with a shell-shocked soldier are among the events that bring the novel to its solemn, yet quietly hopeful, close. Both its timing and its message are eerily resonant. Ages 10-up.

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From School Library Journal

Grade 5-8-In 1914, 10-year-old Johnny enjoys playing with the nutcracker soldiers his toymaker father has made for him. World War I seems distant until people he knows are sent away, and then his father joins the British army. When the bombing starts in London, the boy is sent to live with his aunt in the country. He dislikes the small town, misses his parents and friends, and is uncomfortable living with a relative whom he does not know well. He escapes his troubles by playing in the garden with the toy soldiers, adding the new one his father sends with each letter. Initially Johnny's father is upbeat and glorifies army life, but after he is sent to the front, he writes of the endless rain and mud, the rats, the shooting, and the tense waiting. Each soldier he creates becomes more and more full of the pain of war until one arrives that is so ghastly that Johnny's aunt throws it in the fire. As the boy becomes lost in his play world, he becomes convinced that the battles he puts his "men" through affect the real battles on the front. Using vivid language, Lawrence writes poignantly of war and the devastation that England and its people suffered. Because of the first-person voice, readers travel the heights and depths with Johnny's emotions and feel present in the story. Readers who enjoyed Michelle Magorian's *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (HarperCollins, 1982), set during World War II, will find a kindred story here.

*Cheri Estes, Detroit Country Day Middle School, Beverly Hills, MI*

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From [Booklist](#)

Gr. 5-9. War is an exciting game to 10-year-old Johnny in 1914, though he hates that his beloved dad is far away on the Western Front in France and that he has to leave London to live with his aunt in a country village. Dad is a toy maker who has carved Johnny a set of wooden soldiers, and with every letter from the trenches, Dad sends a small wooden figure to add to the glorious battles Johnny plays in the backyard. The letters quickly lose their romance when Dad confronts the slaughter of "going over the top." At first the book moves slowly; Johnny's war games go on too long. And in case readers don't get the heavy metaphor, there's a fatherly teacher to spell things out and compare the war to *The Iliad*, with bickering gods and rulers who

"toy with the people." But there's realism in the grief of the village people and also in Dad's poignant letters, which move from excitement to boredom to horror and cover-up, and then on to the miracle of the Christmas truce, when the enemies meet in no-man's-land and exchange food and gifts, only to be sent back by the generals with orders to kill each other. This will be a fine introduction to World War I, both for personal interest and for curriculum use, especially when read with the books listed in the Read-alike column on the opposite page. *Hazel Rochman*

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## Users Review

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