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Under the covers

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John Sutherland is troubled by what American soldiers are reading in Iraq

Question: what was the most popular novel in the American Civil War? Automatically, of course, it's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - recalling Abraham Lincoln's shaking the hand of 'the little old lady who started a great war'.

Despite Honest Abe's help, after an annus mirabilis (1852-3) sales of *Uncle Tom* slumped in the mid-1850s to virtually nothing. No one knows why.

Ten years later, as the bloodiest war in American history raged, both sides - blue and grey - devoured Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (1862). So popular was it with the Confederate Army that soldiers took to calling themselves, with that self-mocking irony loved by fighting men, 'Lee's *Miserables*'.

What about the modern American soldier? In 2006, AbeBooks, an internet supplier of new and pre-owned reading matter, analysed the top 50 orders received from the war zone in Iraq.

Rather charmingly, Ouida's Foreign Legion romance *Under Two Flags* (1867) was among the top 50. It's nice to think of the modern warrior's eyes moistening, under his Ray-Bans, at the thought of the heroine, Cigarette, heroically throwing herself into the firing squad's hail of bullets to save her love.

The top 10 novels supplied to American fighting men by Abe were: *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger; *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, J. K. Rowling; *Lonesome Dove*, Larry McMurtry; *Mostly Harmless*, Douglas Adams; *The Collector*, John Fowles; *Devil's Own*, George Robert Elford; *The Unwanted*, John Saul; *The Alchemist*, Ken Goddard; *Apollyon*, Destroyer Unleashed, Tim LaHaye; *Master of Dragons*, Margaret Weis; *The Illuminati*, L. Burkett.

There is a strong whiff of the high school curriculum (Salinger, notably) and a lot of fan fiction. The presence of LaHaye's vision of Armageddon (and the Second Coming) happening in the Middle East in the first years of the 21st century is slightly troubling. But what is striking is the near-complete absence of male-action, war stories. The descendants of Lee's *Miser*



Serving soldiers are not that keen on war

obviously get enough of that at work.

Well, most of them do. There is one example of war fiction in this top 10: Elford's Devil's Guard. It's not a work, nor is Elford an author, with wide name-recognition in what used to be called Civvy Street. But it evidently appeals where the bullets fly and the IEDs thump.

First published in 1971, Devil's Guard purports to be the true confessions of a German SS officer, Hans Josef Wagemueller. Presented as fact, the book is generally categorised by booksellers and merchandisers (Abe, for example) as fiction and by military historians as balderdash.

Elford's hero recounts his exploits - bloody and genocidal - as a soldier in the Waffen SS fighting on the Eastern Front in the Second World War. The tone is savage and unapologetic. Nazi atrocities are, the narrative asserts (with multiple examples), wholly justified by the inhumanity of the Communist foe.

After the (much lamented) defeat of the Reich, Wagemueller escapes to be recruited in the French Foreign Legion. Under his new flag he fights for France in the Indo-Chinese war against the Communist Viet Minh. More abominable sub-humans, deserving only of extermination.

In the Legion with other former Nazis (some 900 of them) he leads the 'battalion of the damned' in daring, ruthless, guerrilla fighting behind enemy lines. Two sequels followed which Wagemueller ends up fighting under the American flag.

Elford is an elusive figure, scarcely more substantial in terms of popular image than his alleged warrior source, Wagemueller. Devil's Guard was, for a long time, an underground bestseller - most reading copies passing from hand to hand. No self-respecting imprint would be keen to be associated with what was generally regarded as sickening neo-Nazi pornography.

Costs of pre-owned copies are, consequently, sky high. Any British soldier ordering Devil's Guard from amazon.co.uk could pay as much as £320 a copy.

If Iraq goes on another five years, a mass-market reprint would seem to be in order. But I would be foolhardy enough to write the introduction I wonder?

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