



## The First of July

*Elizabeth Speller*

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On July 1st, 1913, four very different men are leading four very different lives.

Exactly three years later, it is just after seven in the morning, and there are a few seconds of peace as the guns on the Somme fall silent and larks soar across the battlefield, singing as they fly over the trenches. What follows is a day of catastrophe in which Allied casualties number almost one hundred thousand. A horror that would have been unimaginable in pre-war Europe and England becomes a day of reckoning, where their lives will change forever, for Frank, Benedict, Jean-Batiste, and Harry.

Elizabeth Speller once again sublimely captures the dangerously romantic atmosphere of war-torn Europe in her latest novel that will leave critics and readers astounded.

## **The First of July Details**

Date : Published November 14th 2013 by Pegasus Books (first published 2013)

ISBN : 9781605984971

Author : Elizabeth Speller

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, War, World War I, Fiction, Cultural, France

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## From Reader Review The First of July for online ebook

### Ali says

This is the third novel by Elizabeth Speller, a stand-alone novel, following the brilliant; The Return of Captain John Emmet and The Strange Fate of Kitty Easton, which feature a character in the years following WW1. This novel follows the fortunes of four very different men, just before and during the First World War.

Next year of course it will be a hundred years since the outbreak of WW1 – so the publication of this novel then is very timely, pulling no punches, it is an emotional, evocative story. The landscapes, characters and incidents of this novel will stay in the mind for some time, as the reader embarks on a journey that will take them back to the 1st July 1916. (The US edition of this novel is called The First of July).

“Some day he would steal a boat and row all the way to the sea. He sat on the bank of the river, where willows trailed on the surface of the water and where carp sometimes basked – a flash of silver just under the surface – and he threw a stone into the tiny scum of broken leaves and twigs, caught in the river’s slow bend. In high summer everything here was green – the water, the trees, the bright duckweed – and the smell; the beginning of slightly rotten vegetation, the deep smell of mud and fat eels who lived on flesh and everything mad with growing. “

Four men whose fates are destined to come together on that dreadful day of 1st July 1916 – the first and most disastrous day of the battle of the Somme, four men from different backgrounds with different hopes and dreams, Jean-Baptiste, Frank, Harry, and Benedict. Jean-Baptiste is a young French man, the son of a widow, he loves the river near to his town of Corbie, befriended by the local doctor, he feels betrayed when he finds his friend is also his mother’s lover, running off to Paris he finds comradeship with a group of workmen –with whom he joins up when war comes. Frank, the son of a Devonshire coffin maker, has gone to London getting work in Debenhams department store, his one great desire is to own his own bicycle. Resisting the clamour to join up when war comes, Frank has been influenced by rabble rousing anti-war cries – however following the death of a friend – whose bicycle he is looking after - early in the war, Frank joins the 7th Hunts (Cyclists) battalion. Harry is the son of a baronet, now living prosperously in America, newly married to Marina, he initially tries to get on with his life, but he is English and as war comes he realises he too must answer the call. Harry has not revealed the truth of his family background to his wife, or that he once had a brief love affair with the woman who later became his step-mother. Benedict is a musical scholar, the son of a Devonshire clergyman, enthralled by his synesthesia he loves his music but fears he will never be as good as his gifted friend Theo. Theo persuades Benedict to join up, Theo becomes a pilot, Benedict joins the Royal Field Artillery, though they are able to share a cottage in France where Benedict continues to be concerned by his own complicated feelings for Theo.

Opening in 1913 – At Break of Day follows the fates of these men, as events lead them inexorably to the fields of France where on the first bloodiest day of the battle of the Somme their paths will cross.

“There were rumours flying like bullets, humming overhead with no fixed target. The wave had broken and here was its vicious undertow; with the casualties came all shades of truth and speculation. The unbroken wire, the broken promises (this was mostly the young ones who still believed in such things). All those shells, they said, the cross fire from machine guns that had never been taken out. Men had been mown down as soon as they left the trench, or were left dying on the wire; they’d tried to hide in fox-holes but found them stuffed with corpses.”

In the opening section of book, we are introduced slowly to Jean-Baptiste, Frank, Benedict and Harry, I thoroughly enjoyed how the stories of these men were built up, I found myself thoroughly engaged with these characters, and began to worry for them as the story and the war took told. I particularly loved Frank’s and Jean-Baptiste’s stories - they are the characters I will remember best and longest – moving and unforgettable. Speller’s descriptions of the French countryside slowly torn apart by the ravages of war are

fabulous, and surely must show a deep affection for the country.

This was an engrossing read, beautifully written, atmospheric and rich in historical detail. Taking the reader from London department stores, a Gloucestershire music school, the streets of New York and a small French town on the banks of the Seine in 1913 – to a field hospital in a French Abbey, to the filth and devastation of the trenches in the middle of the war, Elizabeth Speller faithfully blends fabulous storytelling with excellent research.

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## Tina says

This was a wonderful book to start off the new year. If I were given the entirety of the world's history to study, WWI and the inter-war years is my choice, hands down. Basically anything from 1910-1935 I just devour. This was a great novel in that it showcased not just the war and the soldiers who fought it, but their lives before the war, the culture(s) they were part of, and most importantly, how the war affected them, despite their different cultures/stations. Everyone seems to prefer to focus on WWII, because it's easier, I believe. It was a war that had purpose, it had clear "evil" that needed to be vanquished and WWII opened so many doors to technology and culture that changed our world for the better. What I'm fascinated by regarding WWI is how it was an utterly pointless, useless war that decimated (quite literally) a generation, and really was the turning point in terms of how our world was/is structured. WWI essentially killed off the aristocracy, the last vestiges of British colonialism, and it set the stage for WWII. It also was the impetus for my favorite genre of literature - Modernism.

But, this isn't an essay. Clearly I very much enjoy the subject matter and setting, so I'll skip that, and focus on what gave the novel life. The characters.

They were quite masterfully created. I didn't expect so much back-story, and I also didn't expect them to *not* end up in the same unit together (and then band together and become such good friends blah blah). Likewise, the connections they did share were not cliché or too coincidental; they simply reinforced what the world had forgotten during the war – that we're all on the same planet and are tied closer together than we may think. The characters were all realistic and easy to relate to, despite their different stations and decisions in life.

No story was uninteresting to me, but Harry was, I suppose, was the least interesting, though a convenient way to bring in the American aspect of WWI and to introduce the theme of duty/loyalty. He was also a lord, of course, so it was great to see the novelist did her research and placed him where he would have been in the ranks.

Frank, the cyclist wasn't as interesting to me either as the other two, but he was a great example of a middle-class working man. I guess that's why he wasn't as interesting to me – he was *so* urban middle-class, especially in his love of bicycles. (view spoiler)

Jean-Baptiste, despite his dumb decisions, was endearing to me as he really had it rough. His story had me quite hooked and the parallels between his (view spoiler) were very compatible. Plus, his story was the most exciting, I found, in terms of action and sheer plot movement.

Benedict. Oh, Benedict, my favorite. **This entire this in spoilers, so just stop here.**

His synesthesia was an interesting inclusion to the story as well as physically represented his homosexuality; he couldn't talk about either, both were a secret he thought he had to hide; the parallels between the two was very well done. I am rather fond of unrequited love stories and Benedict's balanced the line quite well

between Benedict being in love and being *pathetically* in love. You could tell, especially with the scene at a restaurant, that he wanted so badly to tell Theo to just screw off and leave him alone forever, but doesn't. And then it shows you why – Theo had the spontaneity that Benedict loved so much, the bravery to do the unexpected. Theo was a bit of a jerk, but he wasn't a jerk intentionally to Benedict. He likely had a suspicion that Benedict was gay, but not that he loved him with such intensity (perhaps he would have acted differently?). Despite being a little selfish and narcissistic, I really liked Theo because I understood his rage and sense of lacking a purpose. If I were a soldier in WWI, I'd want to be a pilot too. His death (suicide – I argue) was one of the best scenes in the novel.

This was such a great novel. The more I think about it, the more I really loved it. The author was great at not just drawing parallels, but themes, connections, and teasing you along. The story had suspense, drama, a couple love stories, some good battle/fight scenes, didn't glide over the uncomfortable parts of war/sexuality, and was less focused on showing how dire the circumstances of the Somme were (which, to be honest, was done in *All Quiet on the Western Front*) than progressing the story. I highly recommend this novel to anyone who likes history, a quick-moving story, and something with emotional depth.

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### **Jill Meyer says**

This year - 2014 - is the 100th year anniversary of the beginning of The Great War. It has been marked by the issuance of many books about the war - from military, political, historical, and personal perspectives. Each book, whether fiction or non-fiction, almost seems better than the last. There's a lot of good writing going on and I'm pleased to include British novelist Elizabeth Speller's new book, "The First of July", on that list.

Elizabeth Speller is the author of two previous novels about the time, "The Strange Fate of Kitty Easton" and "The Return of Captain John Emmett". (She's also written a family memoir called "The Sunlight on the Garden" which was a strangely readable look at her very odd family.) Anyway, in "The First of July", Speller tells us about that first, terrible day in 1916, the beginning of the Battle of the Somme.

July 1st, 1916 has been called the bloodiest day in British history. An article in Wiki puts it this way: "1 July 1916 was also the worst day in the history of the British Army, which had c. 60,000 casualties, mainly on the front between the Albert-Bapaume road and Gommecourt, where the attack failed disastrously, few British troops reaching the German front line".

Speller has taken the battle on that day and using the four soldiers - three British and one French of whom she has given us the back stories - she writes of unbelievable physical and emotional pain, heroism, valor, and...fear. Who among us would not have felt the fear of battle?

These are characters whom Speller has drawn with incredible nuance; characters who we follow with a sense of dread and foreboding. We know what they have to lose and to gain by surviving the war; who they loved and of the lives they left behind. Speller does an equally good job writing about the war and the politics behind it, as well as the logistics of this particular battle. She has her four characters interact in strange, quiet ways as each is affected that terrible day.

Elizabeth Speller's book is not for the faint of heart. It's toughly written, but it is written well. Her two previous novels were very good, but with "The First of July", Speller seems to have found her true voice. It's very, very good and very, very sad. As World War One was very, very sad...

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### **Jane says**

Oh, my goodness!! This novel was astonishing and mesmerizing! It took my breath away. Do read this book; you'll be glad you did!

This novel begins in 1913; then World War I breaks out and leads up to the Battle of the Somme [which "began on the middle day, of the middle year of the War", July 1, 1916], the battle itself and aftermath. This is the story of four different men from different social classes: the Englishmen, Benedict, gentle organ student at Gloucester Cathedral and son of a vicar; Frank, a haberdasher and son of a coffin maker; Harry, the titled son, who runs off to America; and Jean-Baptiste, the French peasant lad. The novel took me right into the lives of these men. Each joins the military in a different unit, for his own reason. The pacing was just right and the book well plotted. The prose was excellent. There was not a wasted word. The characterizations were fully fleshed-out and I felt as though these men were believable and people I could know. I could feel their hope, aspirations, emotions. The chapters alternate among each of the four. You feel the passage of time. Each Part of the novel is entitled a particular year, then **The Plan, The Day, Afterwards**. The novel describes the war experiences of each man; because of the war and information each receives, the life of each will be changed forever. Their lives intertwine. Maybe the men do not realize this. The connections felt real to me, though incredible. The last few poignant chapters brought tears to my eyes. I feel this book will someday become a classic of WWI fiction.

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### **Richard Brand says**

For some reason I never got connected to this book. There are five or six different strands that get woven together as they approach July 1, 1916. The lives of these people are nicely developed. They are from a variety of socio-economic conditions. They have their own histories. But I never became concerned or emotionally interested in any of them. There is a lot of vivid description of the horrors of the trench warfare, and the pain and suffering of the combatants. As one might suspect in a book about World War I and a major offensive in that war, that there are not a lot of happy things that can be written. So this is not a comedy.

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### **Sue says**

Stories of 4, very different, men who enlist and towards the end of the novel find themselves in the bloody battle of the Somme in one way or another. Vivid battle scenes mainly from different angles, which made it interesting. Although the stories appear diverse they are linked to each other in different ways. I love Speller's writing - although at the beginning it was hard when the characters kept changing, just when I was getting into their stories, her writing flows. Looking forward to her next book.

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## **Sarah says**

For a book titled, The First of July, this novel has very little to do with the first day of the battle of the Somme and a great deal in leading up to it. Which is ok, we care about the characters when the worst day of their collective lives approaches. At the beginning we meet four different men, three Brits and one Frenchman and follow their lives before and leading up to the fateful day. Their paths cross, sometimes significantly and sometimes just in passing.

The frame is constructed perfectly - so perfectly that you don't feel details are mentioned just because you think the author found them interesting, or anything to take you out of the timeframe. This isn't Speller's first work about World War I and it is masterfully drawn as the rich backdrop for her story. The pacing is appropriate for the story and the chapters being from different perspectives moves it along. While I enjoy novels from different voices, the one fault of this is the multiple perspectives. There are two characters who, in my opinion, were the fullest and most unique - Jean-Baptiste and bicycle crazy Frank Stanton. Their stories and the outcomes of the storylines for these two men could have had much more of an emotional punch if we had been allowed to linger in their worlds. Both men struggle with thoughts of their families back home and what it means to do the right thing. I was somewhat intrigued by organist Benedict Chatto, but his story never got off the ground for me and felt like possibly a whole separate book. I liked the storyline of his torment over his love of his best friend, Theo, but there wasn't enough weight and space for that story to make me completely care. The throwaway character was Harry - the baronet who ran away to America and married a Yank and goes back to sign up because of bravery, or a secret uncovered, or pride, or something. I love the themes of fate and chance, of family dynamics and finding your own way even in chaos. Overall, Speller does a great job at creating a war story that tackles these themes and breathes life into them. I will read whatever she writes.

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## **Denise says**

Beginning in 1913, *At Break of Day* follows the lives of four young men from very different backgrounds whose paths all cross in one way or another, for better or for worse, leading up to and during one fateful day in July 1916, on the bloody first day of the Battle of the Somme.

Skillfully weaving together the four separate story threads into a cohesive, captivating whole, this novel telling of the tragedies of war makes for an enthralling and occasionally heartrending (as well it should, considering the topic) read. (view spoiler)

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## **Joseph says**

*The First of July* by Elizabeth Speller is a novel that examines the lives of four men leading up to the opening of the Battle of the Somme. Speller has lived throughout western Europe and currently splits her time between Gloucestershire and Greece. She has written for The Independent, Financial Times, Vogue, and Big Issue. This is her third novel.

I spend quite a bit of time reading World War I books, from Ernest K Gann's *In the Company of Eagles* which started me in my early teens to Paul Jankowski's *Verdun* in my current to read pile. I find it an extremely interesting subject and something that has driven almost everything in the twentieth century. I have stayed away from World War I fiction because I found it too easy to nit-pick and there is plenty of

poetry to show the more human side of the war. Nevertheless, I gave *The First of July* a try.

The story follows four men starting in July 1913, three years before the start of the Battle of the Somme. Jean-Baptiste Mallet is a blacksmith leaves his home of Corbie, France before before the war; he is disenchanted with recent events in his town. Frank Stanton found his way to London when he was nineteen. He is a carpenter and made coffins before arriving in London. Frank becomes a store clerk and dreams of owning a quality bicycle. He has follows the Tour d' France and the racers. Frank and his friend dream about bicycle touring. Benedict Chatto is from Gloucester is a music man and spends time with his friend Theo. Harry Sydenham lives in New York and is marrying Marina. Harry is British and has fled his home land keeping with him secrets he chooses not to share, even with his wife.

Speller takes these four men and shows the reader how the war will change the lives of all classes of people as the characters lives intertwine. Theo convinces Benedict to join the artillery with him, but no sooner does Benedict sign up, Theo signs on to be a pilot. Frank has no real desire to fight in a war once his friend Dick, who owns a fine Hercules bicycle, dies in the war. Benedict, meets Frank and suggest he join a cyclist brigade. That seemed to be a perfect tribute to his departed friend. On a personal level I was drawn in by Frank and his love of bicycles. The men's stories are interesting and provide a realistic look into their personal lives and the personal issues their faced or kept secret. The book also gives a feel for the general feeling of the populations in France, Britain, and the United States.

The First of July is an excellent World War I novel. It focuses on the main characters and their families and give a nice human element to the war. The novel ends on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. This was the bloodiest battle of the war. For five months the battle went on and produced a million casualties. The British alone suffered 60,000 casualties on a single day, the July 1st. The story is interesting enough so I never had a chance to nit-pic or notice any historical inaccuracies. It is truly enjoyable to find a work of fiction that fits so well into an area of study mine.

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### **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

The First of July 1916, was the first day of the Battle of the Somme. This was a huge offensive wherein the Allies (mostly British and French in this one) attempted to finally turn the tide against Germany. That first day - one day only - the Allied casualties were enormous: 20,000 British and 7000 French died that day in that one battle. In Speller's prologue, she tells of a cameraman making a movie in the silence. That silence was the prelude to the British setting off mines in the tunnels dug beneath the Germans. Film of the explosion has been preserved and is available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPGrr...> The Battle of the Somme continued until mid-November of that year, but the book is really *The First of July*.

The book itself begins in July 1913. This first section is 4 chapters, each telling us of one main character, his background and circumstances: Jean-Baptiste, a poor, young Frenchman; Frank, from Devonshire, now living in London; Benedict, an organist in Gloucester; Harry, a successful businessman, a Londoner now living in New York. The next section is a year later and over the course of the next two years we follow the lives of these four men.

When they disembarked in Dover the customs officer told them, in some agitation, that Germany had declared war on France. The country whose great and beautiful capital Harry had strolled in just a day earlier, the country that lay so few miles to the south, that was visible across the Channel on a clear day, was under attack. He thought of the tense clerk at the hotel desk, the affable waiters who had served them in Nice, the carrier who had borne them to

Calais, and the young workman, hardly more than a boy, who had told them of mobilization, and he wondered how quickly they would be scooped up into a war France could never win.

On the back cover of the edition I read are a couple of review quotes that indicate this is a mystery or a whodunit. What? This is nothing of the sort. There is no mystery here, other than the usual wanting to know what becomes of the characters. Isn't that what reading is about?

This is excellent characterization, where we come to know these four through the events of their lives. My favorite was the one on the page in front of me. The men are real people with challenges, friends and family. This is also excellent historical fiction, well-researched, with enough plot to keep the novel moving. The prose is a bit better than just good enough. I'll look forward to another by this author.

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### **Holly Fetter says**

I really enjoyed this book. At first, I wasn't sure I was going to like it, but it didn't take long for me to be sucked in. I love reading WWI era fiction, and this one didn't disappoint (unlike Wake). I liked how the 4 main characters were connected, yet separate, and didn't feel like a far fetched "you gotta be kidding me" coincidence when their lives intersect. Well done!

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### **Annie says**

The Battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916 and continued for the next four and a half months. By the end of the engagement, more than 1,000,000 men had been killed or wounded. It is one of the deadliest (if not the deadliest) battle in history. The title of Elizabeth Speller's incredible novel, *The First of July* serves as a constant reminder to the reader of what's coming for the five protagonists. The men *The First of July* centers on enlisted in their countries' armies because of misguided camaraderie, hereditary patriotism, or sheer bad luck. The novel begins in the summer of 1914, but the clock is already counting down to 1 July 1916...

*Read the rest of my review at A Bookish Type.*

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### **Gabi Coatsworth says**

#### **A new take on a day in WW1**

Elizabeth Speller has found a different way to tell us something about the First World War. By focusing on four men and the events leading up to the first day of the Battle of the Somme, she's created a sense of the scope of the war and those involved in it. The book is carefully researched, but the author doesn't force-feed you the history - it unfolds organically. Only one of the four stories felt as though the ending had been a little forced, but I felt the overall book was so good I could overlook that. And I loved the way each character's life intersected every other, even if only tangentially.

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**Diane S ? says**

Speller certainly has the ability to craft a well-plotted, tightly constructed novel. I found that they way this novel was written was amazing. Four men from diverse backgrounds all find themselves involved in fighting in France during World War I. We first learn about these men from separate chapters, each devoted to one of the men, and thus we learn their hopes and dreams, about their lives and loves and the reader becomes emotionally vested in each of these men.

That is not to say that this is written to pluck at the heartstrings, it is not, it is written very sentimentally, it is their words and actions that draw us in, at times their inner thoughts. Benedict was particularly interesting to me as he and Theo are organists. Benedict sees great rushes of color when the music is played and I was very disappointed when this was dropped as I continued reading.

I should, however, trusted Speller more because once again an organ is played, with wonderful colors and emoticons. At the time of the playing a very poignant moment is displayed and I see now why she dropped this thread, only to resurrect it at a powerful time. The men never know each other well, but they do play key parts in each others lives and these moments are threaded in and out like the weaving of a intricate tapestry. They are ,of course ,all headed for the Battle of the Somme, where so many lives were lost.

Who will live and who will die in this brilliant novel of wartime and the toll it takes on all. Wonderful book.

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**Jessica Ward says**

I absolutely love war history so this was amazing for me. Super powerful ending and I loved how you had the characters from different countries with there stories interacting

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