**In 2025, 'Wake' was added to the list of texts available for study on AQA's A Level unit about the literature of World War One and its aftermath (*AQA (A) Paper 2 Texts in Shared Contexts*). The English Review, a magazine aimed at A Level students and teachers, commissioned an article by Caroline Barrett on 'Wake' for its April 2026 issue. Before writing the article, she asked if I could answer a few questions on the novel – here are my answers.**

CB: The publication date of 'Wake' was 2014. Was it timed to coincide with the first year of the centenary commemorations of the First World War?

AH: Strangely enough it wasn't. I was some way into writing the novel in around 2011 before I realized that, if the book was published, it was likely to coincide with the centenary.

CB: Ritual and ceremonial as part of the mourning process is a key element of the novel – do you feel it's important to continue to mark Armistice Day in the way that we currently do now that the FWW is more than a century in the past?

AH: I think Armistice Day can feel quite distant and abstract – appearing very much like the machinery of the establishment going about its business - as members of the royal family and the government lay their flowers by the Cenotaph. In writing Wake I was interested in unearthing the raw humanity of the immediate post war period. I wanted to understand the human stories behind the symbolic acts of remembrance we have been left with. As to whether I think it's important to continue to mark in this way – I'm not sure. I have personally found engaging with the legacy of FWW incredibly moving; coming to understand the visceral need people had at the time to find a focal point for their mourning – especially those who had no grave to visit. For me though, the worst possible legacy of those dead would be a hollow sense that they are remembered only by the same machinery of state that sent them to their deaths. It's a real reason why we should keep interrogating the period – even as we live through devastating contemporary conflicts - and bringing our own perspectives to the legacy of the First World War.

CB: You said in an interview for the blog 'For winter nights…' that the sight of military cemeteries in France had given you the inspiration for the Unknown Warrior element of 'Wake' – imagining the feelings of people with no body or grave on which to focus their grieving. I'm planning to write a section in the Texts in Context article on the Imperial War Graves Commission and their role in shaping the ways people were allowed to mourn their dead – eg not allowing people to bring bodies back to Britain or put up private memorials. Can you expand at all on your experience of visiting the military cemeteries and the impact of that on the novel

AH: I visited the battlefields on a research trip with my parents in 2012. We went first to Thiepval, which is the monument to the Missing of the Somme, where there are over seventy thousand names carved into the stone. It's impressive for sure, but I have to say I found it incredibly bleak. I remember standing in front of it, trying to wrap my head around it; each name represented such unimaginable loss. Later, we visited the Commonwealth Grave Commission graveyards. They are so well tended, all the headstones the same colour of white, the same size and shape, and there's a real serenity to the uniformity, but I found them eerie – graveyards and gravestones are usually associated with time and decay; these were kept pristine. Standing in those graveyards though, I started to understand something I'd only really thought about in the abstract – the impact of the decision of the British Government not to bring any of the bodies home. On a practical level you can understand why - the

cost and logistics of bringing back the bodies of close to a million men would have been incredibly high. But what did that mean for the people who grieved those men? If you had the means, then you might be able to visit France or Belgium, and find your loved one's grave, but it would have been way beyond the resources of most people. How, then, were families supposed to move through their loss? In that context the decision to bring home one body – The Unknown Warrior – to stand for all those who had died, starts to make sense. When it came to writing WAKE, I took five days in November, from the unearthing of the anonymous body that would become the Unknown Warrior, to its burial in Westminster Abbey, as my structure. On a technical level, the Unknown Warrior sections have an omniscient voice, and allowed me to drop into different characters; a British nurse, a French farmer, a young mother standing on the tracks waiting for a glimpse of the train carrying the body. They gave me an opportunity to move beyond the frame of the close third person narrative I was using for my three women and bring in a wider societal picture.

CB: One of the things that AQA A Level students are encouraged to think about is the way that post-FWW texts re-present the conflict, reflecting the concerns of society in the publication period as well as studying the socio-political context of the period of the text's setting. Littlewood's 'O What a Lovely War', published in 1964 as a marker of the 50th anniversary of the FWW, clearly reflects the preoccupations of mid-1960s Britain as well as Littlewood's own political views. Do you think that the ways 'Wake' presents the post-war period reflects our early 21st century views?

AH: Yes, I'm sure it does – my concerns will always be formed by my own interests and the circumstances of my life. As someone whose roots are predominantly northern and working class, I am always interested in the social history that lies behind the 'big stories' of history: the kings and the queens and the dates and the political shenanigans. When writing WAKE I was struggling with grief in my personal life, and I was drawn to the ways in which women dealt with a grief that was devastatingly personal and yet also communal: those tight knit communities in which children had grown up together for instance, living in back-to-back terrace houses, and then the vast majority of those young men being killed or wounded. My mind still baulks at that. It's sort of incomprehensible. I was interested in ghosts too (I'm always interested in ghosts) a huge majority of the bereaved reported sightings of their loved ones after they had died. And I was interested in new freedoms for women in the wake of the war. I came of age in the Manchester rave culture of the 1990s and the free party scene - I remember first encountering that feeling of complete freedom on the dancefloor. It was wild. It was an experience that felt revolutionary. I was looking to capture a similar feeling when writing about Hettie. What would it have been like to hear the Original Dixieland Jazz Band for the first time? There was nothing else like them on the *planet* in 1920 - they were superstars. What would it have felt like for Hettie to have been able to move her body on the dancefloor in ways that were unimaginable a few years before?

CB: You mention in the 'For winter's nights…' blog interview that an interest in women's fight for the vote in 1918 was one of the key stimuli for the novel. This doesn't appear directly in 'Wake' – how did your interest in this aspect of immediate post-War society percolate into the novel?

AH: I think it goes back to the earlier answer: women had been agitating for the vote for years prior to the First World War, and had been consistently dismissed in their demands. In many ways the war made them visible - it was an opportunity to show and prove their competencies to the male ruling class, as they took over many of the jobs that men had left to go to the Front. It didn't stop that same ruling class wanting to put them back in the drawing room as soon as the war ended though. I'm thinking mainly of middle and upper middle class women here - working class women had *always*

worked, particularly in the factories of the industrial heartlands. I was interested in this tension between the devastations and freedoms that came from the war, particularly as it played out in the lives of women.

CB: In terms of literary influences, you mention Virginia Woolf and T S Eliot (again in the interview in 'For winter's nights…'), and their fracturing of certainties in the post FWW period. Which particular fractured certainties were you interested in exploring in 'Wake'?

AH: The certainty of progress for a start; before the war you've got this period of hugely expanding wealth for Britain – an empire which spread across the globe, a high watermark of international power and influence, which encouraged very little reflection on whether empire, capitalism and colonialism might be the best way of conducting ourselves. And then the huge cataclysm of the war – this charnel ground onto which close to a million young men were thrown. And the ripple effect of that horror and grief meaning that the old forms people were used to, whether in poems or novels, clothes or music, ono longer fit. So, you get this restless search for the new: Virginia Woolf's fury at the war leading directly to her experiments with rendering human consciousness on the page (read 'Mrs. Dalloway' to see what I mean); the rhythms of jazz remaking music, and new styles of clothes which allowed female bodies to *move* rather than restrict and corset them into rigidity.