PART FOUR

CULTURES OF MEMORY
REACHING OUT TO THE PAST: MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FIRST WORLD WAR NARRATIVES

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The First World War currently enjoys considerable literary status in Britain. The past decade has seen a flourishing of novels that powerfully re-imagine the Great War, including Sebastian Faulks’s popular *Birdsong*,¹ Pat Barker’s award-winning *Regeneration* trilogy and *Another World*,² and Julian Barnes’s short story “Evermore” (in *Cross Channel*).³ These new Great War stories are among the most successful recent works of British fiction. Despite their critical and commercial success, contemporary First World War narratives have often been castigated by historians, and sometimes critics, for perpetuating what has come to be called the ‘Myth of the Great War,’ a simplistic version of the war that emerged in the fictional and poetic writing of the Great War writers, including Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves. In *The Pity of War* for instance, historian Niall Ferguson complains that the majority of modern readers have gained their impressions of the war not from historians but from novels and TV programmes that represent the First World War as a senseless conflict which only involved passive suffering.¹ Historian Brian Bond also laments, in *The Unquiet Western Front*, that the gulf between historical studies and popular misconceptions is widening, mainly due to literary works which “perpetuate myths, stereotypes and caricatures” about the First World War. In his review of the *Regeneration* trilogy, critic Ben Shephard argues that Barker only “retells an old story and faithfully recycles modern academic clichés” and fails to “re-create the past in its own terms.”⁶

¹ Faulks (1993), hereafter cited in text as B.
³ Barnes (1996), pp. 91–111, hereafter cited as E.
⁵ Bond (2002), p. 75. Bond also acknowledges that recent works of fiction have positively contributed to the revival of popular interest in World War I.