



By Jeroen Verhaeghe

Avid readers will recognize the feeling of guilt that comes with buying ever more books knowing full well that the unread stacks you have at home are more than enough to last you several months of quarantine. Luckily, from time to time I stumble across [an article](#) that justifies the occasional buying frenzy, even making me feel good about it. Of course, before a book can get on my “to read” list, it has to go on my “to buy/find/borrow” list, which is a problem of another order of magnitude that I’m not going to discuss here.

Another thing I used to feel guilty about was the fact that I seemed to lack the focus to finish one book before starting another. The three or so books on my nightstand seemed to indicate poor discipline, until From The Green Notebook's Joe Byerly provided me with [an explanation](#) (call it an excuse if you must) that this is not a bad thing either.

An accidental discovery

A couple of months ago, because of this habit of reading more than one book at a time, I discovered something that I want to share here. At the time, I was reading Vasily Grossman's masterpiece [Life and Fate](#) at the same time as the [war memoirs](#) of Field Marshall Erich von Manstein. While reading, and especially as the latter's narrative approached the action near Stalingrad, I noticed something peculiar. I felt a reinforcing effect from reading the non-fiction while I was following the adventures of Grossman's characters, for example knowing before the characters what their enemy had in store for them. Vice versa, I felt the influence of Grossman's fictional story while reading Manstein's account of his campaigns, translating casualty numbers and arrows on maps into stories about people of flesh and blood, worrying about their loved ones.

Gaining context

Nonfiction provides factual context to the fiction. In Grossman's case we are talking about events that he lived through himself, so he was eminently well placed to use them as a setting for a fictional story. At the same time, fiction gives readers a feel for what it is like to be there, to live through the events described elsewhere in timelines, statistics, numbers and map charts. Fiction can even give the reader an emotional investment in historical events. I know personally, I felt my reading experience was lifted to another level by the chance simultaneity of the reading.

It was only by pure coincidence that I stumbled upon the added benefits of pairing complementary (fiction and nonfiction) books together, but I am convinced you could easily

replicate this with a little advance planning of your reading. Another non-fiction title that would probably have worked with the original pair is Anthony Beevor's excellent [Stalingrad](#), which in itself already provides some emotional depth by interweaving personal stories with the macroscopic description of events.

A pairing for another Second World War theater could be Rick Atkinson's [The Day of Battle](#), the second installment of his [Liberation Trilogy](#), with cartoonist Bill Mauldin's [Up Front](#). The latter is not really a work of fiction, but rather a personal account of [Mauldin's war years](#) illustrated with his famous Willy and Joe cartoons. The typical self-deprecating and wry humor of the cartoons works fantastically well against the factual backdrop of Atkinson's account of the Italian campaign.

I don't intend for this post to become a reading list, so I will limit myself to just a couple more examples. A Vietnam War example might be the combination of fictional titles as Karl Marlantes' [Matterhorn](#) or John M. Del Vecchio's [The 13th Valley](#) on the one hand, and non-fictional accounts like H. R. McMaster's [Dereliction of Duty](#) for the political-strategic level, Lewis Sorley's [Westmoreland](#) for the operational leadership aspect, or even Bernard Fall's [Street Without Joy](#) if you want a broader picture including the French Indochina experience.

The fictional titles I am suggesting here are all within a very narrow, military-centric scope, which is what you are looking for if you want to have the greatest possible direct connection with the non-fiction you are reading. However, let's not limit ourselves by thinking that only military-themed fiction can be of value to our professional development. The US Army War College believes that there is value in reading [a wider range of fiction](#), and I couldn't agree more. It is, of course, a matter of time and priorities if you are going to consider including fiction in a curriculum for formal professional military education.

Don't forget about the visual arts too

And what if we dared to venture outside of literature, into the visual arts for example? Just

last month the Strategy Bridge published a thought provoking piece on [Picasso's Guernica as a tool for leader professional development](#). Orwell and Hemingway both come to mind as literary companions. A personal favorite of mine when it comes to paintings (no, I don't just read cartoons) is [The Black Prince at Crécy](#), a rather romantic depiction of the 1346 Battle of Crécy during the Hundred Years' War. And some might argue that Charles Joseph Minard's [Napoleon's March to Moscow](#) is not art at all but a mere graphic, but to me it conveys more emotion and it speaks more clearly of the horror of the 1812 French (Tolstoy would say "European") campaign than many paintings with much loftier claims.

This exercise could continue into the vast selection of movies and TV series, but I'll mention just one to go with the initial pair of books on the Eastern European Theater in WWII: the 1993 German language [Stalingrad](#), which follows a group of German infantrymen to the banks of the Volga and – spoiler alert – to their deaths in the snow. There is heroism, but it is constantly intermingled with fear, disillusionment and despair, and it provides a soldier's perspective to accompany Manstein's general's view of war at the Eastern Front, or a perfect counterpart for Grossman's Soviet military characters fighting on the other side.

Widening our scope of reading

The bottom line? Others have argued convincingly about the value of adding [fiction](#) or [science fiction](#) to PME reading lists. I would add two points: first, let's widen the scope of the fiction we're adding. It doesn't have to be military-themed, and it doesn't even have to be reading. Secondly, I suggest a way of pairing nonfiction and fiction that has the potential to enrich both experiences. Pairing the factual with literary fiction and other art forms may make PME more easily digestible to the not-so-avid readers among us and more fun for everyone. The main thing is that you do it, and that you don't do it by yourself but you discuss and share ideas. And yes, sometimes it starts with buying more books than you can possibly read.

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