



Mister Roberts

Thomas Heggen

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The novel, *Mister Roberts*, was an instant hit after being published in 1946 and was quickly adapted for the stage and screen. The title character, a Lieutenant Junior Grade naval officer, defends his crew against the petty tyranny of the ship's commanding officer during World War II. Nearly all action takes place on a backwater cargo ship, the USS *Reluctant*, that sails, as written in the play, "from apathy to tedium with occasional side trips to monotony and ennui." This irreverent, often hilarious story about the crew of the *Reluctant* has enjoyed wide and enduring popularity. Heggen based his novel on his experiences aboard the USS *Virgo* in the South Pacific during World War II, and began as a collection of short stories. It was subsequently adapted as a play, a feature film, a television series, and a television movie. The film version with Henry Fonda, James Cagney and Jack Lemmon is one of the most well-known movies of WWII.

Mister Roberts Details

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Author : Thomas Heggen

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From Reader Review Mister Roberts for online ebook

Bob Koelle says

Everybody's seen this movie, right? Well, everyone in my family has. Before it was a movie starring Henry Fonda, it was a Broadway hit starring Henry Fonda, and before that it was this novel, published in 1946. And that makes it remarkable.

It's a book about comic moments on a dreary cargo vessel in the Pacific in WWII, not told comically, but manner-of-factly. The author's post-war bitterness and cynicism seep out from time to time in some remarkable passages. Try to imagine anyone writing an ode to the war dead like this today:

The dead, Mr Roberts mused. What could you say about the dead of this war? What could you *really* say? Well, there were a lot of things you could say automatically and without thought, but they were all the wrong things; and just this once, just this one war, anyhow, let us try to say true things about the dead. Begin by cancelling the phrase "our honored dead": for that is not true-we forgot them, we do not honor them but in rhetoric-and the phrase is the badge of those who want something of the dead. If the dead of this war must have a mutual emcomium, then let it be "poor dead bastards." There is at least a little humanity in that. And let us not say of them, this time, "they gave their lives" for something or other; for certainly there was nothing voluntary in their dying. And neither is it fair to speak of "dead heroes," for not at all necessarily does the fact of death include the fact of heroism. Some of these dead were shining youths scornful of the sanctity of their own lives, who lived daily with terror rarefied by inevitability and died with a flawless gesture of self-immolation: and others died as the result of injuries sustained in falling through a privy. But, thought Roberts, if they did not live equally, they are every one equally dead; and you could say this affirmative thing of all; that in a war of terrifying consequence and overwhelming agony, they participated one hundred per cent. That was the only true thing you could say for all, but it was enough. The was demanded the shortening of how many-two million, five hundred and sixty thousand two hundred and fourteen?-lives, and these men were chosen. So pile them high at Austerlitz and Waterloo and Ypres and Verdun, and add a few more places, Aachen and Dunkerque and Anzio; only do not talk lies about the dead.

This passage astonished me, as we live today in a world of military hero-worship. Will anyone have the guts to write something like this about today's wars, and in turn have it be so popularly embraced as this book was?

Lauren says

Funny and poignant, Mr. Roberts was a real treat to read. More a collection of short stories than a novel in the classic sense. The all too real story tells of the trials and trivialities surrounding a crew onboard a cargo ship during WWII. The movie is much altered from the book, but both have their own merits.

Diana Long says

57-Mister Roberts by Thomas Heggen & Joshua Logan (Physical-Play) 4* This play takes place during WWII on a cargo ship in the Pacific Theater just prior to V-E day. The war by the time this play was written was over and so it's a some what light-hearted comedy to a war weary nation. Most of the play is staged on the deck of the ship with a few scenes in the cabin shared by Lt. AJG Roberts and Ensign Pulver. Mister Roberts is basically the serious naval officer who wants nothing more than to be transferred to a ship that's in the thick of the battle where the rest of the personal are bored but glad to be assigned where they are. Ensign Pulver is the main character that is full of shenanigans and he gives the play most of the fun and laughter. I enjoyed it up until the end of the play....seriously writers why not just dump my popcorn in my lap and pour soda over my head.

Louis Barbier says

Mister Roberts was an interesting book about a study of leaders and their style of leadership during WWII in the wide Pacific. The author Thomas Heggen a young naval officer served on various ships and one of them was a ship like the USS Reluctant as described in the book. I felt a kinship since I too served in the US Navy but after WWII and my ships were destroyers or as they are referred to in this book tin cans. Mr. Thomas Heggen description of the routine on a ship I am very familiar with even after having been retired now more years than I can remember. One tradition that is constant after a ship is commission is the coming to life of a ship as the crew goes aboard. From that moment on until the ship is decommissioned the watch is set. There are all kinds of watches and stations of every evolution of a ship while hazy gray and underway or while in port. Another constant is that the ship requires replenishment of fuel, munitions, ordinances, supplies, food, etc. All of these require working parties to lay to. Of course, there are also request for emergency leave, request for transfers, and such but all are in accordance of the US Navy and most important the needs of the US Navy. A chit is used to request any action by a crew member. That chit goes up the chain of command and the last person to sign it approved or disapprove is the Captain of the ship. After it is forward on to the Bureau for their action. This book shows without a doubt that poor leaders make lousy decisions; this in affect has not changed. In my day the best Navy tradition is liberty. Now there are so many other Navy traditions that makes you feel proud to put on your (Cracker Jacks); this is your Dress Uniform and strut your stuff down the pier. Oh yeah; this book covers quite a few but then again it only touches the tip of the iceberg. Also, many passages for those who have been there and done that will bring a smile of the time you served with your Uncle Sam and visited countless places around this blue planet that as a youngster only dreamed of while study geography in elementary school. Always thinking that someday you will do it; but if you for whatever reason missed this opportunity I recommend reading this book. Then for a few hours you can live what the sailors on the United States Ship USS Reluctant during WWII as told to you by the author Thomas Heggen; who served in the US Navy during that period of World History.

Jennifer says

Loving this funny, touching film is what prompted me to read the book, which is also wry and comical. It doesn't quite have the heart of the movie, but, as a short and mostly breezy read, it doesn't disappoint either. I just had to hold my nose when women were mentioned. The nurses in the bathroom, for example, could have

been allowed more dignity, but I accept the voyeurism tale as sadly accurate. It's hard to read something in which most of the male characters feel that women have some duty to be young and pretty, willing and available, yet remain, impossibly, innocently virginal. But as a book about war, and the boredom and tedium in war, Mister Roberts succeeds.

Zach Jensen says

i just started this book a couple days ago and i haven't gotten that far but the crew isn't like the rest of the navy crews by how they act and dress. the captin really doesn't act like a normal captin he doesn't know what kind of power he has over the crew. So the crew can kinda push him around. and mister roberts is the most respected officer.

Sue says

This is the novel the classic movie (James Cagney, Henry Fonda, Jack Lemon) was based on. It captures the tedium and oppressive heat and life aboard a little ship in a big ocean.

My dad started his naval career in the early 50s as a cook on one of these little supply ships in the Pacific, and he had shipmates who'd been there since the War. He said this is pretty darned close to the real thing...including the palm tree!

Louis Barbier says

Mister Roberts was an interesting book about a study of leaders and their style of leadership during WWII in the wide Pacific. The author Thomas Heggen a young naval officer served on various ships and one of them was a ship like the USS Reluctant as described in the book. I felt a kinship since I too served in the US Navy but after WWII and my ships were destroyers or as they are referred to in this book tin cans. Mr. Thomas Heggen description of the routine on a ship I am very familiar with even after having been retired now more years than I can remember. One tradition that is constant after a ship is commission is the coming to life of a ship as the crew goes aboard. From that moment on until the ship is decommissioned the watch is set. There are all kinds of watches and stations of every evolution of a ship while hazy gray and underway or while in port. Another constant is that the ship requires replenishment of fuel, munitions, ordinances, supplies, food, etc. All of these require working parties to lay to. Of course, there are also request for emergency leave, request for transfers, and such but all are in accordance of the US Navy and most important the needs of the US Navy. A chit is used to request any action by a crew member. That chit goes up the chain of command and the last person to sign it approved or disapprove is the Captain of the ship. After it is forward on to the Bureau for their action. This book shows without a doubt that poor leaders make lousy decisions; this in affect has not changed. In my day the best Navy tradition is liberty. Now there are so many other Navy traditions that makes you feel proud to put on your (Cracker Jacks); this is your Dress Uniform and strut your stuff down the pier. Oh yeah; this book covers quite a few but then again it only touches the tip of the iceberg. Also, many passages for those who have been there and done that will bring a smile of the time you served with your Uncle Sam and visited countless places around this blue planet that as a youngster only dreamed of while study geography in elementary school. Always thinking that someday you will do it; but if you for whatever reason missed this opportunity I recommend reading this book. Then for a few hours you

can live what the sailors on the United States Ship USS Reluctant during WWII as told to you by the author Thomas Heggen; who served in the US Navy during that period of World History.

John says

The book is a lot less light hearted than the movie adaptation. The story is rather dated and not terribly interesting. The captain isn't as over the top as Cagney portrayed him in the movie and in the book Doug Roberts is in his mid 20's, Hollywood wanted star power and cast Henry Fonda who was 50 at that time to portray Doug Roberts.

Mary Burks says

Great book. Gives an over view of being on a ship in the Navy during WW II. And shows some of the ship mates and officers and the state of their mental health and challenges while on board.

Eric_W says

Probably all of us have seen the classic Mister Roberts play or movie. The book is better. It captures the mind-numbing tedium much better, and the humor is scorched with irony and paradoxical pain. The hero, Mr. Roberts, spends his time on board trying to leave the safety of his cargo transport's milk-runs, filing one transfer request after another, seeking the action of a war-ship.

The author, Thomas Heggen, was discovered drowned in his bathroom in 1949, an apparent suicide, despite, or perhaps because of, the huge financial success of the book and play.

The *Reluctant* was a cargo ship engaged to carry trucks and toothpaste on a regular run "from Tedium to Apathy and back; about five days each way. It makes an occasional trip to Monotony, and once it made a run all the way to Ennui, a distance of about two thousand miles from Tedium." It's staffed with wonderful characters. Ensign Keith, the Boston bluenose, believes the Navy commandments he learned in boot camp about officers being gentlemen, and he singlehandedly tries to remake the crew into something resembling a regulation Navy vessel- until the famous jungle juice incident. Lieutenant Roberts is a born leader, able to move easily among the enlisted men as well as the officers; competent, he wants nothing more than to get out of this phantom Navy and into the real war. He is hated by the captain for his ability. He is the instigator of many of the famous practical jokes played on the captain. The doctor is simultaneously a great medico and a loony quack, which would depend on the quantity of grain alcohol he had imbibed the night before. He might or might not prescribe aspirin for athlete's foot.

The book has several humorous moments: the discovery by one of the visiting nurses that she and her colleagues have been surreptitiously spied on by men on the Reluctant using the powerful range finder telescopes; the accidental firing of a live shell that nearly took the mast off a friendly ship after a party that somehow got a little out of hand; and the question whether throwing the captain's palm tree s over the side would result in their replacements being squared or doubled (figure that one out).

But war is overwhelmingly tragic and Roberts gets his wish. He is transferred to a destroyer. His former

shipmates learn of his death during a Kamikaze attack just before the announcement of the end of the war. It wipes the smile right off your face.

Shawn says

Loved the movie, loved the play and now I love this book, which everything else was based on. Obviously there is much more detail in here than in the other two sources. And it was those details that made this so incredible of a read.

Jessica Barkl says

Checked out a bunch of books in preparation for the show I'm in currently, and one of them is this book. I finished it late last night when I had insomnia, and I was so sad afterwards that I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the book, and how it relates to the play I'm in...which is going into tech this week, and I guess I just had one of those "tech week insomnia nights." Though, I have to say, not a good way to start a long week.

So...the book jacket probably has the best descriptions of the book...I'm not going to try and improve upon their 1946 publishers; they will always do a better job than I ever will...

(Back cover): "Thomas Heggen's story *Night Watch* was an Atlantic Monthly "First" in April. This book continues the story of Mister Roberts, a man who found himself playing guardian angel, referee, and diplomat without portfolio to some hundred and eight odd men. As each new and more outrageous story was circulated, the legend grew up around him while his ship, the U.S.S. *Reluctant*, crossed and recrossed the tedious breadth of the Pacific."

(Inside front flap): "The U.S.S. *Reluctant* is a Naval Auxiliary – a cargo ship. She has none of the glamour of an Aircraft Carrier or a destroyer. She has never seen action. But her agonizingly uneventful months in the back-washes of the Pacific form the background for one of the most authentic, most moving, and at the same time, most humorous of novels...Lieutenant Roberts is Cargo Officer and First Lieutenant. He is typical of the idealistic reservist who expected to fight for his country, but found himself far behind the front lines. Respected and liked by everyone but the captain, he is the one individual who keeps the ship together...The other officers and men are an embittered but likeable group who spend their time waging an incessant guerrilla warfare against the captain. Perhaps this situation was caused by the pigheaded captain himself, or perhaps it was born of the need for an obsessional pastime. In any case, it led to a long series of hilarious events that helped break up the monotony...Throughout all this **MISTER ROBERTS** does his quiet job, welcomed in every officer's stateroom, worshipped by the crew. His fight is none the less real because it is waged against those nebulous adversaries: apathy, tedium, boredom. 'He has geared himself to the tempo of his ship...with gallantry, courage, and fortitude. Perhaps he is a kind of a hero.' No one who reads his story will doubt that heroism."

Anyway, this is a great book. I really loved its humor, its insight, and its message. I was pleasantly surprised by how frank it was, i.e. the peeping sailors on the nurse ship and the great story about the dimwitted sailor from Rapid City, SD, who got the clap and the ship's Doctor's advice that he keep it because it would make him famous.

Lastly, I'll leave this review with a long quote from the end of the book that I really think sums up Heggen's writing and the wonderfulness of this book:

"Roberts saw all these things in separate scenes, as though they were the changing slides of a stereoscope. And now, suddenly, the series of the tumultuous cities clicked out and in its place came a very different scene. It was a scene Roberts recognized from its origin as a picture in Life magazine. (My knowledge of the war comes straight from Life, he thought ironically.) There was a field in France, and a farmer was harrowing this field, walking behind the harrow. The furrowed rows were very straight, except in the middle of the field, where they broke and gave way for the mounded grave of a British Tommy. It looked like lovely country, green with trees, with the soft haze of distant hills in the background. The rows of the harrow detoured for just the area of the grave and then they ran on straight and unswerving. It was that way the war, too, had moved off and left the Tommy. The grave looked lonely in the bright sunshine. The dead, Roberts mused, what could you say for the dead of this war? What could you really say? Well, there were a lot of things you could say automatically and without thought, but they were all the wrong things; and just this once, just this one war, anyhow, let us try to say true things about the dead. Begin by cancelling the phrase, 'our honored dead': for that is not true – we forget them, we do not honor them but in rhetoric – and the phrase is the badge of those who want something of the dead. If the dead of this war must have a mutual encomium, then let it be 'poor dead bastards.' There is at least a little humanity in that. And let us not say of them, this time, 'they gave their lives' for something or other; for certainly there was nothing voluntary in their dying. And neither is it fair to speak of 'dead heroes,' for not at all necessarily does the fact of death include the fact of heroism. Some of these dead were shining youth scornful of the sanctity of their own lives, who lived daily with terror rarefied by inevitability and died with a flawless gesture of self-immolation: and other died as the result of injuries sustained in falling through a privy. But, thought Roberts, if they did not live equally, they are every one equally dead; and you could say this affirmative thing of all: that in a war of terrifying consequence and overwhelming agony, they participated one hundred per cent. That was the only true thing you could say for all, but it was enough. The war demanded the shortening of how many – two million, five hundred and sixty thousand, two hundred and fourteen? – lives, and these men were chosen. So pile them high at Austerlitz and Waterloo and Ypres and Verdun, and add a few new places, Aachen and Dunkerque and Anzio; only do not talk lies about the dead. They are chosen." (165-166)

Robert Poor says

"Mister Roberts" by Thomas Heggen is a terrific example of Classic Naval Literature. There are numerous published versions of this novel; I recommend one published by the Naval Institute Press, a great organization and a wonderful protector of Naval tradition.

I had a Naval Postgraduate School Professor who once told me that progressing through a Naval career was like sliding down a long pipe. At the beginning, each of us has our own unique edges and shapes and quirks, but by the time we progress through the end of the pipe, each of those edges and burrs and individual anomalies are smoothed off by the friction and constraints of the pipe. Perhaps it is for that reason, the Navy that I've always loved isn't that of the steely-eyed warrior standing nobly at the conn while making calm decisions in the midst of chaos - that's certainly great stuff and requires personnel made of, in the words of Tom Wolfe, the Right Stuff. But the Navy I prefer is the skeevier one, the Navy where the best part of the day is experiencing the lunacy and randomness that results in a doozy of a sea-story told later, preferably in an overseas bar, slightly exaggerated, to an appreciative, raucous, rabid, responsive crowd of shipmates,

friends, neer-do-wells, and just-met hangers on.

The two cruises I completed while at the Naval Academy were perfect examples of the awesomeness of the backwater navy. My Youngster cruise occurred aboard an Ammunition Ship in 1982, just back from Thailand and not yet quite on board with the then-CNO's policy of Zero Tolerance. I realized then that supply ships have better chow than combatants, and so for my First Class cruise I chose an AFS where we ate like kings while cruising from Norfolk to Guantanamo Bay. I learned to play cards and throw dice, and realized that the real Navy was a lot funkier than the Naval Academy.

Tom Heggen's novel "Mister Roberts," first published to instant acclaim in 1946 as the country caught its collective breath after World War II, is a charming collection of vignettes based on his experiences aboard USS Virgo (AKA-20) transiting around the beautiful, sleepy, steamy harbors of the South Pacific Islands during the war. Before the war he had been an editor for "Readers Digest," returning there after his hitch in the Navy. Later, his novel became a wildly successful Broadway Play and later still a classic Hollywood picture.

Mr. Heggen gets the details of the tedium of being at sea exactly right. It's stunning to see how similar his experiences from nearly seventy years ago match up to mine, or certainly to those of any dewy-eyed ensign just out of Office Candidate School and suddenly finding himself a couple thousand miles away from mom and hundred miles away from the nearest bit of land, perhaps somewhere in the Marianas or Society Islands. A sample:

'The [USS] Reluctant, as was said, is a naval auxiliary. It operates in the back areas of the Pacific. In its holds it carries food and trucks and dungarees and toothpaste and toilet paper. For the most part it stays on its regular run, from Tedium to Apathy and back; about five days each way. It makes an occasional trip to Monotony, and once it made a run all the way to Ennui, a distance of two thousand nautical miles from Tedium. It performs its dreary and unthanked job, and performs it, if not inspiredly, then at least adequately.'

From Tedium to Apathy ... Perfect!

After the war, Thomas Heggen returned to work at Reader's Digest, while helping craft his novel (1946), then play (1948) into worldwide smashes. One would have thought that the world was his oyster. However, by 1949 Heggen took his own life before he turned thirty. USS Virgo, the ship he immortalized as the Reluctant, outlived him in fiction and fact. After the war, as noted in the afterward of the version I read, USS Virgo 'made numerous trips between the West Coast and American Pacific bases. When the Korean War broke out, she made three round trips to that theater, carrying mostly ammunition for ships bombarding the Korean coast, including the carrier Valley Forge (CV-45) and the cruisers Juneau (CA-119) and Saint Paul (CA-73). From 1954 through 1961, Virgo was a Pacific workhorse, based at Guam. Deactivated in 1961, she came back into service in 1965, but with a change she lost her attack cargo designation and became an ammunition ship, AE30. The Virgo went to Taiwan scrap yard in 1973. That's a place the USS Reluctant will never go.'

Reluctant will live on forever in the laughter in the rafters of smoky overseas dives wherever sailors gather to hoist a few cold ones, swap a few whoppers, and celebrate the rich tradition of esprit de corps.

Here's one to you, Mr. Heggen.

Paul Samuelson says

My dad was a Navy man who loves this book and the movie that followed. Once I read the book, it was an instant favorite. The story is filled with humor and insights into life on a ship in the Pacific far from the action of WWII. It's a book I go back to a lot just to read a few pages, which always lifts me into a great mood.

Blaine says

Lol,,I seem to be re-reading many of the books from my younger years. This was one of my favourite books. The characters are fantastic. Lt Doug Roberts, his detractor in the Captain and the wannabe Dougs. It will take you through a wide variety of emotions but it will put a smile on your face when you think about the relationships between the characters.

Ramzi says

Book #3 in the shelf experiment

I found Mister Roberts to be a surprisingly interesting story that dealt with life on a Navy supply ship at the tail end of WWII. Contrary to the battles being waged elsewhere, the crew of the USS Reluctant (yeah, absurd name) couldn't live a more sedate life, traveling from friendly island to island, delivering goods and not much else. The book consists of ten or so chapters that pretty much break down into individual short stories about certain crew members and their experiences. We don't see the mythologized version of the heroic soldier but instead are witness to the exploits of the apathetic and hedonistic. The lone standout, of course, is Lt. Roberts, a universally loved officer who gave up a promising medical career to enlist only to find himself thousands of miles away from the action and duty he so desired. We come to see Roberts' case as a sad one but that quickly changes when after three years, he's granted orders to join a battleship in the Pacific. I'll leave out what happens next (should you decide to read the book) but will say that this curious little book turned out to be more satisfying than expected.

Note: According to the jacket, this was adapted into an award winning play starring Henry Fonda.

Stephen says

[foreshadowing as his protagonist also dies on the cusp of achieving something big. (hide spoiler)]

L. says

The book is perhaps not as great as the movie adaptation but then young, ex-GI Heggen didn't have the talents of Fonda, Lemon and Cagney to bring his characters their additional embellishments. What the book does have is authenticity and I'd recommend it to anyone who's considering spending time in the service.

Life aboard ship is not always the harrowing adventure tale that we see in movies and read about in books. This novel gives the reader a sense of the quieter side of military life. And of men in war. By all means, if you liked the play or the movie, then check out the book, but don't expect too much more depth than what made it into celluloid.

Jerry says

Mister Roberts was one of a slew of books published by rising American authors immediately after the end of World War II. These young men had served in the war and drew from their experiences in the conflict as an initial introduction to their work. For young writer Thomas Heggen it brought instant fame and praise, and later personal tragedy. The book is ok, the story is original (one of the greatest battles in war can be the fight against boredom and monotony), however, the resulting movie is more interesting than the book. If not for the popularity of the movie, this book would be forgotten. As it is, it isn't much more than a literary asterisk. That's my story and I'm stickin' to it!
