



The Eleventh Man

Ivan Doig

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A Novel. Driven by the memory of a fallen teammate, Treasure State University's 1941 starting lineup went down as legend in Montana football history, charging through the season undefeated. Two years later, the "supreme Team" is caught up in World War II. . .

The Eleventh Man Details

Date : Published October 13th 2008 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (first published September 4th 2008)

ISBN : 9780151012435

Author : Ivan Doig

Format : Hardcover 406 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Sports and Games, Sports, War, World War II

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From Reader Review The Eleventh Man for online ebook

Dr T says

This is another absolutely marvelous book by one of the greatest American writers of the past 50 years, the late Ivan Doig. He had the ability of telling stories that would keep the reader glued to the pages until the very end, and would make the reader feel that he personally knew the characters he wrote about. Frequently while reading, I would encounter sentences so powerful, so good at conveying images, whether of landscapes or of events or of people, that I would pause and reread those sentences.

This book involves a journalist who was a member of the Supreme Team, the undefeated football team of Treasure State University in the 1941 season. The starting 11 members of that team all entered into service at the beginning of the US involvement in WWII. One of the team members was an already-accomplished journalist, and was assigned by a military publicity agency to cover the activities of the other 10 team members through the war. The book follows those activities and the lives of the principal players through that period. Altogether, this book is one of the best I've read in the last several years. Unfortunately, there is only one of Doig's novels that I have yet to read.

Lucy says

Sometimes, I know exactly how I'll review a book and can hardly wait to get my thoughts down. Other times, like, this time in particular, a book is so lost in that foggy middle between good and bad, that my thoughts never seem articulate. I've avoided writing about *The Eleventh Man*, by Ivan Doig, for over a month now. I've got eight books dammed up behind it, waiting their turn for review.

I grew up looking at Ivan Doig titles in my parent's living room. Surprisingly, it wasn't until a few years ago that I finally read the first of his Montana trilogy, *Dancing At The Rascal Fair*. That experience taught me that Doig is in no hurry to entertain his readers. Rather, a lot like growing up in Montana, he rewards those who endure.

With this in mind, I began *The Eleventh Man*, Doig's latest novel. Ben Reinking grew up understanding how the world of journalism worked as his father owned the local paper in Gros Ventre, Montana. With a degree in journalism from Treasure State University, where he was also a member of "The Supreme Team" 1941 championship football team, he enlists in the armed forces as a pilot. Before he is finished with his training, however, he is given an assignment a war correspondent for the Threshold Press War Project. When the war department learns that the entire eleven members of "The Supreme Team" are enlisted in the war, they propagandize the situation into a opportunity to create war heroes. Ben travels around, visiting his old teammates where they are serving and writes a regular column, spinning tales of bravery and American pride. While waiting for his different travel assignments, he spends his time at East Base outside of Great Falls, Montana. There, he falls in love with Cass Standish, a married female pilot in the Women's Airforce Service Pilot (WASP. There really were female pilots. I had no idea!)

When his columns turn into obituaries as teammate after teammate falls, Ben is forced into understanding that nothing is fair in love and war.

An interesting enough look at WWII, but there is something almost too planned about this book to make it satisfying. It's almost as if I could see his brainstorm page lying somewhere on a table - "I'll have one guy

serving in Italy. This guy in the Pacific. Another one in London and another storming Normandy. I need a few to be stuck in the states to highlight what went on here, though. I know...I'll put one guy in the coast guard and another will be stuck flying back and forth to Alaska where I can write up the Russia angle. To tie them all together, I'll make them all old friends....no...teammates! Even better. And one will know what's going on with everyone else and he'll mainly be in Montana so I can still write about the area I know best!" A jaded opinion, but it felt that way.

If you love all things WWII, then you'd probably enjoy this book as well. If not, then read Doig's other books instead. They're better.

Jean says

Football hero tracks 10 teammates through service during World War II. Doig is a masterful story-teller. I don't often enjoy books written by men but Doig is an exception as is Wallace Stegner. I'll read anything they wrote. I'm reading this one aloud to John while we travel so it will take awhile to finish . . .

Lisa says

This book was selected by my book club to begin our theme of Montana authors. I found myself struggling to get into the story (I didn't even start highlighting passages until the second half!), but it was just compelling enough to keep me reading. The writing was well done, but I found both the military and football jargon along with changing scenes and narratives hard to follow. I did appreciate the myriad references to the Montana landscape and way of life as it related to my local knowledge. Set in WWII, it was a unique plot angle on what sometimes is an overworked era for novels. The main character's love interest was a refreshingly strong, independent woman who was a pilot with the Women's Air Force Program (WASP). The insights into the toll of war combined with the institution of war are worth further deliberation and make it a worthwhile read.

Suzanne Vincent says

Very nice writing, but it just didn't suck me in. I did not finish it.

I mean, it starts with a bus ride in which the main character spends the entire time musing. And while I'm on this bus with him, I'm thinking of all the things I could be doing on a long bus ride OTHER than musing.

Not a good start.

I gave it about 40 pages. That's all I could do. Every time I looked at the book I'd think of something else I'd rather be or should be doing.

Not a good sign.

I chalk it up to a lack of in-depth characterization and too much time spent by the characters musing while they're traveling or doing other things, rather than acting to move the story forward.

Phil says

This World War II novel is set in the late (he died today) Ivan Doig's fictional Gros Ventre, Montana community; the location and characters appear in other novels like **Bartender's Tale**. The novel's premise is that all eleven members of a football team that won a championship in 1941 volunteer for service in the war. Ben Reinking, the central POV character, and captain of the team, goes to flight school for the AAF but then is assigned as a war correspondent who will follow the angle of reporting on all the other members of the team in their various locations in combat and non-combat postings: nice premise for an episodic novel. Ben learns the ropes of wartime reporting, uncovers some truths about his teammates, and has a wartime romance into the bargain. Doig writes straightforward narrative with a few flashbacks. The novel would convert well into a long-form (8 episodes would do) cable TV series for people who liked **Band of Brothers** and who will learn again that war is hell.

Sandy T says

After absolutely loving *The Whistling Season*, I was anxious to read Ivan Doig's latest book. It sounded interesting: After a championship season in the 1940's, eleven college football players enlist in the service following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. One of them is chosen to be a war correspondent and is assigned to follow the stories of each of his teammates throughout the war.

I almost quit this book I don't know how many times. I just kept thinking it was a dud. Too much war and football--subjects I'm not that interested in anyway. (I don't know what I was thinking... isn't that what I knew it was about?) But I just kept reading a few chapters at a time, I guess mainly because I've got to keep my foot up following surgery anyway...

Doig really hit the mark on taking you back to the forties. (So much so even that there was lots of lingo used that I didn't know.) I learned a lot about the war I didn't know, and even some things I didn't want to know. I did enjoy learning about the WASPs (women pilots who flew planes for the US military in non-combat roles) who took such pride in being excellent pilots, but when the war was over, went back to being housewives because the pilot jobs were needed for the men coming home.

In the end, the reason I think I had a hard time reading it is because Doig depicts wartime during World War Two SO accurately. And the reality of war is hard and heartbreaking and pointless and incredibly sad, and this book was all of that. And so I'm giving it 3 stars not because it isn't remarkably written, but because it depressed me so much...

Tim says

"Sure, you could believe for all you were worth that you were too young and fit and lucky to be chased down by death, but all of accumulated history yawns back, 'Why not you?'" — from *"The Eleventh Man"*

Ivan Doig's previous novel, the terrific *"The Whistling Season"* (2006) casts a long shadow, and *"The Eleventh Man"* never escapes from it to soak up some sun, but that doesn't make this World War II tale a bad

one. It's Doig, so of course it's good. In the "The Eleventh Man" the starting 11 from a legendary (fictional) Montana college football team (!) are upset — big time — by the law of averages on the homefront and in war-torn areas of the globe. The U.S. military propaganda machine picks Ben Reinking, son of a newspaper editor, to chronicle the wartime exploits of his 10 former teammates in puff pieces designed to appear in small-town newspapers across the country, an effort to boost morale. The odds say the vast majority of these men will make it through alive, but there are no oddsmakers at the end of a gun or flying a plane or on a ship when a kamikaze pilot attacks. Ben chafes against his superiors as he travels forth and back to his former teammates: on the U.S. West Coast patrolling for Japanese submarine crews seeking fresh water; in battles in Guam and the Battle of the Bulge; flying ships from Montana to Alaska to hand over to the Russians. All the while Ben pursues a relationship with a female pilot — a WASP — married to a soldier serving overseas.

Like nearly all of Doig's work, Montana is central to the tale. And although there are several exciting battle scenes, this isn't an action/adventure book at its heart. Doig goes small instead of big; Ben's struggles of conscience and the gut-punch horror of these men's deaths, one by one, are the focus, not battle-hero stuff. Ben thinks, "The damned odds again. Why can't the numbers just behave and quit giving out coincidences like card tricks?" And the deaths of so many men with one common tie does seem like a tremendous stretch, the dramatic license of a novelist. But in the acknowledgements at the back of the book Doig reveals that 11 starting players from a Montana college apparently did, in fact, die in World War II! Truth as strange as fiction.

Doig's writing here, while of course good, doesn't seem as evocative as it was in "The Whistling Season." And "The Eleventh Man" suffers a bit from the bouncing around from man to man as Ben follows the teammates at home and abroad. At just over 400 pages, and with 11 players and a host of other characters, we simply don't have enough time to get to know everyone. The novel would have worked better much longer, more detailed. A more epic treatment with the same real-person tone would have been more moving. But, hell, Doig's 70 years old! He probably just wants to make sure he finishes!

Carolyn says

This book is read by the same reader who read *Bucking the Sun*, and I also had trouble staying interested in this one. I don't know if it's the reader or if it's the fact that this one, like *Bucking the Sun*, doesn't really have much to do with the Two Medicine country. This one does mention a number of characters from other novels, such as Carnelia Craig from *The Whistling Season*, Tom Harry from *Bucking the Sun*, and who, I understand is the focus of the next book, and Alex McCaskill, from *English Creek*, but none is essential. Little treats for readers of the other books. The story is, I believe, based on the true story of an entire college football team who enlisted for WWII and died there, all but one. That's an interesting premise, but in reading this book, you know what's coming, and we end up with a whole series of stories about how each one died, one after the other. A little on the grim side!

Chris says

Update 11/10/17 - Bumping this up to 4 stars. As I guessed in my review, this book really had stuck with me over the past year. I still often think of Ben and his teammates.

3.5 stars

In the fall of 1941 a Montana university football team goes undefeated. Within the year, all 11 starters will have become involved in World War II. A couple will already have been killed. Dubbed the "Supreme Team," it becomes Ben Reinking's military job to chronicle what happens to his gridiron buddies for a Pentagon propaganda unit. According to the law averages, most of the men should find their way home to Montana safe at the end of the war. If you believe in the law averages. Ben sees enough to make him doubt it. By the end of the book, I too was questioning the hand of fate.

I liked this book, despite being somewhat overwritten. I think it's going to be one of those types of stories that stays with me for a long time. I liked Ben and the emotions he has to go through. It's tough to remember these guys were only in their early 20s.

Karen Waldron says

This was a tough read. Every so often I try authors I've never heard of, or that someone might recommend. I got this off the Library book sale shelf as I had never read anything by Doig before. And as a fan of historical fiction set in WWII, I chose this particular one of his books that were available. Sadly.

I've now gone in and read other reviews and have to concur with many of them that this book is just not all that. It was so hard to get into. Doig does not describe anything concisely and drones on and on. It was like slogging through knee deep mud. And the character development is sorely lacking. I found myself speed reading (skipping through) those sections where detail (about football and war) was gotten into ad nauseum and needlessly. About halfway in I was going to throw in the towel, but was invested enough at that point that I wanted to know how things ended. Though it was fairly predictable until the very few last pages, I'm glad I finished it. Not because it was worth my time, but I really do hate giving up on a book.

From the reviews this was not one of Doig's better novels, but I am so turned off by his style of writing that it is doubtful I will ever read anything else he has done.

Stephanie Pieck says

As usual, I'm late to the celebration of this book. But I'd be willing to bet that most authors would rather have their books continually being read, not just read by a mess of people when they first come out and then ... Since a lot of ink has already been spilled by others on this book, I'll keep my comments brief. I can sum up the book this way: beautiful writing, descriptions of a truly American landscape (Montana) during World War II, and a well-crafted story populated with fully-realized characters. There was so much to love about this book that I went at it like two of its main characters, Ben and Cass: once started, I couldn't stop--and didn't want to! And now that I'm done and it's over, I don't regret any of it ... except for wishing it could go on forever.

Shorewalker says

Once again, one of my favorite authors uses his considerable skills to craft together a story unlike others he has written. This tale follows a group of young men off to war as told by one of their team members - the Eleventh Man. This book has a haunting about it as each man's story is unfolding, connecting past with

present where there is no future!

Often as one reads they hope for a different outcome, we are even given glimpses of what they might be, but alas the author has a different meaning for us. Well researched, we are taken to many different venues of World War II, each well researched, each with outcomes that should not be, but that is where reality comes into play in this novel. Disturbing as war is this novel leaves you with even more to think about.

Ilene Harris says

In this historical novel which takes place in 1943, Ben Reinking is in the air force, serving as a war correspondent during World War 2. Two years prior in 1941 Ben played left end on the undefeated Treasure State University football team in Montana. All eleven members of the starting team joined the armed forces and saw action in the war zones of the Pacific and Europe. Ben's job was to write about what each teammate was doing during the war, publicizing the transformation of football heroes to war time heroes to improve national morale. But while doing this, Ben was still haunted by the death of one of the non-starting teammates who met an untimely death during football practice, and sought to find out what actually happened. This book was able to reveal just how terrible the war was, and the effect it had on young men.

Stephanie says

The Eleventh Man, by Ivan Doig (finalist for 1979 National Book Award and nominee for 2008 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award), was heartbreaking. Mr. Doig tells the (fictional) story of the eleven starting members of the 1941-season undefeated football team of the (fictional) Treasure State University of Montana. Each and every one of them volunteered for service in WWII in some form or another, and the best writer among them, Ben Reinking, is plucked from his pilot duty to become war propagandist extraordinaire, drafted into the service of writing about his former teammates' war service. Ben senses an invisible hand behind his assignment, and, indeed, behind the orders that each of his teammates must obey.

I can't help but compare this book to the others I've recently read, namely, (snigger) Twilight, by Stephenie Meyer, and two of John Updike's Rabbit books (sigh). Unlike Ms. Meyer's book, Mr. Doig's characters and plot are believable, as are the all-too-human relationships he depicts. And Mr. Doig's writing is infinitely more erudite and interesting than Ms. Meyer's. While Mr. Updike's books fired up in me the same *degree* of heartbreaking emotion that Mr. Doig's did, the feeling that Mr. Updike inspired was despair while Mr. Doig inspired hope -- albeit hope shining through my tears for all those brave young men and women who died in WWII. Rabbit Angstrom is simply such an empty-souled, despicable man that he can do nothing more than drive me to despair, while Ben Reinking has a noble heart, flawed hero that he is.
