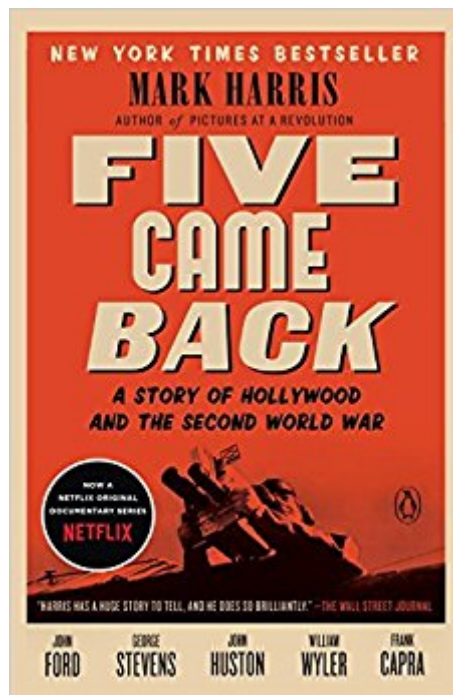




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# Five Came Back: A Story Of Hollywood And The Second World War



## Synopsis

Now a Netflix original documentary series, also written by Mark Harris, premiering on March 31, 2017: the extraordinary wartime experience of five of Hollywood's most important directors, all of whom put their stamp on World War II and were changed by it forever. Here is the remarkable, untold story of how five major Hollywood directors—John Ford, George Stevens, John Huston, William Wyler, and Frank Capra—changed World War II, and how, in turn, the war changed them. In a move unheard of at the time, the U.S. government farmed out its war propaganda effort to Hollywood, allowing these directors the freedom to film in combat zones as never before. They were on the scene at almost every major moment of America's war, shaping the public's collective consciousness of what we've now come to call the good fight. The product of five years of scrupulous archival research, *Five Came Back* provides a revelatory new understanding of Hollywood's role in the war through the life and work of these five men who chose to go, and who came back. "Five Came Back . . . is one of the great works of film history of the decade." —Slate "A tough-minded, information-packed and irresistibly readable work of movie-minded cultural criticism. Like the best World War II films, it highlights marquee names in a familiar plot to explore some serious issues: the human cost of military service, the hypnotic power of cinema and the tension between artistic integrity and the exigencies of war." —The New York Times

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** It's hardly news that the movies affect and are affected by the broader

canvas of popular culture and world history, but Harris—perhaps more successfully than any other writer, past or present—manages to find in that symbiotic relationship the stuff of great stories. He turned that unlikely trick in *Pictures at a Revolution* (2008), about the five Best Picture nominees in 1967 and how they defined a sea change in Hollywood and in society at large, and he does it again here. The number is once more five, but this time it's five acclaimed directors who went to war in the 1940s to make propaganda films and came home changed by what they saw and what they did. The stories of what John Ford, George Stevens, John Huston, William Wyler, and Frank Capra did in the war are dramatic (Ford filming the opening salvo in the Battle of Midway from a rooftop; Wyler riding along on bombing missions over Germany; Stevens filming the horrific scenes at Dachau), but they are also stories of personal redemption, frustration, and even dishonesty (Huston receiving acclaim for the authenticity of his documentary *San Pietro*, which was made up almost entirely of reenactments). Every chapter contains small, priceless nuggets of movie history (Joseph Goebbels thought Wyler's *Mrs. Miniver* was "an exemplary propaganda film" and hoped the Germans could copy it), and nearly every page offers an example of Harris's ability to capture the essence of a person or an event in a few, perfectly chosen words (describing Huston as a "last-call bon vivant"). Narrative nonfiction that is as gloriously readable as it is unfailingly informative. --Bill Ott --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Mr. Harris has a huge story to tell, and he does so brilliantly, maintaining suspense in a narrative whose basic outcome will be known ahead of time. *Five Came Back* is packed with true stories that, according to the proverb, are stranger than fiction. Mr. Harris's story of five particular directors at one particular moment of history tells us much about the motion-picture industry, about the nature of filmmaking and, more generally, about the relation of art to the larger demands of society . . . [A]n inspirational, if cautionary, tale of the triumph of the individual over the collective, of personal vision over groupthink, and ultimately of art over propaganda." --The Wall Street Journal "Five Came Back" . . . is one of the great works of film history of the decade." --Slate "A tough-minded, information-packed and irresistibly readable work of movie-minded cultural criticism. Like the best World War II films, it highlights marquee names in a familiar plot to explore some serious issues: the human cost of military service, the hypnotic power of cinema and the tension between artistic integrity and the exigencies of war." --The New York Times "Five Came Back, by Mark Harris, has all the elements of a good movie: fascinating characters, challenges, conflicts and intense action. This is Harris's second

brilliant book about movies. Both books demonstrate meticulous research and exceptional skill at telling intersecting and overlapping stories with clarity and power. —The Washington Post —“A splendidly written narrative.” —The New Yorker —“Can’t-put-it-down history of World War II propaganda film.” —San Francisco Chronicle —“Meticulously researched, page-turning.” —The Los Angeles Times —“Definitive. In these lush, informative pages, Harris indeed reaffirms his commitment to writing the old-fashioned way, the way that evinces profound respect for his craft, his material and his readers.” —Cleveland Plain Dealer —“It’s hardly news that the movies affect and are affected by the broader canvas of popular culture and world history, but Harris —perhaps more successfully than any other writer, past or present — manages to find in that symbiotic relationship the stuff of great stories. Every chapter contains small, priceless nuggets of movie history, and nearly every page offers an example of Harris’s ability to capture the essence of a person or an event in a few, perfectly chosen words. Narrative nonfiction that is as gloriously readable as it is unfailingly informative.” —Booklist (starred) —“A comprehensive, clear-eyed look at the careers of five legendary directors who put their Hollywood lives on freeze-frame while they went off to fight in the only ways they knew how. As riveting and revealing as a film by an Oscar winner.” —Kirkus Reviews —“Insightful. Harris pens superb exegeses of the ideological currents coursing through this most political of cinematic eras, and in the arcs of his vividly drawn protagonists — we see Hollywood abandoning sentimental make-believe to confront the starkest realities.” —Publishers Weekly —“Harris surpasses previous scholarship on the directors who are the focus here.” —This well-researched book is essential for both film enthusiasts and World War II aficionados. —Library Journal

With the new documentary coming out soon, this is the best time to buy a copy of this book. It’s a fascinating look at Hollywood past, and how wartime politics shaped the careers of five similar-yet-different directors. It’s an insightful time capsule for movie buffs, and I highly recommend it. (When I finished reading it, I gave my copy to my dad, and he liked it too. This seems like a pretty solid “dad gift.”)

really enjoyed Mark Harris’ first book, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*, about the changes in the movie industry in the late 60s. It was with great anticipation that I read his latest, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (2014) which combines two of my greatest interest-films and WWII history. Harris follows five Hollywood

directors (John Ford, William Wyler, John Huston, Frank Capra, and George Stevens) who enlist in the armed forces and make propaganda films and record events that take place during the war. It is a rich subject, but it felt as though most of the events that took place during the war were mired in bureaucratic red tape and doesn't make for the most compelling reading. Furthermore, most of the directors depicted in this book don't come off as heroes of the cinema: Ford and Capra in particular come off as a medal-chasing dictatorial drunk and a malleable soft-headed nationalist respectively. Huston is shown as a womanizing cheat, Wyler almost loses his hearing completely and George Stevens, the director I knew the least about is profoundly affected by bearing witness and documenting the liberation of the Dachau Prison Camp that is used as evidence of atrocities at the Nuremberg trials. I suppose it would be impossible but I should like to see a book that follows Japanese directors such as Ozu, who served in the war as well. I found the sections where Huston is assigned to the Aleutian Island War interesting, since it is a campaign I knew little about much like that of the North African campaign that ended with the battle of Tunisia that Stevens arrived too late to film. Ford got some great film at Midway and Huston made a film about the Italy invasion among other highlights. Harris meticulously uses primary and secondary sources to give a detailed picture of the lives of the directors before, during, and after the war. It's another fascinating book about American cinema and the Second World War.

Mark Harris's *Five Came Back* is a first rate piece of historical reporting; the book details how five (John Ford, John Huston, George Stevens, William Wyler, Frank Capra) well known directors (and in the case of Capra and Ford, arguably Hollywood's two most powerful directors) joined the military in WW II and what each of them went through. It takes some time to get going and there are moments in the first third where it feels over-detailed, but Harris maintains a critical eye throughout and never allows himself to dip into mushy praise for any of the filmmakers' films, before, during and after the war (he's particularly strong on the documentary films where these directors re-enacted battle scenes without fully acknowledging it, the most famous being Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* which has almost no actual footage, though Huston refused to his death to admit that and always made it seem like he was there to witness the battle, which he was not) and he includes a short chapter on their post war careers with astute insights about the ways in which their experiences did (and in Capra's case did not) influence their post war films. It's no surprise that Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* is the most personal of the

post-war films and he manages to make all three main characters in some ways an extension of himself. Mostly, their experiences were far more harrowing than I imagined, particularly for Wyler and Stevens. Though none of the five was ever in serious danger of dying, Wyler lost most of his hearing while shooting footage on a B17 and Stevens who seems the most affected by the war (he was considered a master of the light comedy before the war and never made another after), shot an immense amount of film during the liberation of Dachau, something he never really fully recovered from emotionally. Significantly, Wyler and Stevens are the two who are least enamored of returning to Hollywood after the war, they weren't sure they could return to a normal life and both struggled when they finally did, Stevens in particular. The book is full of information I knew little about. For example, I didn't know that Stevens' footage of Dachau played an important part in the Nuremberg trials (it seems to me that much of the footage we have of the residue of the Holocaust -- the piles of bodies, the bulldozing of those bodies -- came from Stevens and his people) or that Capra really never left Washington DC. There's nothing here about Ford that would surprise anyone, he was devoutly pro-military and joined up before anyone else, got himself into a position of power early on, hooking himself to William Donovan's OSS train (Donovan provided a lot of cover for Ford over the years of the war), and understood how to play the system. The most important footage he shot was of the Battle of Midway and though he claimed credit for all the footage shot, he actually shot only a small part of it. He also in later years seriously inflated his experiences and while his unit was deeply involved in filming D-Day and Ford claimed to be the first filmmaker to hit the beach, Harris thinks it unlikely he actually left the ships in the English Channel until at least a couple of days after the initial invasion. Harris also thinks that the vitriol which Ford directed at John Wayne for not joining up (and Ford's incessant trolling for medals post war) masked guilt at not having done enough during the war. And though Capra is seen as a preening neurotic (and his career seems the most ruined by the war; of the five, he was the one who struggled the most to figure out how to integrate his experience with his work and beyond *It's a Wonderful Life*, which was a box office failure, never made another significant film) whose films pre-war in particular were confused politically, mostly because Capra was confused politically (for example, in 1937, he supported Franco's fascists in Spain), he comes off better than Huston, who joined up because he wanted an adventure, saw a tiny bit of battle (mostly some dead bodies), freaked out, and started drinking and whoring like a mad-man and generally was in way over his head and desperate to get back to his Hollywood career, though he undoubtedly did some interesting work during the war (most notably a documentary about vets and post traumatic

stress, which clearly Huston was also suffering under, which was a serious effort than no one saw until the 70s). It's also amazing how many Hollywood figures crossed their paths during the war as part of the military; writers, directors and cinematographers in particular, and at various times these five worked with Gregg Toland, Budd Schulberg, John Sturges, Mel Blanc, Chuck Jones, Carol Reed, Paddy Chayefsky, Carl Foreman, Anatole Litvak, William Clothier, Dr. Suss, Frank Tashlin, Stuart Heisler, Garson Kanin, William Keighley. At one point, Stevens runs into Andre Malraux and his band of resistance fighters (he said Malraux's men were fanatically loyal to him), at another, Wyler via Stevens employs Hemingway's brother (said to be fearless) as his Jeep driver on a harrowing drive to his home town in Germany, a place he left in the early 30s because of growing anti-semitism. It's a book well worth reading.

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