

BOOKS

GOOD READS

Richard Hopton on four novels that offer a fresh perspective on WWII

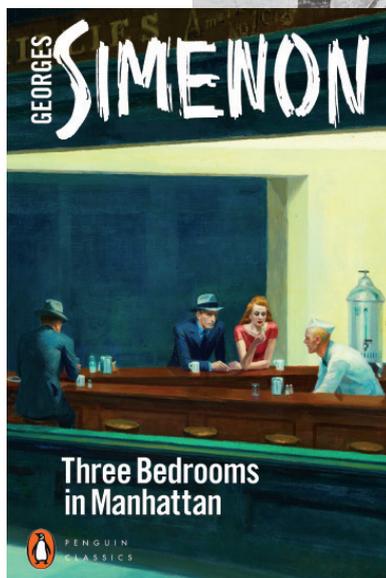
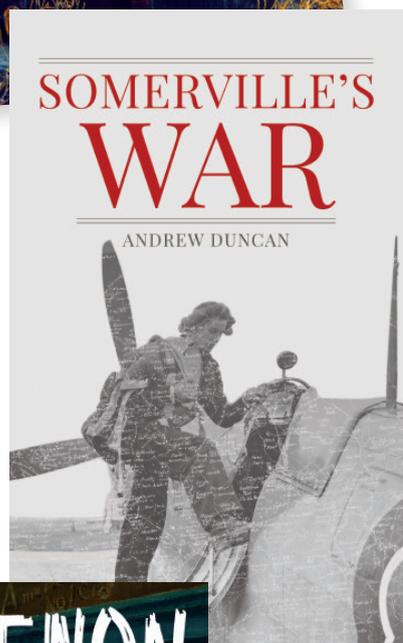
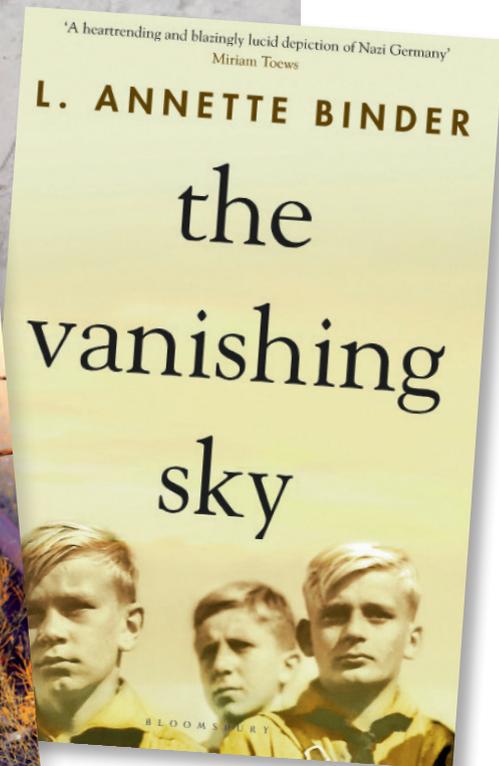
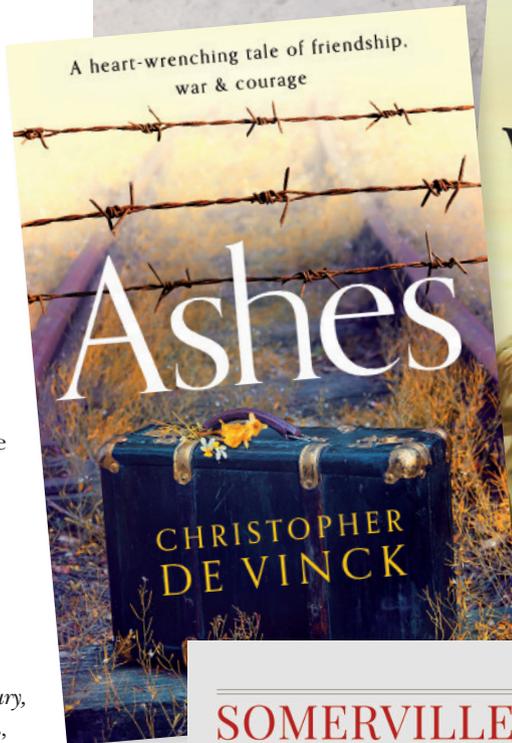
These four novels are birds of a feather: they are all set during the Second World War, three are first novels and they are each inspired by their author's families' wartime experiences. Moreover, they all look at the war from a slightly unconventional vantage point; the civilian and familial, the female and the non-combatant rather than the male and the martial. Total war affected entire populations, as these novels vividly illustrate.

The Vanishing Sky by L Annette Binder (*Bloomsbury*, £14.99) tells the story of a German family, the Hubers, charting its disintegration under the stress of war. It's a story about loss and the damage, mental, physical and material, which war causes and its terrible impact on every aspect of human life. The novel has an unfussy, understated feel – reflected in Binder's calm prose – that belies its powerful impact. It's alternately subtle and striking, quiet and then, suddenly, deafeningly loud. Ruminative pastoral scenes give way to a blazing account of an Allied air raid. She has an acute eye for detail: 'Just smoke and stones and dirty lace curtains' succinctly describes the aftermath of an air raid.

One theme that Binder's novel shares with **Ashes** by Christopher de Vinck (*HarperCollins*, £8.99), is the kindness of strangers to refugees in the direst of circumstances. The twelve-year-old Georg Huber is taken in by an elderly peasant woman and a kindly priest during his wanderings across war-torn Germany. Likewise, the young heroine of *Ashes*, a refugee from Brussels, is sheltered by a wealthy widow in Biarritz.

Ashes is set in Brussels in 1940, as the Germans invade Belgium. It tells the story of two 18-year-olds, Simone and Hava. They are contrasting characters: Simone is sensible, grounded and practical, Hava a free spirit, whimsical and imaginative. De Vinck recreates vividly the mixture of blind panic, hopeless optimism and black despair with which the population reacted to the invasion. The moving spirit of the novel, however, is the genocidal antisemitism of the Nazi regime in all its brutality. It's a good story, vividly told, albeit in parts it would benefit from a lighter, less didactic touch.

Somerville's War by Andrew Duncan (*Vineyard Books*, £10.99) begins in Somerville, an imaginary town on England's south coast, closely corresponding to Beaulieu. The Special



Operations Executive (SOE) requisition a house as a training base, and the early chapters revolve around the residents, a disparate cast of toffs, misfits and oddballs and their new neighbours, who include Adrian Russell, a fictionalised Kim Philby. Once it leaves Somerville, the novel gets into its stride: young Leo Maxwell joins the ATA and starts flying Spitfires. There is a high-octane account of aerial combat over the Channel before the scene shifts to the covert SOE operation in occupied France that brings the story to an exciting climax.

Three Bedrooms in Manhattan by Georges Simenon (*Penguin Classics*, £8.99), first published in 1946, is an intense, atmospheric account of a passionate affair between François, a French actor whose career and life is on the slide, and Kay, a woman of middle European origins with a tangled background. Simenon brilliantly and sparsely recreates the New York of the time – the all-night diners, the sleazy bars, cheap hotels and threadbare apartments. It's a story about love and jealousy, about wildly oscillating emotions, desire and need, certainty and uncertainty, rationality and irrationality. Its claustrophobia heightens the emotions and sharpens the drama. In the midst of the big city, surrounded by millions of people, all that matters, Simenon seems to be saying, is a man and a woman in love. ■