



**Three Soldiers**

*John Dos Passos*

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Read by:	mb	Format:	MP3 CD in DVD case
Length:	14 hours 39 minutes	Catalog:	DB-1227
Language:	English	UPC:	0701236969467
Style:	Solo	MSLP:	\$11.99
Genre:	Fiction, War & Military		

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Like many young men at the time of the outbreak of the First World War, John Dos Passos was driven by idealism to serve and joined the Ambulance Corps. His experience there led to a rapid and profound disillusionment that eventually found expression in his second novel, *Three Soldiers*, which brought him some recognition when published in 1921. In this tale of three soldiers, each from different geographic regions and social milieus, Dos Passos found his satirical voice and crafted a searing denunciation of the military and its shameless exploitation of naïve young men. His soldiers endure the anxiety of long waits in sodden trenches that suddenly give way to battles that combine the timeless

practice of frontal assault with the mechanized efficiency of modern weapons, airplanes, and mustard gas.

*“Until Three Soldiers is forgotten and fancy achieves its inevitable victory over fact, no war story can be written in the United States without challenging comparison with it—and no story that is less meticulously true will stand up to it. At one blast it disposed of oceans of romance and blather. It changed the whole tone of American opinion about the war; it even changed the recollections of actual veterans of the war. They saw, no doubt, substantially what Dos Passos saw, but it took his bold realism to disentangle their recollections from the prevailing buncombe and sentimentality.”* - H. L. Mencken, Smart Set, 69, October 1922

**John Roderigo Dos Passos** (January 14, 1896 – September 28, 1970) was an American novelist best known for his books *Three Soldiers* (1921), *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and the three novels in his *U. S. A. Trilogy*, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936). He was born out of wedlock in Chicago; his father was a trust attorney of half Portuguese and Madeiran descent and his mother was a Virginian. He attended Choate School and Harvard College. After graduation in 1916 he left to study architecture and art in Spain. Within a year he had joined the Ambulance Corps and remained in Paris after the war studying anthropology at the Sorbonne. As a young man Dos Passos was an ardent social revolutionary who believed America was two nations, one rich and one poor. He traveled to Russia to study socialism in 1928 and was a leader of the left-leaning League of American Writers in the 1930’s. He soured on communism and socialism when his friend Jose Robles was murdered during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and as censorship and abridgement of civil liberties increasingly prevailed. His views moved steadily to the political right as he grew older. His last major work was an influential study *The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson* (1954). Norman Mailer said that “those three volumes of *U. S. A.* make up the idea of a ‘Great American novel’”. The Modern Library listed *U. S. A. Trilogy* at number 23 on its 1998 list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century.