

Teacher's Guide

Will at the Battle of Gettysburg 1863

by Laurie Calkhoven

About the Book

When the South secedes and the nation turns to war, young Will Edmonds dreams of enlisting as a drummer on the side of the North. But when his hometown of Gettysburg becomes the site of the largest, bloodiest battle ever fought on American soil, he reconsiders what it means to be a hero. Woven into Will's compelling story are a cast of real-life characters drawn from historical records, making the book a strong supplement or primary introduction to Civil War history.

About This Guide

This guide offers discussion questions and learning activities for students with diverse skills and a range of background knowledge. **Essential Questions** focus thinking on relevant themes and issues. **Before Reading** prompts engage students to increase comprehension. **For Discussion** questions check knowledge and understanding of what students have read; advanced questions challenge them to apply and evaluate ideas from the book. **Activities** for completion during or after reading promote cross-curricular learning and address multiple intelligences. Through the **Author Interview**, students explore the writer's perspective on her work.

Essential Questions

- What are the qualities of a hero?
- What makes people enemies?
- What happens when our dreams meet reality?
- Which freedoms are worth fighting for? In what ways besides war can these freedoms be defended?
- What are the costs of war?
- What are the best ways to settle differences?
- Who most deserves our loyalty: friends, family, country, ourselves?

Before Reading

- Before you begin reading, freewrite for at least a full page on what it means to be a hero.
- Using photos and drawings, make a collage of heroes. Write about your collage, telling what makes each person or character heroic.

- Working in a group, make a map or web of the reasons why people are enemies. Brainstorm as many reasons as you can. Discuss your map. Are there situations where there is no choice but to be enemies, or is there always a way to solve differences?
- Write a story in which you are the hero. Be ready to discuss what you do that's heroic and how your heroism is recognized. What do you imagine is the best thing about being a hero?
- What do you know about the Civil War? Make a chart with three sections. Label the sections "Know," "Want to Know," and "Learned." Fill in the "Learned" section during and after reading the book.
- Listen to music from the Civil War period, including the songs "Dixie" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Describe the music: Which instruments do you hear? How does the music make you feel? What does it make you think of? After reading the book, listen again. What new feelings, connections, and ideas do you now get from the music?

For Discussion: Knowledge

- Who was President during the Civil War?
- Who are Sally and Jane Ann?
- What happened to Jacob in Fredericksburg?
- What is Will's father doing in Washington D.C.?
- Who is Aunt Bess?
- How old is Will?
- When they come through Gettysburg, what do the Rebels do with the Union flag?
- What happened to Abel's father?
- What do the girls of the town do when the Union troops first come through Gettysburg?
- Where does Will take the general so he can get a better view of the fighting?
- Who from Will's family first goes to the Weikert farm?
- Where do the soldiers tell the townspeople to hide?
- Where does Will meet Colonel Braxton?
- What was in the wheelbarrow at the Weikert barn?
- Who was nicknamed "The Snapping Turtle"?
- After digging it up, to whom does Colonel Braxton give his saber?
- Jacob comes home with what disability?
- What wish comes true for Will on the day Lincoln makes his speech at Gettysburg?

For Discussion: Understanding

- What disadvantages did Robert E. Lee's Confederate army face?
- What was Lee's plan in moving his troops north?
- How did a drummer help the troops?
- Why does Molasses have to be hidden?
- Troops from which side first come through Gettysburg?
- Describe Will's first impression of the Rebs when he sees them.
- How does Will save Aunt Bess?
- How does Abel save Will the first time?
- After the Rebels pass through, Will says the town is completely cut off. What does he mean?
- Why doesn't Will's mother leave even after Mrs. Shriver says they'll be killed if they stay?
- What does Will fear might give away the soldier hiding in their cellar?
- What was Will's idea for getting an urgent message to General Meade?
- Why did a red "flag" hang from the Edmonds' window?
- How did Abel save Will's life a second time?
- How does Will get a surgeon to save Abel's life?
- What frightens Will when he first arrives at his house after the battle is over?
- When Will's mother passes Will on her way home from the courthouse, why doesn't she recognize him?
- Why was Colonel Braxton's saber buried in Will's backyard?

For Discussion: Application and Evaluation

- Why do you think Will daydreamed about war?
- Why does Will think the Rebs won't come to Gettysburg?
- Why doesn't Will get along with Grace?
- Based on what he did at Cal's farm, what kind of person is Will's father?
- Early in the book, Will says his father and brother would want him to join the army. Do you think he's right? Why or why not?
- What kind of person is Abel? How do you know?
- Should Will have invited Abel, his enemy, to supper? Why or why not?
- Pick three words to describe Will's mother. Give an example from the book to back up each of your choices.
- Will describes how the Union and Confederate soldiers who ate at their table acted like old friends. If you had been one of them, would you have done the same? Why or why not?
- Was it wrong for Abel to help Will? Why or why not?
- Will dreams of joining up with the Union army, but each time he's offered a chance, he turns it down. Do you think he made the right choice? Why or why not?
- Who won the Battle of Gettysburg? What impact did the battle have on the war?

Activities

- Does courage mean having no fear, or do courage and fear go hand in hand? Working alone or in a small group, make a visual about Will that addresses this question. Include at least three examples from the book. Present to the class.
- Pretend you are one of the others in the Edmonds household (besides Will) who was at Gettysburg during the thick of the battle. Assuming the voice of that character, write a half-page of what you observe and how you feel. Include as many sensory images as possible.
- Working alone or in a small group, make a visual that shows Gettysburg before and after the battle. Include at least three quotes from the book to post with the “before” part of the visual and three quotes to post with the “after” part of the visual.
- Make a list of what matters most to Will both before and after the Battle of Gettysburg. Organize each list from most important to least, from Will’s perspective. What differences, if any, do you notice?
- Will notes that he and Abel can disagree over the same issues the North and South disagreed on without wanting to kill each other. In what other ways besides fighting can conflicts be settled? List as many as possible. Then research the period before the Civil War to see which of these ways were attempted and with what results. Present your findings to the class.
- Though brief, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is one of the most powerful and enduring speeches by an American statesman. Working in a group, “translate” the Gettysburg Address so that a young listener can easily understand it. Then present the speech in its original version to the class, using visuals and good speaking skills (pauses, inflection, emphasis) to make sure the meaning is clear.
- Choosing one of the “historic characters” from the back of the book, write a one-page journal entry about the Battle of Gettysburg from that character’s point of view. The entry may be written either during the battle or shortly after, and the character’s perspective should reflect where he or she actually was during the battle. Date your journals and, after revising for accuracy, compile them in a class anthology.
- Return to any pre-reading activities you did on heroes and/or enemies. What new thoughts can you add after reading the book?

Author Interview

The Battle of Gettysburg was the bloodiest ever fought on American soil. How hard was it to research and write about the death and destruction?

I thought I knew a lot about the Civil War before I started doing the research for the book, but I only knew facts. I knew about guns and generals and the big movements of the war. Then I started reading about individual people, instead of armies, and that made learning about the killed and wounded more difficult. I believe that we had to go to war when all else failed, but it makes me sad that so many had to die to keep the Union together and to abolish slavery. The number of lives lost on both sides is overwhelming.

Tell us about the process of writing historical fiction. How much research do you do before you begin? How important are visits to historical places? At what point do you start crafting a fictional story around the historical facts?

I do a ton of research before I begin. I think I spent six months reading about the Civil War and the Battle of Gettysburg before I started writing. Reading firsthand accounts—including letters, diaries, and memoirs—was the most valuable research. History books tend to focus on generals and armies. I wanted to know about the battle from the point of view of the citizens. Going to Gettysburg was important too. Parts of town look just the way they did back in 1863. I was able to put my fingers into bullet holes in the sides of houses, stand under the same sycamore tree that provided shade for Will, and see the Stars and Stripes on the flagpole in the middle of the Diamond. Owen Robinson's confectionary and Petey Winter's candy store are both gone, but I did find a good ice cream shop!

While I'm researching, I'm always thinking about how to create a story and who my character will be. I jot down ideas, and at some point I know what my opening scene will be. From there I get to know my character, and then I learn everything I need to write his story.

How did you decide which real life historical figures needed to be part of Will's story?

The battle was so big and so complicated that I created an hour-by-hour timeline of what was happening and where the major historical figures were. As Will moved around the town and the battlefield, I checked my chart to see who would have been in the same place as Will. Those people became a part of the story.

In the book, Will discovers that his illusions about war are far different from the reality of war. Though you may not have been in a war, are there other situations in which you've discovered a gap between illusion and reality?

Like Will, I'm a big daydreamer, so there's a gap between illusion and reality in almost everything I daydream about! I took an acting class for writers not too long ago. Before I started, I was secretly convinced I'd go right from class to the Broadway stage. I was terrible! Taking the class made me a better writer. It helped me learn about creating characters. But no one is ever going to pay money to see me act.

Also like Will, I definitely think I'm going to be courageous in moments of real crisis or danger. I've been in a few scary situations in my life, and my overwhelming feeling was fear. I'm not sure I would have had been brave enough to do what Will did during the battle.

In what ways has researching and writing about the Battle of Gettysburg affected your thinking about the wars and conflicts that we hear about in today's news?

Like the American Revolution and the Civil War, the wars being fought today seem to come down to the issues of power and freedom. Someone has power—a king, a dictator, a tyrant, or a slave owner—and fights to keep it and have more of it. Individuals, of course, want freedom and will fight for that.

Wherever people are being denied liberty and basic human rights, they will eventually rise up against those in power. Unfortunately, the world seems to need to learn this lesson over and over and over again. Maybe one day we'll get it. I hope so.