

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Fighting Ground by Avi

Book Information

Avi, The Fighting Ground
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Thirteen-year-old Jonathan has long wanted to be a part of the war against the British, and one morning in 1778, he gets his chance.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Scott O'Dell Award

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Power Lessons AR, Grade 4; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Take Charge; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Wars, American Revolutionary War

Main Characters

Jonathan a thirteen-year-old boy who learns the harsh reality of what it means to be a soldier

Jonathan's father a farmer who was injured in a past battle and worries about Jonathan and his desire to be a soldier

Jonathan's older brother a young man who has not been heard from since he went off to war

the Corporal a seasoned soldier who calls for men to join him in battle to keep their town from falling to the British; he has no qualms about killing those who do not support the colonies

the French soldier a man in Jonathan's unit who is injured; he takes the young French boy to live with him in his home

the old Hessian a gruff enemy soldier who gives orders to the other two Hessians

the tall Hessian one of the three Hessian soldiers who captures Jonathan

the tavern keeper the man who lends Jonathan a gun for battle and makes Jonathan promise to return it

the young boy a French child who hides in a shed after his parents are murdered; Jonathan finds him and tries to help him

the young Hessian the enemy soldier who helps Jonathan bury the boy's parents and tries to communicate with Jonathan

Vocabulary

ambush attack suddenly and by surprise

bayonet a long knife that is attached to the end of a rifle

fife a small, tubelike musical instrument

flintlock part of a gun that strikes and sparks the gunpowder

intently with purpose and concentration

johnnycake a flat, dense bread made by frying cornmeal dough

resumed continued after having stopped

squatted stooped close to the ground with bent knees

tentative uncertain and not confident

urgency a pressing demand for immediate attention

Synopsis

In 1778, thirteen-year-old Jonathan can't wait to become a soldier in the Revolutionary War. His older brother is fighting and hasn't been heard from since he left home. His father was wounded in battle and has returned home to recover. As Jonathan and his father are working in the field, they hear the sound of the tavern bell calling men to gather. Jonathan can't understand the look of fear in his father's eyes. Jonathan runs to the tavern to find out the news and ends up being recruited to fight. With a borrowed gun, he leaves the tavern with a small group of men led by the Corporal.

The Corporal has misled the men into thinking they will be facing only fifteen enemy soldiers, but instead they encounter a large troop of Hessian soldiers, mercenaries from Germany who fight for the British. During the skirmish, Jonathan runs into the woods to escape the enemy but is caught by three Hessians,

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who have also been separated from their unit. Jonathan and the soldiers do not understand each other because the soldiers speak only German. The group becomes lost in the fog but follows the sound of a lowing cow to an abandoned house. While looking for a bucket to milk the cow, Jonathan discovers a small boy hiding in a shed. Not knowing what to do, Jonathan takes the boy to the Hessian soldiers. The boy leads them to a field, where they see that his parents have been killed. Jonathan and the youngest Hessian soldier bury the bodies.

During the night, Jonathan escapes from the house. Because the gun and the boy are heavy, he must choose between them. He chooses to take the boy. After walking for more than two hours, he fortunately finds his unit's camp. The Corporal drills him with questions about the location of the house, the Hessians, and the boy. Jonathan learns that the Corporal knows of the place and it was he who killed the boy's parents. They were French Papists who were Tories. He suspected them of spying for the Hessians.

Early in the morning, the Corporal, Jonathan, and the rest of the men return to the house to ambush the three Hessian soldiers. Jonathan does not want to help and begs to be allowed to return home. The Corporal convinces Jonathan to do his duty as a soldier. Jonathan goes to the door to see if the Hessians are still asleep inside. He tries to get the Hessians to surrender but is unable to make them understand. The men in Jonathan's unit kill the three soldiers when they step out of the house. The Corporal reminds Jonathan to get the borrowed gun so it can be returned. When Jonathan picks up the gun, however, he pounds it against the stone hearth until it splinters. He falls to his knees, sobbing.

The unit returns to the tavern, and Jonathan returns home. His father, again working in the field, is relieved and happy to see him alive. Jonathan, now knowing firsthand the horrors of war, understands that the fear in his father's eyes had not been for himself but for his son. Jonathan is glad to be home and happy to be alive.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Jonathan give himself up to the three Hessians?

When Jonathan runs from the battle, he becomes disoriented and begins to panic. Jonathan thinks that the Hessians see him and have him surrounded. He misinterprets what the German-speaking Hessians are saying. In reality, the Hessians are about to give up looking for him. They are tired and want to move on. Jonathan may have avoided being captured had he just remained still. In his anxious state, he feels he has a better chance to live by giving up peacefully rather than by running away.

Literary Analysis

By the end of the story, what does the gun come to symbolize to Jonathan?

The gun comes to symbolize death, destruction, and shattered lives. Jonathan, who thought being a soldier would be filled with honor and glory, instead witnesses the horrors of war--a dead couple who are killed for their beliefs, a young boy who no longer has parents, and three dead Hessians who allowed him to live. He becomes totally disillusioned with war and destroys the gun, perhaps so that it can no longer be used to kill.

Inferential Comprehension

What are the reasons Jonathan's parents do not want him to join the army?

Jonathan's parents think he is too young to join the army. His father was injured during a previous battle, and Jonathan's older brother joined the army and has not been heard from since.

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Constructing Meaning

How does the Corporal show compassion?

The Corporal seems to have a tender streak for children. He allows the French boy to go home with the Frenchman who had been injured in the skirmish. He also tries to reassure Jonathan that he did well and should not blame himself for anything that may have gone wrong. He even seems to understand why Jonathan sympathizes with the Hessians. He tries to walk with Jonathan on the way back to the tavern, but Jonathan refuses to be consoled by him.

German.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors During the Revolutionary War, minutemen were American civilians who agreed to be prepared to fight on one minute's notice. Ask students to research and report on the minutemen's role in the war. How did it affect family life during this time?

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Most countries have requirements and mandates for enlisting in the military service. Ask the students to choose a country and find out its requirements for enlisting in the military. Students should find out if military service is required or optional, how long a tour of duty is, the type of training a soldier receives, and any other information that may be pertinent. Then have the students organize the information on a poster and present it to the class. The presentations should allow the students the opportunity to compare military approaches from around the world.

Identifying Reason Ask students to research the American Revolutionary War. Students should be encouraged to delve into the history of the conflict between England and the colonies. What were the issues that caused the colonists to want their independence? Ask students to write brief summaries from the information they gathered.

Responding to Literature Jonathan wished he could speak to the young boy in French or to the Hessians in German. It is important for students to realize the benefit of learning and studying another language. Ask the students to construct a simple dialogue between Jonathan and the French boy, or Jonathan and the Hessian soldiers. Then using a French/English or German/English dictionary, translate the key words of the dialogue into either French or