

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Light in the Storm: The Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin

by
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Book Information

Karen Hesse, *A Light in the Storm: The Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin*

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Interest Level: MG

In 1860 and 1861, while working in her father's lighthouse on an island off the coast of Delaware, fifteen-year-old Amelia records in her diary how the Civil War is beginning to devastate her divided state.

Award: Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book

Topics: Adventure, Danger; Historical Fiction, Historical Fiction (All); History, American/U.S. History; History, Slavery; Natural Environments, Islands; People, Slaves; Places, Lighthouses; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Series, Dear America; U.S. States/Regions, Delaware; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Amelia (Wickie) the main character and the person who writes the diary

Daisy a former slave who is now Uncle Edward's paid help

Daniel Worthington a friend of Amelia, who later becomes her husband

Dr. McCabe a doctor who treats Mother

Father Amelia's father

Grandmother Amelia's maternal grandmother

Inspector Howle an official from the Lighthouse Board

Keeper Dunne the first Head Lightkeeper on Fenwick Island

Keeper Hale the Head Lightkeeper who replaces Keeper Dunne; he has a large family

Mother Amelia's mother

Mr. Warner the school teacher who enlists in the Union army

Napoleon Amelia's cat

Oda Lee Monkton an old woman who makes a living scavenging wrecked ships

Reenie O'Connell a friend and student of Amelia

Uncle Edward Amelia's uncle and fellow opponent of slavery

William Worthington a friend of Amelia who drowns after falling through the ice while skating

Vocabulary

cistern a large tank for storing rain water

insurrection a rebellion or revolt

scavenge to look for useful discarded materials

spume to foam or froth

Wickie an affectionate name bestowed upon lightkeepers

Synopsis

A Light in the Storm is a fictional account of the life of fifteen-year-old Amelia Martin from December 24, 1860 to December 28, 1861. Amelia and her family live and work in a lighthouse on Fenwick Island, near the town of Bayville in southern Delaware. Amelia is known as Wickie in the story, an affectionate name given to lighthouse keepers. The story, told in diary form, reveals not only the national upheaval caused by the beginning of the Civil War, but also how its bitter division affects her, her family, and her community.

At the time of the story, Delaware is a border state, which means that states to the south are slave states, while those to the north are free states. Delaware itself is officially a slave state, but refuses to join the Confederacy. The majority of whites in Delaware, especially in the southern part of the state, are supporters of slavery. There are, however, a sizeable number of abolitionists, or opponents of slavery, as well.

This conflict leads to a confrontation in Wickie's family because her mother and her maternal grandmother defend slavery, but her father and her uncle Edward oppose it. Wickie's mother and grandmother are resentful because Wickie's father

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lost his position as a ship captain when he tried to help a leader of a slave rebellion escape to the North. He then took the position of Assistant Lightkeeper at the island. This has caused a further deterioration in the relationship between Wickie's parents because Wickie's father loves the island and the lighthouse, but Wickie's mother hates the isolation and its effect on her health. In addition, an event that took place a year before had increased Wickie's mother's hostility towards her father. A family of fugitive slaves had been shipwrecked and washed ashore on the island. When Wickie's father found them, he wanted to help them escape to Philadelphia. This enraged her mother, who wanted the slaves turned over to the authorities. In the end, however, their mysterious neighbor, Oda Lee Monkton, an old woman who scavenges from shipwrecks, turned the family over to slave catchers to collect a reward.

The diary opens with an entry that Wickie writes on Christmas Eve while she is standing her watch in the lighthouse. Her uncle Edward had given the diary to her as an early Christmas present to keep her company. At the beginning of January, Wickie mentions that her uncle has told her that South Carolina is seceding from the Union. The news only increases the tension among the residents of the area and between her mother and father. By the end of the month a total of five states have seceded. In mid-February, the newly elected President, Abraham Lincoln, is preparing to take office, while Jefferson Davis has been elected as President of the Confederate States. In mid-April, a crew of men, including Wickie's friend Daniel Worthington, begins putting a fresh coat of paint on the lighthouse. Over the course of the next week she and Daniel develop a closer friendship and share their feelings of animosity towards slavery.

On April 19, Wickie writes that the Civil War has begun with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Daniel then volunteers to join the Union Army and, near the end of May, sets out to join the Delaware Regiment. At the end of July, news spreads of a slaughter of Union soldiers at Bull Run, and by the end of August people realize that

the war will last much longer than just a few months. At the beginning of September, Wickie receives notice that she has been recognized for her professionalism in her duties at the lighthouse. She will now be promoted to an official lighthouse employee and will be paid for her work, a very unusual accomplishment for a woman of her time.

In mid-December, Wickie discovers that while the war between the states rages on, the war between her parents has ended. Her father tells her that he has divorced her mother. She receives the news sadly, but determines to continue working at the lighthouse.

The epilogue of the story relates that Daniel returns from the war and marries Wickie. They apparently do not have a happy marriage because, although they do not divorce, after only a short time together they separate. She becomes a Head Keeper of a lighthouse in Maine until her retirement, while he works out west on the Transcontinental Railroad.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How is the American military operated differently today than it was during Amelia's time?

Today we have a military that is much better prepared to wage war at short notice. The United States maintains a large standing army that is well-equipped and well-trained. At the start of the Civil War, however, there were relatively few career soldiers, so both sides had to recruit men quickly. Training in the 1860's was much more limited, and far fewer supplies and equipment were provided. Soldiers often had to scavenge for food and clothing to supplement what they were given. Also, medical care during this time was of lower priority and quality than in the modern army.

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Literary Analysis

What are the two main conflicts in the book and how are they related?

Amelia's life is torn both by the strife between her parents and by the Civil War. The two conflicts are related in that, in large part, the tension between her parents is rooted in their fundamentally different beliefs about slavery. This issue was also a major cause of the war between the states. The conflicts are also related in that both are especially tragic because they strike deep at the heart of what should be very close relationships -- between husband and wife and among American citizens.

Inferential Comprehension

The reader knows from Amelia's thoughts how both Mother and Father feel about the lighthouse and the war. Ask students to discuss whether Father was right or wrong to have Mother continue to live on Fenwick Island even when her health was failing. Was his job more important than Mother's physical and mental health?

Some students may point out that the lighthouse position may have been the only job Father could get to support his family. Or they may believe that his duty to protect hundreds of sailors outweighed the discomfort of his wife's illness. On the other hand, some students may feel that he was being selfish by taking her to live in a place she hated and where she grew so ill.

Constructing Meaning

When Daniel is home on leave, he mentions that newspapers have been writing about troop movements. He feels that the newspapers should be silenced on this issue. What is more important, the lives of troops or the freedom of speech? Ask students to weigh the relative importance of each during a national emergency.

Some students will probably say that freedom of speech is even more important than the lives of soldiers because the rights protected in the Constitution must be protected at all costs. Other students might say that the life of one man is worth more than the issue of freedom of speech during a war or other national emergency. Still other students may suggest a balance between the two sides, stating that freedom of speech is very important, but newspapers should feel a sense of responsibility to preserve national security.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In the 1860's lighthouses provided safety to people who traveled by sea. Have students research lighthouses in the United States and write a short report about this subject.

Responding to Literature The reader knows Amelia's thoughts and feelings on personal and public events. We know this because of the diary form of writing. Have students keep a personal diary for seven days. Instruct them to share their personal thoughts and feelings on both personal and public events.

Identifying Persuasive Language Both Amelia and her father love the sea and working in the lighthouse. Have the students try to imagine the specific qualities of the lighthouse that appeal to them. Then, using these qualities, have them write a real estate advertisement that emphasizes the most attractive aspects to potential buyers.

Identifying Reading Strategies A number of words in the story are related to the seacoast setting. Have students choose five to ten words, define them, and use them in a short story.