

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Rifles for Watie

by

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Book Information

Harold Keith, Rifles for Watie

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Book Level: 6.1

Interest Level: MG

Sixteen-year-old Jeff cannot wait to join the Union army and fight against Stand Watie, leader of the Cherokee Indian rebels.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: People, Native American; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Asa Clardy a Union captain who is cruel to Jeff and betrays the Union army

David Gardner one of Jeff's friends who deserts the Union army

General Blunt the man who awards Jeff with the Medal of Honor

Hooley Pogue a soldier at the rebel camp

Jackman Family the rebel family who nurses Jeff back to health after his bout of malaria

Jefferson Davis Bussey a young man who learns that not all aspects of war are glamorous

John Chadwick one of Jeff's friends who joins the Kansas Volunteers

Lee Washbourne a rebel scout who is executed in front of Jeff

Leemon Jones a slave who brings a message to the Union army for Jeff

Lucy Washbourne a beautiful rebel girl with whom Jeff falls in love

Noah Babbitt a fellow soldier who helps Jeff throughout the novel

Vocabulary

battery a set of guns or other heavy artillery

calvary the branch of an army trained to fight on horseback

Confederates members of the rebel party during the Civil War

infantry the branch of an army trained to fight on foot

malaria an infectious disease transmitted by the bite of a female mosquito

Synopsis

The story begins with a raid on a Kansas family's farm. Bushwackers who believe in the rebel cause attack the family. Afterwards, Jefferson Davis Bussey, a headstrong sixteen-year-old boy, convinces his father that it is time he joins the Kansas Volunteers, a small faction of the Union army. On his way to Fort Leavenworth, Jeff is joined by two friends, David Gardner and John Chadwick. The three friends soon learn what it is like to be soldiers.

After much instruction and training, the Kansas Volunteers leave for Springfield, Missouri. The men march for many days, often going for long periods without water. When the troops reach Springfield, there is much talk about the impending battle. During the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Jeff is sent to find the quartermaster and is unable to fight in the battle. When Clardy, a cruel captain Jeff insulted at Fort Leavenworth, reprimands Jeff and calls him a coward, Jeff informs him that he knows about a secret murder from his past. From that point on, Jeff and Clardy remain enemies.

Jeff begins to find out that war does not just demand bravery in battles. He sees the darker side of war in the foraging he and his fellow soldiers are forced to do; the men raid the homes of local civilians in order to feed themselves. During one of these foraging stints, Jeff meets Lucy Washbourne, a beautiful girl with ties to the rebel cause. Jeff assists Lucy's family with cutting wood, and then helps Lucy by milking her cow. Though he knows she is a rebel, he falls in love with her.

Annoyed that he did not get to fight in the last battle, Jeff is eager to assist in the Battle of Prairie Grove. After the battle ends, however, Jeff changes his

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mind and learns war is not glamorous. General Blunt awards him the Medal of Honor for his bravery during the battle. Instead of being proud of this high honor, Jeff is embarrassed.

Soon, Jeff gets another chance to visit Lucy. During this visit, Jeff and Lucy talk candidly about their political beliefs and the war. At the end of the conversation, Jeff offends Lucy and she runs from the room crying. Soon after, Jeff finds out the fate of Lucy's brother, Lee, a rebel scout. A firing squad shoots Lee in front of Jeff and his friends. Jeff realizes the man is Lucy's brother by the inscription on the man's watch. He sends Noah to alert the family and bring Lee's body to them.

Later, Jeff is given the job of a Union scout. He is to get close to the rebel army to give information to the Union army. During his assignment, Jeff makes several good friends and realizes that the rebels have good reasons to fight for their cause. He contracts malaria and is sent to the Jackman home where the giving family nurses him back to health. After he recovers, Jeff returns to Watie's camp and learns that Watie is planning to purchase many new guns from a Yankee traitor. Jeff makes it his goal to find out who the traitor is. After a month of questions, Jeff is witness to a gun transaction and realizes the Yankee traitor is Clardy. When Jeff makes the discovery he decides to go back to the Union camp. On his way, he stops at a local dance hall and has his last encounter with Lucy. After their discussion, Jeff decides to go back to his rebel tent. There Clardy recognizes him and Jeff is forced to flee.

For several days Jeff eludes the rebels who are searching for him in the woods. He hears them speak about the bloodhounds they will be using to locate him. After a few days in an abandoned cabin, one of the rebel blood hounds finds Jeff. Never having met a dog he did not like, Jeff quickly befriends the dog and the two make it back safely to the Union camp.

Jeff and his friends soon return to Kansas where they are greeted by elated family members. David

finds he has a new father, and Jeff learns his sister has gotten married. After visiting with his family, Jeff reads the letter Lucy sent to him in his absence. Her letter explains that Clardy was stabbed to death, possibly for revenge. Lucy also asks Jeff not to make her wait too long to get married. As night falls, Jeff makes his bed outdoors and gives his dog a pat before falling asleep.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Think about some of the challenges Jeff faced during the course of this novel. Jeff had to leave his home and family, fight in battles, pretend to be a rebel, then flee to the Union army. Explain two challenges you have faced. Did you succeed or fail? Compare and contrast the outcomes. If you were to face the same challenges again, what would you do differently?

Students will have varied answers. One possible answer may be that a student needed to get a better grade on a test. The student may have had to study much harder than was rewarded by getting a good grade.

Literary Analysis

Who are the antagonists in the book? Why?

There are two main antagonists in this novel. The first, Clardy, remains an antagonist throughout the novel. He punishes Jeff constantly. The punishments he inflicts on Jeff are quite severe. At one point, Clardy attempts to make Jeff shoot Lee Washbourne, but Jeff refuses. Clardy is also the "Yankee traitor" who is selling guns to Watie. The other antagonists, the rebels, are mostly present in the first half of the novel. Jeff wishes to fight the rebels in battle and save the Union. When Jeff becomes a scout, however, and joins the Watie rebels, he finds he can sympathize with their reasons for fighting the war.

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Inferential Comprehension

What do you think will happen to Jeff in the future? Will he be a farmer? Will he go to college? Will he marry Lucy?

Students may answer that Jeff will most likely marry Lucy because he always keeps his promises. Jeff also stated that he would like to attend college.

Constructing Meaning

In the novel, which character do you relate most to and why? What are some of that character's traits that are similar to your own?

Some students may identify with Jeff because he is brave and very family oriented. Jeff is also very compassionate and understanding. Other students may relate best to Lucy. Lucy is strong willed and adamant about her beliefs. Noah may also be a choice because he is such a good friend to Jeff throughout the novel.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Read "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman to your class. Then discuss Abraham Lincoln's involvement in the Civil War. How did the Union soldiers in the book view Lincoln? Ask your class to research Lincoln's assassination and write a short paragraph about how the poem relates to the novel.

Describing Actions or Events In *Rifles for Watie*, Jeff learns a lot about the realities of war. Ask your students to find an article in the newspaper or a magazine that examines the atrocities of war. Have each bring a copy to class. Ask each student to read several lines exploring the feelings of the soldiers and civilians. Then have them compare these modern wars to what they learned about the Civil War from this novel.

Recognizing Feelings Pick out any appropriate movie about the Civil War. Show the movie in class and ask the students to keep a journal during the showing of the movie. Ask them to

describe their emotions during the course of the movie. Which emotion is dominant? How does their experience relate to the novel?

Responding to Literature *Rifles for Watie* does not give a lot of detail about the lives of the slaves. Read from "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)" by Frederick Douglass to your class. Have them discuss what it may have been like to be a slave. What would they have done if they were alive during the Civil War?