

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Soldier's Heart

by
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Book Information

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Eager to enlist, fifteen-year-old Charley has a change of heart after experiencing both the physical horrors and mental anguish of Civil War combat.

Award: ABC (Assoc. of Booksellers for Children) Choice Aw; ALA Notable/Best Books; Blue Spruce Award/Nominee; Booklist Editors' Choice; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; Misc./Other

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Main Characters

Charley a fifteen-year-old farm boy from Minnesota who enlists with the Union Army in the Civil War

Nelson a young recruit from Minnesota who is mortally wounded in his first battle

Vocabulary

amputation the process of cutting off or removing a limb from the body

bayonet a steel blade attached to the muzzle end of a gun, used in hand-to-hand combat

civilian a person not on active military duty; a person not part of the military

dysentery a disease characterized by severe diarrhea and passing blood, caused by infection

sutler a civilian who provides items to an army and has a shop in the camp

Synopsis

A fifteen-year-old boy from Minnesota named Charley plans on fighting in the Civil War. Charley walks to Fort Snelling and lies about his age to enlist. At Fort Snelling, Charley is disappointed that the uniforms do not fit, the food is horrible, and all they seem to do is practice. Just when Charley starts believing he will never see a battle, his company boards a train for the East.

Charley is impressed by the plush train, the crowds along the route, and the delicious food supplied on their trip. Along the way, he gets his first glimpse of "colored people" and the poor farms of the South. In his last letter before battle, Charley tells his mother he is a man now because he has seen things he never imagined possible.

At the Battle of Bull Run, Charley sees fellow soldiers injured and dying and no longer wants to be a part of it. He now moves automatically to the commands and listens to the lies of encouragement from the officers. At night he sees lanterns and candles moving among the dead on the battlefield. Charley realizes what all the training was for as he cleans and loads his weapon without thinking. As his company prepares for another battle, fear overtakes him, and he is sure he is going to die.

With his first paycheck in three months, Charley buys some pies and sends the rest of his money home. Disease is spreading around the camp. Charley gets a case of dysentery and discovers that more men die of disease than wounds. Charley feels old when he meets a new recruit, Nelson, even though they are about the same age. When Nelson is shot in the stomach, Charley knows it means a slow and horrible death. Charley helps Nelson by setting his rifle and leaving, understanding what will happen, but not looking back when he hears the gun go off. On night watch, Charley trades coffee,

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tobacco, and talk with a Rebel soldier. He is on the edge of desertion when he is ordered to butcher horses to provide meat for the hospital.

In a battle against a cavalry unit, Charley, numb to everything, charges wildly against the enemy and is drenched in enemy blood. A corporal thinks Charley is wounded and sends him to the surgeon's tent, where Charley sees a pile of amputated arms and legs. The surgeon tells Charley to make a windbreak so he can continue operating. Charley and an attendant use dead bodies to create a wall five feet high and thirty feet long.

In the battle at Gettysburg, Charley feels the Union has the better position. It is during this bloodiest of battles that Charley is finally hit.

The story resumes with Charley back in Minnesota in June, 1867, six years after he first enlisted. He knows he is dying from his injuries. In his head he hears the sounds of battle. While emptying out his picnic sack, he finds a Confederate revolver. He cocks the trigger but sets the gun down, thinking about pretty things and listening to the water.

The author's note tells readers that Charley was a real person. This story uses Charley's experiences, combined with those of other young men. Charley Goddard died at age twenty-three from wounds and stress of battle, a casualty of soldier's heart.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why do you think Charley's mother began to write letters telling her son to desert? What might his mother have heard about the Civil War?

She started thinking about killing and all the bad things in war. She had lost her husband and was afraid she would lose her oldest son. News may have come from the East about the battles and how many young men were being killed.

Literary Analysis

When Charley takes the cake from the "colored" woman, he is curious about why she is crying and why she thanks him for fighting. Why would she be glad, since she is part of the South? What might the white woman do to her when she drags her in the house?

Many slaves were happy to see the Union soldiers because they felt the soldiers would set them free from their owners. Even if Charley did not think he was fighting to get rid of slavery, that is what many of the slaves thought was happening. The white woman may lock the slave inside to prevent her from giving out more food or might even harm her for what she did.

Inferential Comprehension

In June, 1867, Charley is back in Minnesota where he should be thinking about marriage, but he says he is "too old. Not old in years - in years he still had not started daily shaving or learned about women. But in other ways he was old, old from too much life, old from seeing too much, old from knowing too much." What does this quotation mean?

Charley has seen the worst in people with killing each other, leaving each other to die, stealing, lying, and more. He faced too much at a time in his life when he was still too young to have even imagined people could do these things. He lost his youth and innocence through this war. He could not handle all the horrors of war, and now he is unable to enjoy life.

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Constructing Meaning

In the last chapter, the narrator says that when Charley's "thoughts came on to being gray and raining and the parades were done and the dances were done and the killing -- he thought of it as butchery more than killing -- was at last done, he could remember all the pretty things." What does this sentence tell the reader about the war's effect on Charley? Why do you think Charley remembers the war more as "butchery" than "killing"? What is the difference between the use of these two words?

This sentence tells the reader that Charley is psychologically traumatized by the war. He often thinks about the misery of his war experiences, and only after he has purged himself of these awful thoughts can he even begin to remember the pleasant side of life. Charley thinks of the battles as "butchery" because it connotes the same severe style of killing that one would associate with a slaughter or a massacre. Butchers usually do their killing without emotion, and the indiscriminant slaughter Charley encountered on the battlefield probably reminded him of this image. To say that Charley witnessed "killing" may lead the reader to think simply of death, whereas to say Charley witnessed a "butchery" gives the reader a more tangible image of meat, blood, and gore.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Charley mentions that all the battles take place in a meadow or a forest. Have students create a battle plan by drawing a map or picture of a battleground and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using this terrain for battle. Where would the best positions be to defend your unit? Why? Where would you want your army to be camped?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Consult your local historical society to find out if Civil War reenactments are performed in your area, or ask someone who collects Civil War memorabilia to bring in several items to show to the class. What things did they use that we have today? How has equipment changed?

Recognizing Details Charley learns that during the war more men died from disease than from being killed in battle. Have students research the hospital conditions during the time of the Civil War. What options did surgeons have to treat wounds? What were the sanitary conditions of hospital tents and operating areas? Have the students give short reports on hospital procedures, doctor training, medicine availability, surgical procedures, and other aspects of medical treatment at the time of the Civil War.

Recognizing Feelings Ask a local college or high school history teacher to present a short lecture about the country's attitudes at the start of the Civil War. Why were the young men so eager to enlist? How did the views of war differ between the North and South? How did the reasons for fighting change during the war?