

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Across Five Aprils by Irene Hunt

Book Information

Irene Hunt, Across Five Aprils
Quiz Number: 102
Berkley Publishing Co, 1985
ISBN 0-441-00319-2; LCCN
190 Pages
Book Level: 6.6
Interest Level: MG

A moving story of the Civil War and one boy who grew up at home.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Bill Creighton the older brother to whom Jethro feels closest; he decides to join the Confederate Army despite his family's feelings

Dave Burdow Travis's father who helps Jethro when he is in trouble

Eb Carron Matt Creighton's nephew who was orphaned in childhood and lives with the Creightons; he joins the Union Army, but later becomes a deserter

Ed Turner neighbor and friend of the Creightons

Ellen Creighton Jethro's mother who has lost several children already and fears losing more to the war

Jenny Creighton Jethro's older sister who helps Jethro run the farm after Matt's heart attack

Jethro Creighton a nine-year-old boy who is the youngest in his family and who comes of age during the Civil War

John and Nancy Creighton Jethro's older brother and sister-in-law

Matthew Creighton Jethro's father who suffers a heart attack, causing him to age prematurely

Ross Milton editor of the local paper and close friend of the Creightons

Shadrach Yale a young local schoolmaster who is like a member of the Creighton family and is in love with Jenny

Tom Creighton one of Jethro's older brothers who joins the Union Army and is killed in battle

Travis Burdow the young man responsible for the death of Jethro's sister Mary in 1859

Vocabulary

brooked tolerated

paean songs of joyful praise

plaudits expressions of praise

Synopsis

Nine-year-old Jethro Creighton is the youngest child living at home with his parents, Matt and Ellen, brothers, Bill and Tom, sister, Jenny, and cousin, Eb. His oldest brother, John, his wife, Nancy, and their children live nearby. Jethro and his brothers, cousin, and sister help their parents on the farm. Jethro's schoolmaster and a close friend of the family, Shad Yale, also helps with the farm work. Shad wants to marry Jenny, but Pa will not allow it because she is only fourteen. Jethro admires Shad and respects him as his teacher.

Jethro's life changes when the Civil War begins, and he struggles to understand which side is right. John, Eb, Tom, and Shad decide to join the Union Army. Billy decides to join the Confederate Army, a decision that eventually leads to trouble for the Creightons. With the older boys gone to fight battles, running the farm is left to Jethro, Jenny, and their parents. Jethro is forced to grow up in a hurry when his father suffers a heart attack and is unable to work. On his first trip by himself to Newton to get supplies, Jethro is harrassed by some troublemakers who question him about Bill's decision to fight for the Rebs. They think Matt Creighton should speak out against his son for becoming a Rebel. Jethro stands up for his brother, and several people back him up.

The Creightons face many heartaches throughout the story. They learn that Tom has been killed in

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battle. The troublemakers burn down their barn and pollute their well. Eb becomes a deserter, and Shad is injured at Gettysburg. Jenny goes to Shad in Washington to help nurse him back to health, and the two are married.

After four years, the war seems to be coming to an end and things are looking a little brighter because John, Eb, Shad, and Jenny are coming home.

When they receive the news that Abraham Lincoln has been shot, Jethro is devastated because he had hoped to meet him one day. In the midst of his grief, Shad and Jenny return and give him hope for a better future.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Ross Milton warned Jethro, "Don't expect peace to be a perfect pearl, Jeth," what did he mean?

Answers should reflect the idea that even though the war was over, things would still be rough between the North and the South. There would be hard feelings and differences to iron out. The places destroyed by the war would have to be rebuilt.

Literary Analysis

How does the author give the reader information about the battles fought during the war?

She uses descriptions, letters written by the characters, and dialogue between the characters to tell about the various battles.

Inferential Comprehension

In the story, the reader sees only Mr. Lincoln's response to Jethro's letter. What do you think Jethro wrote in his letter to the president?

Answers should probably include a description of Eb's situation as a deserter and a question asking Mr. Lincoln's advice. Jethro may have even expressed his admiration for the president.

Constructing Meaning

Bill could not see the issues of the war as black and white. They were much more complex. What are some issues we face today that are not black and white? How do we decide which side to take? Will everyone agree with the choices we make?

Answers should concern current problems or issues relevant to the present time. Students will probably conclude that we carefully weigh the evidence before coming to a decision. Some students may also realize that not all decisions are well-thought out. Students will probably realize that it's impossible for everyone to agree about everything.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *Across Five Aprils* is a work of historical fiction set during the time of the Civil War. In the story many battles of the Civil War were mentioned, as well as the generals who led the troops in these battles. Students may find it interesting to study one of the battles or generals mentioned in the book. They could write a report and share the information with the entire class. Students also might enjoy reading other works of historical fiction about the Civil War, such as Newbery winner *Rifles for Watie*. Another Civil War book written from a girl's viewpoint is *The Tamarack Tree*. A book with a black perspective of the Civil War is *Which Way Freedom?*

Understanding Literary Features One theme in the story is the coming of age of a young boy. Jethro is forced to grow up quickly when the older boys go to war and his father has a heart attack. Discuss with the class other reasons children may grow up prematurely. Discuss the pros and

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cons of growing up early. How can it affect the person's character? What problems may it cause? How do you think Jethro handled his sudden responsibilities? How was he able to do it?

Understanding Characterization Jethro Creighton admired and respected Abraham Lincoln and in many ways they were alike. For example, both loved to learn and endured hardships during their childhoods. Have students research Abraham Lincoln and compare his life and character traits to Jethro's. Students can share their findings in a class discussion. Do they know anyone else like Jethro or Lincoln?

Understanding the Author's Craft This story was told from the third person point of view by an all-knowing narrator. The letters from various characters in the book were written in the first person. Discuss how this makes the story more personal and adds variety. Have the students choose a portion of the book and retell it in the first person as a character from the book. Examples could be Jenny telling how she feels when her father says she is too young to get married, or Jethro telling about the trip home from Newton when Dave Burdow drives the wagon for him.