

Chigger's War: A Teenage Boy Wrestles With Grief, Fear, And A Sense Of Duty

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Review

CHIGGER'S WAR

A teenage boy wrestles with grief, fear, and a sense of duty

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Ernst, Kathleen *Retreat from Gettysburg*. Burd Street Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 1572491876

If MacKinlay Kantor ever thought about writing a sequel to his famous juvenile work *Gettysburg*, he might have chosen to write about the poignant ten days following that battle, when Robert E. Lee's retreating army crossed the flooded Potomac River. Fortunately, the vivid word-pictures and splendid writing Kathleen Ernst uses to bring those days to life in her new historical novel are worthy of Kantor himself.

Ernst is the author of two previous bestselling children's novels: *The Night Riders of Harper's Ferry* and *The Bravest Girl in Sharpsburg*. Now, in **Retreat from Gettysburg**, she delivers a wonderful tale of the Confederate army's desperate struggle to move its 17-mile-long wagon train of wounded soldiers from Williamsport, Maryland, back to the safety of southern ground. However, it is more than just a history lesson; it is the moving story of a young boy's struggle with the loss of his father and three brothers (all Union soldiers killed in previous battles) and with the numbing grief and war-weary living conditions that alter the relationship between him and his mother.

Chigger O'Malley is a 14-year-old youngster who tries his best to bring his mother back into his life after the loss of their family. Kids aged 10-14 will identify with many of the problems that Chigger, like any boy of his age, encounters. But the worry of being left as the only man of the house (especially when his mother still thinks of him as her little boy), the constant parade of soldiers invading their Maryland home, a wounded Rebel officer left in their care, and Chigger wishing he could join the Irish Brigade, especially will keep modern youngsters intrigued.

There are several characters who come and go in the story, but the author lets Chigger take center stage in passages where he struggles with his feelings. Should he kill the wounded Rebel who sleeps in his house? Should he run off and join the Irish Brigade to take the place of his slain brothers and father? Chigger is also torn between love for his grieving mother and the urge to leave her and join the army.

The sections where Chigger wrestles with these concerns and about what to do with the Rebel in his house are excellent: "I stared at him, my head pounding. Images flashed through my mind like some crazy magic-lantern picture show. My own pa marching away. Ma in a weeping heap in her muddy mourning dress . . . the tug-of-war that had been raging inside for so long threatening to break me into little pieces. . . ."

Ernst gives the young boy many opportunities to break free from his doubts and fears, but he is constrained by devotion to his mother. He doesn't realize he is capable of showing kindness; he has seen too much cruelty around him. War is the ultimate unkindness of all, according to the boy. It is only when Chigger makes up his mind to help someone else that he finds his place in the world. Parents and teachers (and one hopes young readers) should appreciate the author's moral lesson in **Retreat from Gettysburg**: "Sometimes the simplest act of kindness can mean the most."

I also enjoyed the photographs and maps of the actual locations mentioned in the story. Ernst has carefully placed many authentic illustrations throughout the book to help students understand the setting and to follow the historical aspects of Chigger's home. I would love to see more authors use this layout in historical fiction written for upper elementary and middle school readers. Along with the photos, maps, and prints, Ernst includes an excellent section of "Additional Resources" that lists books, music, and information for planning a visit to areas mentioned in the novel.

Kathleen Ernst should be very proud of **Retreat from Gettysburg**. It is obvious she has spent many hours researching the details of the days following the battle. Teachers will find the book extremely useful for further study about the events, as well as a heart-warming, intense look at how youngsters and widows might have dealt with losing their fathers and husbands in the Civil War.

Nancy Clayton, who lives in the Texas Hill Country, is the author of Strange but True Civil War Stories (1999) and Draw History Civil War (1999), both published for children by Lowell House Juvenile. Her current work-in-progress is a complete bibliography of children's Civil War literature, Civil War Books for Children.