

# Civil War Book Review

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## Guerrilla Season

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## Review

Rose, Julia

Winter 2004

**Hughes, Pat** *Guerrilla Season*. Farrar Straus Giroux, \$18.00 ISBN 37432811

Friend or Foe?

Fictional family fights enemies at home

Matt Howard's boots were too small causing him pain when he plowed his family's corn fields and hunted rabbits for his widowed mother and five siblings. Matt refused to exchange his cramped boots for shoes big enough for a man. He was holding onto his child-sized boots in a futile attempt to hold onto a childhood that was quickly transitioning into weary adulthood in war-torn Missouri. Through the character of 15 year-old Matt, author Pat Hughes probes the tragedies that families were forced to endure in Missouri between 1861 and 1865. Regardless of Union or Confederate loyalties or neutrality, the characters in **Guerrilla Season** discover that there is no safe haven from the destruction of the United States Civil War.

In this her first novel, Pat Hughes situates the Howard family in the midst of mourning the loss of the family patriarch David Howard, Pa, and enduring the blows and insults of raiding guerrillas, Union and Confederate foragers, and impressment of the family's labor. Pa was born a Southerner and Ma was from Pennsylvania. Together they planned to fend off warring neighbors and militia by proclaiming their neutral position. Their son Matt has no heroic ambitions. His is to become a farmer like his father and remain obedient to his beloved parents. **Guerrilla Season** is the story of Matt's inevitable transition from a non-committed and confused teenager who is prematurely forced into adulthood by the war. Matt has to make hard decisions on his own. Matt ultimately recognizes the damaging results of his ambiguity, and decides his loyalty lies with his family. He resolves to one day return to Missouri to be a farmer and carry on his father's work and memory.

Early in the book Matt's best friend Jesse, a Southern sympathizer, gives Matt a much needed pair of larger boots. Accepting this generous gift is Matt's first step towards manhood, and finding his own way in a confusing and frightening world. In the end, Matt and Jesse decide what is best for them. Matt accompanies his mother and siblings to the relative safety of Pennsylvania; hence, leaving Jesse's companionship and the bloody landscape of Missouri behind.

Readers see the ravages of war literally setting neighbor against neighbor. Family and friendship bonds are repeatedly tested by people who do not want to do battle; rather who more earnestly want to live as farmers. This coming of age story offers middle school readers a sentimental perspective of one teen's dealings with the moral dilemmas of the Civil War that never seem to achieve justice.

The plot weaves together events of young love, violence, death, and the simple pleasures that family, friends, and nature offered in the midst of the Civil War in rural Missouri. Hughes's detailed descriptions will inform readers about the chores, particular life styles, and some of the difficulties of mid-19th century farm life. Classroom teachers and some parents may find the fictional characters' generous use of biblical quotations and religious examples difficult to interpret for young readers unfamiliar with such references. Slavery is peripheral to the book's protagonists, who are sons of non-slave holding yeoman farmers, for whom slavery was a distant reality that seemed to be a political issue that merely fueled the combatants' fury. The conflict that preoccupied Matt Howard was judging the threat that Northern and Southern forces posed to his family's safety and livelihood.

*Julia Rose is curator of education at Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has directed education departments in historical museums for more than 15 years.*