

Historical Actors: A Tour Of War Narrated For Children And Teachers

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Review

HISTORICAL ACTORS

A tour of war narrated for children and teachers

Yoder, Carolyn P.

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Herbert, Janis *The Civil War for Kids: A History with 21 Activities*. Chicago Review Press, ISBN 1556523556

For children who *really* want to know what it felt like to take an active role in the past, **The Civil War for Kids** is *it!* The cast of characters to choose from is large. Sol-diers, nurses, officers, reporters, artists, doctors, spies, presidents, wives, and children play key roles. These well-known and not-so-known courageous individuals are brought to life through their own words in this activity book.

Unlike most books for children that skirt the details or concentrate on just one aspect or on one side of the War, **The Civil War for Kids** doesn't leave much out. The author, Janis Herbert, takes great pains to tell both sides of a dramatic story and fills the book with archival photographs and illustrations, maps, little-known facts, short biographies, and plenty of activities. To help put all this information in perspective and guide the reader to know even more, she includes a resource section, glossary, timeline, bibliography, and list of officers.

Young men and women will find plenty of interest and plenty to do, as suggested by the title of the book. The title, however, is unnecessarily modest, since many adults, especially teachers and librarians, may also appreciate the details and activities contained in this work.

Instead of being standard textbook fare, **The Civil War for Kids** is written simply, with drama, tension, and purpose. The reasons for the War's outbreak and how the War was played out are clearly presented. Battles are fully described -- with all the anticipation and horror. Herbert puts herself in the midst of the War as she narrates events play-by-play. Here she "captures" the start of Pickett's famous charge:

"Then, silence fell. The Rebel artillery, running out of ammunition, wanted to save enough to support their infantry charge. The Union guns, too, became quiet. Pickett, eager to do his part in this battle, looked anxiously for Longstreet to ask permission to advance. General Longstreet, not wishing to send his friend and the men into this desperate charge, couldn't bring himself to speak. He nodded his head in answer to Pickett's request."

The soldier's life is fully described. Although the bulk of the book is devoted to Confederate and Union soldiers on the battlefield, the reader also follows them during drill exercises, in camp waiting for battle, on the march, and in makeshift prisons and hospitals. Herbert stays close to the soldiers to highlight their excitement, determination, frustration, boredom, fear -- even their sense of fun:

"Lice were a real annoyance in the camps, but the soldiers found one way to make light of the problem. They would place the lice on plates and hold races to see which one could cross its plate first! One soldier won every time. His friends, suspecting a trick, found out that he got his lice to run faster by heating his plate before the race."

The Civil War for Kids also features other witnesses to the War, as well as those who experienced its effects off the battlefield. A chapter devoted to writers, artists, photographers, and reporters spotlights some of the classic literary works, memoirs, and diaries that were written during the War. While Herbert showcases women who served the War as spies, nurses, or even soldiers, she also briefly explains what life at home was like for many women and children. She even includes a short article on what daily life was like for both presidents.

Herbert also covers slavery before the War, life in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, and the roles of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Robert Smalls. She travels with black soldiers who join in the fighting, although little is said about how slaves and free blacks at home were affected by the War and aftermath.

One aspect of the book that readers might find disappointing is the limited scope of the activities. Most are not simple, and some will not be inviting. All except for a few involve life on or near the battlefield -- from drill exercises to

acting out Antietam to playing general to building a lean-to shelter -- and will be appealing to those caught up in the War's details and strategies. Some of these might work better as classroom exercises because they require several players.

Yet the book's strengths far outweigh any shortcomings. **The Civil War for Kids** introduces the Civil War's well-known stories and characters as well as the little-known facts and unknown players. It is a great way for readers to learn more about the Civil War and to appreciate what history is all about.

Carolyn P. Yoder is the senior editor of history at Highlights magazine.