

Bloody Showdown: Teenaged Soldiers And Civilians Discover The Meaning Of Courage

George McNamara

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Review

BLOODY SHOWDOWN

Teenaged soldiers and civilians discover the meaning of courage

McNamara, George

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Venner, William Thomas *Young Heroes of Gettysburg*. White Mane Publishing Company, 2000-03-01. ISBN 1572492007

Writers of historical fiction often provide the reader with numerous coincidences that center on one or more of the primary characters. A seasoned booklover sometimes scoffs at such use of "artistic license." However, books written for children that employ this technique can prove successful and educational.

In **Young Heroes of Gettysburg**, William Thomas Venner effectively weaves very human situations around the events of early July 1863. We witness the battle and its consequences through the eyes of "children" dressed for combat and others who simply lived where the armies met. Rather than being intrusive, the liberties of chance employed add to the story's flow and message. Venner, whose six previous books on the Civil War include the best-selling *19th Indiana Infantry at Gettysburg*, is well suited to author this novel.

The first paragraph captures the attention of the young reader. Three teenaged boys, Johnny, Ben, and Sam—all members of Indiana's 19th regiment—are not engaged in what one might expect to be soldiery work. They are successfully completing a calculated plot to take chickens from a farm near their campsite. Then Annie and Rachel, 13- and 12-year-old cousins who live in Gettysburg, are introduced. The distant gunfire heard while the girls tend Annie's horse that summer morning shortly will change all the children's lives. These central characters are immediately humanized, so that a young reader can readily identify with them.

Initially, the girls experience the excitement and concerns that stir a town in the way of two opposing forces. The boys, though veterans, feel anticipation of

their own as they march toward another bloody showdown.

When the battle commences, it takes a back seat to the lives of our young heroes. The boys and girls are in a situation that affords little time to youthful innocence. Though the three boys and their comrades are seasoned, apprehension dominates their thoughts. The enemy is visible and anxious. The sounds are deafening. The wounds are painful and the aftermath tragic. Annie's and Rachel's struggles parallel those of the young soldiers. They meet new friends, face death and incomprehensible loss, and witness lonesomeness and destruction. Yet the girls find the strength to cope and adjust when necessary. The southern boys who come to their house are charmed by Annie and Rachel with protective hospitality, and the girls help ease the pain of the wounded gathered in and around the town's courthouse.

Venner's plot provides opportunities for real emotion and for attempts to do what is best. The reader is propelled through **Young Heroes of Gettysburg** by a desire to simply know what happens. Pictures presented in the opening chapter add to the bond between reader and characters, and the "Author's Note" and bibliography at the end of the book give inspiration for further study.

Young adults will enjoy the story and appreciate the history. For many, **Young Heroes of Gettysburg** will be the book they reference when asked later: "How did you become interested in the Civil War?"

George McNamara publishes two Civil War-related newsletters, The Children's Chronicle and the Dr. Samuel A. Mudd Newsletter.