

Educator's Guide



With Common Core State Standards correlations



ABOUT THE BOOK

In *Like a River*, two teenagers enlist in the Union Army, each full of secrets, fears, and a strong will to survive.

Teenagers often became involved in Civil War battles because soldiers were in high demand due to the great number of casualties. Many teens became adults the day they signed up with the army.

Like a River, a historical novel, is narrated by two teens whose paths cross while they are both serving as soldiers during the Civil War. They help each other endure heartbreaking challenges and share valuable lessons they've learned during their own struggles—lessons that linger in the backs of their minds, helping them navigate separate journeys as they hope to make it through the war and one day meet again.

This guide is designed to help teachers and students discuss the characters, themes, and plot of *Like a River* by Kathy Cannon Wiechman. Connections to the Common Core State Standards are noted with each activity.

Common Core abbreviations used in this guide:

RL—Reading: Literature


RI—Reading: Informational Text

W—Writing

SL—Speaking and Listening

RH—History/Social Studies

For the complete Common Core State Standards, visit corestandards.org/ELA-literacy.



BEFORE READING: BUILD BACKGROUND

Ask students what they know about the Civil War. Have them look through the photographs at the back of the book. You may also have students read about the Civil War on their own and come to the next discussion ready to share an interesting fact they've learned about the Civil War. Write down students' ideas and keep the list for a future exercise. [RI.6.1, SL.6.1]

Ask students if they've ever read historical fiction before. Have students provide other examples of historical fiction and make a list of the qualities that make up historical fiction. Talk about the genre. What do they like about it? What do they dislike about it? **[RL.5.9, SL.6.1]**

Have students keep a list of words they learn during the reading of the novel. Using an online document, create a class thesaurus of Civil War terms. **[RL.5.4, RL.6.4, W.6.6]**

Encourage students to think about how the author made decisions that affect the reading experience by jotting down ideas and reactions as they read. These notes will be useful in class discussions. Here are two ways students can note their reactions while reading:

- Allow students time to read on their own and provide sticky notes so they can mark events, turns of phrase, and details that interest them. Encourage students to write their ideas on the sticky notes so they remember why they marked the pages.
- Have students note in their journal places where they are surprised by the turn of events in the novel. Students should stop reading when they are surprised in the story and write about their feelings. How did the author successfully keep the secrets from readers? In retrospect, were there clues or foreshadowing that hinted the surprise was coming? **[RL.5.1, RL.5.2, RL.5.3, RL.5.5, W.5.9.A]**



Key Ideas and Details

• How are Leander and his brother different from each other? How are they the same? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.3]**

- What motivates Leander to join the army? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3]**
- Why don't Leander's parents want him to join the army? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.3]**
- Why does Given delay his joining the army? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.3]**
- Where does Leander meet Paul? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.2]**
- Why is Paul working at a hospital? Why does Paul leave the hospital? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3]**

• How does Given help both Leander and Paul at different times in the book? How do they each help Given? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3]**

• Rivers are an important symbol in the story. How many scenes can you remember in which a river plays an important role? **[RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.5]**

Craft and Structure

- The river is a symbol and theme that reappears throughout the novel. Why does the author use the river symbol so often? What is the symbol of the river meant to represent? What other symbols can students identify in *Like a River*? [RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.5]

- Discuss the saying that Paul introduces: "A body can do what a body wants to, if a body wants to hard enough." How is the saying important to both Leander and Paul? How does it help both of them to accomplish more than they think possible? [RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.4]

- Why did the author change the narrator when she did? Why couldn't Paul narrate the story before this moment? [RL.6.1, RL.6.6]

- Was Leander's injury a complete accident? Which of Leander's qualities caused the accident to happen? How did the injury affect Leander's personality? [RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.5, RL.6.6]

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- How is reading a war story different from watching a movie about soldiers or reading a poem about war? Which do you prefer? Why? Examine the best and worst qualities of each. [RL.6.7, RL.6.8]

- Ask students to talk about how they feel about the blending of fiction and history. Is it harder to engage with the story because you're trying to learn about the history? Do you tend to not believe the history because it's fiction? [RL.6.9]

- Have students brainstorm a list of historical fiction they've read and seen. How are all of the pieces similar? How are they different? Is it important for the time period to have a significant effect on the events of the story? Why or why not? [RL.6.9]

- Consider how the lives of the narrators would be different if they had lived during a different period in history. How are the difficulties encountered by Leander and Paul good examples of the sort of problems teens suffered during the Civil War? Are Leander and Paul also good examples of teens from any time period? What makes Leander and Paul relatable to twenty-first-century teens? [RL.6.7, RL.6.9]



A young Union soldier stands with an American flag in front of a backdrop of a battle scene

AFTER READING

- How does the narrator's point of view influence how events are described? For a short writing exercise, have students pick a scene from the book and write it from the point of view of a different character.

[RL.5.6, RL.6.6, W.5.3.A]

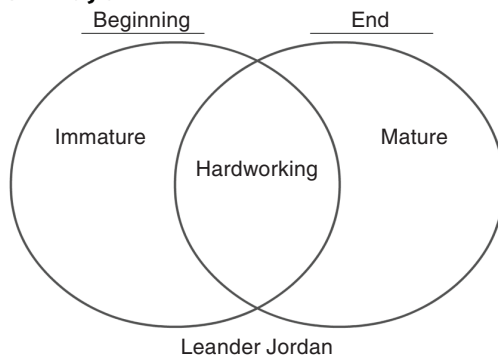
- Have students read aloud sections of the text that stood out to them. Students should describe what stood out about the scene. Ask other students in the class where in the text this scene occurred, and what happened before and after. [RL.6.3, RL.6.5, SL.6.1]

- Ask students whether this book is a primary source or a secondary source. How do the primary sources included in the text help us to understand the secondary sources better and vice versa? [RL.6.1, RI.5.3, RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2 RH.6-8.9]

- Have students brainstorm descriptions of each of the narrators in *Like a River*. Students should identify a character trait and then support their idea with evidence from the text. [RL.6.1, RL.6.3, RL.6.6]

- Have students describe how the characters changed over the course of the story. Create a Venn diagram. One circle should be filled with descriptions of the character at the beginning of the story. The second should include descriptions of the character at the end of the story. The middle section should include ways the character stayed the same. After the class exercise, have students work independently on their own Venn diagrams on another character in the book. [RL.6.3, RL.6.6]

Venn Diagram

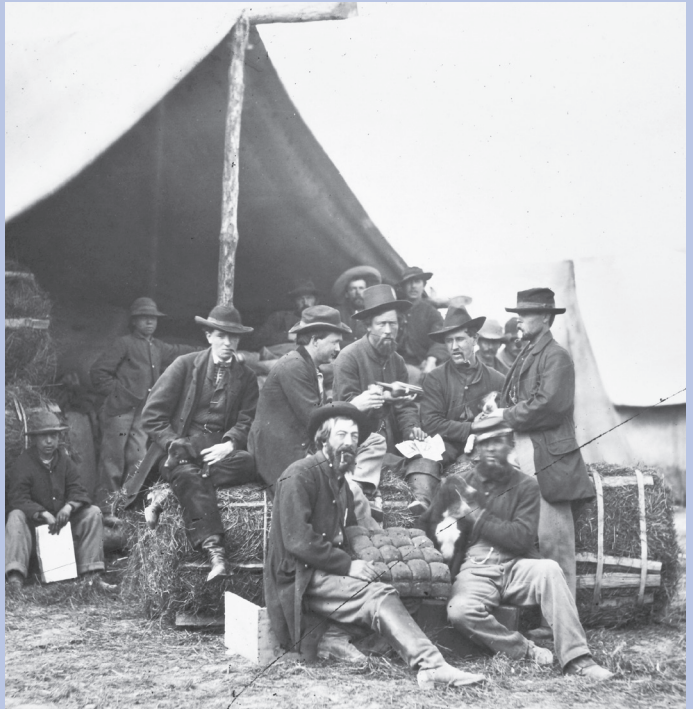


EXTRA CREDIT

Get Creative. Have students attempt to write a short piece of historical fiction. They could attempt a poem, scene, or entire short story set during any time in history. First they should choose the time period they will use as their setting. Allow some time for research and time for writing. Follow up with a discussion on how much research is needed to write historical fiction. Have students imagine how much research is involved in the writing of an entire book such as *Like a River*. [W.5.3, W.5.7, SL.5.1]

Go Further. Present the list of what we know about the Civil War that students filled in before reading. Ask what they could add to it now that they've read *Like a River*. Did they expect to learn facts about history by reading a novel? How is learning about history through historical fiction different from learning about history from a textbook? How is it different from learning from a movie? Ask students which they prefer and why. [RL.5.1, W.5.9, SL.5.1]

Union soldiers pose by a supply tent. Officers' and surgeons' tents were this size, but enlisted men usually slept in small two-man tents.



FURTHER READING

More Civil War historical fiction for and about teens:

- *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane
- *Evvy's Civil War* by Miriam Brenaman
- *High Hearts* by Rita Mae Brown
- *Iron Thunder: The Battle Between the Monitor & The Merrimac: A Civil War Novel* by Avi
- *Black Angels* by Linda Beatrice Brown
- *March Toward the Thunder* by Joseph Bruchac
- *Annie, Between the States* by Laura Elliott
- *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt
- *How I Found the Strong: A Civil War Story* by Margaret McMullan
- *Riot* by Walter Dean Myers
- *Coal Black Horse* by Robert Olmstead
- *Silent Thunder* by Andrea Davis Pinkney
- *Come Juneteenth* by Ann Rinaldi
- *Sarah's Ground* by Ann Rinaldi
- *Trembling Earth* by Kim Siegelson
- *Death on the River* by John Wilson



LIKE A RIVER

A CIVIL WAR NOVEL

By Kathy Cannon Wiechman

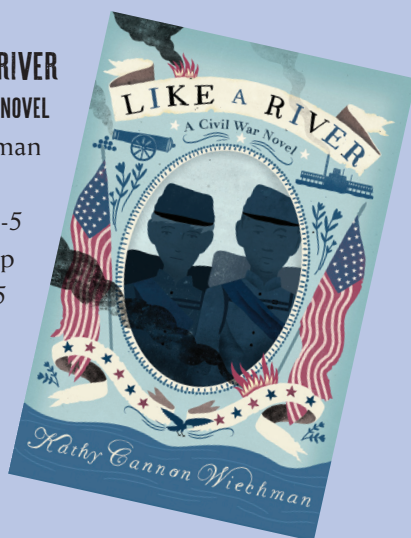
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Ages 9 and up

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"*Like a River* has vaulted to my top-five favorite war stories ever. It's a war story, a thriller, a romance—all that and more. Meticulously researched and brilliantly written, *Like a River* will transport you into a story you won't want to end. Call *Like a River* unforgettable. A stunning debut!"

—Jerry Spinelli, Newbery Medalist for *Maniac Magee*



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This guide was prepared by Marie Jaskulka.



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