

TWENTY-ONE STEPS



Guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

JEFF GOTTESFELD ILLUSTRATED BY MATT TAVARES

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Keeping vigil at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in Arlington National Cemetery, are the sentinel guards, whose every step, every turn, honors and remembers America's fallen. They protect fellow soldiers who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, making sure they are never alone. To stand there—with absolute precision, in every type of weather, at every moment of the day, one in a line uninterrupted since midnight on July 2, 1937—is the ultimate privilege and the most difficult post to earn in the army. Everything these men and women do is in service to the Unknowns. Their standard is perfection.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Gottesfeld is an acclaimed writer whose work has won awards from the American Library Association, the Writers Guild of America, and the National Council for the Social Studies. He has previously written for adult, teen, middle-grade, and picture book audiences. Jeff Gottesfeld is based in Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Matt Tavares has illustrated more than twenty books for children, many of which he also wrote, such as the *New York Times* bestseller *Dasher*. When he's not working in his studio, he travels the country speaking (and drawing) at schools, libraries, conferences, and bookstores. He has presented at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the White House Easter Egg Roll, and he's even done a few book signings at Fenway Park. Matt Tavares lives in Maine with his wife, Sarah, and their two daughters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier? What does the tomb represent? The first soldier buried there was from World War I. What other wars are the interred soldiers from? What happened to the Vietnam Unknown? Discuss why the text speaks of families “whose sons died nameless and faceless” and says, “Their stories were different and the same.”
2. When the first Unknown Soldier was interred, thousands came for the ceremony. Discuss the lines “Those for whom I died lingered and drifted on the roiled waters of loss. I gave them peace.” How does the Unknown Soldier memorial provide peace to families? Discuss why the narrative says of the crowds who now visit the tomb, “They gaze past the mat to the tomb, and imagine our stories. In that moment, we become theirs.”
3. What are the duties of the Tomb Guard sentinels? What words in the Sentinel’s Creed refer to their work? How does the creed express the sentinels’ emotions about their work? Define unusual words like *diligence*, *reverence*, and *vigilance*, looking them up in a dictionary if needed. What does a sentinel revere? How does the word *reverence* relate to the phrase *sacred duty*? What parts of a sentinel’s duties call for diligence and vigilance?
4. Where in the book do the narrative and illustrations directly reflect the Sentinel’s Creed? What parts of the book address the line “My standard will remain perfection”? What do the sentinels do to achieve perfection in their appearance? Why do you think perfection matters to them? Explain why the sentinels march in bad weather, at night, and at other times when the cemetery is closed. Why is the book titled *Twenty-One Steps*?
5. Like the Sentinel’s Creed, the book is in a first-person voice, using “I” and “we.” Who’s speaking? Why did the author choose that voice instead of a third-person one? Identify times in the book when the voice supplies information and times when it evokes emotions. What did you learn from the book? How did it make you feel? Discuss examples of the book’s lyrical language, like “stinging sleet” and “birds don’t dare to sing.”
6. Because the first Unknown Soldier fought in World War I, certain pictures and text in the book reflect that war, such as the trenches on the opening pages and the names related to battles—Argonne Forest, Somme, and Belleau Wood. The narrative also mentions “mustard gas and barbed wire” and “bayonet charges.” How do these references relate to World War I? If necessary, do some research and connect what you learn to the book.
7. To what identity groups have Tomb Guards belonged? And what do we know about the identities of Unknown Soldiers from World War I, World War II, and the Korean War? Why does this matter in our world today?

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who now gives professional development workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award committees.



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