

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



Preview of *Hearts Of Stone*

An American Civil War Novel

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With her father gone to join the Yankee troops and her best friend, Ben, sympathizing with the Confederates, fifteen year-old Hannah finds her world torn apart by the Civil War. Then her mother dies.

Now responsible for holding the young family together, Hannah makes the difficult decision to leave beloved Cumberland Mountain with her brother and sisters and set out on the long and dangerous journey to Nashville, in search of their only living relative.

Their quest to reclaim their family leads them into the very heart of the American Civil War, and could cost them their lives.

Pa ripped our family apart just as spring began whispering sweet promises up on Cumberland Mountain. Serviceberry buds swelled fuzzy and silver. A red fox birthed five kits in an old woodchuck burrow near the meadow. Fiddlehead ferns uncurled by the springhouse. At dawn and twilight, wrens sang their pretty come-to-me, come-to-me song from the fence rails.

And the frost wriggled out of our corn patch, bringing a new crop of stones to light as it went. On one of those warm-in-the-sun, cool-in-the-shade afternoons I put the twins down to nap on a blanket while my little brother Jasper and I picked stones. I stopped when I heard Maude laughing. She was dancing after a yellow butterfly, soft fingers outstretched, her joy bubbling out like a stream blessed with new rain.

"Keep an eye on Mary," I told Jasper. "She'll likely wake soon. I'll go fetch some cornbread, and we'll take a break."



My back complained as I stepped onto the porch, so I stopped to stretch out a kink. But my feet chose to plant themselves right there when I heard Mama and Pa arguing inside the cabin.

"I'm fixing to go," Pa was saying. "And there's a few other men of like mind. We're thinking to leave next week."

Mama's voice edged like an ax. "Your family needs you."

"I know that," he said. "But the army needs me more."

All that frost got sucked right into my gut.

Folks in East Tennessee had been making a fuss about Mr. Lincoln's war for weeks. Some believed in the Union that the Yankee soldiers were trying to hold together. Some cheered when Tennessee joined the new Confederacy of southern states. Some had no tolerance for either side. I'd never heard Pa speak about it in particular. I didn't even know which army he thought to join.

Mama's rocking chair began to creak, faster and faster. "You'd leave this place. You'd leave your wife and children."

"The Yankees will come take charge of East Tennessee," Pa said. "And I'll come home with 'em. Sometimes a man just knows when a thing's got to be done. This is one of those times. We Camerons know the difference between right and wrong."

I heard a sound behind me—Jasper, come after his cornbread. His eyes had gone wide.

Mama's voice was low and cold. "So you men are going to run off and have yourselves a fine adventure." Creak, creak. "Well, never you mind about your family, then. I'll guard this hearth. I'll hold this family together." Creak-creak-creak! "Don't speak to me of a thing that's got to be done, Jeb Cameron. In the end, it's always the women who have to do what needs doing."



"Your bitter tongue won't change what's right," Pa growled. "I'm going hunting."

He was out the door in two paces, rifle in hand. Mama slammed the door shut behind him. Jasper bolted off the porch.

I held my ground. Papa stopped when he saw me, worked his mouth some, blew out a short breath. "It'll smooth over," he told me. Then he stamped down the steps and started across the yard.

I ran after him. "Wait!"

He turned, the anger already draining from his face. "If you heard me speak my mind, there's no need to say it again."

"But—but Pa," I stammered. "We can't manage!"

He faced me with feet fixed firm, arms folded, eyes watchful but calm—just as he stood when facing a new field that needed clearing, or a bear after our livestock, or a fierce storm blowing over the ridge. "Hush now, Hannah. You may look like a girl, but I know you too well. You're stubborn as mule. You'll help see things through. I wouldn't go off if I didn't believe that. You'll manage fine. I'm leaning on you."

"But why do you have to go?" The ache in my chest turned hot and started to smolder like banked coals.

"I'm for the Union," he said. "It's like a family. A clan." He said more things too, but I stopped hearing the words. After a minute he ran a rough hand over my head, then tromped off.

I dragged back to the cornfield. Jasper, eyes shiny, wrestled a stone from the ground and heaved it onto the rock sled. He was skinny as a whittled stick, just nine years old but already game for hard work. And a good thing for that, I thought, as I wrapped my fingers around a rock and pried it free. The dirt felt



damp and cool against my skin. A vireo twittered from the walnut tree, but all I could hear was the echo of Pa and Mama’s arguing. They most often spoke in silence: a thoughtful nod, a mouth hinting at a smile, a long shared glance. I’d never before heard them heave up ugly words from some dark cold place to throw at each other.

The earth smelled raw. The mountain murmured of new life, of plowing and planting, but everything had turned up-side down. I heaved a rock at the sled—missed. Heaved another. Missed again. I wished Pa would come back. Then I might find my aim.

Mind the sled!” Jasper complained, blinking hard.

I might have kept on wasting time if a familiar whistle hadn’t startled a chickadee from its song. I sucked in a fierce, glad breath as Ben McNeill came ‘round the doghobble thicket by the hog pen, a fishing pole over his shoulder.

“You got nothing better to do with your time than whistle?” I asked, when I could wrap my tongue around the words. On a normal day I took a fierce joy in any tune, but not today.

Ben grinned and followed a furrow until he stood at my shoulder. We were the same height. I liked that. I liked the way his dark hair curled around his ears when the air grew damp. I liked how his mind tended toward curiosity.

“That’s a fine greeting for someone who came to bide some time,” Ben said. Then he cocked his head, his eyes going narrow as he studied first me, then Jasper. But all he said was, “You want some help?”

“We’d be grateful,” I allowed, and he tossed his pole aside. The McNeills were our closest neighbors, and good ones—the kind to share chores with, like husking and hog butchering. I didn’t dare go fishing with Ben, not with Pa and Mama simmering. But Ben made any work lighter.



I'd known Ben for all fifteen of my years. Summers we fished for trout and madtoms and darters in Sandy Spring, and tried to figure out where the salamanders went when the cold bore down. Come autumn, we borrowed our papas' rifles and ranged the hills for turkey and wondered why they didn't grow head feathers. In winter, long after nutting season, we'd search for white-bellied mice nests in hollow trees, and wonder how they knew to hide away only chestnuts that weren't wormy. They even knew to eat the tiny heart from each nut so they didn't sprout when the weather got warm and damp. We never could figure that out.

Ben dragged the laden sled to the side of the corn patch and dumped the stones where they couldn't nick a plow blade. "Pa's fixing to leave," I said, when he'd dragged the empty sled back. "He's joining up with the Union Army."

Ben gave me another long look, chewing that news over before getting on with the job. He could talk my ear off, but he knew when to hold his tongue and give a body time.

I dropped a couple of stones on the sled. "Your pa heading off, too?"

"Not so far as I've heard."

"I wish I was going somewhere too," Jasper said suddenly. "I wish it like anything."

A new vine of fear twined around my heart. "You're needed here!"

Jasper scowled. "I don't care. I want to go places like Papa. I'm sick and tired of Cumberland Mountain. I've had my fill of hoeing corn and chopping tobacco and picking rocks."

I crossed my arms. "Jasper Cameron, if you think we aren't staring at enough trouble - "



"Me, I like picking rocks," Ben said. He studied the rock in his hands as if it was a rare thing. "This came from the heart of Cumberland Mountain."

I'd never thought about it quite like that.

Ben shook his head in admiration. "Don't you ever wonder where these stones come from?"

"They rise up when the ground freezes and thaws, just to devil us," Jasper said sourly. "Everybody knows that."

"But how deep do they start?" Ben asked. "What fills the holes they leave behind? If enough years went by, would this mountain run out of rocks to keep shoving our way? Does it keep making more?"

"You might find out if you got off this mountain," Jasper pointed out. "There are big schools down in the flatlands."

"I don't need a school," Ben said. "I figure all the answers I need are right here."

The hot coals of worry and anger I'd banked inside my chest started to fade some.

Ben stepped into the next row, crouched, and came back with an oval stone about the size of a bread loaf. "Here," he said, dumping it into my hands. "This is a fine one."

I stared at the heavy stone. It was gray like a dappled mare—as if all the grays of twilight had sunk into the ground and formed together and popped out again. "It is a fine one."

"You two are daft," Jasper snorted. But his eyes weren't tear-bright any more.

"It would make a first-rate hearthstone," Ben added, and then went back to work.

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Mama's words rang in my head: "I'll guard this hearth. I'll hold this family together." A seed of something good planted itself in my heart.

Ben and Jasper and me spent the rest of the afternoon clearing the corn patch. Later, I hauled that dappled rock into the woods and left it cradled in the roots of my favorite old oak tree, safe 'til I might need it.

"Hearts of Stone transports readers into a lyrical, essential world brimming with life and spirit. It succeeds in that rarest of objectives – to both wrench and warm the heart. Highly recommended."

– **Editors' Choice Selection, *Historical Novels Review***

"The prose is lively, the action dramatic. Historical details never overwhelm the story, and readers will be hooked from the start."

– ***Kirkus Reviews***

"Lessons of endurance, survival, and fierce family love linger long after the story..."

– ***Children's Literature***

Children's Literature Award Winner

– **Society of Midland Authors**

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