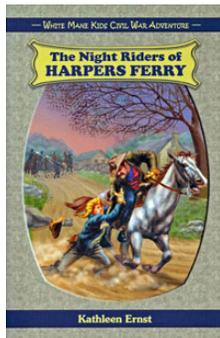


*Kathleen Ernst*  
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



## Teacher's Guide *The Night Rider of Harpers Ferry* An American Civil War Children's Historical Fiction Book

Written by Kathleen Ernst  
Published by White Mane Kids 1996



A memorable tale of loyalty and adventure, based on a true story.

In the weeks preceding the Battle of Antietam Creek, 1862, Solomon Hargreave, along with the rest of the newly-formed 8th New York Cavalry Regiment, has to adjust to life in the army. The appointment of a Southern-born colonel to their unit, and rumors of a Confederate advance, did not ease their adjustment.

While riding in Maryland, Solomon rescues a lockkeeper's daughter, Mahalia, from drowning in the Potomac River. As Solomon comes to know Mahalia and her family, he quickly learns how tangled politics and family relationships can be in that troubled border state. Mahalia's brother is the notorious leader of a band of Rebel partisans, and Solomon's colonel wants him to learn more about the family.

While Solomon pursues that mission, with results that threaten his friendship with Mahalia, the Confederate noose tightens around Harpers Ferry. Only a daring plan can save the regiment. Can Solomon trust his colonel? Can he trust his own military ability? And can he trust Mahalia with his heart?

This book contains a period map, photos, and illustrations, and an author's note about the actual events that inspired the story.

### Activity Suggestions

1. Have students create Venn Diagrams comparing Solomon and Mahalia. What characteristics and beliefs do the two share? How are they different? What admirable values do these characters exhibit?
2. Ask students to write a diary entry from the point-of-view of a member of the cavalry expedition that escaped from Harpers Ferry.
3. Discuss Solomon's reactions to Mahalia's behavior in Chapters 1 and 2. What do they say about the manners and mores of the 1860s? How do they compare to the way students might react in similar situation today?



4. Discuss motivation with students. What motivated Solomon to join the cavalry? What motivated Corbin to join the Confederate partisan group? Was either motivated by patriotism? Ask students to brainstorm possible motivations for fighting in the Civil War. (Possible answers include patriotism, loyalty, search for adventure, need for financial security, desire to emancipate slaves, peer pressure, draft, family expectations, etc.) Which reasons do students feel are valid for fighting in a war? What motivations would compel students to fight in a war today? How do current events compare with the events that led to the American Civil War?
5. Discuss loyalty with students. Why did Solomon choose Randolph to accompany him on the mission in Chapter 10, even though he was one of the worst riders in the company? How did issues of loyalty affect the cavalry officers and men in Chapter 12? Would the students have made the same decisions that Solomon and Colonel Davis made?
6. Discuss the idea of partisans with students. Do they think it was fair or appropriate for some people fighting the Civil War to dress in plain clothes while others dressed in uniform? Compare the political situation of the 1860s with modern political conflicts. Are there causes today that justify such actions?
7. Solomon's experience of war was very different than what he expected. Invite a veteran to visit the class and discuss his or her expectations and experiences, and compare those with Solomon's. Or, ask students to find narratives written by soldiers in a variety of different wars. What do the experiences have in common? What is different about each?
8. Direct students to the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park's or the C & O Canal National Historic Park's websites (see links below). Allow students to explore the photo archives, then select one historic photograph for further study. What can they learn from studying the photograph? What questions does it raise? Ask students to write a paragraph or essay from the point of view of one of the individuals in the photograph, or from a person who might enter that scene. What do they see, hear, smell? What are they doing? How do they feel?



## For Further Exploration

Harpers Ferry National Historic Park  
Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Phone: (304) 535-6029  
<http://www.nps.gov/hafe/index.htm>

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is located at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers in the states of West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland. Explore the terrain Solomon experienced in the story, and learn more about the town's history by visiting the many exhibits and restored buildings. The park's website contains a sampling of historic photographs.

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historic Park  
Hagerstown, Maryland, Phone: (301) 739-4200  
<http://www.nps.gov/choh/index.htm>

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historic Park stretches from Washington, DC, to Cumberland Maryland. Easy day hikes in the Harpers Ferry/Sandy Hook area will help readers explore the landscape described in the novel. The park's website is particularly strong in educational resources, and includes interviews with former boaters, historic photographs, and lesson plans.

## Author Presentations

Author Kathleen Ernst offers a number of programs and presentations for students. Information can be found at <http://www.kathleenernst.com/programs.php>

"Set on the border of North and South during the Civil War, this novel conveys the strain of divided families, misguided loyalties, and the hardscrabble existence of that period."

— **American Library Association Booklist**

"...the book is entertaining and instructive at the same time and, despite a cover and title that don't do it much justice, is a surefire hit for historical fiction fans."

— **School Library Journal**

*The Night Riders of Harpers Ferry* is available as a paperback book from the publisher, White Mane Kids. Signed and personalized copies can be acquired directly from the author. For more information, visit [http://www.kathleenernst.com/book\\_night\\_riders.php](http://www.kathleenernst.com/book_night_riders.php)