

Across Five Aprils Study Guide

Across Five Aprils by Irene Hunt

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Overview

Across Five Aprils appeals to a rather specialized audience. The sophisticated treatment of the Civil War themes requires some familiarity with the great upheaval in American history. This quiet story unfolds in a rural corner of southern Illinois and describes the effects of the war on a human scale, concentrating on the experiences of Jethro Creighton. There are no firsthand accounts of battles from Jethro: everything about the fighting is filtered through letters from older brothers who have gone off to fight.

The novel presents some events not often depicted in stories about the Civil War: troops deserting their regiments, barns burned because the owners are suspected of Confederate sympathies, the bitterness that follows the end of the war, and the unpopularity of Abraham Lincoln. This account does not mythologize or glorify war; instead it offers a realistic view.

About the Author

Born in Newton, Illinois, on May 18, 1907, Irene Hunt received a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois in 1939 and a master's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1946. She taught French and English in the Oak Park, Illinois, public schools for fifteen years. She then taught at the University of South Dakota for four years before returning to Illinois to work as a teacher and as a consultant in the language arts in Cicero.

Hunt has garnered several awards for her books for young adults, including the Charles W. Follett in 1964 and the American Notable Book Award in 1965, both for *Across Five Aprils*, which was also the single runner-up for the Newbery Medal in 1965. *Up a Road Slowly* won that medal in 1967.



Plot Summary

Across Five Aprils begins at the onset of planting season in Southern Illinois. On an April 1861 morning, Matt and Ellen Creighton are working in the fields alongside their sons. Their daughter Jenny is at the cabin, taking care of the gardens and preparing the meals. Ellen and nine-year old Jethro plant potatoes while Matt and the older boys plow in other fields. Through their memories and thoughts, we learn of the family history and emotions surrounding current events. There are differing opinions within the family and community as the President hesitates declaring war. Tom and cousin Eb are anxious for the fighting to begin. Bill is not. All three are of fighting age. Schoolmaster Shadrach Yale, who is in love with Jenny, travels fifteen miles to the nearest town of Newton for the latest news. Upon his return, we learn the Confederate Army has fired on Fort Sumter. The Civil War has begun.

It was boasted among the men the fighting would be short with the Union certain to win. However, the Confederacy has, proven to be a powerful enemy, defeating the North time and time again. Tom and Eb leave in late summer to fight on the Union side. Bill's decision weighs heavy as he doesn't approve of slavery, yet doesn't like the slave-like treatment of employees due to the new industrial machine in the North. His unwillingness to fully side with the North creates a chasm between he and John, ending in a fistfight after which Bill realizes he must make a choice. Choosing what he considers to be the lesser of two evils, he leaves to fight for the South.

While the Civil War rages on in the background of this story, we learn of the tremendous changes in Jethro Creighton. At nine years of age, he has just 'graduated' to working in the fields with his older brothers and the adults, Jethro has received a bit of schooling from Shad and is anxious for the war to start. The war is in full swing in April 1862, and Jethro is faced with added responsibilities left by his brothers' departures. Two months before, Shad and John left, leaving two farms to be plowed and planted by Matt, Ellen and Jethro. Before leaving, Shad gave Jethro his books to keep up his studies and a map he drew. Jethro and Jenny use the map to track the advancements and retreats of the armies.

At ten years of age, Jethro is sent to get supplies in Newton - fifteen miles away. A daunting task for a ten-year old, he is able to manage the team and wagon, then barter for supplies. While in the general store, Jethro is innocently drawn into a no-win argument when the local hothead, Guy Wortman, verbally attacks Jethro for Bill's choice of fighting for the South. Among the men is Dave Burdow, who remains quiet, but appears ominous to Jethro nonetheless. Ross Milton, the newspaper editor, comes to Jethro's rescue by denouncing the talk and seeing Jethro safely out the store. While in Newton, Milton treats the young boy to a meal at the local restaurant, then gives Jethro a book he wrote on improving speech. Jethro is eager to learn all that he can.

On the return trip home, Dave Burdow surprises Jethro by riding a few miles with him. Jethro is afraid of Burdow because of the stories he has been told and the death of his sister Mary at the hands of Burdow's son Travis. However, it soon becomes clear that



Burdow is there to protect Jethro, as they are approached by a drunken Wortman. Burdow drives the wagon, keeps the animals steady, and disables their attacker. He then stays with Jethro until it is clearly safe for him to go on by himself.

After learning of Burdow's actions, Matt prepares to visit and pay his respects. Before he leaves, he suffers a heart attack. While Matt's heart attack is not fatal, Jethro nonetheless is left as the man of the family with the responsibilities of running two farms and providing for his mother, father, sister, sister-in-law and two nephews. His burden is made heavier by Guy Wortman and his friends, who are wreaking havoc on the Creighton Family through nighttime scare tactics. Finally, the vigilantes' night attacks culminate when they let the animals out to pasture, burn the barn full of grain and contaminate the well.

During these events, more Union losses occur. The family sadly learns of Tom's death at Pittsburgh Landing. The community bands together to help the Creightons that year, even setting up a trap to catch Guy Wortman. When it is time to rebuild the barn, Dave Burdow cuts and sends over the logs that are needed. Even though the war is still raging, the county pulls together and begins to mend their differences.

Jethro is only eleven when he is faced with what to do with his cousin, Eb, who has deserted the military and is now living in the woods near the farm. Struggling with moral issues that even an adult would find difficult, Jethro sends a letter to President Lincoln in search for an answer. His answer came in the form of amnesty for the deserters, a decision Lincoln had come to only days before receiving Jethro's letter.

As the war continues, letters and newspapers explain that there is a great deal of political confusion and criticism entangled in the myriad of losses and successes, with Generals being replaced left and right. President Lincoln wins the Republican nomination and is re-elected despite the turmoil the country is in. Through family letters, we learn that Bill has been captured by the Union, John is still fighting and Shadrach, badly wounded at Gettysburg, is in a hospital in Washington, DC. Mr. Milton offers to accompany Jenny to be with him. Upon her arrival, they are married and she stays with Shadrach's aunt while he recovers.

The American Civil War ended in April 1865. Jethro is thirteen. He is jubilant and allowed to join the many celebrations in town. As with every April on the farm, he is once again plowing and planting - which is where he was when Nancy brings news of President Lincoln's death. Having such reverence for and feeling a personal connection with Mr. Lincoln, Jethro is devastated. When life appears at its darkest to Jethro, Shadrach and Jenny return. They have come to take him with them where he will no longer have the responsibilities of the farm and he can continue his education.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

It's planting season (April) in southern Illinois, 1861. Nine-year old Jethro Creighton is in the field with his mother Ellen, planting potatoes while his brothers Bill, Tom and John work alongside their father, Matt and cousin, Eb, who are plowing other fields. Ellen Creighton is a small but seasoned woman strengthened through years of farm life, birthing twelve children, losing four to death, and the oldest has gone to search for gold in California. With the possibility of impending war, thoughts and conversation between the two parents reconstruct the family's history of the family, and set forth their present state of mind and divergent hopes and concerns for the future. As a young boy, Jethro is earnestly looking forward to the onset of war while his mother considers the pain and consequences.

Considered one of the family, schoolmaster Shadrach Yale stops by on his way to town. While the trip was said to be for supplies for Matt, this is the family's way of getting news of the war and about loved ones who no longer live in the area. Shadrach is well educated and has taken Jethro under his wing to teach him and expand his mind beyond the boundaries of farm life. Jethro is an eager student, looking up to Shad with great admiration. Shadrach has endeared himself to the family, but is in love with Jenny, who is five years senior to Jethro.

Less than two years earlier, Mary's death at the age of fifteen left Jenny as the remaining female child of Matt and Ellen. At fourteen, she now prepares the meals and tends to the garden near the house. Her brother John's wife, Nancy, and their two children were visiting for the afternoon meal.

This being his first year as a field worker, Jethro was able to sit at the adult table. Being the youngest and favorite brother to Jenny, he is given the first greens from the garden - a special treat after a long winter! Bill, Jethro's favorite brother, respectfully assisted him through the "first table honors" by dipping a treasured piece of white bread into coffee, a drink usually reserved for adults.

With the family seated around the table, Nancy and Jenny served the food while conversation moved to Matt's refusal of Shad's proposal to his young daughter. With the subject on Shad, soon mention of news brought about unspoken differences. The family suppressed talk of war during a meal and ate in silence.

As the afternoon heated and wore on, the planting became more tedious and the newness of working in the fields wore off and boredom set in. Finally sitting down for a break, the day's work ended with the arrival of Wilse Graham, son of Ellen's sister in Kentucky (or "Kaintuck" as the author so colorfully states).



Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter chronicles a day on the large southern Illinois farm of Matt and Ellen Creighton in April, 1861. Family members are introduced through the memories of Ellen and her son, Jethro, as they plant potatoes on the first day of the planting season. In the same way, diverse opinions of the impending Civil War are reflected both through newspaper accounts and the differences within family members.

This chapter develops the mood and setting of the story. Scenery is described in colorful ways, such as "pink with sunrise" and "basic ugliness□softened by a thick growth of vines," depicting beauty in a simplistic life. The story is told as though we are hearing it from one living at that time, therefore the language is of one who is not book educated. Conversation is stated in authentic tones such as,

"Guess I kind of got carried away with my own noise," he said flushing.

Her eyes lighted a little, "Well, you done me a favor - tellin' me things I ain't never learned and givin' me somethin' to ponder over. It 'mazes me, Jeth, it does fer a fact, the way you kin recollect all the things Shad tells you and how you kin put them away from his way of talkin' into mine."

One deduces from this chapter that while life is about hard work, the family comes together taking care of all that needs to be done. There is the head of the family whose rules are lived by, however the younger generation is growing up and forming thoughts of their own individual futures.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 opens with the brief visit of Ellen's nephew, Wilse Graham, from Kentucky. During the early part of his visit, he shares news of Ellen's side of the family. Wilse is same age as the older brothers, which brings home the depths of the issues surrounding the Civil War as these young men are all of fighting age. Jethro, being too young to be facing issues of mortality, sees the war as an adventure, while the brothers view it based on personal beliefs in war, causes and solutions.

Southern Illinois was mostly populated from southern states, adding even more strain to the split. Wilse, a slave owner himself, speaks of the southern point of view, while Tom, Eb and John side with the North. Bill would be, in today's world, considered a conscientious objector. Seeing the atrocities of humanity's destructive forces on itself, he argues against both sides. As Jethro listened intently, his youthful feelings of excited anticipation of war give way to confusion in trying to understand the larger concepts behind the country's split.

As the discussion heats up, Ellen finally demands a change of subject. They fall into a natural rhythm of conversation that remains pleasant even as they move outside to wait for Shadrach to return with the latest news.

The news Shadrach comes home with is the announcement of the firing on Fort Sumter -

the beginning of the Civil War. This only serves to rekindle the earlier emotions from Wilse. Knowing their mother wants peace at home, the Creighton boys attend to other tasks to avoid confrontation.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 is a family gathering that reveals the varying opinions and dilemmas facing the country, their community and family. The discussion runs around the opposing views surrounding the causes of the country being torn apart, solutions to bring it back together and what President Lincoln is facing as the leader of the country. We have, in this chapter, one family with relations in both the North and South, clearly showing how very personal this war was. Since Jethro is a young person without experience, the family setting provides the backdrop where these things can be expressed and explained for deeper understanding.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The Civil War has begun. The hoopla is more of a celebration across the land than a somber event. With fanfare, speeches and picnics on the battlefield, the seriousness is not felt until the battle of Battle of Bull Run. At Bull Run, the Union is dealt a nasty blow, causing spectators to scramble for safety. With this setback, Tom and Eb join the Union side, while Jethro is taken with excitement as he studies the advancements of the armies. Since learning is such a joy to him, the new names and places are like nourishment to a hungry man.

Although exciting, Jethro has nightmares of events taking place in the newspapers. Bill comforts Jethro, departing words of wisdom of the hypocrisies of war and preferring peaceful solutions in life. While Jethro's youth preferred marching to smite one's enemy, he likes Bill's ways far and above his other brothers. Bill's ways are respected and tolerated in his family because that's just who he is, but he is looked down on by the community for his lack of commitment to the Union side.

As the war rages on and Union battles are lost, the differences between John and Bill became strained. One day, their argument dissolves into physical fighting. Bill, knowing he cannot choose in his heart to fight with the North, is left feeling he has no choice but to leave. He is against the war, but after much self-deliberation, he walks through the fields on his way out of town to let Jethro know he has decided to fight for the Confederacy.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 shows the incredible treatment of the war by the general populous. Treating it as a party atmosphere in the beginning with great disappointment in the Confederate stronghold, the Union is very disorganized and arrogant in its beginnings. This chapter brings home the fact that war is much uglier than one expects. When the death toll begins to rise, it shakes one's perception of reality.

The dilemma facing the two sections of the country is shown, namely industry hiring workers at low wages and farms using slave labor to feed the industrial machine. Such mistreatment of people spurns differences of opinion and makes war the only solution amongst non-warring people



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As news of the war is learned of sporadically through newspapers that are read and re-read, the Creightons receive their first letter from Tom. Hoping the war would be over as quickly as it started, Tom's accounting of the fighting at Fort Donelson makes it clear that the battles were hard fought. Lured into a false sense of security by the hot weather, soldiers threw away their warm clothing to lighten their loads. When at the Fort, the weather turned and many either froze to death or died in battle.

Ellen, feeling the weight of Tom's letter, sends Jethro to Shadrach's to insulate him from his parent's grief. It is February 1862 and the weather is cold. Making his first overnight trip alone to take the letter to the schoolmaster, his mother and sister have bundled him up with clothes and supplies to make the one-mile trip.

It was customary during this time that the Schoolmaster board with a local family. However, Shadrach insisted on having his own quarters. Matt Creighton agreed: "A man has the right to the dignity of his own fireside after a day's work." A log room was added to the schoolhouse for Shad to live.

The time Jethro spends with his teacher Shadrach is pleasant and educational. Shadrach and John will be leaving for the Union army the following week. After reading Tom's letter, Shad draws a map of the country, states and various landmarks for Jethro to follow so that he can picture the places mentioned as the news of the war trickles in. Shadrach gives Jethro a thorough accounting of areas of strength and weakness to both sides, during which he is also teaching the young boy the proper use of grammar - throwing in a lesson on respect such as the use of 'Mr.' when referring to Abe Lincoln.

The map Shad has created and given to Jethro will be used by Jethro and Jenny throughout the war as they match the landmarks with places mentioned in the letters they receive from Shad and the brothers.

We learn more of the attraction between Jenny and Shad. They are, in fact, in love with each other. She is fourteen and much too young, in her father's eyes, for marriage. And, since Shad is leaving for war, Matt Creighton has forbidden the union. This frustrates them both, which naturally fuels the fire between them. Loyal to his parents, Jethro takes their side, agreeing that Jenny is too young.

Shadrach has cooked a fine meal of roast chicken on his fire. The two share their meal and Jethro goes off to sleep.



Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 introduces us to the reality of the communication system of the 1800's, where a newspaper or family letter is something to be treasured and is re-read often. The distance between neighbors makes preparations of traveling a primary task - even for distances as short as only a mile. This makes any visit a thing to be cherished.

We see the simple living of the schoolmaster with his long, narrow room described as a recent and uncustomary addition to the schoolhouse. There is an emphasis on the value of education, especially for those with little access to the world outside their communities. In this chapter, the young Jethro learns the added tidbit of proper use of grammar in conversation and showing respect for people in position.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 shows Jethro's growth as he travels 15 miles into town on his own. With Jethro's brothers off to war, Matt tends to the farm while Jethro and Jenny care for the ailing Ellen - who suffers from a headache because the family had run out of the precious commodity of coffee.

Preparations are extensive as the family makes sure Jethro is protected in all ways (clothing, firearms, knowledge) and is well-supplied (food, money, goods to be traded). This is a "sizeable job" for Jethro as he has never (1) gone to town on his own before, (2) bartered or bought supplies, or (3) handled the wagon and team on his own.

He waves to people as his father had, talks to those wanting to know whatever news they could find out, maneuvers through wagon ruts and mud, and apprehensively drives past Dave Burdow's house, whose ne'er-do-well son Travis killed Jethro's sister, Mary, some three years earlier. Despite this incident and the fact that the Burdow's had never been liked, it was Matt Creighton who had stopped the vigilante mob that wanted to kill Travis after the senseless killing.

Jethro makes it to Newton safely and performs all tasks as promised. His presence incenses a few of the men gathered at the general store. They are bothered that Bill did not join the Union army. Dave Burdow is among them, but it is Guy Wortman who is the instigator of mean words and blame, spewing them toward the young Jethro. Due to his inexperience of dealing with men of ignorance, Jethro unfortunately exchanges words with the man, causing several onlookers to verbally gang up on Wortman.

Ross Milton, the newspaper editor, puts Wortman in his place. He escorts Jethro out of the store toward his wagon and treats him to lunch at the restaurant. Restaurants are a fancy thing to Jethro and he is grateful for the meal. Afterwards, Milton and Jethro go to the newspaper office where Milton gives him a book he has written on correct speech. A prized possession indeed as Jethro is eager to improve himself.

On the drive home, Jethro nervously drives past the Burdow place without incident. A few miles later, coming into the wooded portion of the trip, Mr. Burdow suddenly shows up and boards the wagon. He accompanies a very worried Jethro in silence, with an occasional assurance that he is not going to harm him. After a few miles and to Jethro's astonishment, Dave Burdow wards off a surprise attack by Wortman. Neither speak of the incident, and Burdow continues driving the wagon a bit further until he feels sure the boy is safe. Burdow and Jethro then each return to their own homes.

Shaken, Jethro breaks down into tears as the farm comes into view. Upon arrival, Jethro relates his day of bartering and the visit with Ross Milton. It is not until it is time to turn in for the night that he tells his family about Wortman and Burdow.



Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 paints the vastly different picture of life for Jethro compared to that of a 9-year old today. The responsibilities that fall to the young during hard times makes one grow up fast. We see him conducting business as an adult, naively entering into a conversation that is far over his head and assisted through kindnesses of empathetic adults.

The act of Dave Burdow as protector of Jethro constitutes unspoken repayment for Jethro's father saving Travis Burdow from the town mob. We are introduced to the senselessness of men such as Guy Wortman, who spout their ignorant opinions and take their hatred out on an innocent nine-year old.

It takes great courage to perform tasks that we take for granted today - tasks as simple as buying groceries.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

As Matt prepares to travel to thank Dave Burdow, he has a heart attack. Surviving, he relinquishes charge of the farm to Jethro, the only remaining able-bodied male in the family.

Jethro matures as he takes care of both his and John's farms. Jenny helps Jethro in the fields after her house chores are done. Although Jethro is handling all that needs to be done and partakes in adult conversations of the war, he learns a hard lesson of letting go when Shadrach sends a letter to Jenny - the first of which she does not share with him. Every letter thus far has been shared openly, but this particular one is filled with personal information between two people in love. As Jethro takes it very personally, Nancy counsels Jethro about affairs of the heart and respect of personal privacy between the two people in a relationship.

While Matt Creighton is ill, weak-minded Guy Wortman and his friends decide to turn vigilante. They are angry about Bill joining the Confederacy, so they start paying visits to the cabin with vicious taunts and threats of further trouble for people who side with the Southern Rebel. Neighbors help the family stand watch for three weeks. John's dog disappears and Nancy closes up the house, bringing the boys with her to live with Matt and Ellen.

At the end of the three weeks, the night watches are stopped. One night, after releasing the animals, Wortman and his friends burn the Creighton barn - complete with hay, grain, wagon and supplies - and contaminate the well with coal oil.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 sets forth another major move toward adulthood for Jethro. Through his father's unexpected illness, the ten-year old now must take care of two farms, converse on adult terms and protect his family from an unknown mob because of the actions of a family member who no longer lives in the home. All the while, he is still the young boy whose emotions have not caught up with his responsibilities. The men in the community pitch in to help, but help is limited as they have their hands full with their own farms.

This is a chapter of changes as the life Jethro has known continues to spiral in unforeseen directions.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

County-wide help come to the Creightons throughout the spring and summer of 1862. They pitch in by sending a son or father to help a day or two a week during the planting and growing seasons. Neighbors also are able to collect enough pieces for the Creightons to have a harness, wagon, grain and hay to get them through the 1862 season.

Dan Lawrence is wounded in the war and returns home, bringing news to the Creighton family. Through Dan's accounting of the battle of Pittsburgh Landing, we learn of Tom's death the previous April. The family bible is brought off the shelf and the ceremonious task of entering of the date of his death is given to Jenny and Jethro. As they review the names and dates already entered, we learn of the reasons for the other family deaths.

The County soon tires of Guy Wortman's antics of vigilante harassment and destruction. Without being able to prove it is him, there is nothing anyone can do to stop him. However, he and his friends have begun stealing from the local stores in town. Sam Gardiner, owner of the general store, is fed up with Wortman and decides to leave a trap. Gardiner pretends to leave town, but returns at night to hide in his own store. After three days, Wortman finally takes the bait. He and his cohorts are caught breaking into the general store by Gardiner. The surprised thieves are unexpectedly met with a load of buckshot and humiliation that ends their escapades.

Meanwhile, the Union army marches on to Corinth as public opinion of the generals in charge shifts from day to day. One day General Grant is in high esteem, followed by McClellan, then Halleck. Across the countryside, frustration grows with every defeat and lack of aggression from the Union.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The focus of this chapter shifts from the heavy responsibilities on Jethro to the coming together of the community by helping the Creightons and outing Wortman and his gang. We see the intensifying confusion as the generals are changed and public opinion holds the Northern leaders in low esteem.

As a very poignant part of this story, we see the honor and deep ritual in the recording of births and deaths in the family Bible.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Jenny and Jethro often refer to Shad's map as news comes in about the war. They closely follow the armies of both sides, making comparisons of Shad's predictions and speculating on what might come next. News begins to speak more highly of the Union Army and its leadership. In spite of all the changes, there are in fact several Confederate victories: Fort Donelson, Fort Henry, Pea Ridge, New Orleans, New Madrid, the Confederate fort at Island No. 10 and more. Hopes dashed once again, more Union disasters cause more disarray within the army organization and much criticism toward the President. It isn't long before desertion was a common thing.

Help continues to pour in during harvest season. More than twenty men gather to rebuild the barn. Ellen, Nancy and Jenny put together a big spread to feed all who helped. It is an important gesture when Dave Burdow cuts logs and has them sent over by Ross Milton's assistant, Charley: "Tell the young one Dave Burdow is sending them to him."

The conversation of the men during the meal is that of the war. Jethro just closes his eyes in silent exasperation when the adult men seem to think he is too young to think of or worry about such a worldly conversation.

A few days later, Shadrach sent a letter that Jenny shares with the whole family. In the letter, he expresses his viewpoints as a soldier in the opinion of General McClellan. He tells of his comrades' devotion to the General that he does not yet agree with as he does not see him as a tenacious leader that has the will or skill to win the war.

The army marches on to Antietam and Fredericksburg, with another of his letters arriving - this time with a more bitter tone toward the new General Burnside. John sends his letter after the battle at Stones River in Tennessee. He too is hating the war with all that he has seen. The year of 1863 begins with the people of the Northern States feeling very discouraged.

Chapter 8 Analysis

While we still see Jethro and the community working to help the family hold together, we are also brought deeper into the movements and opinions of the war. New commanders are introduced and many are shuffled around as the Union Army works to gain the much-needed strategic momentum that has alluded them. The soldiers are clearly becoming discouraged.

With all that Jethro has been through and in spite the responsibilities he now holds, there are men of the community that still see him as a young boy unable to understand the talk of war.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

A deserter is introduced, looting and foraging to stay alive and hidden from Federal Agents. Point Prospect Campground is known as a hideout for those that leave the army. Hig Phillips is a local man who avoided the draft. He is murdered by people incensed by his laziness. His murder convinces Nancy to close up her house completely, bringing her stock with her and staying with the Creightons permanently until the war is over.

Federal Agents pay a visit to the Creightons in February 1863. They are in search of Eb, who has left his post. Not pleased by their mannerisms, Jethro and Jenny nonetheless cooperate with them in searching for him. Eb is not found.

Now armed while working the fields, Jethro hears calls coming from the woods. He discovers an emaciated Eb hiding out. He has had enough of death and simply walked away from his unit. Rejecting Jethro's insistence, Eb refuses to come to the house because it could cause trouble for everyone. After catching up on family news, Jethro gives Eb his lunch and sits with him while he eats.

Jethro tells Eb of the Federal Agents and Eb becomes frightened. He tells Eb to stay hidden in the woods and he will think of some way of helping him. Knowing the wrong of his actions, Jethro keeps him hidden and brings him food to regain strength. Jethro is torn, knowing that if Eb returns, he will go to prison, and if he remains a fugitive, he will have to hide for the rest of his life.

Jethro does not tell the family what he is wrestling with. Jenny sees something is wrong and works diligently to pry it out of him. Relentless, he finally allows her to believe he is hiding that he has been smoking. This only adds to his guilt.

Jethro wrestles with this adult decision about what to do. Unable to come up with a solution on his own, he pens a letter to President Lincoln in search of his answer. Jethro tends to the farm, taking food to Eb while he waits for a reply, putting more and more emotional distance between himself and his family in the interim.

President Lincoln's reply comes and the curious family gathers while he reads it out loud. In the letter, Lincoln notes that Jethro's letter was timely as he had granted amnesty to the deserters only 2 days before receiving it.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 examines the personal dilemmas of right and wrong within a larger context of morals. While a soldier rarely knows what he is getting into when he goes into war, the reality and the dream are vastly different. When one commits to a thing, living up to their

commitment is honorable - but is it when you are betraying the soul? Finding answers and balance to life's questions is difficult and finding them takes enormous courage at any age.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Chancellorsville is devastating to the Union when seventeen thousand Northern soldiers are either killed or captured in May 1863. Nicknamed "Fighting Joe Hooker," General Hooker held high hopes for the North but was no match to Confederate Robert E. Lee. Only weeks before, the papers spoke highly of the General who replaced Burnside and now they are "screaming for his head."

Late June 1863, a letter arrives from Shadrach. He speaks sternly of the Army of the Potomac, suggesting Jenny not hold optimism of their future together. The next letter from John is more upbeat, being less about the army and more about home. Eb writes telling of the hardships now that he has returned to duty. He is not treated kindly by his fellow soldiers, but takes it in toll for payment of his earlier desertion.

Public opinion is wondering what in the world Grant is doing. Newspapers speak of pressures for the President to replace Grant. He does not remove Grant, but does other shifting around of leadership. Lee takes the Confederate Army into Northern territory for the first time as he marches into Pennsylvania, garnering much speculation of where he will go next. With the news of Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Grant is the hero of the North once again.

A letter arrives from Shadrach's aunt telling the Creighton's that Shadrach has been badly wounded at Gettysburg. He is in Washington D.C. and his recovery is uncertain. She asks that Jenny be brought to DC as soon as possible.

Accustomed to visiting frequently, Ross Milton arrives the same day as the letter. Listening to Jenny crying inside the cabin, he offers to accompany her safely to DC. After talking it over with Ellen, Matt agrees that Jenny should leave the next day.

Upon Jenny's arrival at his side, Shadrach begins to heal. Eventually, the couple sends a letter to Matt requesting to be married. Matt gives consent. At 16, Jenny marries Shadrach on August 14, 1863. Telling of her life in DC, Jenny lives at the Aunts house and visits Shad in the hospital every day. Using Mr. Milton's book, Jethro closes with a letter of perfect grammar to Jenny.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Through letters and newspaper accounts, Chapter 10 shows the advancements and failures of the Union and Confederate armies during 1863. We see the difficult struggle of Grant as the army meets with the formidable Lee. Vicksburg and Gettysburg are victories that renew faith in the Union army.



The family is spread thinner when Shad is wounded and Matt finally relinquishes his daughter to the man she loves. Once again, it is through letters that we see the differences in lifestyle between city and farm.

Jethro reaches another level of growth as he carefully pens a letter to his sister using Milton's book on perfect speech.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In December 1863, the family receives a long awaited letter from John. Three months after the disastrous defeat at Chicamaugua Creek in Tennessee, John writes of the account. His letter transports us to the mountains around Chatanooga and Sherman's march. Jethro rewrites John's letter and sends his copy to Jenny and Shad.

People begin to talk about peace and the inevitable end to the war. Lincoln delivers the Gettysburg Address the month before in November and offers amnesty to Confederate soldiers a month later, causing public outrage. Jethro, feeling a personal connection with Lincoln, is angered by what is said as the papers denounce the President's actions as treason.

Shadrach writes that he and Jenny have seen President Lincoln, describing everything to Jethro. The letter tells of his chiseled looks being twenty years older than the pictures they studied together when the war began. He also saw Grant, stating that he does not appear authoritative, but rather "ill at ease."

In spite of the vicious words thrown at Lincoln, he is nominated Republican candidate for a second term. McClellan is nominated as the candidate for the Democrats. Shadrach writes that during battle he carried no respect for McClellan as he felt he had no courage. After reading McClellan's peace platform of accepting nothing less than the full reestablishment of the Union, he expresses a change of heart.

With campaigning underway, Grant finally meets up with Lee and their dance on the battlefields begin. The Navy captures the warship Tennessee, Sherman takes Atlanta, Sheridan defeats Early at Shenandoah Valley and Lincoln is re-elected President.

A letter is received from John, who writes of taking care of Rebel prisoners. It is the end of 1864. While he is feeding them, he discovers Bill is among them. Reluctantly, his Captain allows John to visit with his brother for a while where there are able to update one another. He tells his family that Bill has aged quite a bit and that he was not among those that killed Tom at Pittsburg Landing.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 takes place from the fall of 1863 through the end of 1864, describing the advancements of the armies as the Northern armies finally become a consistently powerful force. Throughout the year, the country is in political turmoil as they re-elect President Lincoln to a second term. The focus in Chapter 11 is outside the family farm, taking us to the battlefields, Washington D.C., and a Union prisoner camp where brothers John and Bill are briefly reunited.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In December 1864, the country awaits word as to the whereabouts of Sherman's army. Finally, on Christmas the President receives a wire from Sherman; "I beg to present you the city of Savannah as a Christmas gift."

After taking Savannah, Sherman turns North to meet with Grant. Accounts of soldiers' plundering and looting throughout Georgia are prevalent. The army then moves on to South Carolina, North Carolina and into Virginia. As reports of delight in the devastation come from letters from sons throughout the community, fathers begin wondering what this war has done to their sons' moral senses.

In January 1865, Jethro is now thirteen. He shows the physical changes of a boy turning into a man. Trying to draw him out of the reserve that has settled in over the last few years, one day Ellen asks him to talk about the lessons he had learned from Shad so long ago. He is less interested in his lessons these days as he cares for responsibilities on the farm, telling his mother that "Seem sometimes that the old lessons are bein' lost in the worry of new things happenin' each day, Ma."

Jethro has grown from a boy to a young man of deep thought. Talk has begun of what peacetime might look like. He is less than pleased when Mr. Milton explains that it won't necessarily be a happy time. Jethro prefers the dream of peace rather than the reality of repairing the rift that has torn the country. Milton talks about the Thirteenth Amendment taking years to actually take effect - possibly as long as twenty-five. Jethro holds high hope and confidence that President Lincoln will be successful in bringing North and South together as one unified country.

The Civil War finally ends on April 5, 1865. Terms of peace are signed at Appomattox Court House in Virginia.

Jethro accompanies neighbor, Ed Turner, to Newton where celebration abounds. Even the entrance in the jailhouse roof is opened to allow the prisoners to join in. Staying overnight with Ross Milton, Jethro is treated to another meal at the restaurant and a night of fireworks and festivity. Upon returning home, he shares the adventure with his family. Jethro sees peace as a very happy time.

Suddenly, the bliss of peacetime is snuffed out when Nancy comes to Jethro in the fields telling him of the assassination of his beloved President, Abraham Lincoln. Jethro is devastated, but life goes on and so does the work - it just no longer holds joy for the young teen.

On the last Sunday in April, Jethro lies in the grass with a grieving heart as he tries to make sense of it all. He hears footsteps that he hopes will not bother him. The voice he hears is Shadrach's. He has been offered a teaching job where he will also be able to



return to his schooling. Shad and Jenny have returned to the farm to take Jethro to live with them. At first he refuses as he considers how he is needed on the farm. With the return of Eb and John, the family has already agreed that Jethro's education is more important. Jethro will no longer have the weight of the farm on his shoulders.

Chapter 12 Analysis

As peace approaches, Chapter 12 brings us across the 5th April of the Civil War. There is much celebration, yet there is a lot of mending to be done in the hearts and souls of men. Our youthful hero doesn't like that it won't necessarily be happy. Even though the Thirteenth Amendment is ratified, it will be another twenty-five years before it will make a difference. We still see prejudice and inequality today - 120 years later.

This chapter shows the high price paid along with peace. Just as hope is restored with the end of the war, it is dashed again with the assassination of President Lincoln. We see the emotional effect this takes on one boy. Imagine the effect it had on our entire country at that time!

Just as we are thrown into darkness with the news of the death of the President, life shows us light once again as family is reunited and the promise of a bright new future is shown for Jethro. The cycle of life is clearly shown here as life continues on.



Characters

Jethro Creighton

Jethro Creighton is our main character. He begins the story as a nine-year old boy on his first day planting in the fields. This new position in the family gives him the honor of graduating to the adult table during meals. He is youthful and full of ideas and thoughts of a young mind. As the story progresses over the five seasons of the American Civil War, his responsibilities increase to that of a grown man. As his brothers leave to fight in the war, he is left with the plowing, planting and harvesting of not only the family farm, but his brothers as well. When his father has a heart attack, he is the sole man of the family looking out for the welfare of his mother, father, sister, sister-in-law and two nephews, as well as the farm and livestock.

Jethro's outlook is transformed and tempered with each of life's adversities that occur within the family, community and the country at large. His thirst for knowledge and education add to his abilities to handle whatever comes his way, including conflict at home, in town and within his own heart as he faces daunting tasks and decisions. We see Jethro find his courage as he walks through the fears that face him during these difficulties.

When we find him on that last April in 1865, he is devastated by the demise of his hero, President Abraham Lincoln. As with the proverbial silver lining on every cloud, his youthful heart is still intact with the return of his beloved schoolmaster and mentor, Shadrach Yale. We see that life goes on for Jethro as he is handed the opportunity to leave the hard life on the farm to live with Jenny and Shad while he attends school.

Ellen Creighton

Ellen Creighton is mother to Jethro. We glean much of the family history and pains of war through her eyes. Ellen has birthed 12 children, of which almost half have died in the hard life throughout 1800's. Life's hardship have developed her practicality toward humanity and living. She is slight of build, gentle of mind and tough in her strength to live through diversity. She is a simple woman whose beauty had washed away long ago, replaced by the great love and concern she has for her family. With her two oldest daughters married and living in other states, her oldest son gone off to find gold in California, Ellen watches as sons Tom, John and Bill leave to fight in the American Civil War. Jenny and Jethro are left at home to help tend to survival of the family and family farm.

Jethro is her youngest child. She has great hopes for a good life for him and encourages him to learn. Ellen is deeply interested in what Jethro has learned. Gently, she guides him by balancing his youthful opinions with wisdom of experience. Much of our story emphasizes the importance of Jethro's education through conversation,



thought and Ellen's allowance that he be given additional tasks and responsibilities, until he becomes the boy she must rely on to be a man.

Shadrach Yale

Shadrach Yale is the local schoolmaster and mentor to Jethro Creighton. Coming from Pennsylvania, he is educated at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois and begins teaching at the local school when his educational funding runs out. He endears himself to the Creighton family after succumbing to illness and being taken in by Ellen Creighton and nursed back to health. Shadrach, known as Shad to the family, has fallen in love with their youngest Creighton daughter, Jenny. Matt Creighton has forbidden them to marry because of her youth, which only frustrates the fourteen-year old Jenny.

Revered by Jethro, Shadrach is the driving force and inspiration toward betterment through education. Instrumental even when he is gone, Shad leaves Jethro and Jenny his books and a map which they follow as the news accounts of the war trickle in. With map in hand, the family is able to visualize the locations as the armies march throughout the south. Shad's letters give us firsthand accounts of life as a soldier. When he is hurt and recovering in Washington DC, Shadrach writes of the political atmosphere. Matt grants Jenny permission to travel to Washington with Ross Milton, the newspaper editor. Jenny and Shadrach are finally married upon her arrival. While living in D.C., Shad shares his moments of standing in a crowd when Mr. Lincoln passes by. Jethro then holds him in even higher esteem.

Upon returning to the Creighton farm after the war, he and Jenny offer to take Jethro to live with them and continue his education where Shad will be teaching and returning to college.

Dave Burdow

While Dave Burdow is actually in a small part of the book, his presence and character create a large picture of the make-up and reputation of the Creighton family. County-wide, the Creightons are a well-respected contrast to the recent history of the Burdows. The low reputation of the Burdow family began with Dave's father who moved into the county from out of town. Reputed to be 'shiftless' and 'ne-er-do-wells,' it was Dave's son Travis that carelessly killed Mary Creighton as she was riding home with her date from a dance. Not invited to the dance, Travis Burdow and his drunken friends purposely arrived to make trouble. When Mary's date, Rob, left, Travis followed, firing a shot above the horses causing them to bolt. Mary died when the wagon tipped over. When the town wanted to hang Travis, well-respected Matt Creighton stopped them from causing further bloodshed.

Years later, Jethro makes his first trip alone to buy and trade supplies for the family. In town, he unintentionally finds trouble in a conversation where he is challenged about his brother Bill's loyalty to the South. Upon his return, as he travels alone from town toward home, it is Dave Burdow that travels with him and saves him from being ambushed by

the town vigilante, Guy Wortman. The next morning, as Matt is leaving to thank Burdow, he suffers a heart attack and is no longer able to function as the family provider. When Wortman and his men burn down the barn on the Creighton farm, it is Dave Burdow that cuts and sends the wood for the rebuilding.

The story of Dave Burdow is of a man stuck between generations of trouble. Mislabeled unfairly by the town, his goodness shows through in the end.



Objects/Places

The Fields

Much of the history and thoughts of the family take place while planting or plowing in the fields, giving us a feel for the work of the southern Illinois farm.

The Cabin

The home and place of gatherings for the Creightons and neighbors. This is where opinions of the war were discussed and family letters were shared.

The Parent Table

As a place of honor, Jethro has graduated to the Parent Table now that he is of age to be working in the fields.

Letters/Newspapers

Letters and newspapers were a pivotal part of this story. This was the way family members kept in touch and how farm folk tracked the events of the war.

The Map

Drawn by Shad while he taught Jethro about the locations of battles that had taken place at the beginning of the war. Jethro and Jenny use the map throughout the war to track the advancements and retreats of the armies.

Newton

Newton is the nearest town and located 15 miles away from the farm. All supplies can be bought or bartered in Newton's stores. An interesting note is the structure of the jail. Located between buildings, the only entrance is through a door located at the top.

The Book of Correct Speech

The book written by editor Milton Ross is given to Jethro on his visit to Newton.

The Bible

The family bible contains the family history of births, deaths and marriages. There is a ritual of importance as entries are made.

Civil War

This book is set at the onset and duration of the Civil War. It changed lives and pitted families against one another. Throughout the book, we follow the armies as they move from one battleground to another and the politics of the times. Of particular interest, Across Five Aprils speaks of the sway of public opinion from one week to the next as each battle is one and lost.

Fort Sumter and Vicksburg

These locations mark the historical beginning and end of the American Civil War.

Setting

Across Five Aprils takes place on the farm of the Creighton family in rural southern Illinois during the American Civil War. Jethro, the youngest Creighton child and the main character, is not quite ten when the story begins. As war comes and Jethro's older brothers go away to become soldiers, Jethro assumes responsibility on the farm. His father suffers a severe heart attack, leaving Jethro to manage almost all of the heavy work. The war never reaches this quiet part of the country, but the Creightons' barn is burned because one of their sons has gone to fight for the Confederacy. Deserters from the Union Army hide near the farm, forcing Jethro to make a moral decision.

The action of the novel moves forward against a backdrop of changing seasons.

The return of spring each April is particularly important to the changing season motif. Hunt recalls Walt Whitman's great poem about Abraham Lincoln's April 1865 death, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," as she writes, "A south breeze brought the scent of lilacs and sweet fennel to his nostrils and set all the frosty-green leaves of a silver poplar tree trembling."

A realistic setting portrayed with affection, the Creighton farm is modeled on the farm where Hunt spent her early years. The nearby town of Newton is also realistically depicted. Although not essential to the plot, details about the Newton restaurant and other local establishments lend color and interest to the story.

Social Sensitivity

Hunt introduces many social concerns relevant to the American Civil War. She addresses the issues tactfully and without prejudice. At the beginning of the novel, young Jethro and his brothers eagerly await the war, anticipating "loud brass music and shining horses, men riding like kings." They understand that men will die, but imagine the casualties as "shadowy men from distant parts who would die for the pages of future history books." They soon realize that there is no glory in war, a point that Hunt stresses throughout the story. Death strikes at home when Tom dies in battle.

The family also discovers that war brings out the worst in some people.

When Bill joins the Confederate Army, neighboring Union sympathizers try to injure Jethro by frightening his horses as he rides to town. The Creightons refuse to condemn Bill for following his conscience, even though they disagree with him about the war. Some time later, ruffians ride up to the farmhouse to deliver a bundle of switches with a message attached: "There's trubel for fokes that stands up fer their reb lovin' sons."

The "trubel" turns out to be the burning of the Creighton barn, a particularly cruel act in view of Matthew Creighton's ill health.

Hunt portrays the legitimate grievances of both the North and the South in an evenhanded manner. Wilse Graham, a relative from Kentucky visiting the Creightons, makes clear that slavery is not the war's only issue. High tariffs prevent the South from attaining the same level of prosperity enjoyed in the North. Wilse's defense of slavery, based on its existence from the beginning of history, is weak, and perceptive readers will easily recognize it as such.

Even though Northerners embrace the morally correct stance on slavery, Wilse points out the hypocritical attitudes held by many of them. He asks how Northerners would react if every slave in the South were suddenly freed and went North: "Would they say 'we'll see that you get good-payin' work...that you're well housed and clothed...we want you to come to our churches and yore children...to our schools'?"

The problem of taking responsibility for one's own moral choices receives careful treatment. Jethro faces a moral dilemma when he discovers that his cousin Eb has deserted. Jethro encounters his cousin in the woods shortly after the federal registrars looking for Eb have bullied and threatened the Creighton family. Aware of his patriotic duty, Jethro also displays an uncommon understanding of the forces that have driven Eb to desert. He feels the need to confide in someone but feels he can trust no one. Jethro decides to write to President Lincoln, who, like Jethro, has plowed the fields of Illinois. Lincoln's reply is one of the high points of the book.

Above all, *Across Five Aprils* emphasizes the futility of war. The Civil War solves nothing that could not have been solved by peaceful means. It turns brother against brother and brings out the worst in human nature. Even the arrival of peace does not offer much

hope. Ross Milton describes the physical and spiritual destruction, pointing out that the country must still contend with "the hate that burns in old scars, and the thirst for revenge that has distorted men."



Literary Qualities

Across Five Aprils is a finely wrought piece of prose fiction. The plot parallels the course of the Civil War, beginning in April 1861, when Fort Sumter is attacked, and reaching to the "saddest and most cruel April of the five," when Lincoln is assassinated in 1865. Set on the Creighton farm and its close environs in southern Illinois, the action mostly consists of Jethro's moral and emotional development, leaving the distant battles to be described through the letters of absent characters.

Although the story is told in the third person, Hunt reveals all the action through Jethro's eyes, a technique known as limited omniscient narration.

The narration reflects subtle changes that occur in Jethro's personality as he matures from a child to a thoughtful young man.

Hunt's outstanding use of language and symbolism merits attention. The author borrows some of Whitman's symbols from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and adds others, using the change of seasons as a barometer of her characters' feelings. A significant passage occurs at the end of the novel: Daily the color of April grew brighter. The apple and peach orchards were in bloom again, and the redbud was almost ready to burst.

The little leaves on the silver poplars quivered in green and silver lights with every passing breeze, and Jenny's favorite lilacs bloomed in great thick clusters, deep purple and as fragrant as any beautiful thing on earth.

Then suddenly, because there were no longer any eyes to perceive it, the color was gone, and the fifth April had become, like her four older sisters, a time of grief and desolation.

This fifth April is the time of Lincoln's assassination and of Tom Creighton's death at the Battle of Pittsburgh Landing. In both cases, Hunt emphasizes the discrepancy between the beauty of the season and the horror of the deed. As the bearer of the bad news about Tom, Dan Lawrence, relates, "I never seed a part of the country that looked purtier, with the peach tree in bloom and the air so soft and lazy.... You wouldn't ha believed. . . that trouble was a-brewing fer all of us."

Across Five Aprils has characteristics of an epistolary novel—that is, a novel consisting exclusively of letters. Much of the story unfolds through letters written by people other than Jethro. This technique allows the reader to take a second look at the letter writer, who is first introduced through Jethro's eyes.

Through the letters, the reader, like Jethro, receives personal accounts of the war's progress while maintaining a certain distance from the events. Thus Jenny's experiences in Washington, as described in her letters home, lack the intensity of

Jethro's narrow escape from injury when he is attacked or of his encounter with Eb in the woods.



Themes

Self Improvement

Across Five Aprils has a strong emphasis on the importance of learning and bettering oneself. It is a story that shows the many creative ways we learn. Beginning with the introduction of Shadrach Yale, the schoolmaster, we learn of the schooling structure of farm country. Since he is leaving the area without a teacher, he leaves his books to young Jethro and Jenny for them to study while he is gone.

While Ellen teaches her son wisdom, he is teaching her what he has learned of history in science. Jethro's education allows him a higher self esteem as he is relied on to read letters and newspapers for the family. His interest in learning draws to him the newspaper editor who gives Jethro a book he had written on better speech. Jethro applies this new knowledge not only to his speaking, but his thoughts as well.

In addition to education, we see Jethro grow as a person through gaining in responsibilities. Jethro grows with courage and thought which allow him to participate in skill and conversation far beyond his years. He gains respect for himself and is respected by his family and community.

Family and Community

During times of peace, life can be pleasant and engaging even when hard. During times of hardship or warring factions, family experiences expand far beyond the fences of one's property. Often the community that reaches in and becomes the family, helping and protecting its own.

As her sons grow with their own outlooks and opinions, Ellen Creighton does her best to maintain a middle road in the household. When the war pulled them in different directions, it mirrors the community as some men were outraged at the decision of one son to join the South. While the war rages on throughout the South, vigilantes take things into their own hands in the county. Unhappy with the innocent Creighton members left at home, they needlessly cause a smaller war to rage on as the remaining men in the county bond together to help protect and then re-build alongside the Creighton's.

Beginning the war with eager anticipation, family, community and Country were all glad to see it end.

Life has hard lessons for all of us. When faced with adversity, one learns to lean on others and especially on yourself. We learn when and how to trust and protect. Above all, we gather the strength to go on and keep living life.



Moral Rights and Wrongs

Before the Civil War breaks out, a naïve righteousness and arrogance prevails across the country while everyone is certain of a short-lived skirmish. It seems only those that have seen death close at hand are hesitant for the war to begin.

There is a split in the country that is reflected within the Creighton Family. John, Tom and Eb are angry with the owners of slaves. Bill is the lone brother against the war. He sees the irony of the situation. Bill is frustrated by the Northern industry paying low wages and the plantation owners in the south using slaves to grow the goods needed for the industry in the north. He is a very torn man as is evident in the following passage:

"I hate slavery, Jeth, but I hate another slavery of people workin' their lives away in dirty fact'ries fer a wage that kin scarce keep life in 'em; I hate secession, but at the same time I can't see how a whole region kin be able to live if their way of life is all of a sudden upset; I hate talk of nullification, but at the same time I hate laws passed by Congress that favors one part of a country and hurts the other."

Jethro's facing the desertion of his own cousin is a significant turning point from childhood to adulthood. He has been following the accounts of thousands of soldiers dying on battlegrounds or from lack of proper supplies. When confronted with the skeletal figure of his cousin hiding from the Federal Agents, he has to fight his own inner battle of morality and conviction. Unable to hide from his own honesty, he writes of the dilemma to President Lincoln. When Lincoln granted amnesty to the deserters if they return to their posts, Jethro is able to once again live within the balance of moral and judicial law.

As the war begins and the reality of lives lost sets in, the rights and wrongs of one's beliefs become confused and complicated. This story serves as a fertile ground for moral choice through war and differences of opinions.



Themes/Characters

Despite the small world in which *Across Five Aprils* is set, the novel features a large variety of characters. The main character, Jethro, first appears on a spring day at potato planting time.

Hunt writes, "The world seemed a good place to him that morning," but it soon becomes apparent that Jethro is lighthearted in spite of conditions on the farm and in the world, not because of them. Jethro is the youngest child of Ellen and Matthew Creighton, and four of his brothers and sisters have died.

Furthermore, no one knows what has happened to his oldest brother, who left for California many years before, never to be heard from again. The four who rest in Walnut Hill Graveyard exert a quiet influence on the living members of the family, reminders of life's brevity in a time when the death rate among young children is very high.

Although not quite ten years old at the story's beginning in 1861, Jethro knows of the furor over Abraham Lincoln's 1860 election to the presidency and "of tariffs, of slave states and free ones, of a violent old man named John Brown and. . .of states seceding from the Union."

But Jethro is not so much interested in these issues as he is in the civil war that will inevitably erupt over the issues. On the evening of the day the novel opens, word reaches the farm that Fort Sumter has been fired upon.

During the next few months, changes begin to take place on the farm. Tom and Eb, Jethro's brother and cousin, leave to fight for the Union. In the fall, Jethro's brother Bill goes to fight for the Confederacy, bidding farewell only to Jethro.

Letters from the soldiers begin arriving at the farm. One from Tom disputes the common conception that war is a glorious endeavor: "You tell Jeth that bein' a soljer ain't much." Jethro's brother John and his schoolmaster and future brother-in-law Shadrach Yale, whom Jethro misses greatly, are the next to join the military.

Warm and nurturing, Jethro's mother Ellen and his sister Jenny are among the strongest characters in the novel. Like most women of her social status during the mid-nineteenth century, Ellen has dedicated her entire life to her family and remains uneducated and illiterate.

Although the complicated events of the day interest her, Ellen's understanding of them is limited. Sometimes she closes her eyes briefly, as if "to hide her exasperation from the world."

Jenny, on the other hand, embodies both her mother's strengths and those of the new generation. She has been educated, and at the age of fourteen is in love with Shadrach. Mature for her years, she can run a household almost as well as her mother can. At



sixteen, she journeys to Washington, under the protection of newspaper editor Ross Milton, to marry the wounded Shadrach.

Her letters from Washington vividly describe the war's effects on the capital city.

A third female character, John's wife Nancy, is somewhat shadowy at first.

Jethro senses a lack of warmth and affection in Nancy, but gradually, through the days of anxiety, they grow closer. It is she who brings Jethro the sad news of President Lincoln's assassination.

Many interesting characters outside the Creighton family enrich the story.

Ross Milton inspires Jethro to continue his education, kindling a love for language in an environment where most people speak substandard English. The value of education, although a minor theme, is fortified by its association with two attractive characters, Milton and Shadrach.

The Burdow family, implicated in the earlier death of Jethro's sister Mary, provides a sinister touch, but Dave Burdow aids the family when he tells Matthew Creighton of threats against Jethro that he has overheard. Thus, the youngest Creighton learns that good impulses may be present in those who appear malevolent.

Across Five Aprils reveals the ugly side of war, finding little to glorify. Several subordinate themes reinforce this view, such as the war's divisive effect on the family and community. Jethro's moral dilemma over Eb's desertion exemplifies the complex conflicts that arise. Jethro believes that desertion is wrong, yet he understands the reasons behind Eb's behavior. The cowardly federal registrars who intimidate the families of deserters hardly inspire respect or loyalty. Jethro's actions show his good judgment and his maturation through these difficult years.

Style

Point of View

Based on family stories of her grandfather, who was a boy during the Civil War, Irene Hunt writes *Across Five Aprils* as told in third person. It is from the point of view of nine-year old Jethro Creighton. Jethro grows into an early manhood as a result of the onset of the American Civil War. Through Jethro, we hear the viewpoint of youth, maturing as events take place. Through his memories, thoughts and conversation, we learn of the history of his family. Through conversations with family members and overheard talk of men folk, Jethro's thoughts tell us of the political opinions and changes during an important part of American history.

We follow along with Jethro and the map given to him by Shadrach Yale as the Union Army marches through the South. Jethro and Jenny read letters from the battlefields and newspaper accounts. Through Jethro's interactions, we experience the fear and short-sightedness of prejudice and ignorance. As he is caught in life's dilemmas, we feel the understanding and generosity of those that help the family mend from illness, death and careless hatred. We participate in the American Civil War from the eyes of a nine-year old boy while he grows in to a thirteen-year old young man, still too youthful to understand the ravages of man and war.

Setting

Across Five Aprils takes place just prior and during the American Civil War. Most of the story takes place on the Creighton Family farm in Jasper County on a southern Illinois farm from April 1861 through April 1865. From the vantage point of the farm, we learn of life during that period in our American history. On the fields, memories are spread before us depicting family history and make-up. In the cabin, we learn of lifestyle and partake in much of the War's history through conversation, family letters and newspaper accounts.

The nearest neighbor is a mile away. The nearest town with supplies is fifteen miles away. In town, we learn of the vast differences from today's towns. We follow the advance and retreats of the Union Army through letters, conversation, newspapers and the map. Along with Jethro and Jenny, the map points us to areas across the South as we learn of the Union Army encountering more defeat than success.

In the end, we are brought right back to where we started. It is the April planting season and Jethro goes out to the fields to find solace from the news of his deceased hero. It is here where hope is renewed once again.



Language and Meaning

Author Irene Hunt adds to the authenticity of the setting and viewpoint by writing in backward simplicity. She uses descriptions of the environment one would notice in a slower paced life, such as; "A south breeze brought the scent of lilacs and sweet fennel to his nostrils and set all the frosty-green leaves of a silver poplar tree to trembling."

The conversational writing depicts a less educated format that one would express during the 1800's when schooling was less important than planting and tending to the crops necessary to keep a man and his family alive. These paint a colorful picture of the time in sentences such as that from Bill as he offered comfort to Jethro's when he awoke from a nightmare: "I kin set and talk a spell if it will help you to fergit any ugly things that has come up in yore dreams."

The importance of education was emphasized in this story. With the newspapers and letters being the focal point of communication, one had to know how to read to know what was happening in the world. The wording made a subtle change as Jethro educated himself through reading and practice. He would purposely correct himself in both speech and thought as the story progressed.

Structure

This story flows across a five-year span. Historical facts about the American Civil War weave in and out of the story as we live life with the Creighton Family on their southern Illinois farm. We see the toll the war takes as each year marches on with further Union disappointments dashing hopes of a quick victory. The reader follows Shad's map to different battlegrounds and highlights of political issues through newspapers accounts, family letters and conversations of expressed opinions.

Every April sees Jethro and his family deeper into hardship as the family is dispersed or taken ill. The family structure dwindles from two working parents working beside a handful of children to the full burden falling more and more on Jethro's young shoulders. Finally, he is the only family member working the farm to care for two families.

As is true in all of life, when it doesn't seem that much more responsibility or hardship can be handled, the war is ended. Life's sudden changes happen and our story ends with a fresh new opportunity at hand for our young hero.



Quotes

" She had been a pretty girl back in the 1830's when she married□but prettiness was short-lived among country women of her time□" Chapter 1, Page 8

"Seems sometimes theres' a deep silence all about us out here waitin' to be filled."
Chapter 1, Page 11

"Dread of war was a womanly weakness, he had discovered, evidenced by his mother's melancholy and the tears of Jenny□" Chapter 1, Page 12

"Jethro found he didn't like to think of his sister Mary's death, but some memory had been touched off as his thoughts wandered. Let a few hours of work go by and let one's body begin to weary a little - then the thoughts that had been all of beauty and spring a while before started turning to thing that were better forgotten." Chapter 1, Page 16

"The shot that Travis Burdow fired over Rob Nelson's team that night was a shot fired at a society that had kicked a boy from childhood on because he bore his grandfather's name." Chapter 1, Page 17

"We're a union; separate, we're jest two weakened, puny pieces, each needin' the other." Chapter 2, Page 29

"My thinkin' is all of a rangle, whether I'm out in the fields or in my bed or settin' out under the poplars listenin' to the others talk. Still, the sky is a blessed thing. Much as I keer fer my fami'ly, a crowded cabin chafes me□I want stillness and space about me."
Chapter 2, Page 38

"□I don't hev thoughts enough to keep me busy; after a while, I need comp'ny." Chapter 2, Page 39

"That morning as he looked at the sagging roofs of the house and barn, the general clutter of the ne'er-do-well in the barnyard, he felt a dread as if some evil lay close to the ground on its belly and peered out at him." Chapter 5, Page 72

"The team was tired, the going slow, and a quarter of a mile was covered in only something less than an eternity." Chapter 5, Page 84

"The world was turning upside down for Jethro. He felt as if he were someone else, someone looking from far off at a boy who started from home with a team and wagon on a March morning that was at least a hundred years ago. When he tried to speak he found that his voice, like his identity, had gone too; his lips worked as they had often seemed to work, but no sound passed them, and there was nothing to do but sit quietly while his mind floundered in the uncertainties that beset it." Chapter 5, Page 85

"□I never seed a part of the country that looked purtier, with the peach trees in bloom and the air so soft and lazy□" Chapter 7, Page 109



"the two who had once been closest in affection - cut from the same bolt, Ellen had said." Chapter 7, Page 113

"laughter was a scarce luxury that summer, but as the weeks of 1862 marched on toward fall, an incident occurred that appealed to the rough humor of the times and to the satisfaction of many who saw justice finally finding a niche for itself." Chapter 7, Page 115

"Jethro read the news in dismay, and for the rest of the war there was always a fear within him that disappointment and disaster inevitably followed hope." Chapter 8, Page 121

"Antietam was over - a name for future history books, a battle at which men in later years, blessed with the advantage of hindsight, would wonder a Federal victory in which one was hard put to find a step toward final triumph and peace." Chapter 8, Page 125

"Then a skeleton came out from among the trees. It was the skeleton of a Union soldier, though the uniform it wore was so ragged and filthy it was difficult to identify. The sunken cheeks were covered with a thin scattering of fuz; the hair was lank and matted. It fell over the skeleton's forehead and down into its eyes. The boy stared at it without speaking." Chapter 9, Page 134

"The man is not only without book-larnin,' as I am, but he has a mean and pinched-in mind"

"Don't expect peace to be a perfect pearl, Jeth This is a land lying in destruction, physical and spiritual. If the twisted railroads and the burned cities and the fields covered with the bones of dead men - if that were all, we could soon rise out of the destruction. But the hate that burns in old scars, and the thirst for revenge that has distorted men until they should be in straitjackets rather than in high office - these are the things that may make peace a sorry thing"



Topics for Discussion

Explain how the Civil War changed America.

How did the Civil War affect family life on the farm? In the city?

What affect did Jethro's education have on him, his family and his community?

Discuss the torment Bill had within himself in his opinions of the Confederate and Union causes. Why did he choose as he did?

Compare the actions of Guy Wortman and his group with similar groups in today's society.

What was the significance of Burdow's accompaniment of Jethro on his journey home from town?

What were the changes of Jethro from age 9 to age 13? How does that compare with your life?

How did the opinions and feelings of the Civil War within the family mirror those of colonies?

1. Do you like Hunt's use of letters to tell parts of the story? Why or why not?

What might be the effect of relating these incidents directly?

2. If you were in Jethro's place, what would you do when you discovered Eb hiding in the woods?

3. Do you think that war is glorious and exciting? Why or why not? Has your opinion been influenced by reading *Across Five Aprils*?

4. Is the U.S. still suffering from the effects of the Civil War? In what ways?

5. Do you think the post-war period would have been any different if Abraham Lincoln had lived? Why or why not?

6. What are the "high tariffs" that contributed to the South's decision to secede?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Warfare in the 1860s was far different from what it is today. What are the differences? What has brought them about?

2. Today we think of Abraham Lincoln as one of our greatest presidents, yet in his own time he was disliked by many.

Across Five Aprils mentions several reasons for his unpopularity. Find additional information on his unpopularity and his reelection to the presidency in 1864.

3. What were the effects of the Civil War upon the part of the country in which you live? Were the effects direct (such as battles nearby) or indirect (as in Across Five Aprils)?

4. Read Walt Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last at the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Explain how Hunt uses Whitman's images in her novel. Do the images take on different meanings in the context of the novel? Are the images equally effective in the poem and in the novel?

5. The changing season motif is an important element of Across Five Aprils.

The deaths of Lincoln and Tom Creighton are all the more tragic because they occur during a beautiful spring. Describe some other examples of how events in the novel take on added significance as they are played out against the season motif.



Further Study

Carlson, G. Robert. *Books and the TeenAge Reader*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. Valuable suggestions for teachers and parents. Brief mention of *Across Five Aprils* and other novels by Hunt.

Churchill, Winston. *The Crisis*. 1901.

Reprint. New York: Macmillan, 1929.

A romantic and action-filled novel about the Civil War by an American writer who was a best seller in his time.

Intended for adults, but suitable for mature young people.

Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage*. 1895. Reprint. New York: Bantam, 1986. For mature young people, this is a classic novel of a young Union soldier and his struggle with fear in battle.

Larrick, Nancy. *A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading*. 4th ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975. Originally published by the National Book Committee, this valuable guide makes brief mention of *Across Five Aprils* and contains an annotated list of Civil War stories arranged according to suitability for different age groups.

"Review." *Best Sellers* (June 15, 1964): 129. Emphasizes the skillful character development in *Across Five Aprils*.

Sheehan, Ethna. "Review." *America* (June 20, 1964): 850. Primarily a synopsis of the novel; some favorable comment.



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