

Bull Run Short Guide

Bull Run by Paul Fleischman

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Overview

Fleischman is deeply interested in American history, and his books often include odd but meaningful details about past events. *Bull Run* is full of such details, from the game of baseball featuring a ball made of a walnut with yarn wrapped around it, to liquor buried in a watermelon; the first shows how carefree the soldiers at first were, and the second shows how undisciplined they were. Their devil-may-care attitudes and lack of discipline would cost many of them their lives in the Battle of Bull Run.

The novella exhibits Fleischman's mastery of style and his willingness to take chances with his writing. *Bull Run* is written in the first person from the points of view of sixteen characters.

Each chapter is told with the voice of a particular character; through these different voices, Fleischman shows the battle developing—and how different people, some from far-away places, are drawn toward a single fateful day when thousands of men will try to put a quick end to the Civil War, one way or another. Because of the shifting point of view, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the individual characters, but the overall effect is a moving one; lives are ended or reshaped forever.

Setting

The opening chapters are scattered across the United States, from Ohio to Arkansas. From different states and from different social backgrounds come the characters who will figure in the upcoming battle. They are drawn toward Washington, D.C., although one girl journeys there only in her thoughts —her beloved older brother has gone there as part of a regiment of volunteers. For most of the novella, none of the characters know anything about Bull Run, a small stream to the west of Washington. They are for the most part naive about what warfare is like, and people on both the Union and Confederate sides hope for a quick victory; they dread a war that might last all of three months.

By beginning his account in several different parts of America, Fleischman conveys a sense of the enormity of the powers that are shaping America's destiny. People leave their day-to-day problems to participate in events they cannot foresee and in most cases do not understand. From Ohio come farmers, from farms thick with wheat; from Arkansas come tradesmen; from other places come children eager to find glory, slave owners eager to preserve their rights, and city folk who are all showy uniforms and precision drilling.

By the time the battle comes, Fleischman has put it in its historical perspective, showing what the battle meant to the thousands of people involved, and showing how it affected lives throughout the nation.

According to the character Colonel Oliver Brattle, Bull Run's "banks were steep, the fords easily defended. The hills overlooking the terrain from the south would offer us a commanding position." The Union troops would march against well-protected troops who had the advantage of commanding the high ground and of having a stream between them and the enemy.

When Toby Boyce reaches Bull Run after the battle, he finds that "Loads of Union men, shot or drowned trying to cross, lay all about." The Union troops, in spite of poor training, bad officers, and poor food had almost won the day, but the equally ill-trained Confederate troops received reinforcements, outflanked the Union Army and sent its enemy fleeing in panic. Washingtonians had gathered to have picnics while watching the Union win the battle; instead their terrain, too, becomes chaotic with fear, with Confederate shells bursting on the narrow road home.

From the early morning darkness of men fearfully facing each other across rural terrain, to a day filled with cries and explosions and blood running everywhere, to a defeated Union Army, "Staggering along through the rain, they looked a parade of ghosts," the area around Bull Run had changed from an unknown terrain of muddy roads and fields to the site of the first infantry battle of the Civil War, with each side suffering such losses that it could not put a quick end to the war— the survivors were too few in number and too exhausted to carry on the fight.

Social Sensitivity

Although there are references to cursing, none is explicitly spoken—which is a bit odd for a realistic account of a battle featuring frightened, ill-fed, lice-ridden soldiers. On the other hand, the narrators' plainspoken descriptions of what they saw creates a hellish vision of events. In one scene a man holds his entrails in his lap; in another, a man asks to be killed, having no body left below the waist; in another, horses bleed from their nostrils, or stand three-legged, having lost the use of one leg. These pictures are quickly touched on and are not sensational, but they can be sickening; even so, most young adults ought to be able to handle the descriptions, recognizing them as honest parts of the story.

The grimness of the characters' everyday lives could be disturbing because so little is actually shown of the characters' personalities and backgrounds. For instance, some explanation might be wanted for why Lily Malloy is beaten every day of her life.

Was that common in Minnesota in her day, or was her family an aberration?

Rumors abound in the narratives, with talk of headless horsemen and other impossibilities. Were rumors like the one about Union troops returning escaped slaves to their owners true or also false? These are significant questions, not answered by the novella. Nor are the reasons for the conflict gone into in much detail, other than references to preserving the Union and a Constitutional right to secede. Why would white Northerners not view the war as one of liberation, as the black characters do? Such questions are bound to arise, perhaps making *Bull Run* a good book to use in a classroom study of the Civil War, where other texts and a teacher could provide some answers.



Literary Qualities

This book is by and large sure handedly written, reflecting the maturity of Fleischman's skills. It has two problems, one of which readers are sure to notice: With sixteen narrators, each seeming to appear at random, it can be hard to keep track of who is doing what. The novella develops by having people drawn from afar to the actual battle; the narratives serve to portray this development well, showing how people came to be involved with each other in disparate parts of the country.

Each chapter has a woodcut image stamped at its beginning, with each stamp showing an image related to the chapter's speaker and showing the speaker's initials. Thus Carlotta King is symbolized by a washtub, Shem Suggs by a horse, Nathaniel Epp by a camera, and so on. These woodcuts help keep clear who is speaking, especially if, like Epp, the character is plainly associated with a particular kind of image.

This becomes a little more problematical with the horse image, since courier Judah Jenkins and cab driver Edmund Upwing might reasonably be associated with horses, as Suggs is. Still, Fleischman's unusual approach to his narrative is likely to be successful with most readers, especially those open to new reading experiences. All these little narratives ultimately serve to give the short book a panoramic sweep of the events described.

The other problem is unlikely to bother many readers: The narrators all sound like Paul Fleischman. In spite of regional turn of phrase here and there, seemingly unlettered Shem Suggs sounds pretty much like educated Gideon Adams, and northern whipping girl Lily Malloy sounds pretty much like southern slave Carlotta King. If the novel emphasized characterization, the similarity of speech patterns of the different narrators might seem jarring; but this is an idea novel, emphasizing both the immediate and larger effects of the battle on a wide variety of people. Hence, point of view is the most important element in the narratives, and the point of view is well handled.

Overall, the short chapters that shift from one character to another provide a sense of events coming together. That the Battle of Bull Run is the focus of events is clear at the outset; even so Fleischman does a good job of keeping his characters believably ignorant of future events even as he stirs suspense as one wonders how the various characters will fair during and after the battle. A technique so obvious as the one used in Bull Run is bound to call attention to itself, but the novella is so fast paced that one can be easily absorbed by story itself. Fleischman shows considerable respect for his young audience, providing it with a sophisticated narrative structure that requires some thought. So too does his portrait of the battle call for thought.

His images are stark, sometimes moving, and plainly honoring his audience's ability to sort out truth from fiction.

One of the more interesting aspects of the style and structure of the novella is how they broaden its possible audience. Slow readers will likely relish a meaningful story that

plays to their intelligence while giving them brief sections of narrative to absorb. On the other hand, advanced readers should find the narrative structure interesting and the varying points of view thought-provoking. Further, young adults of all stages of maturity should find the novella exciting reading, with no one feeling condescended to or left out. Adults are likely to find the novella good reading, as well.

Themes and Characters

Fleischman focuses on individual characters whose lives tell of the battle from the points of view of mostly ordinary folks. The only historical figure who actually speaks for himself is General Irvin McDowell, commander of the Union Army. He is portrayed sympathetically; he reluctantly goes into battle with troops that he knows are ill prepared to fight, with junior officers who are too inexperienced, and a lack of the supplies he needs to successfully prosecute a major battle.

Other than McDowell, the speakers who tell their individual stories are fictional. They lead ordinary lives until the Confederacy begins the war by shelling Fort Sumter. The effects of the opening days of the war on ordinary people is the central theme of *Bull Run*.

Fleischman's choices of characters and choices of what he has them say makes this theme clear. He not only chooses to show events from the points of view of soldiers and officers, but also from the points of view of people near but not in the battle and from people far from the action.

Lily Malloy lives farthest from the action. Her home is a sod house in Minnesota. Her life is a grim one; her severely abusive father regularly whips all of his children, not only for transgressions he has caught, but for any that he does not know about. Lightening her otherwise miserable life is her brother Patrick, who at seventeen is five years older than Lily; they were "dear to each other." He runs off to volunteer for ninety days' service in the Union Army; Lily anxiously follows events through his letters and hearsay. A week after the battle at Bull Run, she and her family learn of it.

Then they learn that Patrick had been killed. Far from the scene of the action, Lily's life is nonetheless devastated.

Through her, Fleischman reminds us that war involves more than just the soldiers; it involves more than just the bloody ground; it affects many other people in many other places profoundly.

Another person not in the fighting but nonetheless part of the terrible events is Flora Wheelworth, whose daughters' husbands are in the Confederate army. Loyal to the Confederate cause, she does what she can to help the Confederate soldiers. After the battle, she ends up helping to care for the wounded, treating injured Yankees with as much "solicitude" as the Southern ones. Made of tough stuff, she endures sleepless nights, the sight of amputations, and the many deaths: "When they died," she says, "as so many did, they seemed changed from men back into infants, their bodies relaxing just like a babe's settling into its slumber."

Another near to the battle but not in it is Toby Boyce from Georgia. All of eleven years old, he decides to join the Confederate army. Too young to be a soldier, he discovers that he can join the army band, regardless of his age.



He is allowed to join and does his best to learn to play the fife. He yearns for the glory of battle; he especially wants souvenirs to show off back home. Having spent the battle well behind the lines, where the more sensible members of the band are happy to be, Toby heads out after the sounds of battle have abated and begins looting the battlefield. He discovers a man with no body below his waist who asks him to take a rifle and shoot him. "How I'd longed back home to kill one [a Union soldier]. Here I finally had my chance.

But instead I ran, dodging dead bodies" and fleeing all the way back home to Georgia. Having expected to find glory in battle, Toby learns the hard truth about war. Dr. William Rye brings different expectations to the Confederate cause. Flora Wheelworth believes in the cause and does her best to help it; Toby expects heroism and glory. Dr. Rye expects only pain. "Man is the deadliest of creatures," he declares. He despises war, and remarks that "My trade is healing, the opposite of a soldier's." Even though he believes war to be folly, he gives his services to help the many injured troops he knows will be needing care. After the battle, he says, "A small mountain of amputated limbs grew up between our two tables, the feet often still bearing shoes.

A few of the hands wore gloves. The sights and the stench were overpowering." Was it victory? "Indeed it was, for Death upon his pale horse."

Carlotta King offers yet another point of view. She is a slave brought to camp by her owner. She yearns to flee to the Union Army just a hill or two away, but rumors that the Union troops actually return escaped slaves discourage her. Even so, she must fight to keep from smiling at news of Union successes. When she learns that the Union Army has fled, she gathers some clothes for her wounded master, then sets off as if to find him near the battlefield, but "I told myself I couldn't sit and wait for the Northerners to whip the South" and leaves her degrading life in the South behind as she heads to the north. Each of these characters is but a sketch, none really fleshed out.

What is important about each is his or her point of view, representing different perspectives on events, thus giving a full picture of the battle and its effects upon many people.

Through some of the more immediate participants in the battle, Fleischman also turns a hard eye on motivations and attitudes. For instance, there is Gideon Adams. When news of the war reaches him in Ohio, he immediately volunteers, eager to strike a blow for the freedom of the slaves, but he is turned down because he is a Negro.

Many white Ohioans regard Negroes as too lazy and cowardly to fight; besides, as one shouts, "It's a white man's war!"

Being light skinned, he trims his hair, wears a big hat, and succeeds in enlisting as if he were white. Throughout his experience in the army he is angered by ignorant white attitudes toward blacks, noting that he is better educated than many of them. He sees the Battle of Bull Run for what it is, but unlike many of the white troops, he is undeterred from his passion to fight for the Union. Many of those fleeing the battle were in it for the



glory; Adams is in it to free an enslaved people; that battle is not glorious is unimportant to him.

Other soldiers reflect other backgrounds and attitudes: Shem Suggs loves caring for horses; finding himself almost offhandedly given a place in the Confederate cavalry, he ends up experiencing much of the battle and serves to testify to war's effect on animals. In his last chapter, he notes the suffering of horses that have been maimed or killed. "I hadn't much stomach for celebrating," he remarks. Dietrich Herz is at first heartened that most of his regiment consisted of Germans, with their orders being shouted in German. In him is portrayed the stark desperation of the soldier separated from home, friends, and comrades. As do other members of his regiment, he receives a handkerchief from a New York woman; the handkerchiefs contain notes to cheer up the soldiers from the women who made them, except for Herz's, which says, "I fear I will take my own life." Herz takes the enclosed photograph of the woman with him into combat, eventually asking the woman in the picture not to kill herself, but to wait for him to return. Wounded in both legs and the neck in an up-hill assault, he clings to the photograph, focusing his thoughts on it. He survives the predations of looters, and no one is able to take his photograph away. He loses both legs to amputation.

As these characters' experiences suggest, *Bull Run* is grim reading, featuring straight-from-the-shoulder accounts of how it was when the Civil War began. The first major infantry battle of the war is a catastrophe for most of those involved; generals are killed or relieved of command, families lose sons and are bereaved, soldiers are killed, maimed, or left so exhausted that they cannot continue to fight, and civilians find their lands littered with the dead and dying or are left in fear.

The only comic relief is provided by the photographer Nathaniel Epp, but it is dark humor. While Epp is photographing a Union soldier a bullet fired in sport kills him, creating a curious image of a ghostly figure seeming to step out of the soldier's skin. Epp charges ten cents apiece for people to view the photograph, claiming to have caught the spirit in very moment that it was leaving the body. On the eve of battle, soldiers seem to take some comfort in looking at the image. Later, after the battle, Epp calmly dines on some of the food left behind when panicked Washingtonians fled for home.

He reasons that victorious Confederate soldiers will be as eager to have their pictures taken as victorious Union soldiers would have been, so he waits for them.

This book is one of many written over the ages that sounds a cautionary note about the realities of war. It is easy to draw parallels between people's expectations in 1861 and people's expectations before and during more recent wars. In *Bull Run*, Fleischman points out how war really affects people—that most find no glory in it and no fame. War is mud and lice, blood and entrails. By taking as his subject an historical event that people are likely to have learned about in school, he can make his points clearly and emphatically, with readers able to contrast the dry details of battle tactics to the facts of individual lives struggling to survive from one day to the next. In the process, he tries to deflate some of the myths that grew out of the battle and the war. For instance, he



describes General Jackson as a bizarre man of weird habits who earned his nickname Stonewall at Bull Run not because of heroism, but because he stood calmly with his troops doing nothing while Bull Run 2887 watching Confederate soldiers being slaughtered in the Union offensive: "He stands there like a damned stone wall!" General Bee cries. "Why doesn't he come and support us?" This is a story of botched orders, ill-prepared armies, and foolish leaders.



Topics for Discussion

1. What effect does having many different narrators have on the reader?
2. Why does Fleischman not focus more on the strategy of the battle?
3. Would there not be at least a few heroes in the battle? Does the novella show any?
4. Do the descriptions of disease, lice, and wounded soldiers make the novella too unpleasant to read? Would Bull Run be better or worse without them?
5. Is Fleischman fair to both sides of the conflict, or does he favor one over the other? How can you tell?
6. Does Bull Run change any of your views about the Civil War? Which ones?
7. The Battle of Bull Run was fought in 1861; why should anyone care about it now? Does Fleischman's book help you to care?
8. The only real-life narrator in the novella is General Irvin McDowell.

Why only him? Should Fleischman have included other historical figures as speakers, telling their own stories?

9. Normally, a work of fiction will have at most a few main characters, called protagonists, and will have forces that oppose the protagonists, call antagonists. Who are the protagonists in this story? Are there any villains? What kind of antagonists can you find (people, nature, society, and oneself can be antagonists).
10. Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why or why not? If so, to what sort of people would you recommend it, or would you recommend it to everybody?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The novella says General McDowell was dismissed from his post after the battle. Fleischman seems to imply that the disaster at Bull Run was the reason. Was it really? What were the real-life reasons for his dismissal? Bull Run presents him sympathetically. Did he get a raw deal?

2. The book hints that Lincoln and other politicians pushed for an early military resolution to the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy.

What did Lincoln do before the battle that might have affected it? Did he make any mistakes?

3. What pressures were brought to bear on Lincoln to push the war forward? How did he react?

4. Jefferson Davis was under many pressures himself. How did he press the war toward the Battle of Bull Run?

5. There was a second battle, later in the war, at Bull Run. What happened to bring the battle about? What was the result of the second battle?

6. Select one of the sixteen narrators and tell more about his or her life. You could tell of his or her participation in other Civil War battles or of his or her life after the war. For example, what did Toby Boyce do when he returned to Georgia? Did Dietrich Herz make it to New York, and did he find the woman in his picture? Where did Carlotta King go? Did Gideon Adams keep his secret? Did he realize his dream of helping liberate the slaves?

7. Select one of the characters and describe what his or her life would have been like in the middle of the 1800s. For instance, what would a girl like Lily Malloy's life be like in a sod house in Minnesota? What would life be like for someone who made his living caring for horses in Arkansas, as Shem Suggs did? How would a photographer like Nathaniel Epp live?

8. Who was General Beauregard, and why would people in his day think he was incompetent? Did he really disobey orders at the Battle of Bull Run?

9. Did the troops on either side ever get proper military training? If so, when and how? Who trained them?

What was the training like?

10. Many history books about the Civil War have accounts of the terrible toll in human life wrought in its battles. In Bull Run, Suggs feels bad for the horses. What was the toll on animal life during the war?



11. What was life like for people at home, far from the battle front?
12. Civilians are killed in the battle in Bull Run. How many civilians died because of the Civil War? How did they die?
13. Could the Battle of Bull Run have been avoided? Were there any possibilities for peace between the two sides?
14. Before the conflict commenced, many people, North and South, wanted to fight a war. Why?
15. During and after the Civil War, many people angrily turned against Romantics and the Romantic Movement. Why did they blame Romanticism for the war? How is Romanticism reflected in Bull Run?

For Further Reference

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A brief listing of the highlights of Fleischman's life and career.

Fleischman, Paul. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." *Horn Book* (July/August 1989): 442-449. Fleischman tells a little about himself and mentions several of his works.

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———. "Sound and Sense." *Horn Book* (September/October 1986): 551-555.

Paul Fleischman tells how he emphasizes the sounds of words when he writes.

Fleischman, Sid. "Paul Fleischman."

Horn Book (July/August 1989): 452-455. Sid Fleischman is Paul's father.

He describes his son as intelligent and curious.

Related Titles

Fleischman has written primarily historical fiction. None of his other fiction experiments with narrative to the extent *Bull Run* does. Like *Bull Run*, *The Borning Room* uses first person narration, but it reveals only at the end that it was primarily a flashback. It tells about life in the late nineteenth century in Ohio. *Path of the Pale Horse* tells of an epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. *Saturnalia* tells of events in Boston in the late seventeenth century.

These books reflect Fleischman's deep interest in American history, and if read in order of publication show how confident he has become as a stylist, willing to take chances and trusting of the intelligence of his audience.



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