

# The Fighting Ground Study Guide

## The Fighting Ground by Edward Irving Wortis

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## Overview

The Fighting Ground explores the experiences of a thirteen-year-old boy who decides to involve himself in a Revolutionary War battle. The entire story takes place in the course of twenty-four hours. Instead of naming his chapters, Avi labels each section with the time it takes place. The events happen quickly, and Avi is an expert at making the reader feel what the character feels. The book is enjoyable both as historical fiction and as an adventure.

## About the Author

Avi Wortis was born in New York City on December 23, 1937. He grew up in Brooklyn with his family, which included his twin sister and older brother.

He performed poorly in high school and failed many courses. Finally during his junior year, his English teacher suggested a tutor to help him learn to write and spell. Avi had always read a great deal, and his tutor helped him to gain a love for writing as well.

Avi attended the University of Wisconsin, then continued his studies at Columbia University where he earned a master's degree in library science in 1964.

When his sons were small, he began to write for children, partly because they always wanted him to tell them stories.

Avi, who publishes under his first name, works as a librarian and a writer.

The British Book Council named Avi's *Snail Tale* one of the best books of the year in 1973. Avi won the Christopher Award in 1980 for *Encounter at Easton*, and two of his works—*No More Magic* and *Emily Upham's Revenge*—were runners-up for the Edgar Award of the Mystery Writers of America.



## Plot Summary

The story of "The Fighting Ground" is an account of two days in the life of Jonathan, a thirteen-year-old boy living in rural New Jersey during the American Revolutionary War. He has an idealistic view about war and fighting. His father was badly injured in fighting and his older brother, who joined the battle a year before, has not been heard from since. He wants to become a soldier but his father will not give him permission to join the army. He sees fear in his father's eyes which he takes as a form of cowardice.

Jonathan is determined to join the battle and sneaks off to the nearby town when he hears the town bell peal, a signal for a call to arms. A gruff man, the Corporal who is organizing a band of soldiers, is disappointed with the small response for soldiers. He spots Jonathan and recruits his service. Jonathan is loaned a long musket by the tavern owner who reminds Jonathan that he does not have to go. But Jonathan is ecstatic that his dream of becoming a soldier is coming true.

Trudging through the heat with the heavy musket is Jonathan's first inkling that the life of a soldier is not all rosy. The Corporal is gruff and drives his band unmercifully. Jonathan is exhausted by the time they reach Rocktown where they will confront a troop of enemy soldiers who are advancing there. After hearing the fife and drums of the enemy troops, Jonathan is shocked to see that his band of 13 soldiers will be facing thirty Hessian mercenaries who appear gigantic to the young boy.

Shooting begins and chaos ensues. The air is thick with smoke as the confused young Jonathan runs away from the fighting. He runs across several of his fellow soldiers—one dead and another injured. He begins to think he might have made a mistake by joining the battle. He is pursued and captured by three Hessian soldiers. He is almost certain they will kill him.

The Hessian soldiers speak only German to Jonathan's English and therefore communication is very difficult. The Hessians recognize that Jonathan is just a boy and not a threat. They have no intention of harming him. They find an abandoned farmhouse where they stay the night. Jonathan discovers a little orphaned boy and soon thereafter finds the dead bodies of the boy's parents. The little boy speaks only French and therefore cannot answer Jonathan's queries about the killers of his parents. He is suspicious of the Hessians—perhaps they killed the people. Once the German soldiers are asleep, Jonathan escapes with the little boy and reunites with the Americans.

A Frenchman who is fighting with the Americans learns from the little boy that the Corporal is the murderer of his parents. The murder of these people is what caused the Hessians to the region. The Corporal insists that Jonathan come with him and his men to the abandoned house where the Hessians are sleeping, although Jonathan only wants to go home. Jonathan enters the house and awakens the Hessians pleading with them to surrender—lest they be killed. When the Hessians try to fight their way out, they are killed by the Corporal and his men who await outside.



Jonathan's destruction of his musket is symbolic of his new-found reality of war. He walks home to a grateful father. He realizes in the end that the fear he saw in his father's face was fear for his son's safety, not fear of fighting. Jonathan was glad to be home and knew that he was very lucky to be alive.



# Pages 3 through 15

## Pages 3 through 15 Summary

April 3, 1778

9:58

Thirteen-year-old Jonathan is day-dreaming about the military. His brother is a soldier with General Washington and his cousin recently joined a regiment. When will his father let him join? After all, he is thirteen. But his father was wounded by gunshot to the leg in a recent battle. He is having a difficult time getting around so Jonathan is needed at home. The bell in the town's tavern just chimed—it is a call to arms. Jonathan eyes his father's flintlock musket and touches its shiny butt. Jonathan's protective father sees the fear in his father's eyes and tells him to go inside. Jonathan takes the look in his father's eyes as a form of cowardice.

10:15

Jonathan's mother and two younger siblings greet him at home. He asks if she heard any news about the war. His mother replies that she has heard nothing. The year before her eldest son had gone off to war and has not been heard from since. Understandably, she hates the war. Jonathan thinks perhaps Washington was ready to take back Trenton, NJ, where he had won a battle against the Hessians several years earlier. Jonathan's mother allows him run to town to see if there is any news from the front.

10:25

On his way to the tavern, Jonathan is hoping, praying that a big battle about to ensue. He will join! He will be a better fighter than his brother—maybe even better than his father. As he runs, he passes by a neighbor's house. A young boy who lived there had been killed in the war. He didn't like to think about that. The parents were bitter after their son's death and spoke out against the war. Some called them Hessians. As he is running the bell starts pealing again.

10:45

Jonathan arrives in town and sees the soldiers practicing on the grounds next to the tavern. A young boy is pulling on the long cord connected to the bell. One man sits high in a tree as a look-out. He spots one volunteer heading to town. A man asks if his father is coming. Jonathan explains that his father's leg is still bad. He wishes to himself that he would have brought his father's gun. The boy sounding the bell tells him that British soldiers are on their way.

11:00





A stranger is in town who is called the Corporal. He is a big man with pocked mark face and filthy clothing. He is the man who saw the British soldiers coming. He indicates that perhaps 15 enemy soldiers are on their way. Only thirteen men shows up to fight for the American side. The Corporal looks at Johnathan, asking if he can handle a gun. Jonathan answers in the affirmative. The tavern keeper is staying behind to provide a second line in case the British get through. The fighters drawn by the bell were a little hesitant about their odds but the Corporal insists they have to move now. He tells Johnathan to borrow a musket from the tavern owner.

## Pages 3 through 15 Analysis

The choice of a thirteen-year-old protagonist is appropriate for a piece of juvenile fiction such as *The Fighting Ground*. The hero is near to the intended reader's age and thus the reader can identify strongly with the behaviors and thoughts of Jonathan. Jonathan's naivete is also important, insofar that the book details a coming-of-age story in which Jonathan must grow and mature.

Jonathan is a daydreamer and idealist. Though he lives daily with the consequences of war - his father has a bum leg from a war injury, and his older brother has not been heard from since joining the war effort - Jonathan's immaturity and lack of experience do not allow him to acknowledge the dangers of war. He has a juvenile conception of war and fighting, one which will be tested and changed. He mistakes the fear in his father's eyes as cowardice rather than concern over his young son's desire to fight; thus, the war is an opportunity to "right the wrongs" of his family and emerge a hero rather than the lame farmer his father has become. Jonathan has romanticized war and fighting; the only outcome he sees in his head is victory and heroism. He will not be harmed because he believes he will be a better fighter than his father and brother. Jonathan's private thoughts for wanting to join the battle further underscore his immaturity. He does not exhibit a strong patriotic desire to defeat the enemy. Rather, he wants to be branded a hero—he wants to outdo his father and brother.

These assumptions and wishes form an important backbone for Jonathan's characterization. Actual war will test all of these thoughts and force Jonathan to radically rethink them all.

For his part, Jonathan's father appears to be stoic and uncommunicative. Although he is worried about his son's desire to go to war, he does not adequately communicate to his idealistic son the horrors of war and how at thirteen years of age, he is not equipped physically, emotionally or mentally to join in the fighting. Rather than tell his son the brutal realities of war, he tells him he needs him to work on the farm. Part of this may be a stab at realistically depicting a male-male relationship, which stereotypically leaves emotion at the doorstep, but another component of the father's stoicism is undoubtedly the man's war trauma. This refusal or inability to express oneself in the context of war is returned to when Jonathan returns home at the book's conclusion.



# Pages 16 through 28

## Pages 16 through 28 Summary

11:30

The tavern keeper gives Jonathan a flintlock musket—older than his father's and six-foot long. Jonathan has to handle the weapon with two hands. As the butt rests on the floor, the gun is much taller than he is and weighs about 12 pounds. The tavern keeper makes Jonathan swear to return the gun. He gives Jonathan a gunpowder horn and strings a bag with thirty cartridges around his neck. The tavern keeper stresses to Jonathan that he does not have to go. Jonathan lies and says he has his father's permission to join the fight. The tavern owner seems to be wary of the Corporal. Jonathan emerges from the tavern with his musket. He sees the Corporal on his mount already riding south on Pennington Road. Jonathan joins the others on foot, walking south to Pennington.

12:05

Jonathan is having a difficult time carrying the heavy, cumbersome weapon. He is lagging behind the others. The Corporal stops the group across a bridge. Jonathan hurries to catch up but missed the Corporal's first words. He soon understands that there are more enemies than the Corporal first related. Instead of 15 there could be 25, the Corporal tells them. Some of the men are angered the Corporal's obvious understatement. Finally, they agree to hurry on to Rocktown where they can ambush the British soldiers. Jonathan sees the Corporal as a brave and smart leader.

12:30

One of the men is a friend of Jonathan's father. He is surprised to see Jonathan there and doesn't seem to believe he had his father's permission to come. Jonathan asks the man if something happened to bring this battle on. The man seems to know something but doesn't really answer Jonathan's question.

12:40

The group stops for a rest. He can see the town of Rocktown just ahead up the hill. That's where the battle will take place. Jonathan is curious about what brought about the battle but is afraid that if he asks too many questions, he'll be sent home. He decides to stay quiet and just watch the others.

12:50

One of the men asks the Corporal if the men from Snyderstown, who the Corporal promised would be their backup force, will soon be joining them in the fight. The



Corporal does not respond. The men seem unhappy once again. Jonathan sees the same look of fear in one of the men's eyes as he saw in his father's.

1:00

Marching alone, Jonathan begins to whistle. After an angry look from one of the men, Jonathan ceases his whistling.

1:05

A Frenchman asks about the health of the wife of one of the men. The Frenchman had recently come to the area to join the fight. Jonathan wonders how long it will take to reach the fighting ground.

## Pages 16 through 28 Analysis

Jonathan finds the tavern keeper's rifle to be too-large and cumbersome, both when he initially handles it and when he begins to march with the Corporal and his men. This is a physical manifestation of the fact that Jonathan is ill-equipped to march to war - physically, but also emotionally and mentally and that he is a boy trying to play a man's game.

Jonathan lies about his father giving him permission to go to war. This is a youthful mistake, and the reader realizes Jonathan's folly because the wise adults around him are strongly discouraging him from taking the path he is taking.

The tavern keeper appears to hold back an unpleasantness in regards to the Corporal and his behavior and will not reveal it when pressed by Jonathan. This foreshadows trouble ahead in regards to Jonathan's dealings with the Corporal. The tavern keeper's suspicion buoys the initial impression the reader has already formed of the Corporal based upon physical description alone, when the Corporal is described as having filthy clothes and pock-marked skin.

However, Jonathan's initial impression of the Corporal, as clouded by his war glorification, is quite positive. Where other men take the Corporal's underestimate of the number of enemy soldiers as a blunder, Jonathan sees the Corporal as a wise leader who was able to reassess the situation and take corrective action. This continues the theme of idealism versus reality, as mediated by perception and preconception, that is central to the volume. The friend of Jonathan's father, like the tavern keeper, withholds information about the Corporal and the battle to come. In terms of consequences for the reader, this increases our suspicion of the Corporal and ratchets up tension - What will happen in this battle, and will the Corporal show himself to be a hero or villain?



# Pages 29 through 41

## Pages 29 through 41 Summary

1:30

The group stops for water in Rocktown. There are only six houses. A woman is getting water from a well as she notices the band of men. Seeing that the men are hot and sweaty, she offers them water which they gladly accept. The woman is French and is surprised when she is told that British soldiers are coming and that they are there to fight them off. She becomes very upset and runs to her house. The men laugh at her fear, making them feel a little braver about themselves. She soon reappears with several children and an old man. They shutter the house and disappear again inside. One of the men, shoots off a round in the air and grins at his deed. The Corporal scolds him—did he want to let the enemy know where they are? The Corporal leads the men down the road.

2:05

The Corporal and his band of men travel a half mile south of Rocktown where the Corporal dismounts telling the men they have arrived at the battlefield.

2:10

The men rest and drink water from flasks. Jonathan wishes he would have brought some water. He was very thirsty but is too shy to ask for a drink. Gathering clouds, full and gray, tell Jonathan that the rain they would produce would make shooting difficult. The approaching enemy having to trudge up the hill toward them will make easy targets. The Corporal is abandoning the idea of an ambush since there is no place to hide, which once again angers some of the men. The Corporal orders his men to line up on the top of the hill. Although there is some resistance, the men realize they have no options but to obey. Suddenly the faint sound of drums followed by the piercing sound of a fife is heard. The Corporal announces what everyone already knew—the British soldiers are on their way.

2:30

The men are all tense. Jonathan watches them as they stare ahead at the road waiting for Redcoats to appear. Suddenly the Corporal orders them to line up—with tall men in back and short in the front. Jonathan is not sure where to stand until the Corporal yells at him to get in front. The men jostle for position pushing and shoving Jonathan and stepping on his feet. The men are told to load their rifles.

2:35



After a struggle with his long musket, Jonathan finally loads his ammunition. But as he lowers his rifle, the lead ball falls out. He is embarrassed and tries again. On the second try, he is able to secure his gunpowder and lead ball.

2:40

Jonathan is satisfied that none of the men noticed his clumsiness in loading the gun. The men are all tense as they watch the road for the British soldiers. In the silence, Jonathan can hear the fife and drums getting closer.

2:41

Finally, the enemy emerges at the bottom of the hill. They look like giants to Jonathan. Their colorful uniforms and weaponry tell the men that they are not British soldiers. Instead, there are thirty Hessian soldiers marching straight towards them.

## Pages 29 through 41 Analysis

The brief encounter with the woman in Rocktown getting water starts to introduce cracks in the idealistic narrative of war that Jonathan is following. The men coarsely laugh at the woman's fear, and one fires a round in the air. These are not noble soldiers but a ragtag militia.

Jonathan is similarly afforded no hero status. The reason Jonathan was chosen for the militia was because the Corporal was desperate for manpower. Although Jonathan's romantic view of war is beginning to lose its grasp on the youngster, his pride stands in the way of his fully facing the horrid circumstances in which he has erroneously placed himself. He cannot quite let go of his fantasies of becoming a heroic soldier. His inadequacies are symbolized in his inability to handle his weapon.

By the tense reaction by the older, seasoned fighters in his unit to the prospect of fighting not Redcoats but rather Hessian soldiers, the reader presumes that Hessians must be considered more abler or vicious fighters than the British. Also, there is the fact that the Corporal once again underestimated the number of men. This added element creates yet another dimension of horror that Jonathan knows he will soon face. Since Jonathan is the protagonist, the fact that these dreaded fighters are part of the mix only adds to his dilemma. This foreshadowing may be an indication that the plot is moving towards a confrontation between Jonathan, the Corporal and these mercenaries. In the least, the narrative is spurred ahead by interest in this new "twist" of Hessian soldiers. Why are they so feared? How will this conflict resolve itself?



# Pages 42 through 50

## Pages 42 through 50 Summary

2:43

Hessian soldiers are referred to as the "butchers of Long Island." They are mercenaries who fight and kill for money. The men fear the Hessians and are alarmed that there are thirty of them. Jonathan and the others take aim at the advancing soldiers. The Hessian officer on horseback spots the Americans and brings his troops to a halt. One of the men asks the Corporal about the whereabouts of the Snydertown troops, presumably their backup. "Is there something we don't know?" The Corporal does not respond.

Jonathan keeps his eye on the Hessian officer who is flashing his long saber in the dusky light. He is amazed that the Hessians will be the first enemies he will be facing as a soldier. The Corporal tells the men that he will first order the front line to fire. That line will then step back and re-load. Each man is expected to fire two rounds per minute. The Corporal tells his men that they will not begin firing until they are less than fifty yards from the enemy soldiers. The Hessians begin to advance again, marching in high-stepping perfection.

The Hessians line up ten across, advancing like a colorful wall. The Hessians place their bayonets on their rifles and move closer. One of the Americans fire and then another. The Corporal screams at his men in anger—they didn't wait for his command. Jonathan joins the others and fires. Gunfire is exchanged. Jonathan can barely see through the smoke from the gunfire. He's hears someone crying in pain. He is in shock and unable to reload. The Hessians are getting closer with bayonets drawn and fife and drums still playing.

2:50

Jonathan finally is able to reload but in the confusion does not know where to aim. He hears a strange sound and suddenly the body of his father's friend nearly falls on him. He squats down by the man for a moment. The twisted body of the Frenchman is laying atop his rifle. Finally, Jonathan is able to wrench his gun free. The smoke is clearing and he sees the line of Hessians advancing but he can see no members of his own regimen. Jonathan is standing alone as the enemy soldiers approach. He turns and runs.

3:01

Jonathan runs through the woods with Hessian soldiers in hot pursuit. He is still lugging the long, heavy gun which slows him down. He jumps and leaps through the woods. His foot catches on a large tree root making him trip and fall to the ground. He is out of breath and cannot stand up.



## Pages 42 through 50 Analysis

The Hessians, seemingly giants in their strange attire and supernatural martial discipline, achieve mythical status to Jonathan and the Corporal's men. The small band has been instantly relegated to underdog status: they are an outmanned volunteer army facing a professional mercenary group.

The battle can be chiefly characterized as chaotic. Despite the Corporal's plan, a few men fire randomly, defying his order. The conflict quickly devolves from there, with the musket smoke creating a literal fog of war that comments upon and feeds the chaos of the moment. Jonathan experiences the horrors of war firsthand as the slain body of his father's friend literally drops upon him. At this point Jonathan cannot even tell where he is or the state of who is winning, appropriate to his mental state in which idealistic notions about war are crashing down. All of Jonathan's lofty notions about war heroism, revenging his father and brother, restoring honor to his family, etc., are thrown out the window when the Hessians spy him and war for Jonathan becomes a desperate attempt at survival.



# Pages 51 through 63

## Pages 51 through 63 Summary

3:05

As Jonathan lay on the forest floor, he eventually hears the fading sounds of the fife and drum.

3:16

Jonathan begins to weep—first fragmented cries then full body sobs. He is alone and hurt. He does not know what will happen to him.

3:30

Jonathan is out of tears. He rolls over. He had been laying on his rifle and his hands were still clutching it.

3:35

Jonathan cannot figure out where he is or how to get home. He notices sticky blood on his shoe. He doesn't know to whom the blood belonged.

3:38

Although he is dizzy and weak, he finally stands and looks about for a way home. Part of him wishes he had died since he failed so miserably in his first mission. He hears a noise—a Hessian soldier is standing not very far away.

3:47

The tall, powerfully built Hessian standing in the woods not thirty feet from Jonathan is looking all about, in every direction. Jonathan figures he is looking for him. What happened to the Corporal and the others? Did they all escape or were they all captured? He hears the snap of a twig in another direction. A second soldier, not quite as large, is scouting the area. Jonathan must plan his escape. He squats down to hide then sees a third Hessian soldier behind him. He is surrounded.

3:50

The Hessians are speaking to each other in German; therefore, Jonathan has no idea what they are saying. The soldiers are about ready to give up. They can't find him and they think it's too dangerous and risky to stay around, looking for just one American fighter. Jonathan becomes terrified and jumps up begging them not to shoot him. The soldiers see that the American is just a boy. The oldest German soldier tells Jonathan





that they will not hurt him. Jonathan does not know what his captors are saying and he is terrified. He begins walking in the direction they point to. The three soldiers behind.

4:01

A rope is tied around Jonathan's waist and attached to the youngest Hessian. The young soldier seems pleasant. Jonathan estimates that he is about the same age as his older brother. The soldier points to himself and to Jonathan and smiles and says the word, "Soldat." Jonathan figures out that the young Hessian is commenting that they are both soldiers.

## Pages 51 through 63 Analysis

Jonathan's weeping in the forest is an emotional eruption of all that he has experienced. Jonathan has made his errand into the wilderness and is now changed forever, regardless of what happens next.

The author uses language differences to add complexity to the dramatic situation. The soldiers see that Jonathan is a young boy and do not plan to hurt him. But since Jonathan cannot understand what they are saying, not to mention, that he is scared to death, he feels he is doomed. This creates a sort of dramatic irony, insofar that the reader knows that Jonathan is not deemed a threat, but Jonathan has no idea of his position or status due to the language barrier. Removing the language barrier from the plot would reduce the conflict and interest inherent in Jonathan's capture.

The youngest of the three soldiers seems to be kind. He reminds Jonathan of his older brother who he has not seen in a year. Jonathan feels a connection to the young Hessian who describes himself and Jonathan as both soldiers. The feelings that stir within Jonathan about the young mercenary force Jonathan to reassess his view towards war and fighting. By finding comparisons in the young Hessian to his own brother, Jonathan is able to develop sympathy and understanding about the enemy. War is not black and white—the enemy is not intrinsically evil. The bonding between these two young men of war underscores the humanness of both sides of a battle. The young Hessian is just as afraid as Jonathan, as well. This is the first hint that the Hessians may not be the bloodthirsty butchers in the stories.



# Pages 64 through 76

## Pages 64 through 76 Summary

4:10

The Hessians, with Jonathan in tow, head back down the road towards Pennington. They are being drenched by the heavy rain pouring down. The young soldier finds a large pine tree with a dry spot underneath. The soldiers and Jonathan sit down in the shelter to wait out the rain. Jonathan is fearing for his life. What do they have planned for him?

4:30

The rain is becoming lighter but the daylight is fading. Jonathan evaluates the three Hessians. The oldest one worries Jonathan the most with his tense manner and large mustache. The tall one is menacing because of his size and the scar on his cheek. The youngest one seems the least threatening. But can Jonathan trust him?

Jonathan doesn't feel threatened but he has heard many tales about the vicious Hessians. They sometimes hang their prisoners or send them into slavery in far off lands. He might never see his family again. Jonathan, who is exhausted, falls asleep.

5:00

The soldiers and Jonathan, still tied to the rope, move on after the rain stops. The soldiers are obviously wary not knowing exactly what direction to take. Jonathan is astonished that he has not had escaping on his mind. But if he did escape, to whom could he turn? He had disobeyed his parents. He broke his promise to the tavern keeper. He had let down the Corporal and all the other men in his fighting group. Are these German soldiers his only friends?

5:15

The soldiers discuss in German their situation. They admit they are lost and are not sure if they are the only ones to have survived the battle. Jonathan is watchful of the group and senses that they are lost and confused.

5:20

The rain has stopped but the ensuing fog has made it impossible to see very far. The soldiers hear a noise and raise their arms in its direction. They are frightened and so is Jonathan. They see a man run by and then disappear. Jonathan is fairly certain it was the Corporal. The older soldier addresses Jonathan in German. Jonathan doesn't know if what he said was good or bad—not realizing the soldier had just said, "God help us."



5:30

The group hears a cow lowing. They cannot see very far but keep following the intermittent sound of the animal. The soldiers have their muskets drawn. One of the soldiers has Jonathan's gun strapped to his back. The sounds from the cow is becoming louder. Jonathan gets twisted up in his rope when he attempts to climb over a fence. The young German untangles the rope and unties it from Jonathan's waist. Just as the air is beginning to thin, they see the cow. The field he is in is behind a farmhouse.

## Pages 64 through 76 Analysis

These pages illustrate the power of the mind that is a recurring theme in the narrative. This was first demonstrated in Jonathan's rich fantasy life and how he was motivated to join the army based upon his idealism and glorification of war. Now, in the clutches of the ostensible enemy, Jonathan's mind again takes over, and he imagines all the horrible things that could be done to him, along with remembering all the sordid tales of Hessian atrocity. These mental images fill Jonathan with dread and a sense of impending doom.

However, as Jonathan spends more time with the men and as they take the time to shelter Jonathan from the rain and feed him, these thoughts gradually give way to apparent reality. Jonathan also begins to feel an attachment to his captors akin to what in modern times is termed Stockholm Syndrome. He begins to identify with the Hessians, especially the youngest one nearest to his own age. The more time he spends with them, the more he trusts them and the less he fears them. While the author is not sympathetic to the British side of the war, the trust that Jonathan is able to build for his captors illustrates the humanness of both sides of a war. This is part of the anti-war sentiment that is threaded throughout the story. Especially with consideration of the young Hessian who reminds Jonathan so much of his missing older brother—how could the Hessians be universally murderous and cruel? Jonathan, in his captivity, has seen that the generalization about Hessians simply isn't so.



# Pages 77 through 89

## Pages 77 through 89 Summary

5:40

The Germans force Jonathan to knock on the door of the small house. Hesitantly, after there is no response to his knocks, Jonathan pushes the door open. It is a one-room house with a dirt-floor. No one is there. The way it looks, it was abandoned rather abruptly. Jonathan, through sign language, tells the young soldier he can milk the cow so they can have milk to drink. Jonathan goes looking for a bucket in a nearby shed. When he opens the shed's door, there is a child sitting on the ground there.

6:00

The child is a boy, appearing to be younger than Jonathan's seven-year-old sister. Jonathan whispers to him, asking him the whereabouts of his parents but the boy does not respond. Jonathan tells the boy to stay quiet and that he will be right back. Jonathan doesn't know whether to tell the Hessians about the boy. The Hessians are very pleased with the bucket of milk; in fact, they like it so much that they motion to him to get another bucket full. He gives the second bucket to them and motions that he has to put the cow in the shed. He is anxious to get back to the little boy.

6:30

The boy is still sitting on the ground in the shed. Jonathan questions him again about his parents. He notes that the child looks very dreary and sad. He decides he needs help and will have to put his trust in the Hessians. He takes the little boy's hand and leads him to the house.

6:35

The Hessian soldiers are surprised when Jonathan brings in the little boy. Again, Jonathan questions the little boy. When he asks the boy where his "Mama" is, the boy takes his hands and leads him outside and the Hessians follow.

6:45

The boy leads Jonathan and the soldiers to a field behind the house. There they discover the dead bodies of the little boy's mother and father. Jonathan continues to question the boy but gets no response. The little boy squats down and runs his fingers through his mother's hair. The Hessian soldiers hang back and seem worried. Jonathan begins to think that perhaps these same soldiers killed the two people. He asks the child but again the child says nothing. The soldiers return to the house. The oldest Hessian gently touches Jonathan's shoulder and tells him to come back inside. Jonathan takes the child's hand and leads him back to the house.



## Pages 77 through 89 Analysis

The soldiers' own trepidation and confusion about where they are headed, the fate of their company, and what their next course of action should be parallels Jonathan's own uncertainty and further cements the idea that common humanity exists on either side of a war.

Where before Jonathan's plight was complicated by his inability to speak and understand the Hessians' German, again a language barrier between the orphaned child and Jonathan contributes to the complexity of the plot. The orphaned child is unable relate to Jonathan what happened to his parents, an unresolved matter that will remain important until near the book's end. Jonathan quickly forges a relationship with the child, perhaps seeing himself in the orphan, confused in the wilderness, surrounded by violence and death, and separated from his parents. The horror that the child has undergone has stripped his childhood away from him much like Jonathan's ill-fated decision to become a soldier has taken an aspect of his youth away from him. Jonathan could even be said to be protecting the child in order to save the toddler from the same journey Jonathan is undergoing, in which his innocence is being robbed from him and his basic beliefs questioned.

A final gesture in these pages, that of the older Hessian gently touching Jonathan on the shoulder and leading him away from the site of the parents' murder, continues the theme of humanity in the enemy. Rumor (Hessians are bloodthirsty savages) is separate from perception (Hessians are exotic giants with a machine-like discipline) is separate from reality (an older man is comforting a younger man about death despite a language barrier with a powerful gesture).



# Pages 90 through 102

## Pages 90 through 102 Summary

7:00

The soldiers are drifting off. Jonathan is upset with the distant attitude of the soldiers. He still suspects they may have had a hand in the death of the child's parents. Jonathan picks up a shovel and motions to the oldest soldier that he intends to bury the people. He takes the little boy outside with him. He begins digging the graves as the little boy watches at first but then falls asleep by his dead mother.

7:35

Jonathan is exhausted. He cannot finish the digging by himself. He goes inside and pleads for help. The old soldier finally understands what he wants. He wakes the young soldier and orders to help Jonathan.

7:40

The young soldier does most of the remaining digging. Once he determines that the grave is deep enough, he motions Jonathan to help him with the bodies. They put the man in first and then the woman on top of him. The young soldier and Jonathan shovel the earth back over the bodies. The soldier stops and says some words in German. From the cadence, Jonathan assumes he is saying a prayer for the dead people.

8:15

The old soldier is still awake but the other two fall fast asleep. Jonathan gives the little boy the last of the milk and puts him to bed. The little boy falls asleep. The old soldier ties Jonathan's ankle to his with a rope. The old soldier drifts off. Jonathan easily loosens the knot and unties the rope. He has the power to do whatever he wants. He could escape or, like a good soldier, he could kill the three Hessians.

## Pages 90 through 102 Analysis

At this point, Jonathan is still operating from his preconceptions about the Hessians, who have been vilified to the point that Jonathan instantly suspects them of the murder at the farmhouse. The language barrier between Jonathan and the Hessians prevents any truth from coming to light and fosters such suspicious feelings in Jonathan.

Jonathan is portrayed as virtuous and decent by his decision to bury the bodies of the dead per Judeo-Christian tradition. The child's falling asleep very near to his dead mother has the opportunity to be macabre, but the overall sense is one of poignant tragedy.



The Hessians' decision to aid Jonathan in digging the grave, and the young Hessian's uttering of a prayer, is the first major action to demonstrate (to Jonathan and to the reader) that the Hessians may not be the monsters Jonathan has heard about in tales. These actions also force Jonathan to consider that these men may not have killed the mother and father.

Jonathan freeing himself from the Hessians is a major plot point which brings the narrative to a crossroads; however, it is also a crossroads in the character arc of Jonathan. He has seen the decency of the Hessians, and the rumors and tall tales have proven false. Jonathan is now torn by what he has directly experienced and the reality of the war - the Hessians are ostensibly his enemy. What would the idealized soldier Jonathan has created in his mind do? Jonathan's romanticization of war has already been dealt a blow by his first battle and capture; the Hessians' decency and common humanity threatens to deal another blow.



# Pages 103 through 115

## Pages 103 through 115 Summary

8:45

Jonathan is fighting an internal conflict—should he kill the Hessians? As the Hessians sleep, he loads one of their rifles. He stands at the doorway with one foot in the house and one foot out. He will get off only one shot so he must be ready to run. He aims at the oldest Hessian. He tries to convince himself that the man is a cruel murderer. Jonathan is trembling and in the end cannot pull the trigger. He unloads the weapon and returns it to its original spot. Ashamed of himself, he walks outside and lies on the ground.

9:00

Outside, Jonathan recalls the entire day—how early in the day he dreamed of being a soldier. But when he had his chance to take out his enemy, he failed. What was wrong with him? He must find the Corporal—the Corporal will take care of these Hessians.

9:15

Jonathan returns inside and picks the young boy up in his arms. He would not dream of leaving him behind. Since he had to carry the boy, he had to leave his musket behind. Besides, it was wet from the rain and therefore inoperable.

9:30

Jonathan plans to walk north on the road once he finds it. From there, he is sure he can find the Corporal. The boy is heavy and cumbersome to carry. Jonathan plans to take a break to rest as soon as he gets far enough away.

9:45

Jonathan reaches the fence they had encountered earlier which tells him he is heading in the right direction. But it is very dark and he is unsure where the road is. He has to lift the sleeping boy over the fence.

10:15

The dark is confounding Jonathan. He keeps asking himself, "Where am I going?"

11:20

Still in the dark, walking with the boy in his arms, he sees the light of a fire.

11:25





Jonathan plods on and he sees a campfire around which are hunched some six or eight people, visible in silhouette only. He prays that they are Americans—but they could be more Hessians. Suddenly someone yells "Halt!" It is the Corporal.

11:35

At first, the Corporal doesn't recognize Jonathan and demands to know his identity. The other men see that it's Jonathan. The men are all happy to see him. Once the Corporal holds up a lantern, he is convinced that it is the boy who ran off. He tells the Corporal and the others the events of the last day. Jonathan is surprised to hear that the Americans had won that battle and drove the Hessians off.

The Corporal and his men have been looking for Jonathan and the Hessians. He needs Jonathan to lead him to the Hessians. But Jonathan is so fatigued and confused about the exact location of the house that he is not sure he can lead them there. The Corporal asks about the little boy. When Jonathan relates how he found the boy and his dead parents, a strange look of recognition comes over the Corporal's face.

Jonathan confesses that he could have killed the Hessians but just couldn't pull the trigger. He is ashamed but the others comfort him and tell him not to feel guilty. The Corporal tells Jonathan that it was he who he saw in the woods. But because he was by himself, he could not rescue him.

The Corporal tells Jonathan that he knows where the house is. He had been there the night before. Jonathan is terrified at the thoughts going through his mind.

## Pages 103 through 115 Analysis

Jonathan's decision to attempt to kill the Hessians shows that his character has not yet come full circle; he is still operating from old prejudices and idealized notions of how a soldier should behave. However, Jonathan's inability to pull the trigger again confirms Jonathan as a decent, humane soul, and shows that Jonathan does have the capacity to change eventually, though at this time it is sheer nerve that prevents Jonathan from going through with it rather than any higher reasoning.

The brief but harrowing adventure Jonathan has from that point, lost in the wilderness and desperately seeking the Corporal, parallels Jonathan's own emotional/mental journey. Jonathan is "lost" between his idealism and reality. He believes the Corporal, as the most cogent symbol of "the good guys," will set it all right.

However, clues are dropped into the narrative at this point concerning the Corporal's real identity/intentions, as opposed to the idealism in which Jonathan still holds the Corporal. The Corporal seems almost too eager to pursue the Hessians immediately. His stated attempts to find Jonathan after the young man disappeared drip with a kind of ominous intent. There is finally an expression of recognition Jonathan detects when he relates the story of the farmhouse and the parents' murders. When the Corporal reveals

he had been at the farmhouse the night before, these clues coalesce, and Jonathan suspects the Corporal is responsible for the murders.

Jonathan's idealism has been damaged yet again. The Corporal, who in Jonathan's wilderness journey represented the truth and a resolution to his confused thoughts, is probably a murderer. Even in war, the parents' murders cannot be justified. The very figure Jonathan had invested his trust and loyalty in, indeed perhaps the figure Jonathan has crafted into his "ideal soldier" in his mind, is anything but ideal.



# Pages 116 through 128

## Pages 116 through 128 Summary

11:50

The Corporal tells Jonathan that the dead people were Tories. They only spoke French. He tells Jonathan to speak to the boy in French—he'll respond then. The Corporal adds that the father was a spy and that spies are to be executed. An older boy who escaped from the farmhouse must have been the one to bring the Hessians in revenge. Since the three Hessians are now asleep, they will be easy targets. Jonathan grabs the boy and announces that he wants to go home. The Corporal orders him to go with him to the farmhouse.

April 4, 1778

12:30

Jonathan feels upset. The Frenchman and another soldier talks to Jonathan, trying to comfort him. They tell him that the Corporal is a true believer—a good soldier. But when there is no fight, he is a harsh person, someone to avoid. The Frenchman speaks to the little boy in French. The boy perks up immediately and responds to his questions. He confirms to the Frenchman that it was the Corporal and several other men who killed his parents. The Frenchman confirms to Jonathan that only one person was killed on their side—the friend of Jonathan's father. Others, including the Frenchman, were injured. The Frenchman promises to take the young boy to his wife who will care for him. He will try to find the boy's older brother who ran away.

## Pages 116 through 128 Analysis

The Corporal, perhaps sensing Jonathan's growing horror and suspicion, attempts to reassure the boy that the farmhouse parents were Tories - British sympathizers and spies - and that spies deserve execution. The Corporal's version of events simply doesn't sit right with Jonathan - his gut tells him that the Corporal was not justified in his murder. "Gut feelings" occupy an important place in Jonathan's journey to enlightenment. These instincts allow Jonathan to cut through deception, be it the exaggerated tales about the Hessians or the Corporal's half-baked justification for murder, in order to arrive at the truth.

Jonathan's distrust of the Corporal and his skepticism for the reasons the Corporal gave also serve as a continuation of general anti-war sentiments. The Corporal's reasons, in a war context, may be entirely correct, but in Jonathan's (and the author's) more general anti-war worldview, a worldview Jonathan is now well on his way to developing, no murder can be justified, especially considering it has made an orphan of the little boy about whom Jonathan has grown to care.



The Frenchman's assessment of the Corporal echoes this anti-war sentiment. The Corporal is a good soldier, but he is not someone to be around if there is not a war on. To thrive upon war in this manner hints at depravity and bloodthirstiness of the kind that would lead the Corporal to massacre the farmhouse parents. Thus the Corporal has come to embody all that is ugly in war - moral turpitude, jingoistic blind loyalty, unnecessary bloodshed, and violence as the first and only answer.



# Pages 129 through 141

## Pages 129 through 141 Summary

4:30

Jonathan had drifted off but is startled awake by the gentle touch of the Corporal. He is surprised at the kind treatment by the Corporal who tells him not to fret—that he had done a good job. The Corporal tells him that it is time to go after the Hessians. Jonathan again tells the Corporal he wants to go home. But the Corporal is not moved—Jonathan must go. Jonathan learns that the Frenchman has taken the boy home to his wife to care for. Jonathan wishes he could go home, too.

5:00

Jonathan, the Corporal and several other men are heading to the house where the Hessians are asleep. The Corporal orders them to move quickly before the Hessians awake. The soldiers' guns are all ready to fire.

5:30

Jonathan tells the men that the small house does not have a back door.

5:35

As the group nears the house, the Corporal stops to go over their plans. Jonathan will go to the front door, open it and peek in to see if they're still sleeping. If the Hessians are awake they will not be suspicious of Jonathan since he's built up a trust with them. The Corporal and the others will aim their weapons at the front door. There is no back door to cover. As soon as Jonathan peeks in he will get out of the way fast! Jonathan feels ill and wonders if he is the only one wishing he were some place else.

5:38

The Corporal tells Jonathan to move toward the door. If he does exactly what he said, Jonathan will be safe. Jonathan is hesitant—the Hessians never harmed him. Jonathan climbs over the fence but then stands motionless. The Corporal cocks his rifle and tells Jonathan to move on to the house.

5:45

Jonathan opens the door to the house. He sees nothing and walks inside.

5:50



The three soldiers are exactly the same as when he left, all sound asleep. They never knew he left. He ponders the situation: Which side is he on? In a snap decision, Jonathan shuts the door and locks himself in. He wakes the young soldier and tells him that there are soldiers (Soldat) outside. They will be killed unless they give themselves up. The Hessian wakes the other two soldiers and alerts them. The young soldier looks out the front door briefly. A barrage of shots smash into the front of the house. A second round sends a lead ball crashing through the window and into the fireplace.

The Corporal yells from outside calling for their surrender. The soldiers grab their guns. The old Hessian quickly places his bayonet on his musket. The rope that had tied Jonathan to him is still tied to his ankle. Jonathan realizes that they are going to try to fight their way out. He pleads with them to surrender. The old Hessian grabs Jonathan, holding him around the neck from behind. He plans to use Jonathan as a human shield. The young soldier tells him to let Jonathan go but the older soldier refuses. Once on the porch, Jonathan twists so violently that he frees himself. The Hessians are thus exposed. There is a barrage of fire and then silence.

## Pages 129 through 141 Analysis

These pages represent the climax. One obvious indication is that the unique "time stamp" structure of the narrative slows down, with entries divided by mere minutes, and not hours, demonstrating that a lot is happening in a brief amount of time.

Jonathan's decision to side with the Hessians and warn them about the Corporal appears to be the end of his character arc, but this action is deceptive in this regard. In fact, Jonathan is still operating with idealism; he hopes to end the conflict in a bloodless, neat way, with the Hessians surrendering and the Corporal and his men holding fire, with Jonathan himself as the hero. Unfortunately, the reality of war will not provide Jonathan with such a happy ending. The Corporal, perhaps realizing what Jonathan had done, fires upon the farmhouse, demonstrating what seemingly little regard the Corporal has for Jonathan's well-being. Meanwhile, the older Hessian assaults Jonathan and uses him as a human shield.

The older Hessian's offers a penultimate complication. The reader could imagine a simpler version of the same tale, one in which the stereotyped Hessians are revealed to be uniformly decent. In fact, the only truly decent Hessian is the youngest one - itself perhaps author commentary about the young being able to shed prejudices while the old cannot help clinging to them. The oldest Hessian is perhaps as morally bankrupt and war-altered as the Corporal. Indeed, both men seem to be capable of anything in times of war, no matter the moral codes or consequences.

The conflict ends in the death of the Hessians, who perhaps would have been joined by Jonathan had the boy not wrenched free at the last moment. There is no honor or glory on either side - the Corporal ambushed three men trapped in a house, and the one Hessian who cowardly used a boy for a shield was certainly no hero. By the end of this climax, it is apparent Jonathan's idealism is dead.



# Pages 142 through 152

## Pages 142 through 152 Summary

6:10

The bodies of the Hessian soldiers are on the ground, twisted and bloody. All the Americans, except for the Corporal, are walking away.

6:13

The Corporal closes the eyes of the dead men. He knows that Jonathan tried to save them but reminds him that they were killers. Jonathan responds that they didn't hurt him. The Corporal said they probably would have in the end—Jonathan was just lucky. The Corporal tells him to retrieve his gun—it doesn't belong to him. Jonathan takes the musket and in an emotional fit bangs the gun against the stone fireplace, shattering it to pieces. He sobs and collapses on the floor.

6:40

The Corporal and Jonathan catch up with the others as they make their way back toward town. Jonathan is sullen and refuses to walk next to anyone.

9:30

By the time, Jonathan reaches the tavern in his small town, all but four men had gone their separate ways. The Corporal was gone as well. The tavern keeper is glad to see the men and proud that they won the battle. He tells Jonathan that his father was by asking about him and seemed very worried. Jonathan tells him his rifle is lost. The tavern keeper tells him that his father will have to replace it.

10:30

Jonathan comes home and sees his father working with the hoe in the field. His father is very relieved to see Jonathan. Jonathan realizes that the fear he saw in his father's eyes was for him not for himself. Jonathan is very glad to be home and alive.

## Pages 142 through 152 Analysis

As a final complication to the Corporal's characterization, he is especially tender and understanding with Jonathan, even though Jonathan tried to save the Hessians and is thus guilty of behavior that would rise to the level of treason in other contexts. The Corporal maintains his prejudice about the Hessians and dismisses them as murderers and vicious mercenaries that would have harmed Jonathan sooner if not later. Jonathan, through first-hand experience, has been able to see another side of the



Hessians, in the form of the youngest Hessian and his humanity, and so Jonathan has a more rounded and less stereotypical view of the Hessians than the Corporal.

Jonathan's destruction of the tavern owner's rifle and his subsequent breakdown is an obvious demonstration of Jonathan's character change, from naïve youngster whose inexperience allowed him to glorify war and violence to a traumatized young man who has experienced reality, not only the horrors of war but the darker side of humanity. Jonathan has in fact become a man, and his "coming-of-age" journey is complete. Jonathan has rejected war, which explains why his journey back home with the soldiers is not one not of camaraderie but of isolation and sullenness.

Jonathan's inability to tell the tavern owner what happened or how his rifle got destroyed echoes Jonathan's father's inability to accurately convey the horrors of war to his son at the beginning of the volume. War, and how it changes one, is revealed to be a very private experience.

Jonathan reunites with his family, having a new found understanding for war and thus a new found respect for his father. The fear Jonathan sensed in his father's eyes upon leaving for the army was not cowardice but worry for a son. Jonathan has emerged from war physically unhurt, unlike his father and perhaps brother, though the older brother's fate is unstated and left to the imagination. However, Jonathan bears the mental scars of war, and it seems unlikely he would even volunteer for such a conflict again.





# Characters

## Jonathan

Jonathan is a thirteen-year-old boy living on a farm in rural New Jersey. The story covers two days in April 1778, in the midst of the American Revolutionary war. Jonathan's father fought in the war and incurred a serious injury to his leg. He is not able to get around without great difficulty. Jonathan is daydreaming about becoming a soldier. His father apparently denied him permission because of his injury—he needs Jonathan's help around the farm. While Jonathan interprets the fear in his father's eyes as a form of cowardice, the reader understands his father fears for his son and does not want to see him go off to war to be killed or injured. His father already has an older son who joined the army a year ago. His parents have had no word from his since he left. The worry and sadness on his mother's face reflects the anguish for her missing son and fear that Jonathan may soon follow.

But Jonathan is thirteen and knows no fear—he is immortal. He hears the bells in the nearby town sound. It is a call for arms. He runs to the town on the premise that he will inquire about news from the front and winds up joining a small band of rag-tag soldiers headed by a stranger called the Corporal. The men take off for another small town, Rocktown, where they encounter a troop of 30 Hessian soldiers. The Hessians are mercenaries who are ruthless and blood thirsty by reputation. When fighting ensues, several fellow Americans are injured. Jonathan is captured by the Hessian soldiers.

Eventually, Jonathan escapes from the Hessians and reunites with the American soldiers. The Hessian soldiers did not harm him; in fact, at times they were kind to him. The Corporal wants Jonathan to take part in killing them. Jonathan tries to save their lives but fails. He destroys his musket and collapses into tears—symbolic of his new-found reality of war and of being a soldier. He makes his way home to a grateful father. He is happy to be home again and knows he is very lucky to be alive.

## The Corporal

Near the beginning of the story, *The Fighting Ground*, the Corporal is introduced as a somewhat menacing and shadowy figure. He is organizing a band of men to fight against some advancing British troops who are reportedly on their way from Pennington, a town to the south of protagonist Jonathan's home. Jonathan's father refuses to give his son, Jonathan, permission to join the army. Jonathan is only thirteen and the family has already lost a son and his father has suffered a serious injury from fighting. But Jonathan is determined and sneaks off when the town bell tolls a call to arms.



The Corporal has a scowling face and looks dirty and unkempt. Not enough volunteers respond so when the Corporal spots Jonathan he quickly recruits the youngster. The town tavern keeper intimates that there is something nefarious about the Corporal.

The Corporal drives his men hard as they march on the hot and humid day to their destination of Rocktown where the conflict will take place. There is distrust for the Corporal among his band of men. He has lied to them about back-up troops coming and about the number of the enemy they are to fight. When the small group sees the enemy approaching, Hessian mercenaries—thirty strong, the Corporal tells them to hold their fire until he gives the order to shoot. Someone jumps the gun and firing ensues. Jonathan is separated from the others and is captured by three Hessian soldiers.

When Jonathan is reunited with his fellow soldiers, he learns that the Corporal murdered the mother and father of an orphan boy Jonathan found. The Corporal defends his actions by stressing that the people were Tories and therefore traitors who needed to be executed. Jonathan is told that the Corporal believes in the cause and is a good soldier but is someone to avoid when there is no battle to fight. It was the murder of the boy's parents that sparked the conflict.

The Corporal demands that Jonathan accompany him on his mission to find and kill the Hessians who had captured Jonathan. In the end the Corporal is victorious over the Hessians. He is understanding of the young Jonathan's mixed feelings about war and is surprisingly gentle with him. Along the road back to town, the Corporal disappears as quickly as he had originally appeared.

## **The Tavern Keeper**

The tavern keeper in the small town near Jonathan's farm lends Jonathan a musket to use in a conflict in which he will be taking part.

## **The Young Hessian Soldier**

Jonathan is captured by three Hessian soldiers. The youngest of the soldiers reminds Jonathan of his brother who is off fighting in the war. He is the kindest of the three Hessians.

## **The Tall Hessian Soldier**

Jonathan is captured by three Hessian soldiers. The tallest of the soldiers is menacing and has a large scar on his face.



## **The Old Hessian Soldier**

Jonathan is captured by three Hessian soldiers. The oldest of the soldiers seems to be in charge and has a large, curling mustache.

## **The Little Boy**

Jonathan discovers a little orphaned boy in a shed near an abandoned farmhouse where he and the Hessian soldiers spend the night.

## **The Frenchman**

The Frenchman is one of the soldiers in Jonathan's small band. He is wounded in the battle with the Hessians. He speaks French to the little orphaned boy, and the little boy tells him who killed his parents.

## **Jonathan's Father**

Jonathan's father will not give thirteen-year-old Jonathan permission to fight in the war. The father was badly injured during his time in the war.

## **Jonathan's Mother**

Jonathan's mother hates war. Her elder son volunteered to fight over a year ago, and no one has heard from him since.



# Objects/Places

## Jonathan's Family Farm

Jonathan and his family live on a farm in a rural area of New Jersey.

## Trenton, NJ

Trenton, NJ, which is near Jonathan's home. The townspeople are hoping General Washington will soon retake the city from the British.

## Town Tavern

The tavern in the small town near Jonathan's house sounds a bell as a call to arms.

## Jonathan's Musket

Jonathan is loaned a musket by the town's tavern owner. The musket weighs 12 pounds and is taller than Jonathan.

## Pennington

Pennington was a New Jersey town seven miles to the south of Jonathan's home. The town was held by the British and the Hessians.

## Alexandria

Alexandria was a New Jersey town ten miles northwest of Jonathan's home. The town was held by the British and the Hessians.

## Fleming

Fleming was a New Jersey town six miles northeast of Johnathan's home. The town was under the control of American forces.

## Rocktown

The battle that Jonathan and his band faced with the Hessians was waged just outside Rocktown.

## **The Abandoned Farmhouse**

The Hessians and Jonathan stay at an abandoned farmhouse. Ultimately, the Hessians are killed by American soldiers there.

## **The Shed**

The Hessians and Jonathan stay at an abandoned farmhouse. Jonathan finds a young orphaned boy in a shed near the house.

## Setting

The story takes place in New Jersey on April 3 and 4 in 1778. The Revolutionary War has begun, and the American colonists are fighting for their independence from Britain. In addition to the British forces, the Americans fight the Hessians, German soldiers hired by Britain. Small towns prepare their own brigades to join the fighting whenever necessary. News travels by word of mouth, and the ringing of church bells signals any urgent matters, calling the townspeople to the village squares.

The main character, Jonathan, lives on a small farm near a village. His family consists of his mother and younger siblings who live at home, his father who has been injured in battle and has returned home while his leg heals, and an older brother who is still away fighting. Jonathan and his father run the farm without the aid of any animals. In order to prepare the ground for planting, they must hoe it themselves.

## Social Sensitivity

The Fighting Ground's themes do not address the morality of war; rather, they explore the naivete of inexperienced soldiers. Jonathan glorifies war while his father, who has been wounded, fears it.

Avi's message is that war is ultimately a personal matter, and that individuals suffer its consequences. Even in the Revolutionary War, which most American readers think of as a noble cause, there is no glory, only the reality of death.



## Literary Qualities

Two literary devices that Avi uses to establish theme and tone are titling the novel's brief chapters by the time of day and giving characters no names or identities other than a generic title, such as the young Hessian, the Corporal, and the old soldier. Both techniques establish the alienation that Jonathan experiences during his day at war. By not naming characters other than Jonathan, Avi suggests the impersonality of war. People are pawns with designated functions; war forces them to give up their individual identities and their capacity to form human relationships.

Nineteenth-century author Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, considered the first modern war novel, incorporates a very similar technique. The three principal characters are almost always referred to as "the youth," "the tall soldier," and "the loud soldier." Like Jonathan, Crane's protagonist is a young man who envisions war as a glorious adventure only to be disillusioned.

The isolation Jonathan experiences teaches him the meaning of fear. Avi imparts the nature of Jonathan's fear by titling chapters with the exact time of day. Uncertain whether he will live from one minute to the next, Jonathan becomes acutely aware of time, which ticks away like his heartbeat. For most of his life, time has provided a continuum of experience—he has always had an idea of what the next day would bring. Now that he cannot predict the next minute, he can no longer take time, or his life, for granted.

The language barrier between Jonathan and the Hessians also contributes to Jonathan's sense of uncertainty and isolation. Because readers know what the Hessians are saying and thus understand more about the situation than Jonathan does, this is an example of a literary technique known as dramatic irony. Avi's use of dramatic irony allows readers to realize early on that the reality of war is far more complex than it first appears to Jonathan, who makes a series of judgments based on the assumption that he is involved in a straightforward struggle between good and evil.





# Themes

## Signs of the American Revolutionary War

The story of *The Fighting Ground* takes place in 1778 in the midst of the American Revolutionary War. The protagonist is thirteen-year-old Jonathan who lives on a farm in a rural area of New Jersey. Jonathan is hoping to hear news that General George Washington has recaptured Trenton, NJ. A tavern in the small near-by town has become the recruiting station for the area. When the tavern owner sounds a large bell, it is a call to arms.

Jonathan's father fought in the war and incurred serious injury to his leg. Jonathan wants to join the fight, but his father will not give him permission. He claims that he needs Jonathan's help around the farm because it's difficult for him to get around with his bad leg. In reality, his father fears for Jonathan's safety. His older brother joined the army a year earlier and has not been heard from since. Jonathan's parents fear that their elder son is dead—they don't want to lose another son.

Jonathan sneaks off and joins a band of volunteer soldiers for a battle with some advancing enemy soldiers. When the men encounter the soldiers, they are not Redcoats; rather, they are Hessian mercenaries who reportedly are vicious and blood thirsty. The Hessians wear colorful, elaborate costumes with tall gold hats and speak only German.

The main weapon used in the war is the musket. It is a long, heavy rifle that is loaded with gunpowder and lead balls. The Hessian soldiers have bayonets affixed to their muskets. The Hessian officer, who rides a mount, flourishes a long saber.

A French speaking man and woman are murdered by American fighters. They are suspected of being Tories—British sympathizers. The man is suspected of betraying his country and spying for the British.

## Language/Communication Barriers

Jonathan is a thirteen-year-old boy who wants to join the fight against the Redcoats in the American Revolutionary War. He keeps his daydreams about war to himself—afraid to communicate them to his parents. The tavern keeper reminds the youngster he does not have to serve but does not directly tell him that he fears for him and that the fighting is very dangerous.

When Jonathan is captured by Hessian mercenaries who speak only German, he is beset with another communication problem. Jonathan wishes he could ask the Hessians what happened to the other Americans in the battle and reach out to them appealing to their humanity. When a man is glimpsed running through the woods by Jonathan and his captors, Jonathan is terrified. What he doesn't realize is that the



Hessians are just as fearful expressed by one of the soldiers who says in German, "God help us." Throughout his time with the Germans, he is guessing their intentions and remains suspicious of them when there was no need to do so.

Jonathan discovers a young boy, perhaps five years old, whose parents have been murdered. Jonathan asks the child who murdered his parents. But the child does not respond as he only speaks French. Jonathan becomes suspicious that his captors may have killed the people.

## Romanticism of War

Thirteen-year-old Jonathan, the hero of the story, *The Fighting Ground*, daydreams about going off to war. He wants to be a soldier, a hero who would fight for the American cause in the American Revolutionary War. His father was badly injured in the war—his leg was lame. Jonathan's older brother had joined the army a year before and has not been heard from since. Jonathan saw fear in his father's eyes which he took as a sign of weakness. But Jonathan was not afraid—he would be a brave fighter and perhaps a better soldier than his brother or father.

Jonathan's father refuses to give permission for his young son to join the battle, but Jonathan is so enraptured with becoming a soldier that he sneaks off and joins a band of soldiers. On his way to town to join the fight, he passes the house of a young man who was killed in the war. The parents became bitter and were accused of being Tories or traitors. Jonathan did not let himself think about that dead young man; rather, he looked forward to becoming a brave soldier.

Of course, the reader can see it coming; once the idealistic young protagonist is in actual battle, his romanticism of war and fighting begins to change. Jonathan's idealism is further challenged when he is captured by the enemy—he is disappointed at their lack of empathy for an orphaned child's parents. Later when he is reunited with the American soldiers, he risks his own life to try to save his former captors—hoping against hope he could spare their lives and end the bloodshed.

Near the end of the story, after he had truly become a soldier, he realizes that the experience was not what it thought it would be. He no longer wanted to be a soldier or fight—the costs are too high. He bangs and shatters his musket. As he destroyed his weapon, he also destroyed the last remnant of his romantic view of war and killing.



## Themes/Characters

Jonathan is the most important character in *The Fighting Ground*, and the only one whose name is given. In the beginning of the book, he is excited by the ringing of the church bell while he and his father are hoeing. He sees fear in his father's eyes, but he longs to join the battle. His mother sends him to find out what news the bell is signaling and gives him strict orders to return home with the news. But instead Jonathan joins a small party to try to stop the Hessian soldiers who are advancing in their direction. During the next twentyfour hours, Jonathan discovers a great deal about fighting, soldiers, his father, and himself. He must decide who the enemies really are and how he feels about them.

The Corporal, leader of a small band of men from Jonathan's town, orders his forces to stand against a much larger group of Hessian soldiers. Jonathan both fears and admires the Corporal before this battle. The Corporal is important because his actions force Jonathan to question his definition of the enemy.

When Jonathan is separated from other Americans during the battle, he encounters three Hessian soldiers speaking German. He is sure they are awful people because he has heard horrible stories about their cruelty. He has also heard that they fight for pay, not because they believe in the things being fought for. Jonathan becomes confused when they do not harm him and seem to trust him. The youngest Hessian soldier even attempts to overcome the language barrier and be friendly.

Jonathan ends up in a situation where he has to trust the Hessians when he discovers a small boy whose parents have been killed. They turn out to be worthy of his trust, and the young Hessian soldier helps him bury the child's parents and says a prayer for them in German. This confuses Jonathan even more because he now sees these men as people rather than just as enemy soldiers.

After escaping and finding his way back to the Corporal's group, Jonathan, who has suspected that the Hessians killed the boy's parents, realizes that the Corporal is responsible for their death.

When the Corporal wants Jonathan to lead them back to the Hessians, Jonathan tries to refuse, and wonders whose side he is really on. He returns with the Corporal, goes back into the house where the Hessians are sleeping, and tries to warn the Germans. But they cannot understand him, and the Corporal's troops kill them.

Jonathan must still deal with his reasons for wanting to save the Hessian soldiers. He returns home to face his father and discovers what his father's fear has really been. Jonathan now understands that war is not a clearcut battle between good and evil. He and the Hessians he meets share a common humanity; they seem to be decent human beings rather than the bloodthirsty enemies he imagined. Except for the language barrier, Jonathan does not see how they are much different from him. Furthermore, the most brutal deed of war he encounters—the murder of the small boy's parents—has

been committed by his fellow Americans, not the supposed enemy. In the short space of one day, Jonathan has attained a more mature perspective on war than many of the adult townspeople have.



# Style

## Point of View

The story of *The Fighting Ground* is told in limited omniscient point of view through the character of Jonathan, a thirteen-year-old living in New Jersey during the American Revolutionary War. His story begins as he is working in the field with his father on their rural New Jersey farm. Jonathan's father has a bad leg, injured when he fought in the war. Jonathan's older brother signed up in the army a year before and has not been seen or heard from since. Not surprisingly, Jonathan's parents aren't about to give the youngster permission to go fight. They don't want to lose another son. But that doesn't stop Jonathan from day-dreaming and romanticizing about serving his country.

The story pivots around Jonathan's desire to be in the fighting. When he finally engages in battle, his daydream is shattered in the reality of gunfire, a dead fellow soldier and frightening mercenaries chasing him through the woods. The reader is privy to his thoughts and emotions, which change drastically from imagining what fighting is like to actually being a part of a conflict.

Perhaps the war did not create a great and brave soldier in Jonathan but what is more powerful is Jonathan's evolution into a thinking, concerned person. He will not abandon a little boy orphaned by the war. He cannot shoot the Hessians, his captors, when they are asleep and easy targets. He cannot leave the dead bodies of the mother and father of the orphaned boy and struggles all night to bury them.

## Setting

The story of *The Fighting Ground* takes place in rural New Jersey in 1778, when the country was at war with England in the American Revolutionary War. Thirteen-year-old Jonathan lives on a farm with his parents and siblings. The family farm is located outside a small town where a tavern keeps a large bell that is sounded when volunteers are needed for battle. The rural area where Jonathan lives consists of thick woods and is dotted with small towns.

When the town bells toll a call to arms, Jonathan wonders if perhaps Washington might be recapturing Trenton, New Jersey, which was in the possession of the British and their mercenary soldiers, the Hessians. Pennington is a New Jersey town seven miles to the south of Jonathan's home. The town was held by the British and the Hessians at the time of the story. Another town, Alexandria, is a New Jersey town ten miles northwest of Jonathan's home. The town is under the control of the British and the Hessians. Fleming is a New Jersey town six miles northeast of Johnathan's home. Fleming is still in possession of the revolutionaries.

Another town still under control of American forces, Rocktown, is the site of a battle between Hessian soldiers and a small band of American fighters including young



Jonathan. Rocktown is described as very small, having only six houses. Jonathan is chased through very thick woods by the Hessians.

Jonathan is captured by three Hessian soldiers. They take him to an abandoned farmhouse where they spend the night. This house is the scene of a conflict the next morning when the three Hessians are killed by the Americans.

## Language and Meaning

Since the story takes place in 1778, in the midst of the American Revolutionary War, there are some words used in the story that are indicative of that era. For example, the soldiers have "muskets," weapons that would now be called rifles. The soldiers have to string a gunpowder keg around their necks—their source of firepower when they are loading their "lead balls" which would in current days be called bullets. The houses are described as one-room buildings with "dirt floors." There are other examples. A young boy that Jonathan encounters is described as wearing a "linsey-woolsey" blouse. When the hungry Jonathan reunites with his soldiers, he is offered a "johnnycake." When the tavern keeper realized that Jonathan had lied about having his father's permission to join the fight, he called him "sly boots."

The main character, thirteen-year-old Jonathan, is captured by Hessian soldiers who are fighting on the side of the British. Jonathan who was ill-prepared to fight exercised the bad judgment of joining a band of revolutionaries. The Hessian soldiers speak German and of course Jonathan speaks only English. The book, therefore, is interspersed with German dialog. An appendix after the story provides a translation of all the German words and phrases. This is helpful to the reader, of course, but Jonathan has no idea what the men are saying and of course they cannot understand him.

Jonathan adapts to this situation by using sign language or mimicking actions. For example, when the three Hessian soldiers and Jonathan come across an abandoned house, they find a dairy cow. Jonathan gets the attention of the young and hungry Hessian soldier, making milking motions and drinking motions. With a smile, he repeats in German that Jonathan will milk the cow so they can have it to drink.

Jonathan encounters another language barrier when he stumbles on to a little boy whose parents have been killed. The boy speaks only French and does not respond to any of Jonathan's questions. Jonathan suspects that the three Hessian soldiers killed the boy's parents. The identity of the murderer is revealed when one of the French speaking American soldiers questions the child.

## Structure

The structure of the book, *The Fighting Ground* is segmented by time. The first page announces that it is April 3, 1778. Before the beginning text, "9:58" is centered in the middle of the page just as the title of a chapter would be. The ensuing narrative is thus divided by time segments.



This structure provides an immediacy, almost blow-by-blow approach in telling the story. The reader knows for example, that it took Jonathan thirty minutes to walk to the nearby town (from 10:15 to 10:45). There is an added element of tension as the reader is watching the clock by virtue of the book's structure as the story unfolds. Jonathan is captured by the Hessians. The reader knows that when it is 5:30 or 6:00, darkness will settle and Jonathan's parents will become very concerned about his whereabouts. This structure serves to carry the story along at a clear and rapid pace, allowing no opportunity for flashback episodes.

The Hessians speak only German, and there is German dialog throughout the section that includes the Hessian soldiers. Located behind the story is an appendix with a translation of the dialog spoken by the German soldiers. The reader is thus at a vantage point knowing the intentions of the Germans while Jonathan can only surmise what they are.



## Quotes

"The gun was primed, ready to be used. Johnathan knew how. Hadn't his father taught him, drilled him, told him that everyone had to be prepared? Hadn't he said, 'We must all be soldiers now?' And hadn't Johnathan talked with his friends of war, battles old and new, strategies fit for major generals? And, having fought their wars, they had always won their glory, hadn't they?" (5)

"The boy's folks said it was an awful war, cursed it, spat on it when they could. People, hearing them, hinted they might be secret Tories. There were lots of Tories like that around, spies and turncoats all. Such folks were warned to keep their thoughts to themselves. Tories got what they deserved." (9)

"The gun was heavy. Jonathan tried throwing it over his shoulder and resting it as the others did, only to find its weight cut into this neck. He had to use both hands and carry it across his chest. He didn't like the notion that he was the only one who held his gun that way." (19)

"For a moment Jonathan remained behind, upset. He turned to look at the Rocktown homes. From some of them people emerged. They stood watching as the band moved off. Jonathan began to find his pride again. They were, he reminded himself, looking at him, for he too was a soldier." (31)

"At the end of the road, as it came out from behind the tall trees, soldiers were advancing. Jonathan watched, spellbound, as the troops marched into view. Three by three they came, ten rows, thirty soldiers, all moving in lockstep, their legs lifting high and stiff. The still at the bottom of the hill, the soldiers seemed enormous. Never had he see such men. Giants." (41)

"Shouts and shots pursued him from behind, branches and vines caught at him. His side ached terribly. His cartridge box and powder horn kept banging against his knees. Pulling them from around his neck, he flung them away. His foot caught upon a root. He crashed down, seeing nothing but a blur of green, his breath blown, completely spent, leaving him without the strength to move at all." (53)

"Noting Jonathan's gaze, the soldier smiled. It made his cheeks even brighter. 'Soldat,' he said, pointing first to himself, then to Jonathan. 'Soldat,' Jonathan repeated, nodding to show he understood. 'Soldier,' he said more slowly in reply, suddenly hearing it as an echo of what he had wanted to be. 'Soldier,' he said softly, realizing that indeed, that was what he now was. 'Soldat. . .' he whispered, feeling his intense humiliation." (63)

"Jonathan found the boy's parents out beyond a small field, not far from the woods had started to reclaim the land. A man—Jonathan assumed the boy's father—lay on his back, his arms wide to either side, his eyes closed, dead. The woman, also dead, lay face downward." (89)





"A high fragmentary moon came and went elusively. All about, the forest spoke, sometimes sounds of animals, sometimes the white whirl of insect wings, sometimes only the trees shifting gently." (110)

"Young friend, this Corporal is a man that is known as—well, how to say, a man who—fights. Bravely. When the fighting happens, yes, of course, he is what one wants. To be sure. But when the fighting stops, well, no perhaps that is something that is different. Then perhaps, you hope that he. . .that he is not there." (128)

"It took time for him to find his gun, buried as it was beneath the rubble of the room. Slowly, he pulled it clear and grasped it in his hands. He looked down at it. Then, lifting it, holding it by the barrel, he swung it over his head. With the surging strength of his exploding rage, he brought it down against the stone hearth. The shock shot through his bones. The gun almost fell from his grasp. But now his rage had seized him completely, pouring through him. Gripping the gun even tighter, he began pounding it against the stones, again and again and again. The gun stock splintered. The metal bent and burst. Pieces flew in all directions. He fell to his knees sobbing." (147)

"And there, then, at last, Jonathan understood that his father's fear had not been for himself. No, it was for Jonathan, that he might be spared. And suddenly, Jonathan understood more. Understood the most important thing—that he had indeed been spared. Oh, how glad he was to be there. And alive. Oh, alive." (152)



## Topics for Discussion

What are the reasons Jonathan's parents do not want him to join the army?

What does the tavern keeper tell Jonathan about joining the fight? What does he make Jonathan promise? What might the real motives be behind the tavern keeper's words?

How does the lack of communication, or language barriers, figure into the story of The Fighting Ground?

Why do some of the soldiers distrust their leader, the Corporal?

What does Jonathan think of the three Hessian soldiers who capture him? Which Hessian soldier is most sympathetic to Jonathan?

What reason does the Corporal give for killing the parents of the little orphaned boy?

How does Jonathan try to help the Hessian soldiers who captured him? Why did he have mixed feelings about his captors?

How does Jonathan's view of war differ before and after he actually engages in battle?



## Essay Topics

1. Why is Jonathan, who is afraid of the Hessian soldiers, glad to be with them?
2. Why does the party attacking the Hessians begin to question the Corporal?
3. Why does Jonathan try to warn the Hessian soldiers?
4. What does the character of the orphaned young boy add to the story? Why were his parents killed?
5. Jonathan does not understand his father's fear until he has experienced war for himself. What does he discover to be his father's greatest fear?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on the role of mercenary soldiers in the Revolutionary War.
2. During the Revolutionary War, minutemen were American civilians who agreed to be prepared to fight on one minute's notice. Research and report on the minutemen's role in the war.
3. Though more sophisticated than *The Fighting Ground*, Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* presents similar themes and incorporates similar techniques. Read Crane's work and compare it to Avi's novel in terms of literary techniques and the protagonists' experiences.
4. There are three different languages used by the people in this book. Why did Avi create characters who speak different languages? What do these language barriers show about the people?
5. Avi talks about the ticking sound beginning again when Jonathan returns home. Why does Jonathan feel that time has begun again at this point? What does the use of the time as headings for each section do for the story? Why did Avi choose to use them rather than chapter headings?

## Further Study

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983. Contains an autobiographical sketch of Avi.



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