

Growing Up in Coal Country Short Guide

Growing Up in Coal Country by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

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Contents

Growing Up in Coal Country Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

Bartoletti enjoyed listening to and telling family stories. She collected the oral histories of men and women who grew up in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region and conducted research at museums and libraries. *Silver at Night* and *Growing up in Coal Country* were inspired by the stories of her husband's grandfather, Massimino Santarelli, who emigrated from Italy as a boy and worked in the coal mines for fortyfive years. *Growing up in Coal Country* tells the stories of miners and their families through oral histories, historical research, and photographs.

"Slowly, I was able to piece together what life was like for the children of coal country... [the] children who lived, worked, and played nearly one hundred years ago... . This is their story." The first half of *Growing up in Coal Country* describes work at the mines. Chapters 1 through 4 are titled "The Breaker Boys," "Nippers, Spraggers, and Mule Drivers," "Mules and Rats," and "The Miner and His Butty." The noisy breaker room, the starting point for the children who worked at the mine, was filled with young boys who endured backbreaking work picking out coal from the chutes. Boys were also the nippers, spraggers, and mule drivers, and men were the miners. The dangerous underground shafts where men shared their lunch with rats and their prized mules were also where they made their way to freedom through the miles of underground tunnels. "The Black Maria" and "Strike!" detail the tragedies of working at the mine and the attempts by organized labor, boys, and miners to gain a living wage and humane working conditions.

Life outside the mine was still dominated by it politically, socially, and economically. The reader learns in the second half of the work, in the chapters titled "The Patch Village" and "After a Hard Day's Work," of the hard life led by all members of a mining family. Bartoletti writes of her husband's grandmother: "'I was thirteen when I married,' said Pearl Santarelli. 'Massimino was twenty.... I had to stay home and cook and clean.' .. . At fourteen, Pearl had her first baby." To escape the drudgery of work, people used their own ingenuity for recreation and relied on Old World ways to provide continuity from generation to generation.

Bartoletti concludes with a commentary about the legacy of "Coal Country," a list of the resources she consulted to write the book, and a list of photograph sources.

About the Author

Susan Campbell Bartoletti lives with her husband and their two children in northeastern Pennsylvania. Before establishing her career as a writer, she taught eighthgrade English for eighteen years. Bartoletti then resigned to pursue her writing career.

She now teaches creative writing and literature at Binghamton University, where she is also a full-time graduate student in the creative writing program. When she is not writing, Bartoletti often speaks to librarians and writers about historical research, historical fiction and nonfiction for young adults, writing, and publishing.

Bartoletti is the author of two juvenile books: *Silver at Night* (1994) and *Dancing with Dziadziu* (1997). *A Christmas Promise* is scheduled to be published in 2001. Set during the Depression, it is the story of a girl and her out-of-work father who ride the Kids on Strike! 1999 (nonfiction) *No Man's Land*, 1999 (fiction) rails, looking for a good place to spend Christmas.

Bartoletti has written two nonfiction books about child labor, *Growing up in Coal Country* (1996) and *Kids on Strike!* (1999).

Like *Growing up in Coal Country*, *Kids on Strike!* tells the story of working children during the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. Bartoletti describes the millions of children who worked long, grueling hours for meager wages and who helped to support their families and improve their lives. *Kids on Strike!* is the story of children who discovered how powerful they could be when they banded together for a common cause.

Sometimes they won big—like the New York City newsboys and bootblacks—and sometimes they helped their parents and other grownups win—like the Pennsylvania anthracite mine workers and the mill children of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Some children, like the Lower East Side tenants and some of the New York City and Philadelphia shirtwaist makers, won only small victories. Still others, like the New York City messenger boys, never succeeded at all, but success for some—the mill children who marched alongside Mother Jones, for instance—would be recognized years later.

No matter what kind of victories they won, the children fought abuses and demanded social justice and human dignity. They developed a common understanding from their shared living and working experiences, even though they did not share the same language, traditions, or customs. Striking children made a difference for future generations of workers.

The author's latest contribution to the young adult historical fiction genre is *No Man's Land* (1999), a coming-of-age story about a fourteen-year-old boy who joins the Confederate Army hoping to prove his manhood. Bartoletti also wrote a book for the "Dear America" series, *A Coal Miner's Bride* (2000). The novel tells the story of a thirteen-year-old Polish girl who comes to America as a promised bride to a coal miner.

In addition to trade books, Bartoletti has published articles, textbooks (Study Skills Workout, grades 5-8, 1987), short stories, and poetry. She has won both the Highlights for Children fiction contest and the Highlights for Children "History Feature of the Year."

Bartoletti served as the regional coadviser of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) for eastern Pennsylvania. She has spoken to groups of students, educators, writers, librarians, and scholars and given presentations for the Pennsylvania State Librarians Association (PSLA), the International Reading Association (IRA), the Children's Literature Association (CLA), the SCBWI, and numerous schools and colleges.

Because many of the same questions about publishing and illustrating were asked at SCBWI conferences, Bartoletti and Lisa Rowe Fraustino created "The How-Do-I-Get-It-Published Quiz" (1994, 1996). The "HDIGIP Quiz" is a fun way for individuals interested in writing and illustrating to learn how to get published in the children's literary market.

Growing up in Coal Country has received numerous awards and recognition from various library and literary organizations. In 1998 the work was one of the resources used for the PBS documentary The American Experience: America 1990. Bartoletti has also been recognized by the SCBWI with the Golden Kite Honor Book plaque for nonfiction in 1996. Golden Kite Awards are bestowed annually to the most outstanding children's books written or illustrated by its members that were published that year. An Honor Book plaque in each category is awarded as well.

In the longer work category, the book was the 1997 recipient of the Jane Addams Book Award, which recognizes the children's books that most effectively promote the cause of peace, social justice, and world community. Also in 1997, Bartoletti was awarded the Carolyn W. Field Award by the Pennsylvania Library Association's Youth Services Division. This award honors the best book for young people by a Pennsylvania author or illustrator. In 1998 Growing up in Coal Country was included in the American Library Association's 1998 Best Book List.

Setting

The stories told in *Growing up in Coal Country* are from coal-mining towns in northeastern Pennsylvania in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some towns were "patch villages," or company towns built up around a mine, and others, such as Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, were "free" towns. The driving economic and political force in all these towns was the mine.

Mining towns were often filthy from coal dust and unsanitary sewer and water systems, and unsafe owing to cave-ins underground in the mine shafts. Most activities revolved around the mine, and virtually every house and institution was owned by the mining company—the stores, the police, the churches, and even the schools.

Town residents, with names like O'Boyle, Wentovich, and Santarelli, were divided by class and ethnic group. The ethnic neighborhoods allowed immigrant families to continue speaking their native language and observing family traditions, most of which revolved around food, religious holidays, dress, and other customs.

Despite the different ethnic backgrounds, a strong community spirit developed. When sports teams representing each mine competed against each other, most of the town turned out to support their team. The little time that miners had for recreation was spent drinking in pubs and playing sports.

Funerals were a common social event owing to the hazardous working and living conditions. Families relied on each other for help and support when they lost a loved one to disease or death in the mine. Life in these towns was harsh not only for the miners and the breaker boys but also for the women and girls, whose daunting tasks included raising the children, cleaning, taking care of paying boarders, scavenging for coal, and bearing children.



Social Sensitivity

"The patch village was laid out according to the class of worker." One cannot read this book without confronting the issue of class and the working poor. Like their modern counterparts, the turn-of-the-century American upper classes perceived the poor as lazy or unwilling to improve their lot in life. Unlike poor Americans today, however, the working poor of that era had little federal support and were taken care of by the company instead—with substandard housing, limited schooling, and company credit. The captains of industry built their empires in part on coal profits. This book is not about the comfortable life of mine owners or managers. The coal empire was made possible by the willingness of laborers to work long hours for low pay. Only when labor was able and willing to organize, acquire political clout, and go on strike to force companies to meet worker demands did the working poor begin to earn wages and gain working conditions that allowed families to advance economically. This advancement enabled some children of mine workers to escape from a life in the mines and become members of the middle class.

"In one village, it was possible to visit Scotch Road, Dago Street, Murphy's Patch, Welsh Hill, and Hun Town." Ethnic differences are another social issue treated in the book. Each reader will perceive these ethnic differences as pride or prejudice or both according to his or her own point of view.

New immigrant miners were often "pelted by stones and sticks as they got off the trains." Although the miners and their families were clannish at the mines and in their neighborhoods, the families had to overcome these differences to unionize and to survive tough times and tragedy. John Mitchell rallied the coal workers for the United Mine Workers with the slogan "The coal you dig is not Slavic coal or Polish coal or Irish coal. It is coal.... A whole new culture emerged—a coal culture."

Literary Qualities

Growing up in Coal Country intertwines oral histories with the historical account of the past to create a narrative that reads like a story. Each chapter begins with a photograph and a quotation from a "Coal Country" survivor. The boys and men speak not of a romantic past but of a past filled with hard work, tragedy, hope, and family. The photographs and stories of the miners and their families convey their pain and their pride. This is no dry history textbook: the miners' stories come alive through the text and pictures. Growing up in Coal Country provides a vivid portrait through stories and photographs of people and places.

Bartoletti's narrative offers much insight into the everyday life of the turn-of-the-century coal miner. To keep the story from becoming a textbook narrative, she uses oral histories and quotations from the children and adults who lived in the coal towns.

The quotations interspersed in the narrative—the direct expressions of hope, despair, cynicism, and humor—bring the miners' stories out of the past and into the present. These personal narratives let history speak for itself.

The hard and tragic lives of mining families could be overwhelming to the reader.

Despite the hardship, the wit and humor of the boys and the families radiate through the personal accounts of how they managed their harsh lives. For example, Bartoletti tells about the spraggers, the boys who controlled the speed of the mine cars going down the shaft. Many a boy lost a finger, a hand, an arm, or a leg. Despite the hazards, the boys found opportunities to have fun.

"We'd stand on the bumper and ride the cars... . It was pretty lively.... Of course the bosses didn't like it."

The photographs are integral to this work.

The frontispiece photograph compels the reader to look at the face of each dustcovered boy. A few are smiling, but most are somber, with looks of fierce determination. The black-and-white photos emphasize the black and gray world of the mining town.

Themes and Characters

Bartoletti interviewed sixteen individuals who were children during the early twentieth century. Additionally, she used interview tapes and transcripts of local oral histories from Eckley Village and the Bureau of Archives and History at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Although she does not quote the same individuals consistently throughout the work, the same voice emerges from the text.

Children named Carlo, Samuel, Lil, and Massimino are the central characters of *Growing up in Coal Country*. Each personal recollection is a story within the story of life in the mine or the mining town. Each recollection was pieced together by the author into chapters that describe work, play, and home life in "Coal Country."

The individual voices from the past echo the themes of determination, hope, hard work, and courage. Bartoletti explores not only the hard life in the mines but the hard life at home. In the end, the pride of these individuals for having survived the coal mines and coal life shines through. Despite their hard lives, they do not speak in voices of self-pity, anger, or hatred.

There are also stories within the story, such as "The Courage of Martin Crahan" and "William McKinney and His Mule."

Martin Crahan is a twelve-year-old mule driver who refuses to leave the mine until he has alerted the other miners about a shaft fire. He scratches a final message to his family before he dies—alongside his prized coworker, his mule. These stories convey the courage and camaraderie found among the boys and men in the mines and explain the daily dangers they faced and their need to rely on others for safety in the mine. These stories sustained the mine workers as well, giving courage, fortitude, and grace to the boys who faced death in the mine every day they went to work.



Topics for Discussion

1. Pick an incident in the book that you liked and read it to the class. Describe why this incident is important to you.
2. The photographs are an important part of this work. What does the photograph on page 96 tell us about life in "Coal Country"? Pick another photograph from the work and describe what it tells the reader about life in "Coal Country."
3. Some books make the reader feel sad, and other books make the reader feel happy, angry, or excited. How did this book make you feel overall? State your reasons using examples from the book.
4. "Many a time I cried with the pain [from picking slate], but yet when the whistle blew for quitting time in the evening, I was as happy as a king to know I had finished another day and added another quarter to my pay to help support my family." Do you think that young adults today are lazier and do not work as hard as young people in years past? What do you do to help your family (hold a job, do chores, baby-sit younger children) without asking for compensation?
5. The stories in this work describe life in American coal towns at the turn of the century. How was that life similar to American life today? How was it different?
6. These stories describe the life of the working classes—people who had to struggle to make a living and who lived in unsanitary and unsafe places. Why do you think the author chose to focus on the working classes in the mining towns rather than the middle and upper classes?
7. This book is a historical account of life in mining towns at the turn of the century. How does it differ from the accounts presented in history textbooks?
8. In chapter 8, "Strike!," the author recounts the miners' attempts to build a union and force the mining companies to provide living wages and safer workplaces. Are unions today trying to provide living wages and safer workplaces for the workers they represent? What are unions asking employers to provide for their members? Do you think there is a need for unions in today's workplace?
9. Despite coming from many different ethnic groups, the people who lived in coal towns were able to overcome their differences and work together to achieve a goal. Why do you think they were able to cooperate? Do you think they were more or less prejudiced than people are today?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. On page 127, the author lists people she interviewed for *Growing up in Coal Country*. What stories do your family members—your grandparents or other relatives—tell you about growing up, working, and living in the twentieth century? Interview a relative about an incident or about what life has been like for him or her. Tape the interview and transcribe it. Think about what questions are important to ask your relative.
2. The children have little time for school or play in "Coal Country." For one week write down the number of hours you spend on the following activities: school, personal grooming, sleeping, recreation, watching television, work, volunteer activities, and family time (talking and playing with parents or siblings). For your report, analyze how you spend your time and answer the following questions. On average, what percentage of your day's activities is spent in each category? Do you feel that you have enough time in every day? How could you better spend your time doing what you need to do?
3. Does the author describe cultural and ethnic prejudice in mining towns or just ethnic pride? Do you see prejudice in this work? Do you see evidence of prejudice in your community against an ethnic, religious, racial, socioeconomic, or gender group? If so, focus your report on one type of prejudice you see in your community. What do you think is the source of that prejudice? What can you do about it?
4. Community pride and spirit were important in the mining towns even though families sometimes barely had enough to eat or enough coal to keep warm. Why do you think people cared about their community, and why do people care about their communities today? Is it the neighborhood, the schools, social activities, the environment, prosperity, or cultural similarities? For your report, think about these questions and describe what you like about your community. What do you think makes people proud of your community today?
5. The author states, "I read old mining records, newspapers, magazines, and books." Visit your local museum or library. What can you discover about your community in the early twentieth century? Was it very different from your community today? In your report, describe the number and type of people who lived in your community and your town's primary business and cultural activities.
6. How would you describe your community today for future generations? Would you write about the negative events in your community, about the positive events, or about both? How do you decide which events to write about? What do you think kids will be interested in about your community in one hundred years?
7. Child labor comprised breaker boys, nippers, spraggers, and mule drivers. Young boys were pulled from school to work in the mines. Young girls were needed to stay at home to help raise families. Investigate and report on child labor violations in today's world. What countries use underage workers? Why do countries pay children low wages



and provide minimally adequate working conditions for them? What have children or others done to publicize the abuses of child labor?

8. In chapter 7, "The Black Maria," Bartoletti describes disaster at the mines—injuries, flooding, cave-ins, explosions, and deaths. Write a report about workplace safety at the mines. What were the Black Marias? How did the mining companies help the families of injured miners? How did families cope with disaster?

9. The photographs in this book illustrate the stories told by the author. What photographs would you take of the community today to show to future generations? Who and what in your town would you photograph? After you take the pictures, describe what your photographs say about your town.

10. Bartoletti provides a glimpse of how women lived in the coal towns. Visit your school or public library and find other books about life in the nineteenth or twentieth century for young women.

Write a report about a young woman's life during that period.



For Further Reference

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. "The HDIGIP Quiz." Online web page available at: <http://www.users.interport.net/~hdu/lisasue.htm>. An amusing quiz that provides information about how to get published (or not) in the children and young adult market.

Deifendeifer, Anne. Review. Horn Book 73, 2 (March-April 1997): 210-11. Deifendeifer gives a grade of A to *Growing up in Coal Country* and describes the work as "engrossing" and a "thoroughly researched account of working and living conditions" in coal towns.

Rochman, Hazel. Review. Booklist 93, 7 (December 1, 1996): 652. Rochman gives *Growing up in Coal Country* a review grade of A, describes the work, and recommends it for adults as well as young readers.

Whelan, Frank. "Coal Country Mines Gritty Histories; *Growing up in Coal Country* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti." *Morning Growing Up in Coal Country* 143 Call (Allentown), June 29, 1997, p. F3. An enthusiastic review of *Growing up in Coal Country*.

Related Titles

Diana Musgrave Aikens wrote *Through a Miner's Eye*, a history of coal mining in the United States. In *Anthracite People: Families, Unions, and Work, 1900-1940*, John Bodner describes the history of coal towns and inhabitants in the early twentieth century.

Tom Beck's book *George M. Bretz, Photographer in the Mines*, documents the work of the photographer George Bretz, who lived from 1842 to 1895 and photographed the coal mines in Pennsylvania.

Coal Mine Peaches by Michelle Dionetti tells the story of the author's grandfather, who worked in the Italian mines before coming to America. *Tales of the Mine Country* by Eric McKeever is a recollection of the author's experiences as a child in the 1930s growing up in a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania. The stories portray the life and times of those who worked the mines, especially the Irish miners known as the Molly Maguires. Judith Hendershot tells about a child growing up in a coal-mining community full of excitement and hard work in her work *In Coal Country*. Life in a coal-mining town can be difficult under any circumstances, but the family in Ruth C. White's *Sweet Creek Holler* has it really rough. The father, the coal miner and breadwinner of the family, has been shot at the beginning of the novel, and they have had to leave the Clancy Valley Coal Camp and move to Sweet Creek Holler. The story is set in 1948, and we get a close look at the tightly knit but sometimes narrow-minded citizens of western Virginia at the time.

John J. Flagler's *The Labor Movement in the United States* is a good nonfiction source of information about the labor movement in the United States. *Frankie* by J. Sydney Jones is a fictionalized tale set against the backdrop of the Colorado mine strike of 1913-14. Doreen Rappaport's novel *Trouble at the Mines* details clashes between mine owners and union workers in 1898. We see that life-altering event through the eyes of Rosie Wilson, a young girl whose family is deeply involved in the strike. We also learn about the role Mother Jones played in that strike. The book is short and very easy to read.



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