

Traitor: The Case of Benedict Arnold

Short Guide

Traitor: The Case of Benedict Arnold by Jean Fritz

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Overview

Fritz's account of the life of the Revolutionary War general Benedict Arnold presents a difficult subject objectively yet with great sympathy. Long the subject of disdain and criticism from patriotic Americans who know him as the man who made a failed attempt to turn West Point over to the British, Arnold is shown to be a man driven by a need to succeed and to be recognized for his accomplishments. Fritz reviews the facts of Arnold's life with care, showing how the events of his childhood and turbulent teen-age years had lasting influence on the man whom George Washington once considered the finest soldier in the Continental Army. Her account also provides some insight into the lives of the men and women forced to choose between submitting to an increasingly oppressive regime of colonial government administered from across the ocean, or taking the drastic step of declaring independence from their legitimate, if ill-willed, ruler, King George III.

About the Author

Jean Guttery Fritz was born on November 16, 1915, in Hankow, China, where her father, Arthur M. Guttery, was a minister and a missionary, working for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). She spent over a decade in the Far East before returning to the United States, where she was educated at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. After college, Fritz worked for a time as a research assistant for the Silver Burdett Company in New York City. She worked briefly as a librarian in Dobbs Ferry, New York, in the mid-1950s.

Fritz began writing fiction early in life, but it was not until 1954 that she published her first novel, *Fish Head*. She quickly established her reputation as an excellent writer of books for young adults. Her specialty is historical biography, and she combines meticulous historical research with a lively style appropriate for young audiences, making figures from the past come to life in her well-paced narratives.

Fritz's work has been recognized by several educational and literary associations, including the Pennsylvania School Library Association and the Washington (D.C.) Children's Book Guild. *Homesick*, Fritz's autobiography, received the Christopher Award, the National Book Award, a Newbery Honor Book citation, and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book citation. *Stonewall* was named a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book in 1979, and *Traitor: The Case of Benedict Arnold* as a National Book Award finalist in 1982. Washington and Jefferson College awarded Fritz an honorary doctorate in 1982.

Fritz was awarded the Children's Book Guild Non-Fiction Award for "total body of creative writing" in 1978.

Setting

The events of *Traitor* span the years of Benedict Arnold's life, 1741-1801, centering on the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s. Fritz begins with Arnold's early life in Norwich, Connecticut, and traces his career as a soldier in New England and Pennsylvania. Her account of Arnold's campaign north through New York to Canada in an ill-fated attempt to capture the British-held city of Quebec provides vivid descriptions of both the foreboding surroundings and the hardships of the soldiers who accompanied Arnold on the expedition.

Social Sensitivity

Fritz provides a delicate balance between sympathy and condemnation in her portrayal of one of the most vilified figures in American history. She acknowledges the facts of history: Arnold got off almost scot-free, even though his plot failed; he received a British pension that supported him for the rest of his life; and he never returned to America to stand trial for his crime. Nevertheless, Fritz clearly shows the destructiveness of his vanity, bitterness, greed, selfishness, and insatiable need for recognition and praise. With some care, Fritz shows that Arnold did have cause for anger but that his overreaction to apparent insult and his overweening pride led him to commit acts that can only be described as despicable.

Literary Qualities

Fritz is a captivating storyteller, and the major strength of *Traitor* is the fastpaced plot line. She carefully selects anecdotes that highlight character traits in Arnold and the other historical figures she portrays. Fritz also uses setting effectively, especially in contrasting the hardships of the upstate New York wilderness with the opulence of Philadelphia. These contrasts help build sympathy for Arnold, who can be seen at times as a man with just grievances.

Fritz does not search for symbols to lend her narrative larger significance.

Instead, she uses the familiar image of money as an emblem of Arnold's grasping for material satisfaction. Although Fritz makes no direct connections between the two men, lurking in the background of this portrait of America's most famous turncoat is the image of the world's most renowned traitor, Judas Iscariot, the man who betrays Christ for thirty pieces of silver in the Bible.

Themes and Characters

Fritz uses the story of Benedict Arnold's life to illustrate several important themes about human behavior.

First, she demonstrates that, even in times of crisis, one's character determines one's actions; people are in control of their own destinies, rather than being mere pawns swept up by events beyond their control. Arnold's life serves, too, as an example of what can happen when a person's ego prods him or her to seek selfish ends; the consequences of such action can lead to personal failure and to social and political disaster as well.

Fritz relies heavily on character development to present her themes. The focus of her study is Benedict Arnold himself. She plays up the dominant personality traits of the American general: his bravery, which at times leads him to the extremes of foolhardiness, and his driving need for success and recognition. In a sense, Arnold appears as an Achilles-figure: like the Greek warrior in Homer's *Iliad*, he is shown to sulk when lesser figures refuse to grant him what he believes is his due.

With great subtlety, Fritz illustrates how Arnold's childhood experiences lead him to become the hero and the egotist who is indispensable to the Continental Army yet considered reprehensible by the army's governing body, the Continental Congress. The son of a successful but spendthrift merchant, Arnold devotes his life to amassing a fortune after facing poverty as a teenager when his father goes bankrupt.

Arnold's obsession with riches, coupled with his insatiable desire for fame, makes him highly susceptible to the British general Sir William Howe's offer to sell out the American forces at West Point in exchange for a handsome reward and a commission in the British Army, where Arnold believes his prowess will be better appreciated.

Fritz also provides a vivid portrayal of Arnold's wife, Margaret "Peggy" Shippen. Peggy is a Philadelphia belle whose attentions are courted by the British occupying forces in the American capital and later by the Continental officers who take over the city when the British withdraw. Peggy's own need for attention and her penchant for material goods contribute to her husband's fateful decision to betray his country. Fritz paints Peggy as a willing helpmate who schemes with her husband to outwit the Americans and who suffers in her own right when Arnold's scheme is foiled.

Other historical personages are introduced as they interact with Arnold. One sees Arnold's brief encounters with such figures as Ethan Allen; members of the Continental Congress; and the British major John Andre, the go-between who is arrested and hanged as a spy when the plot fails and Arnold escapes. Fritz vividly captures Allen's personal magnetism (which Arnold despises) and Andre's suave mannerisms without detracting from her focus on Arnold.

Topics for Discussion

1. How do Arnold's daredevil actions as a young boy relate to his behavior later in life?
2. Is it wrong for the Continental Congress to deny Arnold the promotion he feels he deserves? Does Arnold act responsibly when he learns of the decision?
3. Arnold believes that by turning traitor he can shorten the war, thereby becoming a hero of a different sort. What events lead Arnold to think this way?

Where is he wrong in his reasoning?

4. Arnold joins the Continental Army of his own free will, and as a result his business suffers. He makes up his losses, however, by skimming funds from the money he receives from the Continental Congress. How do you feel about his actions?
5. What kind of future would Arnold have had if he had been promoted? How might that have influenced the war and the formation of the Union following the conflict?
6. If the British had won the war, would Arnold have become the hero he wanted to be?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Critics of Fritz's historical biographies contend that Fritz illustrates common human characteristics that can be seen in men and women of any period. What are some of the characteristics of Benedict Arnold that appear to be "timeless"?

2. In *Traitor*, Fritz defines two different types of heroes: the brave, dashing military hero that Arnold becomes during the war, and the rather different kind of hero he hopes to become after the war. How do these two types differ?

Is one better than the other? What do these two definitions say about society in general?

3. Fritz begins her book by focusing on Arnold as a small boy, who lacks confidence and feels unimportant. Trace the change in Arnold from an obscure youth to the most infamous traitor in American history, showing how specific incidents bring out character traits.

4. Technically, the Americans who rebelled against the British were traitors.

Discuss the differences between Arnold's betrayal of the American revolutionaries and the colonists' betrayal of the British government.

5. Jean Fritz has written many biographical novels for young adults.

Select one other work and compare her style, format, methods of characterization, and themes to those found in *Traitor*.

For Further Reference

Ammon, Richard. "Profile: Jean Fritz."

Language Arts 60 (March 1983): 365369. An overview of Fritz's life and work, concentrating primarily on the series of brief biographies of the founding fathers and Homesick.

Fritz, Jean. "Acceptance Speech: Regina Medal Recipient." Catholic Library World 52 (July/August 1985): 21-25.

Provides information about Fritz's writing process.

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