

# **The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans Short Guide**

## **The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans by Harriette Gillem Robinet**

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## Overview

Pierre and Andrew Alexandre, twelve-year-old twins and runaway slaves, had earth-brown skin, pale gray eyes, and limp black curls. They had danced together to entertain their master's guests—until now.

Raised apart by Marquis Francois Jean Claude De Ville, they now lived together in the swamps around New Orleans in a perfect hiding place built by their father, Jacques. At the beginning of the story, Robinet plants the question inside the reader's head: Will the levelheaded and cautious Pierre be able to work together with his impulsive and playful twin, Andrew, to save their own lives and reunite their family?

Leaving the boys alone in the swamp, Jacques went to try and free their mother and baby sister, but did not return. When Pierre and Andrew realize that their father will not return, they must learn not only how to survive in the swamps, but also how to rescue their mother and baby sister from a slave auction. The historical elements of British forces, pirates, and Andrew Jackson's American army, add an interesting twist to the twins' plight.

## About the Author

Born July 4, 1931, in Washington, D.C., to teachers Richard Avitus and Martha Gray, Harriette Gillem Robinet became familiar with slavery during her childhood summers in Arlington, Virginia. Her maternal grandfather served as a slave under General Robert E. Lee until age thirteen, while her father's family served as slaves to Jesuit priests in Maryland. This childhood experience paved the way for the author's interest in slavery and historical fiction.

In 1953, Robinet graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the College of New Rochelle in New York. The author then earned her master of science (1957) and doctorate (1963) degrees in microbiology from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. From 1953-54, Robinet worked in Children's Hospital, Washington, D.C, as a bacteriologist before serving at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C, as a medical bacteriologist and as a research bacteriologist. Later, she worked as a biology instructor at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana and as a civilian food bacteriologist for the United States Army Quartermaster Corps.

In August 6, 1960, the author married McLouis Joseph Robinet (pronounced robi-nay), a health physicist. The couple raised six children: Stephen, Philip, Rita, Jonathan, Marsha, and Linda, including one son with cerebral palsy.

Influenced by her family's slavery and her disabled son's challenges, Robinet began writing books about children's struggles and victories over physical and emotional difficulties. Her first book, *Jay and the Marigold*, describes an eight-year-old boy who, like her son, deals with cerebral palsy.

The author's second book, *Ride the Red Cycle*, portrays a disabled child seeking individuality and self-respect.

According to the biography on Robinet's Web site, she believes history gives perspective on life today. She also suggests that historians have deliberately changed or ignored the stories of African Americans.

To combat this, Robinet writes historical fiction, portraying amiable children and adults, with their needs and struggles, during pivotal times in American history.

Four of the author's books have received the Notable Social Studies Books for Young Children Award from the National Council for the Social Studies. *Children of the Fire* won an award in 1991 from the Friends of American Writers; *Washington City Is Burning* won the 1997 Carl Sandburg Award; and *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans* won the 1998 Midland Authors Award. The author received the Society of Midland Authors Award for Children's Literature in 1998. *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* won the 1999 Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award for the Year's Best Fiction, as well as the Kentucky Bluegrass Award for Grades 3-5 in 2000-2001.

In a telephone interview on February 1, 2001, Robinet expressed that her research of the War of 1812 created two books. The first book she called *Washington City Is Burning*.

Inspired by the Battle of New Orleans—the only battle won by the Americans—Robinet created the second book, *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans*. To complete her research, the author took several Louisiana swamp tours. A resourceful tour guide educated her about what humans could have eaten in the swamps and how they survived.

An active member of Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Robinet lives in Oak Park, Illinois, with her husband. They have four grandchildren.



## Setting

The novel starts with a breathtaking adventure. Andrew propels himself across wet tree roots in the Louisiana swamp to catch a hen. Pierre watches nervously. Pierre knows that the hens will provide them with eggs to eat once they return to Hotel de Jacques—the swampland hideaway named after its builder, their father. He also knows that Andrew is stealing. After an alligator bites Andrew's foot, Andrew captures three hens and makes it to safety. Through this fast-paced opening scene, Robinet efficiently propels readers into the novel.

Robinet establishes the swamp scenes immediately by using distinguishing wildlife and vegetation. Her scenes include owls, alligators, a swamp rooster and chickens, ducks, geese, and egrets, in addition to a poisonous cottonmouth snake, green lizards, and cave bats. The author also introduces an abundance of swamp vegetation: bald cypress trees; live oaks heavy with Spanish moss, ferns, bromeliads, and delicate white blossoms of ghost orchids; cypress shrubs; rope twine; and tall grasses winding among shallow waterways. Robinet constructs her story to subtly educate readers about swamp life. For example, she describes cat-o'-nine-tail roots as "filling, like rice or bread. When raw, they were crunchy; when cooked, they were chewy."

The author explains other foods in the twins' swamp diet, including raw eggs, snails, and frog's legs seasoned with wild garlic bulbs.

In addition, she warns of the dangers of poisonous plants, such as the water lettuce on Lettuce Lake of which "no animals eat the leaves." Her vivid descriptions let readers develop a more thorough idea of swamp life.

Along with information about living in the Louisiana swamp, Robinet presents the historical events of 1814. She introduces the American soldiers and the earthworks that they hid behind as they fired on the British.

She describes the soldiers' uniforms and weaponry. As the events unfold, Robinet references the booming of cannons from the American ships: the fourteen-gun Caroline and the twenty-two-gun Louisiana. She details the pirates' dress—rawhide trousers, peaked short-brimmed hats, white shirts, colorful sashes, scarves, and muddy boots—and lets readers hear the pirates' songs.

Robinet also talks about Grand Terre, the pirate's fortress island, present on old maps but missing in recent ones. A hurricane destroyed the island, according to her author's note at the novel's conclusion. This attention to historical detail provides credibility and enables readers to become familiar with history while reading the story.



## Social Sensitivity

Robinet approaches slavery vigorously and with genuineness. Her novel illustrates her desire to share what she calls America's concealed history. Through Pierre's viewpoint, Robinet educates readers about slavery, pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans.

She seizes the opportunity to educate readers about the miseries of slavery, saying things like "the Marquis also taught them their 'place' as slave boys. He kept them apart and often starved them for discipline."

She effectively highlights the conflicts inherent in slavery and demonstrates how it affected slaves.

Along with writing about the evils of slavery, Robinet also delicately tackles the issues of diversity and survival. As readers observe Andrew and Pierre overcoming obstacles, surviving, and maturing from their challenges, the virtues of courage, hope, and endurance emerge. Readers may realize, along with the twins, that diversity among people has its advantages. Pierre and Andrew make it to the end of the novel by relying on one twin's strength to balance the other twin's weakness.

## Literary Qualities

Robinet creates her writing style by employing the historical language native to slaves who lived in the United States at that time. This use of the vernacular language, combined with behavior and attitudes of the region, adds credibility to her novel, enabling readers to understand the dynamic elements between slave and master.

The author also uses flashbacks to educate readers about slavery. She informs readers of this important historical event by interrupting the chronological sequence of events to depict what happened to the twins while in slavery with the Marquis. This flashback technique provides the scenes that aid the readers in understanding how these experiences shaped the twins, and highlights for readers the issues of slavery.

Throughout the novel, Robinet employs simple and powerful imagery. Not only does she give readers a concrete sensation of the swamps and its wildlife, she also informs readers in a realistic way about the events that transpired during the Battle of New Orleans. Readers will develop an understanding of this historical time and how it influenced the lives of its people—soldiers, pirates, and slaves alike. By the end of the story, readers will have gained knowledge about the natural environment of Louisiana's swamps as well as many important historical events that occurred there in the early nineteenth century.





# Themes and Characters

Employing a third-person limited point of view, Robinet develops Pierre as the protagonist, focusing on his thoughts and feelings. Pierre, smart yet cautious, lacks self-confidence. He takes risks only after carefully weighing the options. Pierre also listens to and tries to follow his conscience.

For example, when Andrew steals from the pirates, Pierre objects. He frequently cautions Andrew about his actions, saying things like: "No, no white can be seen from the water. That's not safe." However, Pierre's cautious behavior has its advantages. When a poisonous cottonmouth snake slithers onto his back for warmth one night, Pierre "sweats out the cold darkness," keeping still until the snake glides off in the sun's morning warmth.

However, Andrew, a risk taker with a keen sense of direction, feels confident in his spontaneous choices. He enjoys scaring people and playing tricks. A clever boy, Andrew knows how to survive in a swampland and devises a way of travel by tying ropes in trees. He fishes, hunts, and harvests food, keeping a supply of cattail roots for them to eat. He even knows how to season the roots with wild onions and red bay leaves, and serves his brother boiled fish or frog legs with wild garlic bulbs.

While Pierre prefers to consider his options carefully, Andrew makes quick day-today plans.

Pierre realizes that he and Andrew think and behave in unique ways, even though they have the same looks. The author sets up this personality diversity in the beginning, using the conflict between the twins' personalities to heighten the story's presentation. For example, after Pierre cautions Andrew about a spontaneous choice, Andrew reaches over to push and kick Pierre, exclaiming: "You always stop me! Who do you think you are? My master?" By the story's resolution, Pierre realizes that neither he nor Andrew would have survived the swamp adventures alone, admitting, "Differences were good. Together they made a great team."

The author uses this diversity as an opportunity to clearly develop each character and to create the conflict that develops the themes. She presents these key issues for young people: maturation and self-worth, death, courage, trust, and intimacy.

As Pierre leads readers through the adventures, his confidence blooms. He forms a sense of direction, takes the lead when appropriate, and learns that he can survive on his own. He feels good when he knows something before Andrew. Pierre learns to make quick survival plans and he accomplishes difficult tasks. His character exemplifies the theme of maturation and self-worth.

Jacques, the twins' father, introduces the universal theme of death. The twins barely know Jacques due to their lives of slavery.



One night, Jacques steals them from the Marquis Francois Jean Claude De Ville, their master. Through a well thought-out plan, Jacques gets them to the swampland where he has built the Hotel de Jacques.

Although the twins do not get to know Jacques, he provides for their safety. When they open the sea chest of jewels belonging to Black Jack the Pirate, they see Jacques' signature and realize that their father chose the life of a pirate. When they overhear the pirates discussing Black Jack's death, they experience sadness, fear, and anger. Understanding that they must go on in life, the twins also realize that their father loved them enough to build "a hiding place to ensure their freedom." Through his death, they feel liberated.

The author introduces the universal themes of trust and intimacy along with courage.

These themes emerge not only on an individual level but also on a community level.

On an individual level, Pierre realizes that the sadness he sees in Andrew's eyes will not be expressed verbally to him. While slaves, Pierre had established a private language of signals for himself and Andrew.

The whistles emulated sounds of nature: tree frogs chirping or birds calling. At first, the whistles arranged stolen moments at midnight. Now, they help them survive.

Pierre yearns for intimacy with Andrew far deeper than their private language. He feels sadness "that they couldn't talk to each other more."

As Andrew and Pierre discuss their experiences with the Marquis, they realize how the Marquis used deceit to put them against each other. The Marquis had kept them apart and starved them for discipline.

The twins make a pact to not let the Marquis's tactics prevail. The bridge to personal trust begins to form. The boys mature and find the courage and trust to share intimate feelings.

Unfortunately, learning whom the twins can trust in the community becomes difficult. For example, Pierre sees a priest and automatically assumes that he is trustworthy. However, when Pierre overhears the priest thank a man for offering part of the proceeds from Andrew's capture to the church, his trust evaporates. But later, when the priest sees the boys during an escape, he does try to conceal them. He even negotiates with Pirate LaFitte and General Jackson to purchase the freedom of Isabel, Bella, and up to fifteen slaves. The priest arranges for the freed family to live on Grand Terre.

Eventually, Pierre realizes that he can trust the brown-skinned priest, and the priest must trust them for hidden inside his robe— known only to the twins—is the priest's own dark skin.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Andrew. What is he like? Does he mature during the novel?
2. Discuss how Robinet uses flashbacks to introduce slavery to her readers.
3. How does the author inform readers about historical events? Is she effective?
4. Using the details in the novel, create a description of pirates, including what they wore, what they ate, and how they lived. Pirates are presented as superstitious. How does the author portray this?
5. Characterize Pierre. What is he like? How does he mature during the novel?
6. Describe Jacques. How does his fatherly love present itself in the novel? What is the significance of his death?
7. The author employs vivid swamp descriptions to create the mood of the novel. Write down the descriptions, making note of the wildlife and vegetation, and share what you learned about the swamp.
8. Who is Evil Eye? What role does he play? 9. Slavery is a key theme. Describe the information that the author provides about slavery. What benefits, if any, did slavery provide for the slave? What did Andrew miss about slavery?
10. Describe the Marquis Francois Jean Claude de Ville. What are his attitudes and beliefs? How does he "make" slaves?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research pirates in 1814. Why did people choose to become pirates? What did a pirate do for livelihood? Where did they live and travel? Were all pirates "bad"? What happened to pirates?

2. Learn about the Mississippi River limestone caves. How did they form? Who used them and why? Do they still exist today?

3. Using the descriptions in the novel, illustrate the Hotel de Jacques, the twins' swampland hideaway. Use whatever medium (i.e., paint, chalk, pencil, etc.)

you desire to put Robinet's descriptions of the place to life.

4. Research swamps in Louisiana. Could humans find edible food there? How?

What foods are poisonous? How would someone identify poisonous foods?

5. Characterize the wildlife and vegetation in the Louisiana swamps as well as the year-round temperatures. How would these things affect life in the swamps in 1814?

6. What is a pirogue? Describe its history and how a pirogue is made. Who used them and why? What material did they use to construct them? How was it propelled? Why did users prefer them?

Draw a pirogue or bring in pictures.

7. What caused the War of 1812? Research the many battles fought during the war.

What caused the battles and what did they accomplish, if anything?

8. Describe the Battle of New Orleans of the War of 1812. In addition to General Jackson's regular United States Army units, who else did he count on to help him fight this battle? What effect did it have?

9. What populations made their homes in New Orleans in 1814? Why?

10. The author introduces the theme of forming intimacy and trust. How can someone build intimacy and trust with a baby, a child, an adult? Look into what experts claim fortifies intimacy and trust and what deteriorates it?

11. Research slavery in the United States.

How and when did it start and end?



Explore the gripping themes of nineteenth-century slavery, including employment, fight and flight, family connections, interaction with masters, and spiritual beliefs.

## For Further Reference

"Harriette Gillem Robinet." Telephone interview with Michelle Prebilib, freelance writer, February 1, 2001.

"Robinet, Harriette Gillem." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 42*. Detroit: Gale, 1994. Offers a brief biography of Robinet's life and commentary on some of her work.

Weisman, Kay. Review of *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans*.

Booklist (November 15, 1997): 561. In her review, Weisman praises the historical novel.

## Related Titles

Readers interested in historical fiction about major events may enjoy the following titles. *The American Revolution*, written by Joann Grote, features the story of thirteen-year-old Stephen Lankford and his older brother William, as they get involved in the "Sons of Liberty" revolutionary group in Boston in 1773. For more information about Africans who fought their oppressors, consider Suzanne Jurmain's *Freedom's Sons: The True Story of the Amistad Mutiny*.

When most black Americans had no legal rights, a group of captive Africans challenged the United States Government before the Supreme Court. In 1839, the fiftythree Africans aboard the slave ship *Amistad* broke out of their chains and took over the ship. Former president John Quincy Adams came out of retirement to argue the Supreme Court case that ultimately set the imprisoned Africans free. *Let My People Go: African Americans 1804-1860*, written by Deborah Gray White and Earl Lewis, explores slavery of men, women, and children in white homes and plantations. It shows how slaves created communities under bondage, how they fought back, and how they contributed to the system's decline.

## Related Web Sites

Harriette Gillem Robinet Web Page <http://www.hgrobinet.com/index.html>.

March 28, 2001. This website provides a brief biography of Robinet and lists her children's books to date, providing jacket art for each work.





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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996