

A Voice from the Border Short Guide

A Voice from the Border by Pamela Smith Hill

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Overview

A Voice from, the Border illustrates the growing friendship and understanding between a fifteen-year-old girl and her father's fifteen-year-old slave while the American Civil War is being fought a short distance from their home. Margaret Reeves O'Neill and Hector, her father's slave, are the protagonists. However Margaret Reeves O'Neill is the narrator. During a short four months, Reeves' notes reveal her thoughts about slavery and how she matures as she gains insight into the lives of those around her.

Both young people learn to face the complex events of the war, death, and slavery.

By the story's conclusion, Reeves and Hector have grown toward making mature decisions and have learned to value each other as friends.

About the Author

Award-winning author Pamela Smith Hill's roots are in Springfield, Missouri, the setting of this young adult novel.

Hill was born in 1954 in Springfield, Missouri. Her father is a retired minister and painter and her mother, Carolyn Clark Hill, is a homemaker. Hill says that she grew up on Bible Stories and old television Westerns.

Perhaps that is why she enjoys writing about the past. Also she admired the writing of Louisa May Alcott and particularly enjoyed Jo March's character in Alcott's novel *Little Women*. Hill says that Jo was a tomboy and longed to be a writer like she did. During Hill's college years, she served as editor of the student newspaper, the *Southwest Standard* at Southwest Missouri State University, and as a newspaper staff writer for the *Springfield Leader and Press*.

Hill's newspaper career in Springfield covered all facets of writing community life: weddings, Girl Scout Jamborees, Water Piks, Navajo rugs, and basketball shoes.

That background in newspaper writing led her to careers in Kansas, Colorado, and Oregon. In 1994 she left the news industry and began a new career, writing novels. In 1996 Hill's first novel, *Ghost Horses*, was published, chosen as a Junior Literary Guild Selection, and won the Heartland Regional Emmy. This Western-based story's protagonist is sixteen-year-old Tabitha Fortune, the daughter of a preacher who believes that a woman should serve only her husband and God. When an expedition comes to the area to find dinosaur bones, Tabitha disguises herself as a boy so that she can participate.

She fools her father and the leader of the dig, Professor Parker.

Hill's second novel, *A Voice from the Border*, is a historical fiction published in 1998.

In 1999 this novel was nominated for the Michael Shaara award for excellence in Civil War fiction, was named a Best Children's Book of the Year by Banks Street College, and was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Presently Hill is the director of the professional writing program at Washington State University, where she teaches writing classes and continues writing young adult fiction. Hill and her husband live in Portland, Oregon, with their retrievers. Their daughter is a student of mathematics at Bryn Mawr College.

Setting

The novel's content is dependent on its historical setting. Fifteen-year-old Margaret Reeves O'Neill records, from July 14th to October 30, 1861, her thoughts about the American Civil War being fought in Springfield, Missouri, a Border state. During this short time Reeves' attitude towards life and her parents' slaves changes, and she develops a deeper more mature understanding and sympathy for those around her.

The novel is set in and around the O'Neills' home, which is located within sight of the city square in Springfield, Missouri, and not far from the sounds of the guns and cannons in the battlefield. From this setting Margaret Reeves O'Neill and Hector observe the action happening around the city square and its bordering streets, Richmond and Saint Louis. Through this compelling story, both the protagonists, Reeves and Hector, a family slave, grow in their understanding about each other, slavery, and friendship.

In order to create a more realistic setting, Hill mentions battles and landmarks such as the Battle of Bull Run, a memorable Civil War battle, and two less famous battles that occur near Cowskin Prairie, in McDonald County, and in Wilson's Creek, where dead soldiers' bodies were dumped and covered with dirt. Other landmarks cited are Booneville Hill, Telegraphy Hill, and Bessie's Branch, located near the O'Neills' home.

Creating an even more realistic novel, Hill cites some of the historical Unionist figures of that era: President Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Army Major General John C. Fremont, U.S. Army Acting General J. M. Schofield. From the Secessionists, she includes General Nathaniel Lyon, General Sterling Price, and Claiborne Davis, governor of the Border state of Missouri.

Hill also mentions two regional newspapers, the Cincinnati Commercial and Springfield Journal; two popular literary magazines, The Atlantic Monthly, published by James Russell Lowell, and The Wilder Review; and a new type of photograph, the carte-de-vista.

Like most wealthy educated families in the 1800s, Gaylan and Vasti send their daughter Reeves to the Fayetteville Ladies Institute, a school where young ladies are educated and taught correct manners. Gaylan, an educated man, encourages Reeves to create a portfolio of writing, which he critiques. After one critique, he encourages Reeves to continue writing, but to write in her own voice.

Since Gaylan's study contains a large library, Reeves has a large selection of books to read. Often Gaylan chooses reading material for her from the classics, such as Shakespeare's plays, and from the more modern writers, including Adam Bede's three volume novel, plus Melville, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Romantic Poets, and Reeves' favorite poet, Keats.



In order to make the characters more realistic; Hill uses language typical of that area and time. Some persons like the Grimes and Jenkins families speak substandard English, and people use both folk sayings and colloquialisms. An example is when someone refers to the villainous Tiger-Eye Brown as a "fox in sheep's clothing." Another time a character states that "I wouldn't trust her (Tiger-Eye) as far as I could throw her."

When the O'Neill's arrive at a church gathering without Gaylan, and Mr. Jenkins questions Mrs. O'Neill about his whereabouts, he turns to a Union officer and states, "Best send some of your men back to town.

O'Neill's secesh fer sure."

Hill also includes the customs and dress of the 1800s in her novel. She shows how manners and speech patterns show a person's breeding, and how the way a person dressed was important. She also shows how, during the 1800s, persons took great care to be gracious and hospitable on all occasions but especially when entertaining in their home.

The ladies and gentlemen felt that dress was extremely important. For example, men, women, and young persons were expected to dress rather formally for social gatherings. Ladies might dress in fine water silks or sprigged cotton, and hoop skirts, and young girls wore colorful ribbons in their hair. When a death occurred in a family, they wore black for two years as a sign of mourning for their loved one.

Generally gentlemen dressed in suits and wore hats. Men politely tipped these hats to ladies and removed their hats when entering a home or a building. Both men and women wore riding habits when showing their fine horses. Designated days were set aside for calling on one's friends during their set-aside "at home" visiting hours.

When ladies and young girls visited, they wore their very best dresses and if they traveled by a coach or a buggy, a lady wore a protective duster over her dress in order to arrive "as fresh as a daisy" at her destination. Furthermore, ladies and their daughters always wore a hat and gloves and carried a parasol to protect their delicate complexion from the sun's damaging rays.

Even when traveling short distances, Vashti's servant, Juneau, brought a carpetbag equipped with powder, fragrant perfumes, and rose water to "freshen" a lady's appearance. Juneau also carried a fan that smelled of her favorite verbena sachet.

When going on a picnic or to a community gathering, people took baskets filled with fried chicken, baked ham, sweet corn, yams; burnt sugar cakes; and blackberry pies. Water and lemonade completed their menu.

During this era women often gathered in small groups to sew, knit, or embroider. In one scene the camaraderie between the O'Neill, Phelps, and Campbell families is illustrated as they gather to knit socks for the soldiers in either the Union or the Confederate armies, and they discuss cautiously the information they have heard about the war.



Hill also mentions Reeves' favorite haunts in and around her home. One of her favorite spots of retreat is in her father's study, which is filled with both classic and current books. Like her daddy, Reeves seeks solitude, and so when Gaylan leaves Springfield to join the Secessionists, his study becomes her special place of escape, perhaps because in this place Reeves feels closer to her father. Other special retreats are the stables and Bessie's Creek, where Reeves and Hector sometimes go and read the poetry of Keats aloud to each other.

In order to add more realism to the setting, several area crops are mentioned: blackberries, sweet white field corn, yams, potatoes, apples, and tobacco to mention a few.



Social Sensitivity

The author illustrates a closeness and sensitivity to the world created in her novel.

Hill does not judge her characters' choices about which side they choose to join in the war, and neither do most of her characters, each other's choices, nor do the characters degrade each other for using substandard language. Finally, except for Mrs. Brown, the major characters do not exhibit bigoted behavior. Hill's message is one of tolerance and respect for one another.

In most cases the characters respect and live harmoniously with one another. This harmony and respect shows through the relationships between the O'Neills, Campbells, and Phelps. Even though the O'Neills and the Campbells are for secession from the United States and the Phelps are Unionists, these families remain close friends. The ladies continue including one another at social gatherings and gather to knit socks for both Union and Secessionist soldiers; however, by mutual agreement personal politics are not discussed.

The first dissension between the townspeople occurs when their clergyman the Rev. Mr. Casey invites them to a picnic.

When the O'Neills arrive, they discover that they have been duped. A bank of Union soldiers encircles the church, and some of the O'Neills' friends stand with hands tied behind them. The people were asked to declare their loyalty to the Union. Those who did not were separated from the rest and their hands tied behind them. At this meeting, the little Grimes' girl whispers that the Union is going to confiscate the Secessionist's property.

One major character, Mrs. Horatio Brown, the wife of Colonel Brown, truly exhibits her bias toward the Secessionists. The O'Neills' home is confiscated as a residence for the Browns. Mrs. Brown, nicknamed Tiger-Eye, sweeps into the O'Neills' home as though it were her own.

Quickly she charms Lucy, but the other members of the family are not taken in so rapidly. Later, the reader discovers that Mrs. Brown is spying on them and sending bigoted articles about their family to the Cincinnati Chronicle.

Hill shows her willingness to satirize people with highly inflated opinions of themselves through Mrs. Brown and other characters. One is Mr. Jenkins, a smelly, tobacco-spitting crude man, who acts superior to the O'Neills when he questions them about Gaylan's absence. His arrogance is obvious when he tries to jump into their carriage but is rebuffed by Juneau.

The O'Neill family shows respect and sensitivity toward their slaves as persons.



Mr. O'Neill is opposed to enslaving people and makes a new will that frees them regardless of the war's outcome.

Although Vasti opposes Gaylan's new will to free their slaves, she is a thoughtful owner who respects them. For instance, Juneau was a wedding gift from Vashti's father, but the two women grew up together at Vashti's home. They have many memories in common, one of which Juneau shares with Lucy and Reeves. Mrs. O'Neill trusts Juneau, and they work harmoniously together around the O'Neills' home.

Hill is sensitive toward the feelings and choices that both her freed and slave characters make. And even when some slaves choose to leave the O'Neills after being set free, Hill does not try to sway the reader's opinions about these characters' choices.

Throughout the story, these families show a sense of community and continuing friendship.

Literary Qualities

Hill uses a number of literary techniques in the novel: foreshadowing, flashback, similes, and dialect to add flavor to this story. Telling the story through the voice of the main character, Margaret Reeves O'Neill, enriches the reader's enjoyment of the novel.

Hill incorporated similes to aid readers in visualizing characters and their emotions and actions. For instance when Mr. Phelps informs the slaves that Gaylan's will does not free them until the war's end, "Their faces were as blank as pages in an empty ledger." More examples are when Mrs. Campbell declares that "Tiger-Eye Brown is a scourge sent from the Devil himself," when one of Mrs. Brown's news articles describes the O'Neill women as "self-satisfied slave-holding women, with the trappings of culture and the sensibilities of scullery maids," and when Mrs. Brown says, "the workings of this family are a tangled web they have woven that is called Slavery."

Once, Mrs. Brown refers to Gaylan's writing as amateur. Reeves silently feels "a cold wave of contempt spread through my veins like a bitter tonic." Another time Reeves says, "My face went as hot as a cook stove; my arms as limp as overripe rhubarb."

Besides using similes, Hill has characters using substandard English, the manner in which people from that area and that time spoke. One example is shown in Mrs. Grimes' character. When the Union questions her about her loyalty, Mrs. Grimes answers, "You bet I'm secesh. And my whole family is too. I won't take no oath. And you cain't make me."

Finally, using Reeves as a narrator is one of the strongest techniques that Hill employs. The story told from Reeves' point of view quickly involves the reader in the events happening to her and how she deals with them.

At the beginning of this novel, Reeves is protected, naive, and immature. However as the story evolves, the reader watches Reeves maturing into a sensitive, thoughtful young woman. By viewing events through Reeves' eyes, the reader learns how the war affects her relationship with her father, with Juneau, with Percival, and her friendship with Hector.



Themes and Characters

Although this novel has numerous characters, Margaret Reeves O'Neill, a skinny, intelligent, fifteen-year-old is the major protagonist and narrator. During a short four months, Reeves records her impressions about the American Civil War's impact on her family, their slaves, and their neighbors. Another major character is Hector, the handsome, well-spoken, and loyal fifteen-year-old son of Juneau. Gradually Hector's and Reeves' relationship changes from that of slave and master to an understanding and acceptance of each other as friends.

Their friendship provides a major theme in this novel, in addition to themes of slavery, conflict, deceit, war, and finally their maturation.

The opening scene quickly places the reader amidst Reeves' parents discussing their conflicting views about slavery. Vashti, her mother, questions Gaylan's new will that will free their slaves, no matter which side wins the war. Vashti declares that the slaves will not be freed. Throughout the novel, Vashti never moves from that stance.

Then she states that it is bad luck to talk about one's own death, thus foreshadowing Gaylan's death.

Another instance illustrating the conflict theme is when the family innocently attends a church picnic, only to discover that Unionist members of the community have invited the townspeople to take an oath of allegiance to the Union. Mrs. O'Neill and others firmly refuse to take such an oath.

Then both the Jenkins and Grimes men call them names and accuse Gaylan of being a coward.

An internal conflict occurs when Reeves is attracted to a young handsome Union officer, Lieutenant Percival Wilder. At first Reeves coyly resists his flirtatious attention. Even though she is flattered, Reeves suffers from the internal conflict she feels about admiring this Unionist. Later Reeves admits to herself that she likes Percival as a person, thus resolving this conflict.

As the war continues, Reeves remembers Gaylan's thoughts that he expressed to her about slavery; his belief that they should be freed. Remembering her father's stand, Reeves begins to wonder how Juneau, Hector, Hiram, and Bruno, feel about being enslaved by her family.

The theme of death or loss touches both Reeves and Hector, however in different ways. Both young people grieve the loss of their fathers. When Reeves discovers her mother lying across the body of her dead father, she flees to the stables in order to grieve alone. Although Hector's father is not killed, he experiences a similar loss because his father deserted his family in order to fight with the rebellious and destructive Kansas jayhawkers.



Later in the novel, Lancelot Wilder, Lieutenant Percival Wilder's brother, brings Reeves the news that Percival has died in a battle. She is saddened and recalls searching the wagons filled with dead men, hoping not to see Percival among them. Besides the deaths of Gaylan and Percival, Hill creates a realistic and horrible scene showing death wagons filled with dead bloating bodies that are driven through the Springfield streets to a disposal spot. In one instance dead soldiers' bodies are simply dumped by a creek and covered with dirt.

At the beginning of the novel Reeves takes the family slaves for granted, even though Gaylan expresses his desire to grant them their freedom. However, as the plot progresses, Reeves' attitude toward the slaves becomes more thoughtful and she realizes that they are good, loyal persons.

Numerous things lead Reeves to a different attitude toward the servants. First, Reeves and Hector have similar interests.

Both enjoy and care for Gaylan's fine stable of plantation pacers, and it is not unusual for Reeves and Hector to care for their horses together. In order to save the O'Neills' best horses from being conscripted by the Union Army, Hector hides some of their best riding stock and relocates them at the O'Neills' dairy barn some distance away from their home. Another basis for Hector's and Reeves' friendship is their enjoyment of their favorite poet, Keats. Often Reeves and Hector, go to the stable or to Gaylan's favorite yellow willow tree and read Keats aloud to each other. When he briefly returns from following the jayhawkers, Hector gives Reeves her precious notebook that she had thrown into Gaylan's open grave.

Reeves asks where he found it, and Hector reminds her that he helped dig the grave.

Finally Reeves recognizes Hector as a true and thoughtful friend.

Another important character in this novel is Juneau, Vashti's slave, a wedding gift from her father. This character is an excellent example of stoic loyalty. Juneau is always at Vashti's beck and call. Furthermore, Juneau treats the members of the family with respect. Still, Reeves wonders if she really likes them, but knows that Gaylan is Juneau's favorite.

Juneau is always responsible for packing Vashti's carpetbag filled with make-up, preparing the picnic basket, helping dress Lucy, and carrying her fan scented with verbena and rose water to freshen their eyes. Even when she is disappointed about the changes made in Gaylan's will, she remains steadfast. Only when Hector runs away does Juneau's "stiff upper lip" veneer crack, and she takes to her bed. Hector briefly returns to tell Reeves where Titain and Trooper are, then leaves again. Reeves asks Juneau why she did not go with him. For a while they are silent, then Juneau says, "It's time I cut the apron strings, Miz Reeves. I used to tell your mama that she was like the ivy out front, chokin' out the roses. She was smotherin' you girls. All the while, I was that ivy myself." Even when the slaves are free, Juneau faithfully remains to serve the O'Neill family.



Later, Hector leaves home to join a rebellious group of jayhawkers, in the hopes that he and his father will be reunited. When Juneau discovers that Hector has gone, she goes into a deep depression. Rather than leave her alone in the O'Neill house, Reeves stays behind and patiently takes care of Juneau until she recovers. Through these experiences, Reeves gains the understanding that the servants are human beings with the same needs and feelings she has.

A theme of deceit develops when the Union Army confiscates the O'Neill home for the residence of Colonel and Mrs. Horatio Brown. Mrs. Brown, better known as TigerEye, is an arrogant, self-centered, two-faced woman and a villain. She claims to be a published poet and writer. Immediately she wants access to Gaylan's study for her books and writing. However, Vashti diplomatically chooses Reeves' room for her instead. Then, Mrs. Brown makes friends with young innocent Lucy in order to use her to gain information about the family. TigerEye spies on the O'Neill family and sends biased written articles about them to the Cincinnati Chronicle. Once, Reeves follows Mrs. Brown to the local telegraph office and reads the copy being sent to the news office.

After she reads Brown's unkind remarks about her family, Reeves is furious. Another time, Lucy shares Reeves' precious portfolio with Brown, who then copies Reeves' work and sends it to the Atlantic Monthly as her own work.

When Lancelot Wilder, the brother of Percival, appears, he recognizes Mrs. Brown and warns Reeves about her. Later Lancelot shows Reeves the Atlantic Monthly article with Mrs. Brown's byline, and she recognizes her story. Mrs. Brown's theft is exposed. Shortly after this, Colonel Brown is killed, and Mrs. Brown leaves the scene to everyone's relief.

Little by little, Reeves faces the trauma and destructive upheaval in and around her home. By the end of the novel she develops a sensitive understanding about friendship and loyalty toward those around her.



Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Margaret Reeves O'Neill's family and her life as a teenager during the American Civil War.
2. Discuss Reeves' relationship with her father, and how it differs from her relationship with her mother and sister.
3. Discuss who Mrs. Miranda Brown is and what her relationship is to Reeves and the rest of the family.
4. Discuss the different ways Vashti and Gaylan O'Neill view slavery. Why did Gaylan choose to fight with the Secessionists?
5. How important is the setting in this story? What would change if the story were set in a Union state rather than in a Border state?
6. What is the significance of the title *A Voice from the Border!* Who are some of the main characters outside of the O'Neill family?
7. Discuss one of the following themes in this novel: friendship, maturation, slave/master, and death.
8. How does the author use these techniques to enhance the novel: foreshadowing, simile, and flashback?
9. Locate examples and discuss the author's use of substandard English and colloquialism.
10. Discuss Reeves' relationship with Perdval Wilde and with his brother, Lancelot Wilde. How important are these relationships to the story?
11. Who is Hector and what is his role in the novel? Discuss his attitude toward being a slave.
12. Who is Juneau and what is her role in the O'Neill home? Discuss her attitude toward slavery.
13. Explain who the jayhawkers were in the American Civil War and why Hector was so interested in them?
14. Discuss some of the social customs of the 1800s.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How realistic is life portrayed in this border town during the Civil War? What are some of the important aspects of this community?
2. Explain some of the causes of the American Civil War. Was the question of slavery the only reason for this war?
3. Who were the German immigrants, and why were they important in this novel?
4. Research and write a paper on one of the following characters and their roles in the American Civil War: Abraham Lincoln, General Caliborne Jackson, General Sterling Price.

For Further Reference

Bradburn, Frances. Review of Ghost Horses.

Booklist (April 15, 1996): 1434. Bradburn felt that Hill's novel would be popular among readers who enjoyed historical fiction.

Bush, Elizabeth. Review of Ghost Horses.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (September 1996): 15. Bush found the heroine unique and likeable in Hill's first novel.

Larson, Jeanette. Review of Ghost Horses.

School Library Journal (March 1996): 196.

Larson offered a negative review of Ghost Horses.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Hill has written only one other novel, *Ghost Horses*, published in 1996. This is a story of sixteen-year-old Tabitha Fortune, the daughter of a preacher who believes that a woman should serve her husband and God. When a paleontological expedition comes in the area to find dinosaur bones, Tabitha wants to join it, so she disguises herself as a boy to fool her father and the equally sexist Professor Parker, the leader of the excavation. Tabitha reveals herself at the end of the novel, only to join another excavation group, this time headed by a woman.

Some other historical fiction titles that might appeal to young adults are Harold Keith's *Rifles for Watie*, Gloria Houston's *Mountain Valor*, Ann Rinaldi's *In My Father's House*, and Janet Lunn's *The Root Cellar*.

Keith's novel is about the Civil War, as is Houston's *Mountain Valor*. The latter title is about teenager Valor who fights to defend her North Carolina farm while her father and brothers are away fighting in the Civil War. Rinaldi's *In My Father's House* tells the story of two sisters who experience two types of war, one emotionally inside their home and the other outside of their home in the form of the Civil War. The last novel, Lunn's *The Root Cellar*, involves both the present and the past. Twelve-year-old Rose is orphaned and sent to live with relatives on a Canadian farm. She discovers and befriends people in the root cellar who lived on the farm more than a century ago.



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