

Who Comes with Cannons? Short Guide

Who Comes with Cannons? by Patricia Beatty

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Overview

Tabitha Ruth (Truth for short) Hopkins has been sent from Indiana by her father to live with her mother's relatives in North Carolina. Her mother died when she was an infant, and her Who Comes with Cannons?

father will soon die from tuberculosis.

She is called a "kettle Cousin" because she is poor. According to her cousin Robert, kettle cousins are supposed to "lick the pot when the rest of us get done with our food." At first she does not know it, but she has been sent to people who are part of the Underground Railroad—that is, they are part of an organization that helps escaped slaves flee to the north. Some slaves such as Squire take up residence in Northern states, while others continue to Canada where they are much less likely to be forced to return to a slave state.

The Civil War is about to begin, and Truth is on a farm in a slave state, North Carolina. As the story unfolds, she becomes involved in the Underground Railroad, and later in a desperate attempt to save her cousin Robert from a Union prison. This exciting tale is given depth by the many details Beatty provides about life in North Carolina in Truth's time. The land and its people are made to seem real by these details, making Truth's adventures all the more realistic, and therefore even more suspenseful and harrowing.

About the Author

Patricia Robbins Beatty was born on August 26, 1922, in Portland, Oregon, to Walter M. and Jesse (nee Miller) Robbins. Her father was an officer in the Coast Guard and his career required his family to move often. As a child, Beatty did a great deal of reading. She seems to have been an introspective child; she was hospitalized for five months when she was ten years old, and during that time she read constantly, which seems to have enhanced her thoughtful nature. Her family returned to Portland in 1935, and Beatty spent her young adult years there, attending both junior high school and high school.

Beatty was not strictly a bookworm in those years. She took up horseback riding, becoming knowledgeable about caring for horses. Horses figure in several of her books. Her love of learning was probably the reason she decided in high school that she wanted to become a teacher. After high school, she attended Reed College, where she received her B.A. in 1944. For a while, her interest in the natural world made her contemplate getting a degree in marine biology, but she eventually earned her degree in literature and history. While at Reed College, she was an athlete, participating in fencing.

She met John Beatty while she was in college. After he left the U.S. Army, they were married on September 14, 1950. He became a history professor in California, and they had a daughter Ann Alexandra. From 1947 to 1950, she had been a high school teacher in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. From 1952 to 1953, she worked for Dupont corporation as a technical librarian, then was a librarian in Riverside, California from 1953 to 1956. She did not return to teaching until the late 1960s, when she began teaching courses on creative writing for UCLA.

According to her own recollection, her work as a librarian was dull, and she took up writing to relieve her boredom. The publication of *Indian Canoemaker* in 1960 began her career as a writer of books for young people.

She had lived among Native Americans for much of her childhood because her father was often stationed on Western reservations. She drew on her knowledge of Native American customs for the book; the book also reveals her characteristic penchant for thorough research into the history and backgrounds of her subjects. With the publication of *Bonanza Girl* in 1962, Beatty became a full-time writer. In about 1962, she found herself consulting her husband, a professor of history, about details for a book she was working on. This led to their collaboration on *At the Seven Stars*. He specialized in the history of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, and their several collaborations usually were focused sometime in those eras. Patricia Beatty became very knowledgeable about American history, so when she was not collaborating with her husband, she was writing books about America on her own.

John Beatty died in 1975. Patricia Beatty later married an economics professor, Carl G. Uhr, on July 31, 1977. Beatty remained a very productive writer, with her books



published during the 1980s earning much praise from book reviewers. Her last few years saw her writing some of the best books of her career. She died of lung cancer on July 9, 1991, in Riverside, California.

Beatty recollected with some bitterness how she was treated by some people when she began publishing books. Friends, if such they were, and neighbors gave her a hard time about writing and thereby supposedly neglecting her duties as a mother. This made Beatty a feminist, and the fires for feminism still burned hotly in her to the end of her life. She chose to create strong young women in most of her novels; she wanted to portray young adults coping with hard times and challenging situations. This gives her novels an utterly uncondescending quality because Beatty seems to have been at all times conscious of what young people can accomplish.

Beatty received several awards for her work, including the Scott O'Dell Award for Charley Skedaddle (1987), given to an outstanding novel that focuses on an aspect of American history. Among her other awards are the Commonwealth Club of California Medal in 1965 for *Campion Towers* and the Southern California Council on Children's and Young People's Literature Medal in 1983 for *Jonathan Down Under*. *A Donkey for the King* was named a 1966 Horn Book honor book; *Red Rock over the River* was named a 1973 Golden Kite Award honor book by the Society of Children's Book Writers; *Wait for Me, Watch for Me, Eula Bee* was named a 1978 honor book by the Western Writers of America; *Lupita Manana* was named a Jane Addams Children's Book Award honor book.



Setting

Most of the action takes place on or near a farm in North Carolina. The soil is rocky but fertile; Truth's uncle Matthew Bardwell has piled up some of the stones in a corner of his property.

In good times, the family has plenty of good food to eat, even if some of it, such as cornbread dipped in molasses for breakfast, may seem unusual to modern Americans. After the Civil War begins, times become hard. Matthew Bardwell's sons are forced into the Confederate Army, and their father must try to raise and harvest crops on his own, which he has trouble doing because he is aging. Various soldiers also steal food from the Bardwell's, taking most of their meat.

Near the farm is a town with a school and a Quaker meeting hall.

Truth attends the school until her teacher is conscripted and forced to leave. She and her friend Lydia then run the school the best they can. The three girl Quakers—Truth, Lydia, and Martha—are outsiders when they are students at the school because of their religious faith and their opposition to slavery—an opposition Martha is willing to shout to just about anybody.

Also near the farm is the farm of the Coxey's, where Truth goes to help a mother with a newborn child. Part of the battle of Bentonville is fought on the Coxey's land, leaving behind a dreadful sight of a land denuded of trees, with the ground churned into mud, and with dead soldiers of both sides scattered about.

Washington, D.C. plays a brief role in the novel. Truth is disappointed by its small size, with big government buildings set far apart from each other.

Even Greensboro, North Carolina is a bigger town. In New York City, Matthew Bardwell is attacked and badly hurt by people who hate Quakers.

There, he and Truth are helped by Squire and his wife Liley.



Social Sensitivity

Although the focus of *Who Comes with Cannons?* is on a girl in North Carolina in the 1860s, it touches on issues that are still sore points with many people. Many people in Truth's day regarded refusal to serve in America's military to be unpatriotic. Today, many people still have that attitude and resent anyone who refuses to serve because of his or her religious beliefs or conscience. The reasoning usually is that those who benefit from America's way of life should be prepared to fight to protect it. This is a nettlesome subject that can bring out high passions from people on either side of the disagreement. In *Who Comes with Cannons?*

Beatty presents people who, because of *Who Comes with Cannons?*

religious faith and conscience, refuse to bear arms to kill other people. The portrait is sympathetic, with the Quakers' involvement in the Underground Railroad suggesting that they had plenty of courage and that they fought slavery in their own, nonviolent way. In this novel, Beatty does not advocate either side of the argument, leaving answers to some of the moral questions to her readers.

Beatty points out in her notes that women were important figures in Quaker religious practices and that Quakers advocated the education of women as well as men. At least one of the elders in the book is a woman. Sensitive as most modern readers are to matters of sexual equality, Beatty does not have to press the point very hard to get readers to notice the respect accorded girls' minds and spirituality by the Quakers. Historically, America's Quakers have always regarded education for all, regardless of race and gender, as very important. Even so, men and women have different chores and duties in Truth's new home, with the women's work being well described.

Women are also treated by some characters as weaker than men, although the courage of Truth and her aunt is equal to that of any of the men. Truth is no shrinking violet but is, instead, a strong minded, determined young woman whose intellectual abilities attract her schoolteacher to her and make her a good prospect to become a teacher herself. She is tough and used to hard work. As extraordinary as some of her adventures are, her characterization makes her heroics plausible.

Quaker religious practices are described in *Who Comes with Cannons?*

Readers who are themselves Quakers might find the descriptions dull and repetitive. For other readers, the descriptions will be their first encounter with Quaker religious practices, making the descriptions important for their understanding of the characters' motivations. Beatty never presents the Quakers or their religion as quaint or odd; instead, she presents the faith of Quakers forthrightly, showing its great importance to people such as Truth, her relatives, and her friends. Teachers using this novel in class should be prepared to answer questions about how Quakers practice their faith.

Literary Qualities

Patricia Beatty died while at the height of her powers. *Who Comes with Cannons?* is a beautifully written book that is a model of historical fiction for young adults. The narrative's pace is even throughout, with excitement on nearly every page. Her characterizations are deft. The details of life in the 1860s are seamlessly woven into the events of the novel. This means that readers can experience a real world, different from their own but peopled with characters who seem fully human.

Part of the fun of a good historical novel is in experiencing what it would have been like to live in a particular time and place. Beatty's carefully created background of facts make experiencing Truth's time easy and fun.



Themes and Characters

Truth is unhappy about being sent to North Carolina to live with her mother's relatives instead of going to California with her father, whom she loves.

She knows her father thinks that he is going to die from his tuberculosis and that he has sent her to North Carolina so that she will have someone to care for her after he is gone. He does, indeed, die during the book.

Truth is a first-rate heroine; aided by her faith in God, she bears up under the painful circumstances of her life.

One of the first things she hears when at her new home is that she is a "kettle cousin"—fit only for scraps from the dinner table after the others have eaten—and that she might get the Bardwells in trouble with the law. Rather than buckling under the misery that she feels from the evident contempt from Robert, the loss of all her friends in Indiana, and the loss of her father, Truth strives to live a worthy life. It is an admirable touch by Beatty not to have Truth go through the cliché of striving to prove herself to those who think ill of her; instead, she just tries to live a decent, honest life, much like most people have to do. That she eventually does perform some heroic acts stems not from a desire to prove herself to others; she takes action because her deeply held religious beliefs and her own personal integrity require her to. Thus, she does not show off her deeds in front of others; she keeps them to herself and the elders until the elders decide she should tell their fellow Quakers about what she had done.

During the four years in which the novel occurs, Truth matures into a strong person with sound personal values.

As a study in character, the novel focuses tightly on Truth, and none of the other characters are as well developed as she. Of her father little is said; he was a hard working man who taught his daughter to be hard working. He plainly gave his daughter much love. He and their circle of friends in Indiana also seem to have helped Truth to develop sound personal values. At first, North Carolina seems less hospitable. "That's what she is, Ma, a kettle cousin, another mouth to feed," declares her cousin Robert.

School seems no more hospitable, with some children shunning her because she is Quaker; even another Quaker, Martha, at first keeps her at a distance.

Her Aunt Elizabeth is the stereotypical good mother, who gives Truth kindness and consideration, making Truth's adjustment to a new life somewhat easier. Her uncle Matthew is aging, but he too is kind. He learns to trust in Truth.

Truth's first big moment comes after she is chased home by an escaped slave. She sees the man following, and she races for her life into the Bardwell farmhouse—the slave follows and to her surprise, he is recognized. "Todd, husband, Robert. It's Squire!" calls Aunt Elizabeth. The slave drops down a secret opening near the fireplace and



disappears. Squire had not been chasing her. "He knew where to come because he's been here before," Truth's aunt explains. Truth discovers that the Bardwells are part of the Underground Railroad; they help slaves escape northward. This introduces the theme of the escape from slavery to freedom.

Historically, most Quakers opposed slavery; the Bardwells can even cite Biblical passages saying that escaped slaves should not be returned to their former masters. Truth is as much opposed to slavery as the Bardwell's are; she helps Squire make it to the next station on the Railroad.

The Underground Railroad figures prominently throughout *Who Comes with Cannons?* It represents hope for people like Squire; it is part of their service to God and humanity for the Bardwell's and Truth. A "station" on the Underground Railroad is a hiding place where escaped slaves can get help and be moved to the next "station." No one at any of the stations knows of any other stations except the ones immediately preceding and following theirs; the implication is clear: If caught none of the people of the stations can be forced to tell where all the stations are. They have no idea where more than three of the stations could be. The atmosphere is almost like that of a police state. Strange armed men burst into houses, searching where they please and threatening the inhabitants with harm. Young men like Robert and Todd can be beaten up just because people suspect they may have something to do with helping people become free; women like Truth can be abused and molested simply for being associated with ideas that the state opposes. It is no wonder Robert fears a twelve-year-old girl toward whom he should be kind. Any outsider is an enemy, because an outsider might tell the law where to find the slaves.

The atmosphere of hate makes the lives of the Quakers tense and frightful.

As disgusting as some of the characters like Mr. Fields can be, Beatty nonetheless avoids turning them into stereotypical thugs. The Civil War tempers most of the characters' spirits. The supposed glory of war becomes the unrelenting dreariness of war. The Underground Railroad becomes a system for helping people who do not want to join the Confederate Army escape, as well as helping slaves. Its help is needed when Truth and Uncle Matthew need to go to New York to free Robert.

Those who hated the Quakers for their association with the Underground Railroad and the antislavery movement become more humane in their outlook.

For instance, one of the Quakers' nastiest tormenters, Perry Gibson, changes a little: "After his brother Lockwood's death, he'd been more quiet in his behavior. He was thin and ragged, and his mule's ribs showed." In hardship, he and Truth have some common ground, and because of this he tells Truth that Robert has been captured by Union troops.

Another important theme in *Who Comes with Cannons?* is the value of honest labor. Farm life in North Carolina was hard, with farm families having to do physical labor for long hours each day. Going to school is preferable to the wearying work in the fields;



young people miss school when they leave it; their parents look forward to having strong young people help them with labor that has worn them down.

No one in the novel questions the importance or value of hard work. The Quakers, in particular, have a strong work ethic. At the novel's beginning, Truth expects to earn a place for herself through her diligent labor; she does not contemplate doing anything heroic. As she matures, the dignity of honest labor is shown. In addition, the obligation of all family members to work to the common good can be contrasted to slavery. This is the thematic importance of midwife Nancy Andrews's reply to a Union soldier's question, "Is she a slave?" She declares, "I'm free, and I've been free for fifteen years. I get paid for what I do." She gets paid for her labor, and she is proud of it. She earns her way in the world, as each person should be allowed to do.

Another theme is that of faith, which governs much of what Quakers do.

Most of them believe that their faith requires them to aid slaves; most also believe that they must help the slaves in strictly nonviolent ways. Not all of them agree on this; one young man decides that he must join the Union Army to fight slavery, that the moral imperative to put an end to slavery is greater than the requirement that people live peacefully. The Quakers' faith shows up in other ways that are important to understanding the story. In her notes, Beatty points out: Quaker women were encouraged to 'testify' on First Day, or Sunday.

They were as renowned for their quiet courage and steadfastness as the men. The justification for their taking part in church matters was the New Testament, in which it is written, 'Women spoke to Jesus.'

This shapes Truth's role in her religion and helps explain why she felt embarrassed at never seeming to have anything worth saying at Quaker gatherings. In the novel, women are not just permitted to speak, they are expected to speak now and again, like the men. In addition to shaping how characters behave and how they look at their roles in the community, faith is a sustaining spiritual force for Truth and the Bardwells. They draw on their faith for strength to endure hard times, and for courage when doing right will be very dangerous. They see God at work during frightening moments, such as when the Gibsons threaten to harm the Bardwells, but Truth puts them off by reminding them of how Southern men are supposed to treat women and displaying considerable defiance as she speaks. She and her aunt suspect God had a hand in helping Truth to say and do what was needed to save the family from harm. This is a solid, honest kind of faith. For the Quakers in *Who Comes with Cannons?* it is woven into their lives and serves their practical needs for endurance and courage, as well as encouraging their idealism.



Topics for Discussion

1. If the Quakers opposed slavery, why would they not fight in the Union Army? In *Who Comes with Cannons*?

they seem to hope the Union army will win. Should they not be helping it?

2. Do you like historical novels in particular? What makes a good historical novel special? Does *Who Comes with Cannons*? have any of these special qualities?

3. New Yorkers attack and severely beat Truth's uncle because he is a Quaker. Why did they do this? Were they right to do it? What, if anything, should they have done instead to show their anger?

4. The children and young adults in the novel want to be in school. Why?

What do they do when they are not in school?

5. What do you learn about farm life in North Carolina in the middle of the nineteenth century?

6. Considering that many people hate them in both the North and South, why do the Quakers wear clothing that make them easy to identify, even in a crowd?

7. Is the refusal to bear arms exhibited by Truth's cousins a good idea?

What might have happened during the Civil War if many more people had the same attitude? Would the slaves have been freed?

8. Why is it important for Truth to be able to tell her story at the meeting house?

9. Do American citizens have a moral obligation to serve in the military if their country needs them to?

10. Why did the Southern men think it was okay to beat up boys and men but not girls and women? Why would they think it was okay to force girls to kiss them?

11. Truth's religious beliefs play an important part in the novel. She sometimes seems to think God has aided her, spoken through her, or acted through her. How does this affect the plot of the novel?

12. Are Quakers' religious beliefs fairly portrayed?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Frederick Douglass had good reason for feeling kindly toward Quakers.

Read about his life, find out why, and explain his relationship to Quakers.

2. What was the history of the Underground Railroad? How did it function? What were the Quakers' involvement in it?

3. What is the history of the refusal of many Quakers to bear arms. Why is it that some Quakers have served in the military?

4. In her notes, Beatty mentions Orthodox Quakers, Hicksites, and Wilburites. What were the differences between these three groups of Quakers at the time of the Civil War? Do they still exist?

5. Why do some Quakers wear dark clothes without buttons? What are the clothing customs of those Quakers?

6. The battle of Bentonville, described in *Who Comes with Cannons?*

was fought in March 1865 in North Carolina. Describe how the battle came about, how it was fought, and its outcome.

7. Union soldiers loot the home of Truth's aunt and uncle in *Who Comes with Cannons?* Did Union soldiers really loot homes? Why or why not?

8. Abraham Lincoln and black leaders like Frederick Douglass had a falling out over the issue of blacks serving in the Union Army. Lincoln was a complex man whose idealism was partly tempered by political pragmatism. Did he have good reasons for delaying the enlistment of blacks? What were they?

9. Describe the relationship between Lincoln and the Quakers.

10. Describe the relationship between Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

11. Did Lincoln's wife Mary Todd Lincoln ever really intercede with her husband on behalf of petitioners?

12. What was the history of Elmira *Who Comes with Cannons?*

Prison during the Civil War? Why would it be horrible for Robert to be there?

13. Why would the Confederate Army use Quakers—or anyone else—for cannon fodder?



14. Why would conscripted Quakers not only refuse to train with weapons, but actually just fall to the ground when forced to face the enemy?
15. Compare the novels *Who Comes with Cannons?* and *Beatty's Turn Homeward, Hannalee*. How are the protagonists in each similar and different?
16. What other groups of people refused to fight in the Civil War on grounds of conscience? Did their religious beliefs have any part in their refusals? What other reasons of conscience did people have?
17. Describe conscription and how it worked in both the Union and the Confederacy.
18. What was life like for young adult girls like Truth during the Civil War?
19. Quakers have played many important roles in American history. For instance, President Nixon was a Quaker. Research the history of Quakers in America.
20. Why were slave catchers such as Mr. Fields allowed to seize and take back to the South escaped slaves in New York City?



For Further Reference

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Telgen, Diane. "Beatty, Patricia." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 73.

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Watson, Elizabeth S. Review. *Horn Book* 69 (January/February 1993): 83. Recommends the book "for a women's studies curriculum."

Related Titles

In the last decade of her life, Beatty wrote five other novels about the Civil War besides *Who Comes with Cannons?*

Charley Skedaddle is about a drummer boy in the Union army who deserts it.

In *Turn Homeward*, *Hannalee* and *Be Ever Hopeful*, *Hannalee*, Beatty shows the effects of the Civil War on the South.

Eben Tyne, *Powdermonkey* tells of the first battle between ironclad ships. *Jayhawker* discusses abolitionism. Each of these books displays Beatty's extensive historical research for the backgrounds of her novels.



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