

Why Not, Lafayette? Short Guide

Why Not, Lafayette? by Jean Fritz

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Contents

Why Not, Lafayette? Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	10
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16

Overview

Lafayette holds a special place in U.S.

history. His participation in the Revolutionary War has been treated as something U.S. school children must know about, but other aspects of his life may be somewhat murky for many Americans. In *Why Not, Lafayette?*, Fritz tells about Lafayette's lifelong struggle to secure civil rights for all people and to make laws that would protect the common people from the tyranny of kings and nobility, even though he himself was a nobleman born into wealth and privilege. According to Fritz, the defining period of Lafayette's life was his service in the United States, during which he absorbed the ideas of liberty American revolutionaries were fighting for. His triumphal return to the United States near the end of his life shows how Americans felt about him: It took him two years and over five thousand miles of traveling to satisfy all the Americans who wanted to see him and to thank him. Even today he is one of America's most beloved historical figures, a man of courage who helped America when it was in dire need of help and who risked his life time and again for the liberty of others.

About the Author

Jean Guttery was born in Hankow, China, on November 16, 1915. Her parents Arthur and Myrtle Guttery were missionaries for the YMCA. In about 1928, she and her Why Not, Lafayette?

family left China to escape the warfare that swept through China as part of the aftermath of the revolution that removed the old monarchy and replaced it with a fragile civilian government. While in China, she kept a notebook of her thoughts and observations that later served as a basis for writing about China. Guttery's writings about her own life reveal a nostalgia for China.

After she graduated from Wheaton College in 1937, Guttery took a job with an advertising agency in New York, but she left it to work for a textbook publisher, Silver Burdett Company. She married Michael Fritz on November 1, 1941, just in time for him to be called to military service and sent to San Francisco, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, marking the U.S. entrance into World War II. Eventually she and her husband and two children (a son and a daughter) moved to Dobbs Ferry in New York, in 1953. There, she found a job as a librarian and created a children's literature section.

During the 1960s, Jean Guttery Fritz researched the history of the American Revolution, resulting in a work intended for grownups but suitable for teenagers, *Cast for a Revolution* (1972), and several works for young readers, such as *Will You Sign Here, John Hancock?* (1976), that have gone through many printings, including one of all of them in 1999. Although she has written distinguished fiction, Fritz is plainly drawn to biography, particularly lives presented in the context of the history of their times. Having been nominated in 1982 but not winning, in 1986 she received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for her lifetime of writing. Although published after Fritz won that award, *Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers* may be the most universally praised of her books.

Fritz has been nominated for awards such as the National Book Award many times, winning some of them. The Children's Book Guild gave her its honor award in 1978 for her many historical writings. In 1982, her autobiography *Homesick: My Own Story* was named a Newbery Honor Book and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book, and it won the American Book Award (what the National Book Award was called for a brief period). *The Double Life of Pocahontas* won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Nonfiction Award for 1984, and *The Great Little Madison* won the same award for 1990. The Madison biography also received the Orbis Pictus Award from the National Council of English Teachers.

Setting

Why Not, Lafayette? is not a complete life of Lafayette. It only touches briefly on Lafayette's childhood, most of which was lived on country estates. The biography begins during Lafayette's late teens in Paris by detailing his conduct and thoughts. For Lafayette, Paris was at first an alien world.

He had been born into his rank of marquis, and servants, family, and townsfolk catered to him, but in London people did not tip their hats to him and did not in general even notice him. The city was a busy place, with people bustling about hurriedly. Furthermore, Paris was a place where Lafayette was expected to participate in the court of the king and to attend balls and many other social functions, most of which bored him. He wanted a more meaningful life.

America's revolt against England promised the active life Lafayette wanted. France had long been hostile to England and had fought wars in the Americas against the English and their colonists. However, Lafayette's desire to sail for America and fight for the Americans was disapproved of by both his king and his family, so he had to use his own money to pay his way to the Revolutionary War. He loved America, in spite of its hordes of mosquitoes and its muddy, rutted roads. He became a trusted aide to George Washington and led troops into battle. Why Not, Lafayette? does not cover all of his victories, but it emphasizes how Lafayette came to love Americans and their ideals.

In America, Lafayette was loved by his troops, who called him "the soldier's friend," and it was while in America that he learned how to lead. Back in Europe, aristocrats did not admire him. He petitioned and lobbied for the rights of France's common people, prompting the queen to call him a traitor to his class. Indeed, Lafayette no longer wanted to be called "marquis," insisting on general, a rank he had in the American army.

Because of his persistent pursuit of civil rights for all people, Lafayette was imprisoned by the Austrian king when he fled France. He lived in stinking, vermin-infested prisons for five years. Even so, once he was released, he resumed his campaign Why Not, Lafayette?

ing for legal recognition of rights of common people, often placing himself at risk.

Fritz details Lafayette's return to America. President James Madison had invited Lafayette to be the guest of the United States, and Lafayette happily accepted.

Although fat and perhaps weakened by his years of toil, he revealed a great reservoir of energy, enduring America's rutted roads as he traveled through a nation that was more than twice as large as the one he had left after the Revolutionary War. Everywhere he went, people made speeches in his honor and many more crowded streets and roadways just to see him and to thank him.



Lafayette did his part by always behaving as though each stop and each speech were entirely new to him.

It is Fritz's purpose in *Why Not, Lafayette?*

to show how Lafayette's connection to America influenced his life, thus the book emphasizes the two periods in America and Lafayette's efforts to secure civil rights for the people of France. His tireless campaigns for the rule of fair and just laws are tied to his experiences in the United States, where he saw examples of ordinary people ruling themselves successfully. His trip as the guest of the United States serves not only to show how much Americans loved him and how much he loved them, but also to show how his gallantry, care for his troops, and his determined courage in the defense of the rights of others inspired Americans.



Social Sensitivity

Lafayette's advocacy of civil rights extended to all people, which means that he opposed slavery. *Why Not, Lafayette?* barely touches on this issue, but worth noting is his discomfort at being waited on by slaves, even while visiting old friends who were slave owners. *Why Not, Lafayette?* emphasizes his work in France to secure permanent legal rights for the common people rather than any discomfort he felt at flaws in American law. In France, he was a heroic figure for commoners and an irritation for those who sought to rule France. If he was not in danger of being executed by one or another king, then he was in danger of being beheaded by the revolutionary leaders who were annoyed by his insistence that they rule justly and that they not execute people who disagreed with them. Lafayette was a complicated man, seen as weak by some historians for not using his fame and popularity to enforce his views militarily, as well as for his long years of mediating between different political groups while striving for a political consensus on human rights in France. In *Why Not, Lafayette?*, Fritz develops a portrait of a man whose public life represented not weakness but the courage to stand up for justice. Even when meeting Napoleon, Lafayette refused to be intimidated and told Napoleon exactly what he thought about Napoleon's rule.

Literary Qualities

Why Not, Lafayette? is a short biography that is intended to entertain as well as inform its audience. Fritz has chosen to examine closely three aspects of Lafayette's life, relegating other aspects to the background.

Thus, the biography is divided into three movements that rise and fall much like movements in novels and plays would. The first movement is Lafayette's early life and especially his service in the Revolutionary War. He was a very young man during the war, eventually leaving service when only twenty-five. Nevertheless, the several years he spent in America shaped him and helped shape America. His eager advocacy for America helped win support for the rebellious colonies from abroad, particularly France, whose government had originally opposed Lafayette's participation in the American cause. His leadership helped win battles; his exceptional talent for mediation helped keep divided commanders cooperating with each other.

Much of this first movement should be well known to American youngsters. Lafayette was a dashing figure of unblemished heroism and compassion, making him a favorite for inclusion in history textbooks.

Beyond that, he was pivotal in the eventual success of the Revolutionary Army. Even so, what followed his service in America may be unfamiliar to readers. Why Not, Why Not, Lafayette?

Lafayette? tells of his struggle for legal recognition of human rights in France and of his perilous advocacy of civil rights in an era in which his views could result in his execution. What may be most notable in this second movement of Fritz's book is the even-handed approach Lafayette took in his advocacy. It was his view that human rights should apply to everyone, even bad people. When given a chance to enforce the law in Paris, he protected both great and small from mob rule and mob injustice.

Although his liberal views were well known, he criticized leftist radicals for mass murder, and they became as much a threat to him as the nobility were.

In the third movement, Fritz describes Lafayette's tour of the United States, visiting large cities and small hamlets, even homes along country roads. This movement is very satisfying reading: it offers a portrait of what America had made of itself after Lafayette's service in the Revolutionary War and shows Americans behaving at their generous best, honoring a man who had sacrificed comfort and peace of mind to help people less fortunate than he was.

After his courage in the Revolutionary War and his long and dangerous battle to secure human rights in France, it is a pleasure to see him rewarded by the adulation he deserved. According to Fritz, the tour of America was long and tiring, and Lafayette had to play the role of a grateful man as if it were all new to him at stop after stop, but

Lafayette was receiving the glory he had sought when a teenager. It is an example of a good man getting what he deserved.



Themes and Characters

The phrase "Why not?" may form the central theme of *Why Not, Lafayette?* When people told Lafayette that what he wanted could not be done, he would respond, "Why not?" This he made his motto ("Cur non?"), having it included in his coat of arms.

Throughout his adult life, he tried to do what others believed could not be done. His service in the Revolutionary War is an example of this; America's poorly fed, poorly equipped army was fighting the world's best equipped, best trained army, the British army. After his return to France, he advocated the rights of poor people and was an exponent of human rights in a land in which might made right, in which kings, revolutionaries, and a self-made emperor enforced their views by killing those who disagreed with them. It is possible that only Lafayette's popularity with common people saved him from execution, although it did not save him from prison. It is also possible that his extraordinarily likable personality made it hard even for his political opponents to actually kill him.

According to Fritz, Lafayette himself saw glory as the theme of his life. When a teenager, Lafayette yearned for glory, to distinguish himself with heroic deeds. For him, America's war against England offered a chance for such glory. He was a restless man, uncomfortable with wasting his time at social gatherings, and America's war promised action. Although only a teenager, he won the affection of American officers, including General George Washington, and when given the chance to command soldiers, he proved himself to be, as Fritz points out, a cool, calculating strategist.

Apparently very open-minded about what "glory" entailed, Lafayette believed that his treatment of others was as important as his valor in combat. This value included caring for his troops, even spending his own money to equip and clothe them. When he returned to America many years later, his former troops sought him out and he remembered the name of each and every man. In France, the glory he sought was not on the battlefield; he hoped to help usher in an era in which universal human rights were recognized by law. Justice would be his glory, although it proved to be elusive in a land in which people were willing to kill others over political views.

In *Why Not, Lafayette?*, two other figures play prominent roles in Lafayette's life. One was George Washington. When they met, it was a case of two exceptionally charismatic men almost instantly liking one another: "The next day he [Lafayette] met George Washington. There was no mistaking him.

He stood tall, a commanding presence, with glory written all over him. This was the man Lafayette had been looking for all his life." It was partly through the influence of Washington that "[Lafayette] wanted America to win the war not only because he liked winning, but because he had become wholly devoted to the American idea that people should have a say in their government." In Washington, Lafayette saw the embodiment of American idealism, and he may have conducted his life in France the way he did because he was imitating Washington. General Washington was a reluctant warrior and



a reluctant leader. Washington did not want to be president for life (as Alexander Hamilton proposed) or to be king. When given command of troops and opportunities to seize power, Lafayette may have remembered Washington's example; he called for the rule of laws that guaranteed everyone would have a say in the government.

The other significant figure in *Why Not, Lafayette?* is hard to fully understand. She was Lafayette's wife, Adrienne Noailles, who was just fourteen years old when she married Lafayette on April 11, 1774, when Lafayette was only sixteen years old. Although their marriage was arranged, as was the French custom for its nobility, Adrienne, Fritz says, fell deeply in love with Lafayette, even though he did not return her passion. Adrienne lives in the shadows of Lafayette's life for much of *Why Not, Lafayette?*, but she seems to have been crucial to his long life by seeing to it that he was cared for. When he was imprisoned, Adrienne worked hard for his release, eventually being granted the right to visit him, which led to an improvement in his health and helped lead to his release. Did Lafayette eventually return the love of such a courageous, devoted woman? In *Why Not, Lafayette?*, the answer is not clear, although one passage hints that he did: "[Lafayette] was, of course, a man who deserved to be honored for his fearless, unswerving support of his principles; a man who embodied the very idea of freedom. But he was also a man who had an enormous capacity for love and, in return, was loved."



Topics for Discussion

1. Fritz says that late in life Lafayette did not like to be called a "marquis." Explain the difference between his two titles, marquis and colonel, and then explain with cues from the book as support why he preferred the second title.
2. The marriage of Adrienne Noailles and Lafayette was arranged, yet Fritz reports that Adrienne adored her husband. Does Fritz explain why this was so? Evaluate Lafayette's feelings for his wife.
3. What did Lafayette do that earned him the nickname "the soldier's friend" among American troops?
4. In *The Great Little Madison*, Fritz says that Lafayette was very fat by the time he made his triumphal tour of the United States. Why would she be more circumspect about his weight in *Why Not, Lafayette?*
5. Lafayette was a French aristocrat, so why would he want "the people of France to rule themselves the way the people of America did?"
6. Fritz says the Austrian king had Lafayette held in prison for five years. Why would he view Lafayette as a threat?
7. According to Fritz, "Lafayette was kept busy running from one party to another, mediating, which he did very well and would do all his life." What are examples of his mediating in *Why Not, Lafayette?*
8. In 1789, with Thomas Jefferson's help, Lafayette composed his Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

Lafayette was a rich nobleman, so why did he care about the rights of others?

Why did he risk his life to create a declaration that spoke of rights that should belong to everyone?
9. What does President John Quincy Adams mean when he says, "We [the United States] shall look upon you [Lafayette] always as belonging to us?" Do Americans still view Lafayette as belonging to them?
10. What motivated Lafayette to give his life over to the campaign for human rights?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Fritz says, " [General Charles Lee] had a fine reputation as a warrior, but was an unpleasant man." Is this true? What was Lee like?

2. Fritz portrays Lafayette as a man who stuck to his principles. Do other biographers agree with this evaluation? Was his sticking to his principles always wise?

3. What was Lafayette's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen? What did he hope to accomplish with the declaration? In what ways did Thomas Jefferson help him to write it?

4. What were Lafayette's years in prison like? In what prisons was he confined?

How was he treated? Why would he not know what had been happening in France during those years?

5. What of Lafayette's life do you miss from *Why Not, Lafayette?* What more would you like to know?

6. What has been Lafayette's influence on America?

7. What was Lafayette's relationship with George Washington?

8. What other battles besides the one at Yorktown did Lafayette participate in?

What did he do in these battles?

9. What was Lafayette's life with Adrienne like?

10. Why did Lafayette not use military force against those with whom he disagreed in France?

For Further Reference

Bush, Margaret A. Horn Book Magazine, vol.

75, no. 6 (November 1999): 756. Bush remarks that Jean Fritz "depicts a man of intelligence, enthusiasm, leadership, and a great capacity for friendship and love."

McAndrew, John. Childhood Education, vol.

77, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 45. McAndrew states that the book provides a good understanding of the foundations of U.S. independence and of the Franco-American relationship.

Meyer, Randy. Booklist, vol. 96, no. 2 (September 15, 1999): 253. According to Meyer, in *Why Not, Lafayette?* Fritz aptly documents Lafayette's role in the fight for democracy both in the United States and in France.

Publishers Weekly, vol. 26, no. 38 (September 20, 1999): 89. The reviewer states that Jean Fritz's portrayal of military and political figures will assist those who have background in French or American revolutionary history.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Fritz's *The Great Little Madison* covers the same period that *Why Not, Lafayette?* does.

Lafayette appears in *The Great Little Madison*, first as a war leader and later as Madison and America's guest. In *The Great Little Madison*, Lafayette is described as obese during his tour of America, but this image is softened considerably in *Why Not, Lafayette?*, which only hints that he had put on weight. *Why Not, Lafayette?* was written ten years after *The Great Little Madison*.

years after *The Great Little Madison*, so it is possible that Fritz acquired new information during the period after writing *The Great Little Madison*, although it is possible that she grew to like Lafayette so much that she did not care to characterize him as obese. Otherwise, *The Great Little Madison* notes Lafayette's immense popularity in the United States and his warm friendship with Madison himself.



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