

## TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

Shelby Foote writes, "Any understanding of this nation has to be based...on an understanding of the Civil War.... The Civil War defined us as what we are and it opened us to being what we became, good and bad things." *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?: The Diary of Emma Simpson* provides today's young readers with a look at the Civil War from the vantage point of a teenage girl living in Virginia during 1864.

Through Emma's diary entries, readers feel the helplessness and anger of Southern homeowners when Yankee troops enter their houses, take their family possessions, and then burn the homes. They feel the constant ache Emma feels as the destruction of war becomes a part of her daily life—soldiers returning home with no legs, the awful results of typhoid fever and dysentery, and always the daily news of more deaths. But even as the war rages all around her, Emma tells of her "gleams of sunshine" that punctuate the dark sky of war.

Author Barry Denenberg says that writing *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?* allowed him "to write history from the perspective of those who experienced it. Not the history made by politicians, but the history made by ordinary people during extraordinary times. History from the bottom up, not the top down." This bottom up approach to the Civil War period adds the tears and laughter—emotions of real life—to a pivotal event in the history of America.

# When Will This Cruel War Be Over?

*The Diary of Emma Simpson, Gordonsville, Virginia, 1864*

BY BARRY DENENBERG

Ages 8–14 • 176 pages

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## SUMMARY

*A rose garden helps remind us that nothing beautiful in life comes without thorns.* The Simpson family had lived a peaceful life in the tradition of the antebellum South. Mr. Simpson and his son, Cole, vied each day to be the earliest to breakfast. Mrs. Simpson and her teenage daughter, Emma, tended the rose garden, supervised the house, sewing, and cooking, read, visited neighbors and relatives, and once a week, tutored the slave children with biblical readings. The Simpson family and their way of life survived because of slavery.

The War between the States, as it was called south of the Mason Dixon Line, abruptly altered that way of life forever. In one of his letters home from the battlefield, Mr. Simpson wrote, "our proud Confederacy is watched over by a kind providence... there will come a time when we will surely return to the life we knew and cherished before the Abolitionists chose this blasphemous and brutal course of action." But that day never arrived. Instead, hundreds of thousands of soldiers died on battlefields throughout the South.

Sorrowfully at first, then with increasing resignation, Emma's diary discloses the deaths of family, friends, and neighbors. Supplies—medicines, food, firewood, even ink to write in her diary—become increasingly scarce. Finally, even Emma's house is commandeered by the Yankees.

Emma survives, partly because she is able to adjust to the times. Her diary reveals the episodes of melancholy that haunt her life. But her attitude invariably returns to hopeful as she realizes the things that are important. "This war has made me see how precious life is. Odd when I am surrounded by death and darkness. I fear I have wasted my youth on trivialities...I was living in a state of ignorant bliss. Well, this is no more."

Barry Denenberg, the author of *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?*, said he wanted to write about "What it was like to have your world torn apart while war rages at your doorstep?" Emma Simpson's diary provides an emotion-packed answer to that question.

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Emma records many of her everyday thoughts and activities in her diary. How are you and Emma similar? What thoughts or beliefs make you different from Emma?
2. Emma's diary is filled with sadness from the death of her mother to the constant reports of neighbors and relatives killed on the battlefield. Yet, Emma manages to remain hopeful about life and quotes Jane Eyre who says, "Even for me life has its gleams of sunshine." What are some of the "gleams of sunshine" in Emma's life?
3. What surprised you most about this picture of life in the South during the Civil War?
4. How would *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?* be different if the diary had been written by a boy instead of a girl?
5. Cousin Rachel and Emma are very different. How are they different? Were you surprised at what happens to Rachel by the end of the book's Epilogue?
6. Towards the end of her diary, Emma writes, "I am no longer young. At times I feel like I am a thousand years old—that is what this cruel war has done to me.... I know I have changed forever and there is no going back." How has Emma changed forever? Why is she no longer young?
7. If you could ask Barry Denenberg, the author of Emma's diary, any question, what would you want to ask?

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Wars seem to inspire songwriters. "When Will This Cruel War Be Over?" was the title of a popular Civil War song. Find other music that young people and their parents enjoyed in 1864. Were any still-famous songs written then? Do you find any similarities among the themes for these songs? Prepare a tape-recorded radio show featuring war songs. Include commercials for products that might have been advertised during this period of American history.
2. Prepare a script of the conversations that might have occurred when Nelson, the head slave on the Simpson plantation, tried to convince the other slaves to run away with him. Why did Amos and Iris remain? Try to use some of the words

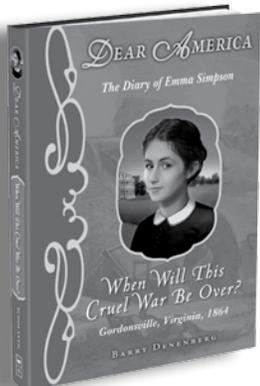
and situations that Emma writes about in her diary. Stage a dramatic reading for your classmates.

3. Emma often quotes from her favorite book, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Try reading some of *Jane Eyre* yourself. How does it compare with your favorite book?
4. Emma's diary is a work of fiction made up by the author. Compare Emma's diary entries with some actual diary entries and letters written by people living during the Civil War. How are they different? How are they the same? You can find actual excerpts from diaries and letters in such books as:

Meltzer, Milton. *Voices from the Civil War*. Crowell, 1989.

Murphy, Jim. *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk About the Civil War*. Clarion, 1990.

5. Write an 1864 edition of a daily newspaper for an imaginary small town in New Jersey. What events would interest these people? How did the war affect their lives? Be sure to include articles on issues other than the war: world news, cooking, fashion, and entertainment are also parts of a newspaper.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BARRY DENENBERG** is the critically acclaimed author of many books of nonfiction and historical fiction. His historical fiction titles include several in the Dear America, My Name Is America, and Royal Diaries series. Barry Denenberg lives in Bedford, New York, with his wife and daughter.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH BARRY DENENBERG

**You have said that one of the things that appealed to you about writing *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?* was that it allowed you to write “history from the bottom up, not the top down.” Could you explain that, and tell us what you enjoyed most about writing Emma’s diary?**

I was taught American history as the story of presidents, kings, queens, wars, and treaties. Although knowledge of these things is essential, by itself it gives a false sense of history. In writing Emma’s diary, I used primary sources that included letters, diaries, documents, and oral histories of the American people at all layers of society. That is essential for a true understanding of history. What I wanted to do was provide my readers with this kind of perspective.

The part I enjoyed most about writing the diary was doing the research necessary to imagine what it was like to be a fourteen-year-old, aristocratic, slave-owning Virginia girl living in 1864.

**Would you describe the research that went into writing Emma’s diary?**

I write as an excuse to do research. I read over seventy-five books about the Civil War, including diaries and letters. One of my great joys is to immerse myself in books on a particular subject and truly reconstruct what it was like to be there.

There were two critical points in my research process to write Emma’s diary. One was when I realized my

understanding of the Civil War was superficial. Humility is the first step in writing good history. Then, about ten or fifteen books down the line, I began to assemble some understanding of the times and knew that at least I was on the right track. I think it was Carl Sandburg who said, “I don’t know much and, come to think of it, what I do know, ain’t so.” The first thing I do is read enough to realize I don’t know, and then I go from there.

**Point of view is very important in this novel. You write about the Civil War from a Southern viewpoint and a female viewpoint. How were you able to “almost feel what it was like to be Emma Simpson”?**

First you accept the challenge not to make judgments. I think that’s valuable. You can’t impose modern morality on your subject. I simply asked myself what it was like to be Emma. That’s where the research is critical. You can’t do too much research. To read diary after diary and letter after letter is worth the effort because, after a while, you can begin to think like your subject. Not only what they thought about a particular topic, but also how they thought and, therefore, what they would think about any topic. Then, once you’ve done your research, you can begin to define your character and start to think like your character and those around her. I became so familiar with Emma’s personality that I actually had dreams as Emma Simpson.

**What is one question you’d like to ask your readers after they have finished reading *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?***

Did every word in Emma’s diary ring true?

**Books and reading, especially *Jane Eyre*, are very important to Emma. How does reading, and *Jane Eyre* in particular, help Emma?**

I was struck by how well read the girls were and how extensive their parents’ libraries were. I compiled a list of books and read (or reread) some of them myself, in order to add color to the story. But *Jane Eyre* became something else both for me and for Emma. I read *Jane Eyre* through Emma’s eyes. Jane, like Emma, is faced with constant adversity with little relief and not much hope. What is she to do? Cave in? Give up? Like *Jane Eyre*, Emma chooses (unlike Cousin Rachel) to persevere despite the odds. Emma takes heart from *Jane Eyre*’s courage—she too will survive and thrive.

**What is one thing you hope young readers will take with them after reading *When Will This Cruel War Be Over?***

What I’d like them to take away is a realistic view of what war is about.

Discussion Guide written by Richard F. Abrahamson, Ph.D., Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, and Linda M. Pavonetti, Ed.D., Assistant Professor, Oakland University, Department of Reading and Language Arts, Rochester, Michigan.

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