

A GUIDE TO

My Brother Sam Is Dead

James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier

*“In war the dead pay the debts for the living.”***THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE**

My Brother Sam Is Dead is a historical coming-of-age novel that exposes the futility and inhumanity of war through the suffering of one family during the American Revolution.

Setting: 1775–1778, Redding, Connecticut, and surrounding towns, an area sympathetic to the British Crown

Protagonist: Tim Meeker, twelve years of age, thrust into manhood by the turbulence of war and family conflict. The novel is told from Tim’s first-person point of view.

Conflicts: Several conflicts provide the backbone of the novel: Tim’s internal conflict over his loyalty to his Tory father and his intense admiration for his Patriot brother, between the comforting illusions of childhood and the harsh realities of war; Sam’s conflict between loyalty to family and loyalty to a cause; Mother’s conflict between love for her older son and her opposition to war.

Resolution: Sam is executed by the very army he has served so selflessly, a bitter irony that convinces Tim of the savage absurdity of war.

Themes: We see conflicts traversed on the threshold of maturity: divided loyalties within a family, the clash of generations, and the gulf between idealism and pragmatism, between innocence and experience—especially the gap between the heroic ideals of war and its grim, brutal realities.

Of Special Note: The **historical setting** has been thoroughly researched.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems for students reading at middle school level. There are some episodes of violence, but they are not gratuitous and effectively vivify the book’s antiwar theme. Although not all the conflicts are resolved happily, the book’s realism underscores its major theme of learning to accept responsibility in the face of life’s irrationalities and difficulties.

BACKGROUND

American Revolution. Thirteen British colonies in America began to rebel against rising taxes and political oppression by the British monarchy in 1763. The ensuing Revolutionary War (1775–1783) resulted in victory and independence for the United States of America.

Battle of Lexington and Concord. This battle launched the Revolutionary War. On April 18, 1775, eight hundred British troops were sent to Lexington to arrest John Hancock and Samuel Adams and to Concord to destroy military supplies. Hancock and Adams had fled from Lexington, but the British exchanged fire with the Minutemen there. Moving on to Concord, the British found that most of the supplies had been hidden, and they suffered major casualties at the hands of the Americans.

Minutemen. These volunteer soldiers organized into militias to fight against the British Army; they were said to be ready “at a minute’s notice.”

Samuel Adams (1722–1803). One of the original leaders of the American Revolution, which he advocated in speeches, newspaper articles, and political activism. A delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, Adams signed the Declaration of Independence.

John Hancock (1737–1793). Along with Adams, Hancock was a target of the British expedition to Lexington and Concord. The adopted son of a wealthy Boston merchant, Hancock’s early opposition to British rule culminated in his election to the Second Continental Congress and his famously large signature on the Declaration of Independence.

Benedict Arnold (1741–1801). A man whose name has come to stand for treason, Arnold was a brilliant general for the Revolutionary forces in the early years of the war, but lavish spending habits resulting in debts led him to sell military secrets to the British. After fleeing to British headquarters, he served in the British Army for the rest of the war and then moved to England.

Patriots, Rebels. Supporters of the American Revolution.

Loyalists, Tories. American colonists who remained loyal to the British Crown during the Revolution; they numbered approximately one third of the general

population, but they were more heavily concentrated in the area around Redding.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Tim Meeker (narrator), a sensitive twelve-year-old who worships his older brother Sam and also loves and respects his father; Tim comes of age in confronting his conflicting loyalties to Sam, a devoted Revolutionary soldier, and to his father, a firm supporter of the British Crown.

Sam Meeker, sixteen years old, inflamed with the passionate idealism—and blindness—of youth, leaves Yale to volunteer for the Rebel forces, incurring his father's wrath and provoking an irrevocable schism in the family.

Susannah Meeker (Mother), a stoic figure whose wisdom and courage in the face of adversity and loss preserve the family business and help Tim to cope with the harsh realities of war and the uncertainties of evolving manhood.

Eliphalet (“Life”) Meeker (Father), a stern disciplinarian who cannot abide Sam's apostasy in joining the Rebels. A pragmatist who upholds family and business over the abstract principles of the Revolution, he stubbornly attempts to carry on business as usual during the brutal conflict and brings about his own undoing.

Jerry Sanford, ten years old, Tim's best friend and a supporter of the Rebels; his capture by British troops helps convince Tim of the evil of both warring parties.

Tom Warrups, a local Indian who provides friendship and shelter to Sam after his split from his family.

Betsy Read, fifteen years old, Sam's devoted girlfriend; her pride in Sam's military exploits begins to wane as hardship and privation erode the ideals of the Revolution.

Mr. Heron, a wealthy local surveyor, former politician, and spy for the Crown who attempts to recruit Tim as a messenger for the Loyalists.

Ned, Samuel Smith's black servant, a Patriot fighter; when Tim witnesses his beheading by British troops, he abandons the Loyalist cause.

Colonel Parsons, a local officer in the Continental Army who believes in Sam's innocence; powerless to overturn the conviction, he refers the case to General Putnam.

General Putnam, a steely Continental commander who subordinates justice to military discipline in condemning Sam to death.

PLOT

Chapter I. We meet the **characters** and their **setting**: In April 1775 in Redding, Connecticut, Tim Meeker's family is sitting at dinner at the family house—part tavern and part general store—when Tim's older brother Sam arrives unexpectedly, proudly wearing his Patriot uniform. He announces that the Minutemen, whom he joined after leaving Yale, have beaten the British at

Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. A major **conflict** arises when Sam's enthusiasm for the Revolution is answered by his father's angry, vehement expression of loyalty to the king. Tim is torn, wondering who is right, his brave brother or his wise father. After dinner, Sam tells Tim that he has come home to arm himself with Father's prized hunting rifle. Refusing to give Sam the gun, Father ridicules the Revolutionary cause and orders Sam from the house. Later Tim looks in on Father and finds him slumped over the table, crying, and he **predicts** that bad times are in the offing.

Chapter II. After church the next day, Tom Warrups, a local Indian farmer, tells Tim that Sam is hiding at his place. Tim runs off to see Sam and notices Father's gun lying on the floor. Sam makes Tim promise not to say anything to Father about his whereabouts or the stolen gun. Tim agrees and runs home crying tears of agony over his conflicting loyalties.

Chapter III. During the summer of 1775, as the Revolutionary War rages, fragments of news reach the family tavern, but nobody in the family mentions Sam's name. In September, Betsy Read asks Tim if he will swear not to tell anyone if Sam comes back to town. Tim agrees, but weeks pass with no sign of Sam. Finally, in November, Betsy tells Tim that Sam has arrived.

Chapter IV. Tim notices a group of about twenty Rebel soldiers galloping toward the family tavern. The Patriots are searching Redding, Loyalist territory, for weapons that might be used against the Revolution. Scoffing at Father's claim that his son stole his gun, the Rebel officer raises his sword and slashes Father across the cheek and lip. This is Tim's first glimpse of the horrors of war, a major **theme**. Tim dashes off to Tom Warrups's place, where he finds Sam in a deep sleep. Tim manages to extract the gun from Sam's grasp without awakening him and runs frantically back to the tavern. But Sam awakens, overtakes Tim, and takes the gun back. When Tim asks him to intervene on Father's behalf, Sam explains that he can't be seen because he's on an unauthorized leave from the Rebel army to see Betsy. After agreeing to go as far as the barn, Sam cautiously follows Tim into the kitchen of the tavern, where they confront Father, blood flowing from his cheek. After a frozen, anguished instant, Sam turns and flees from the house.

Chapter V. As 1776 wears on, the war causes food shortages and rising prices. Mr. Heron asks Father if Tim can walk to Fairfield to deliver “some business letters” for him. To Tim's disappointment, Father refuses, suspecting that Heron is trafficking in war-related documents. Bitter and frustrated at losing his chance to take part in the war, Tim begs Father to reconsider, but to no avail.

Chapter VI. Days later, Tim seizes his opportunity when his mother sends him to Mr. Heron's to deliver some rum. Mr. Heron accepts Tim's offer to make the delivery as long as Tim says nothing to his father about it.

The next morning, Mr. Heron gives Tim a letter to be delivered to “Mr. Burr” in Fairfield. On the way, Tim runs into Betsy Read on the outskirts of town. When Tim lets slip that he saw Mr. Heron that morning, Betsy fears that Tim is unwittingly carrying a spy report on the Minutemen’s location. Betsy wrests the letter from Tim, opens it, and tosses it back at Tim, who reads, “If this message is received, we will know that the messenger is reliable.”

Chapter VII. At the end of November, Father asks Tim to join him on a perilous three-day, forty-mile journey to Verplancks Point in New York to sell cattle. Several hours into the journey, the two are accosted by a band of six rough-looking men on horseback—“cow-boys”—who accuse Father of supplying beef to the Tories in New York. The Meekers are rescued by another group of strangers, who identify themselves as Loyalists and escort Tim and Father safely into New York.

Chapter VIII. The Meekers stop at the farmstead of some relatives, the Platts, in North Salem, New York. Tim and his cousin discuss the pros and cons of the Tory and Rebel causes; Tim identifies himself as a Tory but still harbors strong **internal conflict** over the issues. The next morning, Tim and Father move on, picking up armed escorts along the way for protection. At Verplancks Point, Father sells the cattle and purchases the goods needed to stock the store for the winter. They begin the return journey the following morning and arrive safely at the Platt farm.

Chapter IX. The next day, under sunny skies, Father and Tim resume their journey home, still impeded by the deep snow. Fearful of ambush by cow-boys, Father rides a mile ahead several times to scout for danger. Tim becomes alarmed when he realizes that one of Father’s scouting missions is taking an unusually long time. He stows the oxen and cart by the roadside and runs ahead to search. **Suspense** rises when he notices an area dense with hoof prints; he knows the cow-boys have abducted Father. After briefly considering a daring rescue mission, he settles on the more prudent course of recovering the wagon and trying to drive the supplies home by himself. At nightfall he is confronted by a band of cow-boys but bravely fends them off with a clever ruse: He asks them if they are the anticipated Loyalist escort party, and the cow-boys, fearing an imminent armed confrontation, ride off. Tim arrives home safely at midnight. Father, however, remains missing.

Chapter X. On an April morning in 1777, British troops march into Redding. After a brief meeting with Mr. Heron, who apparently betrays the identities of the Rebel leaders, the British round up three residents, including Tim’s young friend Jerry Sanford. A Rebel messenger who approaches the scene is wounded by the British soldiers before they leave town. Sent to summon a doctor to treat the wounded Rebel, Tim encounters a battle between British troops and a group of Rebels holed up in a nearby house. When the British troops

storm the house, Tim sees one of them behead Ned, Sam Smith’s black servant. Violently sickened by the gruesome sight, Tim resolves his **conflict** between the two warring sides and can no longer feel any sympathy for the Tory cause.

Chapter XI. As the doctor treats the wounded Rebel at the Meeker tavern, the soldier says that General Benedict Arnold’s troops are chasing the British soldiers toward the north, and Tim’s heart swells as he recalls that Sam was with General Arnold. Later the head of the Connecticut militia and General Arnold lead a group of Continental soldiers into town. Tim dashes out to the church, where the troops are quartered, and finds Sam there; the brothers embrace in tears. Heading back to the tavern, Sam tells Tim that Father was arrested for selling beef to the British. Despite Mother’s pleading, Sam plans to reenlist in two months and fight until victory.

Chapter XII. In June 1777, Tim and Mother learn that both Father and young Jerry Sanford have died of cholera on prison ships. The news of Jerry’s death causes Betsy Read to question the value of Sam’s cause for the first time. Tim no longer feels compelled to choose sides: In war, he now realizes, no one is totally right.

On December 3, 1778, a ragged and exhausted Sam walks into the tavern and announces that he will be stationed in a nearby house for the winter. He warns Tim that the only protection against cattle theft by hungry soldiers is to slaughter the herd, freeze the meat, and hide it. Tim delays, and a month later Sam and Tim discover that four of their eight cows are missing. Sam takes off in pursuit of the thieves, who assault him and have him arrested, pinning the crime on him. This ironic complication underscores the theme of the absurdity of war—a soldier for justice becomes a victim of a cruel injustice at the hands of his comrades in arms.

Chapter XIII. Tim pleads Sam’s case at Colonel Parsons’ quarters but is rebuffed by an adjutant. On the way home he finds the missing cattle—one of them already slaughtered—and drives the surviving cows back to the barn. In the morning he pleads Sam’s case in person before Colonel Parsons, who refers him to General Putnam. Mother goes to see the general, but despite her pleas, Sam is held for a court-martial, which results in a sentence of death by firing squad. Tim appeals again to Colonel Parsons, who says that for General Putnam it’s not a matter of justice but of making an example of someone to deter other potential thieves. Nevertheless, he arranges for Tim to see the general, who gruffly promises to reconsider the case and allows Tim to visit Sam at the stockade.

Chapter XIV. Tim cries when he hears that General Putnam has refused the plea for clemency. In the book’s **climax**, Tim, overcome with despair, takes Father’s bayonet and sets out to rescue his brother, ignoring Mother’s desperate protests. As he approaches the stockade, he nearly succumbs to the insanity of war as he considers killing the dozing guard. The guard

suddenly awakens. Shouting Sam's name, Tim tosses the bayonet into the stockade and flees, suffering a minor bullet wound in the shoulder. As he looks back at the scene, he sees that the prisoners have already been moved from the stockade and that his mission was for naught. The next day, Mother refuses to attend the execution. Tim insists on going and experiences the bitter **irony** and futility of war as he watches the Patriot firing squad carry out the brutal execution of his brother Sam, the devoted Patriot.

Epilogue. Writing in 1826, Tim, now sixty-four years old, sums up his life since Sam's death. After several months of grief, he studied surveying with Mr. Heron and then moved with Mother to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where they built a tavern and went into the real estate business. Prospering enough to start a sawmill and a bank, Tim grew into a comfortable old age, surrounded by children and grandchildren, but still wondering if the fruits of the Revolution could have been attained by other means.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its **historical setting**. The conflicts in the story are directly connected with a particular time and place. (This focus makes the novel an excellent adjunct to social studies courses focusing on U.S. history.) Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating the Historical Background

One of the first things young readers might want to talk about in regard to this novel is "Did things like this really happen?" That question could lead to an investigation of several features of the novel's setting:

- Lifestyles of the colonists in Connecticut and New York in the 1770s
- Causes of the American Revolution
- The role of civilians during the American Revolution
- The clash between Tory and Patriot colonists

2. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- Unlike the United States, Canada became an independent country without a revolution and without severing its ties to the British Crown. Why were things different in Canada?

- Does violence ever solve problems, either in war or in personal matters? Have students think of examples from the news, history, or personal experience.
- Do adolescents always tend to rebel against the values and lifestyle of the older generation? Again, students should draw on both history and personal observation.

MEET THE WRITERS

A resident of New York City, **James Lincoln Collier** (1928–) has written many children's books (such as *Give Dad My Best* and *Planet out of the Past*) as well as hundreds of articles for such magazines as *Reader's Digest*, *Boy's Life*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. He has also collaborated on six books with his brother, **Christopher Collier** (1930–), a professor of history at the University of Connecticut who specializes in early American history and lives in Orange, Connecticut. The most recent of their joint efforts is the novel *Who Is Carrie?*

READ ON

Esther Forbes, *Johnny Tremain*. Historical novel. In 1773 in pre-Revolutionary Boston, the young silversmith's apprentice Johnny Tremain faces a bleak future after he accidentally burns and cripples his hand. Mocked and rejected, he learns the meaning of freedom and independence as an activist with the Sons of Liberty. (A Newbery Honor Book)

Albert Marrin, *The War for Independence: The Story of the American Revolution*. An excellent, readable history.

A. B. Guthrie, "Bargain." Violence begets more violence in a story about rough justice in a frontier town.

Alfred Noyes, "The Highwayman." A rousing narrative poem about love and sacrifice.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride." A famous narrative poem based loosely on historical events in the American Revolution.

Dorothy M. Johnson, "Too Soon a Woman." A short story about a courageous young woman on the frontier who risks her life to save a family that has befriended her.

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