

The Not-So-Boring Letters of Private Nobody

A Junior Library Guild Selection

Educator's Guide

Includes Common Core Standards

Dear Amazing Educator,

As a current middle school social studies teacher, this book is literally my daily life. It was a blast to write, as it combined my three favorite things about education: the kids, history, and storytelling. Oh—and the Civil War.

Students often encounter the Civil War as a mass pile of battles and generals and dates, and to some degree that makes sense—the war was filled with battles and generals and dates. But it was so much more, impacting so *many* more, than just soldiers. Arguably, the Civil War was the single most defining moment of our nation since inception because it made good on the promises put forth in the Declaration, seen most in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. But to most kids, that critical truth sounds horribly boring.

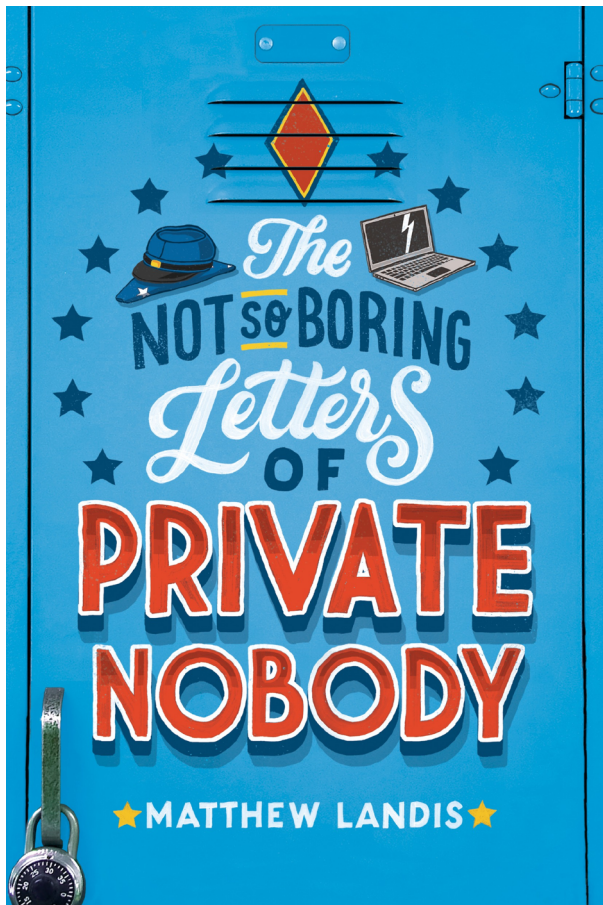
So I wrote a story about a trio of hilarious students who bumble through a social studies project and dig up some of these weighty Civil War impacts in a not-horribly-boring way. They also dig up some things about each other, their teachers, and of course the hilarious pitfalls/confusions of early romance. Oh the awkwardness.

Thanks so much for checking this story out. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it, and that it rings authentic for you and your students. Please feel free to reach out to me at author.matthewlandis@gmail.com with comments, questions, or school visits/Skype visit requests. I promise not to dress in a Union soldier uniform should we ever get the chance to meet.

Happy reading!

- Matt (who is pictured right, wearing the 2016 Geography Bee medal he forgot to give to the winning student)





Ages 9-14 | Available in Hardback or Kindle
ISBN (Hardback): 9780735227989
ISBN (Kindle): 9780735228009

Oliver is a Civil War nerd.

He knows everything about it: the battles, the generals, every movement of the Union and Confederate Armies. So when the last assignment of seventh-grade history is a project on the Civil War, Oliver is over the moon—until he’s partnered with Ella Berry, the slacker girl with the messy hair who does nothing but stare out the window. And when Oliver finds out they have to research a random soldier named Private Raymond Stone who didn’t even fight in any battles before dying of some boring disease, Oliver is crushed.

The project is doomed.

Or is it? Ella turns out to be very different from what Oliver expected. As the partners film their documentary about Private Stone—with Oliver’s friend Kevin signing on as their head writing consultant—Oliver discovers that sometimes the most interesting things are hiding in uninteresting places. Even Private Stone is better than expected: There’s a mystery buried in his past, and Oliver knows he can figure it out.

PRAISE FOR *PRIVATE NOBODY*

“Matthew Landis depicts the world of middle school with laser-like clarity, big-hearted warmth, and abundant humor, while also managing to bring Civil War history vividly to life. . . I wish I were still teaching just so I could hand this book to my favorite students.”

—Jordan Sonnenblick, award-winning author of *Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie*

“A couple of tech savvy seventh-graders that readers will love getting to know go digging for a civil war soldier with a secret and discover themselves. Matthew Landis’s novel is the best kind of time travel as past and present cross-dissolve.”

—Richard Peck, Newbery Medal-winning author of *A Year Down Yonder*

“For seventh-grader Oliver, nothing’s fair when it comes to war, first love, or group projects. . . Teacher Landis knows how middle schoolers work, and he shows his skill here.”

—Kirkus

“Landis challenges readers to see history as more than ‘endless battles, dates, and generals.’ Each setting (school, homes, historical societies, reenactment practice field, and Gettysburg) adds another dimension to the characters and issues in this appealing novel.”

—Booklist

Pre-reading Activities

Discuss with students what they know about the Civil War. Why was it fought? Who was it fought between? Who won, and what was the impact on the country? Then, direct students to read the secondary source “[10 Facts: What Everyone Should Know About the Civil War](#)”; more advanced students could explore primary and secondary sources in [NPS Slavery Brochure](#) to examine the war’s cause. Afterward, have students cite textual evidence as they share why the cause, big events, and outcome of the war.

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.1-2 – Key Ideas and Details*

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-12.7 – Research to Build and Present Knowledge*

Post-reading Discussion Questions

- How does Oliver see the Civil War at the story’s beginning? How does that change by the end?
- Why do you think it’s so hard for Oliver to accept this change in his view of the war?
- How does Oliver wrongly judge Ella based on her appearance and academic struggles?
- Speaking of Ella—what is her deal? Why is she dressing that way and failing on purpose? Have you ever felt like she did? How did you respond?
- Kevin is also dealing with family issues. What are they, and how does he handle it?
- What is Oliver’s biggest problem with Private Stone?
- Why does Ella care so much about Private Stone—and how does this cause conflict with Oliver?
- Oliver wonders if you can both like someone and find them super annoying. What do you think? Name someone that fits the description for you (but don’t share it because then rumors might start that you’re totally going out).
- Why might Mr. Carrow ask Mrs. Mason share her family history as a part of the Civil War unit?
- How do you think Mrs. Mason’s view of the Civil War might differ from someone who does not share her race (African American) or enslaved ancestry? What impact did this have on Oliver, specifically?
- Oliver and Ella BOTH could have handled group project conflict better. Give one situation where there was conflict, and explain how they could have solved it in a better way.
- After the big blow up at the dance, Mr. Carrow tells Oliver, “Some people make history what they want it to be instead of what it actually was.” Do people do this with the Civil War today? How, and what problems might that cause?
- How did Oliver’s grand apology show that his views on Private Stone had really changed?
- Aren’t Cheez-Its amazing? Discuss, and then go eat some. Mmmmm Cheez-Its.
- Why do you think that generals and battles and dates are usually the primary focus of Civil War studies? What other areas of the Civil War would you like to know more about, and how could you dig into that?

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6-12.1-3 – Key Ideas and Details*

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-12.6 – Craft and Structure*

Writing/Research prompts

- The group project can be epic and awful, depending on students in it and workload. In a paragraph, support or argue against this statement, making sure to give a specific reason and example: “The group project should be removed from the middle school classroom.”
- Mr. Carrow shows Oliver the monument to Confederate General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, and they have a discussion about what message statues communicate. Pick a different monument/statue from anywhere in America, and research **when** it was built, by **whom**, and **what** message it is “tells people”.
- Union General Grant, who later became President Grant, oversaw the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—often called the Reconstruction Amendments. Research one of them, and write an essay explaining how that amendment fulfilled the promises made in the Declaration about “all men are created equal.”
- Contact your local historical society and find a Civil War soldier or resident from that time who left behind some primary sources. In a paragraph, try to answer the question Mr. Carrow put to the class: How did the war impact his person?
- Disease was the biggest killer during the Civil War. Read “[Modern Medicine’s Civil War Legacy](#)”, and then research a specific disease you find interesting. Write a paragraph about this killer, including how doctors tried (and failed) to treat it.

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-12.1 – Text Types and Purposes (Argument Writing)*

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-12.2 – Text Types and Purposes (Informative Writing)*

Further reading and Internet Resources

[Mirk and the Midnight Hour](#) by Jane Nickerson (Knopf Young Readers, 2014)

[Unbound](#) by Ann E. Burg (Scholastic, 2016)

[Day of Tears](#) by Julius Lester (Jump at the Sun, 2005)

[Numbering the Bones](#) by Ann Rinaldi (Scholastic, 2002)

[Riot](#) by Walter Dean Myers (Egmont USA, 2009)

[The River Between US](#) by Richard Peck (Puffin, 2005)

- These are all middle grade or young adult historical fiction novels that I use in my 8th Grade Civil War Book Club. They cover a wide range of topics, aren’t super old and boring, and appeal to a variety of readers.

www.civilwar.org

- The Civil War Trust is an incredible nonprofit organization that basically exists to nerd on the Civil War. They have incredible primary and secondary sources, videos, digital maps, and do a great job of chronicling the war without getting lost in the battles and dates and generals. I use it in my class all the time. Do it.

⇒ *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.10 – Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity*