

***Ambush in the Wilderness*** by Kris Hemphill offers a close-up view of a dramatic battle in the French and Indian War. The story begins in western Pennsylvania in 1753, two years before the battle, when then thirteen-year-old Patrick Egan witnesses the murder of his father by enemy Indians. Orphaned—Patrick’s mother had died of disease years earlier—Patrick must leave behind the life of a traveling fur-trader he knew with his father. He must also leave behind his best friend, Gwayo, a Mingo Indian. Patrick is sent east to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to live with his Aunt Netta and Uncle Friedrich, his only remaining relatives. A Quaker and a farmer, Uncle Friedrich’s pacifist religion and agrarian occupation would seem strong enough ties to keep him on the farm. Nevertheless, he feels compelled to help in the coming war against the French, if only to contribute much needed supplies to the effort. Patrick, too, volunteers his services, and the two go off together.

It is long, slow-going, traveling from Pennsylvania German country to the Forks of the Ohio, (present-day Pittsburgh). British, colonial, and some Indians friendly to those groups are all traveling to the Forks to try to capture the strategically placed French Fort Duquesne, which *had* been a British fort. But the French have their Indian allies, too, and unlike the British, the French listen to and learn from their allies. While the British doggedly stick to the European style of fighting they know and trust, the French force has learned well from their Indian instructors on how to use the wooded terrain to their advantage. In two hours’ time, all the traveling, training, and anticipation of the British-allied forces is brutally ended. The Battle of the Monongahela is a resounding failure for the British.

While the English and colonial forces did suffer a devastating defeat—nearly two-thirds of their men were killed, wounded, or lost—for Patrick Egan the battle was a chance to test his mettle, and to meet another young volunteer who fought bravely under demanding battle conditions: George Washington.

## BACKGROUND

The French and Indian War is an often overlooked, even confusing chapter in our country’s military history. First, the name. In Europe, it was known as the Seven Years’ War. We call it the French and Indian War because that’s what the colonists—who were fighting the French and the Indians—called it. Adding to the confusion is that the French and Indian War was actually the last in a series of four wars that the French and English had been having in America for nearly 75 years. What’s more, the English and French didn’t limit their aggressions against each other to battles on the North American continent. During the Seven Years’ War, the two countries fought across Europe, India, the Caribbean islands, the Philippines, and Africa.

Back to the French and Indian War here in America. Actually, the British and their colonists weren’t fighting all the Indians. Through much coaxing and diplomacy, the mighty Iroquois—the most powerful Indians in eastern America—were convinced to side with the English. The Iroquois, strong due in part to their coalition of six nations, were still angry at the French, who had sided against them in a battle nearly 150 years earlier. That ancient grudge helped push the Iroquois over to the side of the British.

The remaining Indians—the majority—were fed up with English expansionism. They more naturally aligned with the French, who wanted only to trap animals and trade and sell furs in the new world, not move in.

Good training and sympathetic alliances notwithstanding, the French and their Indian allies eventually lost the war. The English had simply funneled more manpower and money into the operation. The English victors then essentially booted the French off the continent. The British had won, but at great financial cost; England’s spending more than doubled during the war. The British felt that it wasn’t fair for them to bear all the costs of keeping the American colonies safe, believing the colonists should help shoulder the financial burden by paying taxes. The colonists disagreed. So began the problems between Great Britain and the colonies.

French and Indian War Timeline: The first battles were in 1754; England officially declared war on France in 1756; the French surrendered in 1760; and the treaty ending the war was signed in 1763.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Before reading *Ambush in the Wilderness*, discuss with your class what they already know about the French and Indian War. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that *Ambush in the Wilderness* focuses on one battle of the war. Show them the location in the book’s map, then on a larger map of Pennsylvania. Have any students been to Pittsburgh? What is the landscape like?
- This story takes place in 1755. What else was happening in America around that time? What about in other parts of the world? Where does the story fit in chronologically with other events already studied? Who was president in 1755? (Aha!) Were there colonies or states at this time? Name them.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS – Literature • Social Studies • Arts • Writing • Math

1. After reading a few chapters of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, one that interweaves real and made-up characters and events. Discuss with students aspects of historical fiction that make it so exciting and interesting to read. Help students realize that this type of novel brings readers closer to another time period through the experiences of the characters. Instead of just reading about an event, readers can “live” it with the characters.
2. Point out that authors of historical fiction often let readers know in an introduction and/or postscript which events and characters are real and which are fictional. Be sure students read the prologue and postscript to learn about the actual events of this time period.
3. Engage the students in a discussion about how a reader can discern fact from fiction. Be sure the students understand that facts can be checked in reference books, newspapers, magazines, historical documents, and other official public records, as well as individual accounts such as journals, diaries, sketches, plans, and charts. Official reference sites on the Internet are also a good resource for the researcher.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What kind of story does the title suggest?
- What did you learn about the French and Indian War that you didn’t know before?

# STUDY GUIDE

## Ambush in the Wilderness



by Kris Hemphill

- Put yourself in Patrick's place. What do you think you would have found most exciting about being engaged in battle? What would you have liked least?
- Before the Battle of the Monongahela even began, British and colonial soldiers seemed to have had a testy relationship. Why do you think there were tensions between the two groups?
- Think about clothing. What did the British soldiers wear during this battle? The colonists? The French? How did clothing have an impact on the outcome?
- It's something of a miracle—more like half a dozen miracles—that George Washington lived through the Battle of the Monongahela. Have students suggest who might have been our first president, had Washington not lived. Write the suggestions on the board. Who is the popular favorite? What attributes does that person have?

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Write a diary entry for Patrick Egan for the day after the book ends. Recount the events of the day, adding personal reactions and feelings.
- Examine the illustration on page 65. The expression on the British soldier near Patrick is notable. Have students write one or two paragraphs on what they imagine he is thinking.
- We have dollars; the British have pounds. If one pound equals \$1.50, figure out how many more dollars the British government spent at the height of the war than at its beginning.  
Initial spending: 6.5 million pounds      Mid-war spending: 14.5 million pounds  
Extra credit: how much is this equivalent to in today's dollars and pounds?
- Have students pretend it is 1787. Patrick, now 47, is still farming in Lancaster. His friend Gwayo was forced off his land with the other Mingos years earlier. Having won the Revolutionary War, the new nation's leaders are meeting in Philadelphia to create a constitution. George Washington is there. Correctly suspecting that Indian homelands and rights will be key issues, Patrick travels to Philadelphia to try to talk with Washington. What does Patrick say? Have students stage a dramatic presentation of the meeting.
- There were other important battles in the French and Indian War. Make a map including these colonies: Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, as well as New France (Canada). Note all battles, marking their sites on the map. Include the year and who won.
- As the saying goes, they (the French) won the battle, but lost the war. Research the remaining years of the French and Indian War after Monongahela. How did the French lose their advantage?
- Research young George Washington. What was his occupation in 1754, when he was sent to Fort Necessity? What were the skills needed for such a job? Is that job still performed today?
- Have students do a timeline of major events in America beginning in 1754 and ending in 1776.
- Interview an older person who is a veteran of a war (World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraqi conflict). Ask him or her to discuss the experience of being in a war. Did the experience have a major effect on life after the war? Tape record the answers or write them in a notebook. Share and discuss the answers with classmates.
- If France had won the French and Indian War, what would our country be like today? Have students write a one-page essay, either serious or humorous in tone.

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