

The Hessian's Secret Diary, by Lisa Banim, is a mystery set in Brooklyn, New York, during the Revolutionary War. The story, seen through the eyes of 10-year-old Peggy Van Brundt, centers around the invasion of Brooklyn by British soldiers, culminating in the Battle of Brooklyn on August 26, 1776. At the outset of the book, Peggy's parents are loyal to King George, while her two older brothers have just joined the patriots under general George Washington. Peggy is worried by the absence of her brothers and angered by the presence of British soldiers in Brooklyn. Since the soldiers have invaded, Peggy has been forbidden to leave her family's farm house, and can no longer visit her favorite spot in the nearby woods. Finally, when she can stand it no longer, she sneaks away to her special place. She manages to do this several times and on one visit, she finds the "secret diary" of a wounded young man. As it turns out, he is a wounded soldier, a Hessian, who has deserted the British army. Peggy risks her parents' and her own safety to protect him and care for him as he hides in the Van Brundt's old barn. Their brief, yet touching friendship inspires Peggy to become a more thoughtful and a truer Patriot.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading *Hessian's Secret Diary*, discuss with the class what they already know about the Revolutionary War. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that the story takes place during this time period, in Brooklyn, New York. Some questions for discussion could include:

- Has anyone heard the term "Hessian" before? What do you think it means?
- Who might be keeping a secret diary during the Revolutionary War? What do you think this person would be writing about?
- Mention that this story takes place during August of 1776. How does this fit in chronologically with other events already studied about the revolutionary war?
- Have any students been to Brooklyn? What is the landscape like? What are their impressions of Brooklyn now? What do they imagine it was like in 1776?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading all or part of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the characters in the story actually existed and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people who lived at the time. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching

events and characters in the story using sources such as encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class "debriefing" . . . what names and events could they read about in other sources and which were most likely created by the author?

2. Have students extend their knowledge of the topics presented in the book by doing a research project like the ones suggested below:

- What other information can you find about Hessian soldiers. Over one third of the soldiers who fought on behalf of the British were paid, German soldiers. How were these soldiers selected? Were they employed throughout the War? How long did they usually remain in the army? How many deserted? Why did they wear blue instead of red coats? Were they less committed since they were fighting for money instead of a belief? Make a list of other questions you would like to know about the Hessians, and head to the library!
- Find a detailed map of New York City which also includes the surrounding waterways and Westchester County. Referring back to the historical postscript on pages 74 and 75, trace the route of the Royal Army from Gravesend Bay up to what is known today as Flatbush. Then trace the route of the colonial army from Brooklyn Heights to Manhattan, then up the East River to Westchester. Note the distances covered and any interesting landmarks they would have passed.
- What did real women and girls do to help the colonial army? What accounts are most interesting to you? How did you find information on this topic? Were you surprised by what you learned?
- Choose any aspect of the Revolutionary War to investigate further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class, and break into pairs or groups to locate information.

3. In the story, Peggy Van Brundt, and Frederick, the Hessian soldier, shared a passion for drawing. As a class, try working with charcoal and paper, the medium these characters used. It might be nice to go outside for this activity and sketch a scene in a nearby park. The class may also enjoy sketching the same scene or object in pencil and later comparing the process and final products. Which do students prefer? Why? The drawings could make an interesting classroom display.

4. Throughout the book, Peggy visits her special place in the woods. Ask students to look back through the book to find descriptions of this place. As they find a reference, raise their hands, and refer classmates to the page, they should read aloud phrases and sentences which describe the spot. Record these exact descriptions on chart paper. Review them as a group and invite students to sketch their vision of Peggy's special place from the descriptions. Then ask students to think of a special place they like to visit. You might ask them to break into pairs or small groups and discuss briefly what it is like and why it is important to them. For homework, ask them to visit their special place and describe it in a journal. They might want to focus on how it looks, when and why they go there, and/or what it would be like for them if they could no longer visit. To model an example of the type of response you are looking for, you might like to read from your journal about a special place you like to visit.

TEACHERS GUIDE

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5. The scenes in *Hessian's Secret Diary* often involve dialogue between two or three characters. This makes it an ideal story to share as a skit. Depending on the size of your class, divide your students into groups of two's or three's. Assign a chapter to each group and ask them to act out part or all of that chapter for the class. When students have had time to decide and practice how they will perform their chapter, gather the class together for a "reenactment" of the story. At each new chapter, a new group of actors will arrive on stage. After the play, discuss different techniques and styles, asking students to note those that were particularly effective.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY

The Next Chapter

Hessian's Secret Diary has an ending that leaves students wondering about what happens next. Frederick has escaped and Peggy's brothers have survived the Battle of Brooklyn and joined General Washington to continue fighting the British. Since students will be curious about how Peggy remains involved in the War effort, and if and when she will see Frederick and her brothers again, have them determine it! Break the class up into groups of 4 or 5 students and ask them to continue the story where it leaves off.

Ideas to review before the groups begin:

- Do you plan to write about the next few days, weeks or years in the characters' life?
- What voice and style of writing will you use? Will you continue the story through Peggy's viewpoint, or tell the story through the eyes of Frederick or her brothers?
- How will you work together as a group—will you discuss ideas first, or brainstorm individually? Who will be the official scribe of the group? What will you do if you all don't agree on an idea?

You might like to give the groups choices about how to share their ideas with others. Some may choose to form their "next chapter" as a play, while others may like to write it in a book format. Still others could write a series of newspaper articles about a character's efforts in the War. After each group shares its new ending, encourage other students to provide written feedback. This continues the dialogue and reflection regarding the story and empowers students to reply to each other's work in a thoughtful way.



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