



Private Fleming at Chancellorsville: The Red Badge of Courage and the Civil War (SHADES OF BLUE & GRAY)

Perry Lentz

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Famous for its insight into a young, inexperienced soldier's psychology, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* has long been assumed to have been based on little more than magazine articles and veterans' reminiscences. It also has been subject to various misreadings, including ones unduly influenced by fictional responses to the wars of the twentieth century. Perry Lentz now draws on more than three decades of teaching the novel and his own experience as a historical novelist to plumb the historical realities that actually shaped Crane's work and to confront these misreadings.

Taking a new look at a classic work that many may feel they already know, Lentz shows how this apparently impressionistic novel is actually a faithful reflection of Civil War combat based on thorough knowledge about combat in general and the battle of Chancellorsville in particular. Anchoring the novel's action firmly in the Civil War, Lentz challenges the long-standing assumption that Crane did little research for the novel, arguing that he made extensive use of contemporary sources to fashion an accurate depiction of Chancellorsville.

Rich with information about infantry combat in the Civil War, from uniforms and weaponry to formations and battlefield tactics, Lentz's study invites readers to follow the exploits of Private Henry Fleming of the 304th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment as he and his fellow soldiers participate in this legendary battle. Lentz shows how Crane evokes a set of traditional responses from his reader and how close reading expands those responses. He examines Private Fleming's adventures behind the lines of battle in terms of the historical situations in which they are set, then explains how Crane repeatedly entices readers into imposing their initial expectations and final evaluations upon the experiences of this particular soldier.

Lentz also investigates why the novel's portrayal of its hero's experiences on the second day of battle is sometimes ignored and always undervalued. By focusing on events both as they actually unfolded at Chancellorsville and as Crane depicted Fleming and his comrades experiencing them, he shows how these soldiers judge themselves, how others judge them, and how a reader can achieve a more sophisticated understanding of these judgments. Lentz's work reclaims a place for this novel in the American canon and enhances our understanding of Crane, of a legendary battle, and of war literature in general.

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