



## [The Red Badge of Courage](#), by Stephen Crane

### **In A Nutshell**

Stephen Crane, a twenty-year old who had never been to war, wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895. Regardless, the book is considered one of the most accurate portrayals of the physical and psychological effects of intense battle. This book covers just two days of a heated battle between the Union and Confederate soldiers during the American Civil War. The novel traces the emotional trajectory of one young recruit, Henry, as he strains to cope with all of the feelings and behaviors of which he is guilty.

Stephen Crane is a master of creating vastly realistic scenes of combat and death, and of the strange and varied emotions that accompany these experiences. Before *Red Badge*, war novels were generally written from a vantage point in the sky, dealing with issues like tactical movements of large groups of men rather than getting into the psyche of one particular soldier. By doing this, Crane rejected the grandeur and poetry of war and portrayed instead its harsh reality. The novel is known for its important place in the genre of realism, relying on lifelike actions and objects rather than on symbols and allegory. (Some argue that it's impressionism rather than realism, but we'll get into that in our discussion of "Genre.")

Because Crane dispensed with the pleasant veneer and exposed the brutalities of combat, *The Red Badge of Courage* is sometimes known as the first American anti-war novel. This didn't go over so well with the critics, at least in America. In fact, a U.S. General named Alexander McClurg called it out as an attack on the country and its military. Only after critics in England

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recognized the value, ingenuity, and literary and psychological merit of *Red Badge* did America follow suit.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Does knowing that Crane had never personally experienced war change your view of the book and its accuracy/realism? Why or why not?
- 2 Do you get a sense of Crane 's attitude toward his character Henry Fleming while reading? Does he respect Henry? Hate him? Mock him? Where do you see this most clearly?
- 3 While you 're on it, how do Crane 's views differ from those of Henry 's? Particularly on topics like nature, God, and war?

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