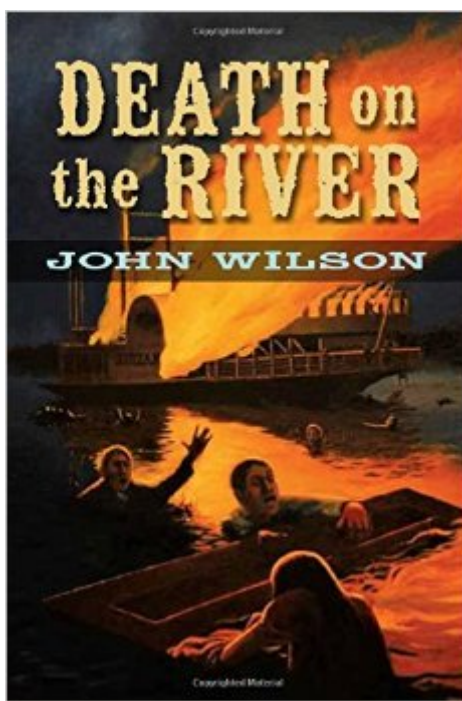


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# Death On The River



## Synopsis

Set during the last year of the American Civil War, *Death on the River* portrays the grim brutality of war through the eyes of a young soldier. After the older brother he worshipped is killed in battle, young Jake Clay joins the Union Army in the spring of 1864, determined to make his parents proud and honor his brother's death. His dreams of glory vanish, however, when he is wounded and taken prisoner in his first battle at Cold Harbor, Virginia, and confined to the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, where 30,000 soldiers face violence, disease and starvation. Frightened and disillusioned, Jake takes up with Billy Sharp, an unscrupulous opportunist who shows him how to survive, no matter what the cost. By the war's end Jake's sleep is haunted by the ghosts of those who have died so he could live. When the camp is liberated, Jake and Billy head north on the Mississippi riverboat *Sultana*, overcrowded far beyond its capacity. Unknown to Jake, the fateful journey up river will come closer to killing him than Andersonville did, but it will also provide him with his one chance at redemption.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 760L (What's this?)

Paperback: 193 pages

Publisher: Orca Book Publishers (October 1, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1554691117

ISBN-13: 978-1554691111

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #894,637 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #59 in [Books > Teens > Historical Fiction > United States > Civil War Period](#) #407 in [Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Violence](#) #930 in [Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > United States > 1800s](#)

Age Range: 12 - 17 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

## Customer Reviews

Young Jake Clay managed to get himself into the American Civil War just long enough to have his brains scrambled by a blow to the head at the battle of Cold Harbor. But, as it turned out, he was

one of the lucky ones because he fell so close to the Confederate lines that he was almost immediately snatched up and taken prisoner. Others, less fortunate, died miserable deaths in the field when General Grant refused a truce during which the dead and wounded from both armies could be cleared from the battlefield. It is the first taste of battle for Jake Clay and, as big a shock as battle is, he is about to get an even bigger one when he arrives at the Confederate prison in Andersonville, Georgia. Naïve young man that he is, Jake soon finds himself giving William Collins all the cash he has in exchange for promised protection that will help ensure his survival despite the horrible living conditions of the prison camp. Collins, a former big city street thug, is the self-appointed leader of what he calls Mosby's Raiders, criminals who kill and steal from their fellow prisoners at will. Jake Clay entered Andersonville Prison an innocent boy with high expectations of himself but, by the time he left the camp, he had condoned behavior that shamed him. He might be barely alive, but to stay out of the Andersonville cemetery he had done things, or allowed them to be done on his behalf, that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Little did Jake know that his journey home at the end of the war would offer him a final chance at redemption - an opportunity that would almost kill him in the process. "Death on the River," aimed at the Teen Market, offers a realistic look at Civil War fighting and the horrors of Andersonville Prison without over-focusing on the gory details. Jake Clay is a Union Army volunteer primarily because his older brother has already been lost in battle and Jake wants to honor his brother's memory. Jake, though, like most soldiers of the period, has little idea what he is getting himself into as his first battle approaches and, like so many others, his first fight will be his last. This historical coming-of-age novel is so filled with adventure that it might very well lead its young readers to search for more books on the American Civil War, much as I did at that age after I read "Red Badge of Courage" for the first time. Several decades later, I still find myself drawn to Civil War fiction, new histories of the war, and biographies of those who played a role in it. Here's hoping that books like "Death on the River" help spawn a new generation of amateur historians who will move on to Civil War fiction classics such as MacKinlay Kantor's "Andersonville," winner of the 1956 Pulitzer Prize, or Michael Shaara's "The Killer Angels," another Pulitzer winner (1975).

Reason for Reading: John Wilson is a Canadian author whom I have read a few books of and enjoyed. I also enjoy reading Civil War historical fiction. This is a dark, merciless book which shows one side of war, its heinous toll on life, the bloody injured victims and those people whose characters will let them take advantage of the less fortunate in any situation. The story is that of a just turned 18 year-old, Jake Clay, who joins the Union Army because his brother whom he looked

up to was killed in the war. Fresh in uniform he is involved in a battle in which he is taken POW and sent to the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, one of the worst in history. Thus the story goes on to tell the tale of the prison inmates and daily life, through the eyes of young Jake, as he is taken under wing of an immoral Billy Sharp who knows how to survive at any cost. A page-turning story and almost too horrible to believe it is based on truth. The author pulls no punches and there are many brutal, disturbing scenes. Though the author does write them in a stark matter-of-fact way without becoming needlessly gruesome in the details. They are true to life and there is one scene in particular that I don't think I'll ever forget. Jake is a realistic character and one who not only suffers physically but also suffers with his morals and that he cannot always remain humane in an inhumane world. Certainly a unique Civil War story for teens, told through the eyes of a POW. The publisher's recommended age is 12+, however I don't agree with that. I think the book is more appropriate for older teens. Along with all the violence I've mentioned, the protagonist is 18 years old, and the language includes continuous use of the sh- word, along with every conceivable rendition of taking the Lord's name in vain I ever thought possible. For older teens and grown-ups who like to read YA, I heartily recommend the book for an eye-opening look into a nasty piece of US history.

When Jake's brother is killed in battle during the Civil War, he decides to join up with the Yankee Army in order to honor his brother's memory. Taken down in a bloody battle, he's sent off to Andersonville, Georgia, one of the worst prison camps in recorded history. When a soldier without any moral sense befriends Jake, he's flattered, and desperation drives him to turn a blind eye when the man murders, lies, and steals to survive. When the end of the war grants the prisoners release, Jake is boarded onto an overloaded riverboat going up the Mississippi River. When an engine blows up and everyone is pitched into the river, Jake will have to choose: morality or survival? Will Jake be able to survive the journey, help others, and save his soul from going down the same dangerous path as that of the Andersonville soldier? This book does a great job of depicting the horrors of war. There is a fair amount of language and the violence can be disturbing for younger readers. However, the accuracy of the story is amazing, the characters are well-developed, and the plot is engaging. Readers who like historical fiction, war stories, and survival books will all enjoy reading *DEATH ON THE RIVER*. Reviewed by: Kira M

I loved the depth of the characters, and the details of the prisoner camp. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in history, especially history of the USA. My rating was based on the ease

of the read and the way it kept my attention throughout.

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