

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Across Five Aprils

by Irene Hunt

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ISBN: 978-1-58049-900-2

Item No. 200995

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Chapter 1

1. *Across Five Aprils* seems to be a strange title for a novel. What do you notice in the first chapter that has to do with April? Based on what you think this novel is about, is this a good title?
2. We are told that Jethro is nine years old. In what ways is he (or isn't he) a typical nine-year-old?
3. State what you think Ellen Creighton's emotional state is in this chapter, and what frightens her. Put yourself in her place for a moment and describe the feelings you would have.
4. Referring to Ellen Creighton, the author states, "But prettiness was short lived among country women of her time." We assume that he is saying that hard work ages a person quickly. Do you suppose that statement is as true today as it was back then?
5. When Jethro asks his mother if they'll be finished planting by sunset, she replies, "Your hopes is makin' a fool of your reason." Do you know anyone who has ever let his or her hopes make a fool of his or her reason? Have you ever let your hopes get in the way of your reason?

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6. With the talk of war heavy in the air, Jethro's mother says, "Seems sometimes there's a deep silence all about us out here waiting to be filled." For a classmate who doesn't understand what she means, describe what Ellen is feeling.

7. In describing the people's mistaken belief that the sun and moon revolved around the earth, Jethro says, "Seems like people on earth believed we had the best diggin's jest because we want to believe that—because it made us feel important—" Later the narrator includes, "Jethro, forgetting the lecture to his mother on the inclination of people to select beliefs that bring them most satisfaction, never doubted that if Tom and Eb got their chance to go to war, they'd be back home when it was over, and that it would be shadowy men from distant parts who would die for the pages of future history books."
The idea that people believe only that which provides satisfaction, regardless of the facts, clearly plays a big role in this story. Describe something that you once believed and later discovered to be false. What convinced you to change your mind?

8. Jethro is annoyed by his father and Abe Lincoln because both men seem to delay making decisions for fear of getting people's blood on their hands; he admires Tom and Eb, though, because of their clear vision. Can you understand how Jethro feels? Why do the older men feel so different from the younger men?

9. The narrator says that Travis Burdow fired a shot at "a society that had kicked a boy from childhood." This raises two interesting points. From what kind of discrimination does Travis Burdow and his family suffer? What kind of attitude does that discrimination breed? Based on your observations, do you think that kind of discrimination exists today?

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10. Bill, Jethro's favorite brother, is quite different from the other brothers. What makes him so different? Do you think he'll be a more or less interesting character than the other brothers?

11. Matt is concerned that Shadrach's "praise" for Jethro stems from Shadrach's affection for Jenny, Jethro's sister. If you were Jethro's father, would you have the same suspicion? Based on your observations of people, how does the comment strike you? Is Matt overreacting?

12. Jethro is proud to eat with the adults at the "first table" for the first time. Describe a time when you sat at a similar table or some other place which you felt to be an honor.

13. Consider the age difference between Shadrach Yale and Jenny Creighton. Today, such an age difference would be considered inappropriate. Why do you suppose it is frowned on today, but not back then?

14. This chapter ends with "company arriving," which pleases Jethro because it breaks the monotonous routine. What aspects of Jethro's life do you think you would wish to share? Which aspects are you glad you don't have to share?

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Chapter 2

15. For economic reasons, slavery has existed for thousands of years. Around 3500 B.C., the Sumerians enslaved the lower classes in Mesopotamia. The inhabitants of India were enslaved following the Aryan invasion of 400 B.C. Imagine you are a Southern plantation owner who depends on slave labor to stay in business. Write a letter to the *New York Times*, stating your views on slavery.

16. While the South supported slavery because of economic reasons, the North denounced it for moral reasons. As an anti-slavery proponent, write a letter responding to the plantation owner.

17. Matt Creighton tells us that “human nature, the all-over picture of it, is better than it was a thousand–five hundred–even a hundred years ago.” Based on your knowledge of history, do you think he’s right? Identify at least two ways in which human nature has changed for the better.

18. The cousin, Wilse Graham, presents the Southern white’s view on the trouble between the states. Summarize, as well as you can, Wilse’s point of view as it is presented in this chapter. If you had been arguing with him about his views, what would be your final word on the subject?

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19. Jethro listens to the argument between Wilse and his brothers and remembers the secret delight that the thought of war had given him only a few hours before. The narrator says, “Suddenly Jethro was deeply troubled. He groped toward an understanding of something that was far beyond the excitement of guns and shouting men; but he could not find words to define what he felt, and that lack left him in a turmoil of frustration.”

Can you understand what Jethro is feeling at this point, and do you know why he is feeling that way? If you can, in your journal, explain it to a classmate who doesn't understand what feelings Jethro is experiencing.

20. Keeping in mind that the narrator has told us earlier that these brothers are very close, notice at this point in the discussion, Bill says something that challenges John:

John did not answer. The two brothers looked at one another steadily for long seconds; it was as if they had forgotten all the others at the table and that each was searching the other's face with some pressing need. Tom and Eb squirmed uncomfortably; Wilse Graham crumbled a piece of bread.

Describe what's in the mind of the brothers at this point. Describe what you think is the “pressing need” they have.