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Before the Book

Before reading *The Red Badge of Courage*, it would benefit students to have a feel for the historical time period and cultural framework in which the book is set. There are also some generic pre-reading ideas that can help students focus on the literature in order to stimulate their interest and enhance their comprehension. Here are some activities that might work for your class.

1. After hearing only the title, predict what the story might be about.
2. Discuss other books or movies that deal with the Civil War.
3. Discuss the concept of historical fiction.
4. Individually or in small groups, list periods in your country's history where fighting has broken out on your soil. This might include periods of war, violent protests, riots, or criminal warfare. Write a diary account of how it must have felt to live through such turmoil and discuss these feelings with the class.
5. In small groups, discuss the following questions:
 - How do you view war?
 - What would it take for you to voluntarily enlist in the army?
 - How do you think you would perform under great pressure in battle?
 - How do you measure your strength of character?
6. Discuss the reality of war and how it differs from the romanticized version we see in Hollywood movies, heroic tales of valor, ballads, and epic poems.
7. Discuss what it means to be a “man.” What characteristics and traits do we as a society attach to the concept of manliness? How might our definition of being a man promote violence and fighting, rather than conflict resolution? How might this definition encourage boys to take risks and face danger, rather than backing down or walking away from a situation?
8. A recurring theme throughout the story involves the main character's obsession with defining his own character. Is he strong, brave, and valiant? Is he weak and cowardly? Write a description or brainstorm ideas about what the source of such courageous strength might be in the face of tragedy. Determine if the source of such strength would be physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. Discuss the ideas as a class.

About the Author

Stephen Crane was an American poet and novelist. He was one of the first writers to utilize the naturalistic style of writing in his poetry, and he is known for his vivid portrayals of the human condition. Although many of his words are pessimistic and dark, his figurative use of language and poetic charm lead to a sympathetic understanding of the characters.

Crane was born November 1, 1871, and raised in Newark, New Jersey. He was the last of 14 children and the son of a minister. He moved several times during his childhood and his father died when he was nine. He went on to Lafayette College for a short time and he later attended Syracuse University where he was most known for playing baseball. Having a passion for writing, he began work in 1891 in New York City as a freelance reporter. He lived in the slums, known as the Bowery, where he drew from his meager existence for his work. His first novel, *Maggie*,

Girl of the Street, was the story of a young prostitute who commits suicide. This was published at his own expense and under a pen name, Johnston Smith. Although the story won praise from famous writers, it was not a popular success. However, with his next novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane received international recognition, as well as monetary success, at the age of 24. With his new fame, Crane continued to pursue an artistic and eccentric lifestyle. In 1896, he was shipwrecked while accompanying an expedition from the United States to Cuba. Due to the lack of healthy conditions, he eventually developed tuberculosis. His experiences from this ordeal were the basis for his work titled *The Open Boat and Other Stories*. Due to continuing gossip about his many extramarital affairs, Crane decided to leave the United States in 1897 and settle in England, where he began his long friendships with writers Joseph Conrad and Henry James.

Although he had never actually joined a military service or fought in a wartime battle, Crane was known for his vivid portrayals of wartime tragedy. Because of this, he was hired as a news correspondent by both American and foreign newspapers during the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 and the Spanish-American War in 1898. In addition to his novels, short stories, and journalism, Crane was also a poet who used innovative verse techniques. His two volumes of poetry, *The Black Riders and Other Lines* and *War Is Kind and Other Poems*, display his ability to form free verse. Despite suffering from tuberculosis, Crane did much of his writing during the last few years of his life. He died in Germany at the young age of 28 on June 5, 1900.

