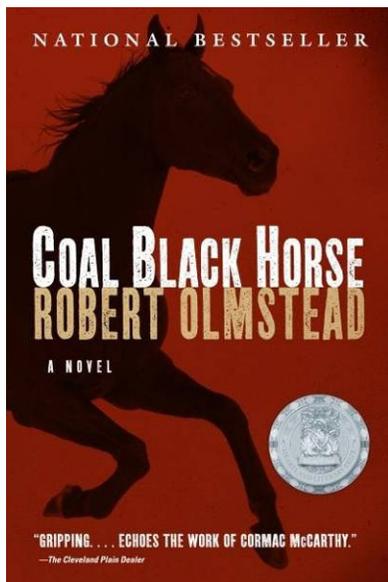


Coal Black Horse

by Robert Olmstead
A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit



About the Book

When Robey Childs's mother has a premonition about her husband, a soldier fighting in the Civil War, she does the unthinkable: she sends her only child to find his father on the battlefield and bring him home.

At fourteen, wearing the coat his mother sewed to ensure his safety—blue on one side, gray on the other—Robey thinks he's off on a great adventure. But not far from home, his horse falters and he realizes the enormity of his task. It takes the gift of a powerful and noble coal black horse to show him how to undertake the most important journey of his life: with boldness, bravery, and self-possession.

Coal Black Horse joins the pantheon of great war novels—***All Quiet on the Western Front***, ***The Red Badge of Courage***, ***The Naked and the Dead***.

Book description and jacket image courtesy Algonquin Books (<http://www.algonquin.com>). Used with permission.

Book details:

Coal Black Horse by Robert Olmstead.

Algonquin, 2007, ISBN 978-1-54512-601-5.

<http://www.workman.com/products/9781565126015/>

Other formats: large print, 2008, ISBN 978-1-5941-3237-7; audiobook, 2007, ISBN 978-1-4281-6017-0.

Available through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program: <http://www.klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio>.



About the Author

Robert Olmstead is an established writer of fiction, magazine, and journal articles. He directs Ohio Wesleyan University's Creative Writing Program. His most recent books are the critically acclaimed **Coal Black Horse** and **Far Bright Star**. He also has published **Elements of the Craft**, a textbook for fiction-writing workshops, and a memoir (**Stay Here with Me**).

Coal Black Horse earned the 2007 Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction as well as the Ohioana Book Award for fiction. The novel also was a finalist for the SIBA (Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance) Book Award for fiction, and it was nominated for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the first and only annual U.S. literary award recognizing the power of the written word to promote peace.

Far Bright Star – the second book (with **Coal Black Horse**) in a trilogy that Olmstead is planning – has won a 2010 Spur Award from the Western Writers of America for “Best Western Short Novel.”

Robert Olmstead received his B.A. and M.A. from Syracuse University. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an NEA grant, he is a professor at Ohio Wesleyan University and director of Ohio Wesleyan's Creative Writing Program.

Photo of Robert Olmstead by Molly Olmstead-Uline. Used with permission from Algonquin Books. Biography compiled from information provided by Cole Hatcher, Ohio Wesleyan University, and by Algonquin Books. Used with permission.

Author Resources:

Robert Olmstead's official website

<http://www.robertolmsteadbooks.com/>

Author page on Algonquin website

http://www.workman.com/authors/robert_olmstead/

Robert Olmstead at Ohio Wesleyan University Department of English

<http://english.owu.edu/olmstead.html>

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Talk About it!

(Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key events in the book. Do not read if you don't want to find out what happens.)

- How would you describe Robey's relationship with his mother, the coal black horse, his father, and Rachel? How is each relationship different and alike? And how do these relationships define Robey as a boy and Robey as a man?
- War has affected the land and the people—for example, the “raggedy old woman with a sun-stained and stroketwisted face” (page 178). To what extent have the characters, the land, and even the animals been affected by the ravages of war?
- How has Robey's story altered the way you think about war and violence? Has it made you think about love and faith differently? Are there particular passages that reflect your opinions and feelings?

Above discussion questions courtesy Algonquin Books; used with permission.

- Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson was considered by many to be the greatest of all the Confederate generals. He died on May 10, 1863, the day when **Coal Black Horse** opens. Why do you think this event led Robey's mother to send him on this mission?
- Robey's journey takes only a few months (early May to late summer). Compare his character at the beginning of the story versus at the end of the story; in what ways has he changed?
- If placed in the same situation, is it likely that a 14-year-old today would have the same independence and strength that Robey exhibited?
- In traditional ‘hero's quest’ stories, the hero is given a talisman, undertakes a journey, and gains wisdom and courage before returning home. Would you say that **Coal Black Horse** fits that description? What other stories can you think of that also fit that description?
- Are there elements of the supernatural in this book? Do you think that these elements served as literary devices in order for the story to move forward?
- Has this book had an impact on your understanding of the Civil War?



<http://oh.webjunction.org/ohctointro>

- The novel offers great contrasts between people whose actions might be called 'good' (Robey, Morphew the merchant who loaned him the horse) and people whose actions might be called 'inhuman' (the scavengers, the preacher). After witnessing such brutality, what prevents Robey from becoming brutal himself? Or, would you say that he does become capable of brutality, out of necessity?
- Is it difficult to keep our own, modern-day experiences from influencing the reading of historical fiction? Can we imagine what life was really like for these characters?
- Does the book have a hopeful ending?

Above discussion questions courtesy The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County; used with permission.

Continue the conversation! Additional discussion questions are found in the Reader's Guide included in the paperback edition of **Coal Black Horse**, along with a conversation with Robert Olmstead. These resources may also be found online at: http://www.workman.com/more/readers-guides/coal_black_horse/.

In the classroom:

Teachers, please note: Reading **Coal Black Horse** will address benchmarks for the following Ohio academic content standards for grades 10-12:

English/Language Arts Standards

- Reading Process: Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies Standard (all indicators)
- Reading Applications: Literary Text Standard (all indicators)
- Acquisition of vocabulary (all indicators)

May also include assignments that address benchmarks from the following standards:

- ELA: Writing Processes
- ELA: Writing Applications
- ELA: Writing Conventions
- Social Studies: History

Alignment with Ohio Academic Content Standards courtesy The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County; used with permission.



<http://oh.webjunction.org/ohctrointro>

Explore more!

“Echoes of the Past” by Linda Feagler

<http://ohiomag.com/Main/Articles/4015.aspx>

Article from *Ohio Magazine*, July 2007: “Delaware author Robert Olmstead explores war and family ties in his new novel, **Coal Black Horse**.”

Robert Olmstead on His Life as a Writer

<http://kboo.fm/node/16352>

Audio interview with Robert Olmstead from KBOO Community Radio (originally broadcast August 2009).

Ohioana Awards 2008

http://www.ohiochannel.org/multimedia/media.cfm?file_id=116529

Video of the 2008 award ceremony from The Ohio Channel. Robert Olmstead received the 2008 Ohioana Award in fiction for **Coal Black Horse**.

An Interview with Robert Olmstead by Christopher Zenowich

<http://bit.ly/b5cQAM> (Opens Weber site)

From the Fall 1996 issue of *Weber*, a biannual journal informing the culture and environment of the contemporary West.

Ohio Civil War 150

<http://www.ohiocivilwar150.org/>

2011 marks the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) of the start of the American Civil War. The Ohio Civil War 150 website, a project of the Ohio Historical Society and its partners, includes digital collections, teacher resources, a statewide calendar of Civil War-related events, discussion forums, a timeline, and much more.

U.S. Civil War History

<http://www.ipl.org/div/pf/entry/48451>

This pathfinder is a starting point for quality information about the Civil War, including print and web sources, from *ipl2: Information You Can Trust*.

About Choose to Read Ohio

Choose to Read Ohio (CTRO) spotlights Ohio authors and promotes reading across Ohio. The State Library of Ohio, in partnership with Ohioana Library Association, developed this initiative to encourage Ohioans of all ages to share literature by authors native to, residing in, or associated with Ohio. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: <http://oh.webjunction.org/ohctrointro>.