

Johnny Tremain

A Story of Boston in Revolt



Esther Forbes

With a new introduction by the Newbery Honor winner Gary D. Schmidt

Johnny Tremain

Written by ESTHER FORBES

Illustrated by LYND WARD

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To Pamela, Emily, John and Molly Taylor

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Introduction by Gary D. Schmidt

On the day that *Johnny Tremain* was first published, the United States was midway through World War II—though at the time, no one knew how much longer the war would go on. Germany had conquered Europe and Great Britain was tottering. American forces were fighting fierce battles in North Africa, but they hadn't even a toehold on the European front. In the Pacific, the war seemed to be going badly. Every tiny island was a battleground, and a costly, deadly one at that. Despite President Roosevelt's radio assurances, Americans realized that the costs of this worldwide fight for freedom were going to be very high, and would touch every family.

In the middle of that comes the most unlikely book—unlikely because it is astounding that it was ever written or published. Esther Forbes was a historian, not a novelist—certainly not a novelist for young readers. In the year that *Johnny Tremain* was published—1943—she had won the Pulitzer Prize for *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (1942), but that was a historical work for an adult audience. Now she was using what she had learned in that book to try her hand at a story about a young boy growing up in Boston during the Revolutionary War. And she was going to base it all on a single, small, true incident in which a boy delivered a message about British movements to Paul Revere—a slight enough beginning, to be sure.

But there was more that made the book unlikely. As a writer, Forbes faced enormous struggles. She had to work her way through dyslexia, a condition that made it extremely difficult to draft any writing. She rarely spelled a word the same way twice. Her punctuation was a series of dashes—and that's it. And her temperament would have driven most editors to tears: she refused to accept suggested changes to her story, she refused to clean up the manuscript with proper punctuation, and she refused to even bother with standard spelling.

And if that weren't enough, she decided to put the most important words in the book—the words that would sum up the book's entire meaning—in the mouth of a character who is clearly a lunatic.

Here are those words: “that a man can stand up.”

Half a dozen words. Each only a single syllable.

But perhaps it was these very things that made the book almost inevitable,

and that made Esther Forbes the one person to write it. It was her years of work on *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* that gave her the historian's eye that was so necessary. Only someone so immersed in the world of Revolutionary Boston could guide a reader through the narrow streets, under the signs of various shops, to the wharves where the boys went swimming, down to the Common where the blueberry bushes were thick and as high as a cow's belly and the British soldiers were drilling, out along the Neck where Redcoats guarded the way to Charleston.

But it was her novelist's eye that Esther Forbes used as well, to enliven a character like Johnny, who begins as an arrogant, almost obnoxious apprentice so skilled that he runs his master's household, so clever that he dominates the other apprentices, so sure of himself that he has his entire life planned out: he will become a wealthy silversmith, with a household of his own, and fat, rich merchants like John Hancock will come to him, begging for his work. But this is not the way it is to be. Instead, Johnny finds himself turning his back on his trade—because he has no choice—and then on his aristocratic heritage—because he does have a choice—and choosing instead to become one of this new breed of men whose fight is deeper and wider than even they know, whose fight is not only for themselves, but for all humanity. He will become an American.

He will fight so that a man—any person, anywhere—can stand up.

For Forbes is writing about 1775. And she is writing about the fictional character Johnny Tremain. And her history and her story drive us through her novel at a pace as fast as Johnny's horse, Goblin.

But Esther Forbes is writing with another purpose, too.

She is addressing a nation of young readers who are looking about at their nation at war. They know soldiers and sailors and pilots from their cities and neighborhoods, their churches and synagogues, their schools and town business—their families—who have died in the fight against the world's darkest cruelty and oppression. Up and down their streets they see the stars hung in the windows, showing that from this household, a boy is away at war, fighting for America. And Esther Forbes wants to say, This is why we are fighting. This is what it means to stand against evil. So she has Johnny remember the words of James Otis: "so a man can stand up." And she has Doctor Warren respond, "Yes. And some of us would die—so other men can stand up on their feet like men. A great many are going to die for that. They have in the past. They will a hundred years from now—two hundred. God

grant there will always be men good enough.”

The words are stirring, for they look forward to the Civil War, and now to World War II, when Americans are called upon to fight so that all people, in this country and abroad, can stand up. And so the book ends on a somber but incredibly hopeful tone, as Johnny understands that many “would die, but not the thing they died for.”

This is what Esther Forbes wanted to convey to her first readers—and to readers of *Johnny Tremain* in future years, when the country is again called upon to fight “so a man can stand up.”

But—and this is a big but—she does not make things easy, because in real life, things are rarely easy. It is not the case that the British are all oppressive, wicked men who want to take vengeance on the Americans. The occupation of Boston is a gentle one; until the end of the book, the American cause is hardly challenged. A number of the British soldiers are on the side of the American revolutionaries; all the Redcoat Pumpkin wants is to change his uniform for a farmer’s smock and go find some land he can work. There are so many soldiers like Pumpkin that the British are hard-pressed to keep their soldiers in Boston. And Johnny actually likes Lieutenant Stranger, who saves his horse, and who practices riding and jumping with him on the Common.

And not all the Americans are noble. Sam Adams will use anything to fight for his cause, even means that he knows are underhanded. The Sons of Liberty have no trouble dismissing James Otis, even though he is one of their founding members. They can be bullies, too; Johnny witnesses the awful things that are done to one Tory victim. And many of the townsfolk of Boston seem more concerned with the profit of their business than the great cause that is swirling around them.

Johnny’s commitment is, more than anything else, to an idea: that every person has the right to be free. For him, this is more important than business, than his trade as a silversmith, than friendships. When he thinks of Doctor Warren operating on his maimed hand to cut the scar tissue and free the movement of his thumb, he thinks only that now he will be able to fight for the cause. His commitment to fighting for freedom is even more important than the grief he feels when his closest friend is shot dead on Lexington Green during the first day of fighting. That is something he will think about another time. Right now, there is this work to be done.

I first read *Johnny Tremain* because of Walt Disney, who made the novel into a film in 1957—the year I was born. It was one of several movies and

adventure series that Disney made about early American history—like *The Swamp Fox* (1959–61) and *Daniel Boone* (1964–70) and *Zorro* (1957–59). I probably first saw it on *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color*, which aired on Sunday nights on our black-and-white television set—which didn’t show any color, but we tried to imagine. It was thrilling. Johnny was daring, brave, and resourceful—and he rode a horse really well. He disdained a life of aristocratic ease and chose to become not Jonathan Lyte, but Johnny Tremain—an American. He gained the trust of men such as Paul Revere, and dressed like an Indian for the Boston Tea Party, and was there when the lanterns were hung high in the tower of the North Church.

I probably knew that the film wasn’t particularly good history: after the tea was thrown into Boston Harbor, the Sons of Liberty probably did not process through the streets of Boston, showing off, playing drums and fifes. And probably they did not carry lanterns to illuminate the Liberty Tree, all the while singing, “It’s a tall old tree and a strong old tree.” But I can still sing the song, and I remember the sight of the tree glowing in the darkness, and the swelling of pride that I, too, was somehow connected to all of this.

I think Esther Forbes would have approved. She was, after all, speaking to all generations, hoping that whatever else the American experiment in democracy meant, it meant that the country would rise to challenge evil, that it would praise noble sacrifice, and that it would commit itself always to enable every man, woman, and child to stand up.