

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## My Brother Sam Is Dead

by

### James Lincoln Collier

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### Book Information

James Lincoln Collier, My Brother Sam Is Dead  
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Scholastic, Inc, 1974  
ISBN 0-590-40737-6; LCCN  
216 Pages  
Book Level: 4.9  
Interest Level: MG

In this novel of the American Revolution, a young man is torn between his brother's patriotism and his father's Tory sympathies. The coauthor is Christopher Collier.

**Award:** Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books;  
Newbery Honor; Phoenix Award/Honor

**Topics:** Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Fathers;  
Power Lessons AR, Grade 4;  
Recommended Reading, California  
Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Wars,  
American Revolutionary War

### Main Characters

Betsy Read Sam's girlfriend and granddaughter of Colonel Read

Captain Betts the Meekers' neighbor who was in the Rebel militia

Colonel Read the head of the Patriot militia, who doesn't think the Patriots should fight unless there is no other way and does not actively take part in the war

Eliphalet "Life" Meeker Tim and Sam's father, who owns and runs a tavern, is loyal to the King and dies as a prisoner onboard a British prison ship

General Putnam the strict Rebel general who sentences Sam to death for stealing cattle

Jerry Sanford a boy around the same age as Tim, who is his friend and ends up dying on a prison ship

Mr. Beach the minister of the Meekers' church, who is a Loyalist

Mr. Rogers the Meekers' neighbor and a Patriot

Mr. William Heron a neighbor of the Meekers who probably works for both the British and the Patriots

Sam Meeker Tim's older brother, who has left college to join the Rebel forces against his father's wishes

Susannah Meeker Tim and Sam's mother, who is torn between the love she has for her son and the need to obey her husband's wishes

the Platts Tim's cousins on his mother's side of the family, with whom Sam and his father stay on the way to Verplancks Point to sell their cattle

Tim Meeker the principal character and narrator of the story; an adolescent boy whose family is caught in the middle of the Revolutionary War

Tom Warrups the last Indian in Redding, to whose hut Sam often went when he had a fight with his father

### Vocabulary

**fusillade** a quick discharge of many firearms

**lasciviousness** lust; sexual immorality

**recalcitrance** stubborn resistance to authority

**sedition** language or conduct that causes others to rebel against the government

**seines** a large fishing net

### Synopsis

Tim Meeker, a boy living in the Tory town of Redding, Connecticut, tells the story of his family's life during the Revolutionary War. His older brother, Sam, has joined the Rebel Army, while their father is a loyal supporter of the English king. He does not want Sam to fight in the war. Tim doesn't know whose side to take. He has always looked up to his brother, but his father is a very imposing figure. Sam comes home to get his father's gun, and he and his father get into an argument. Sam takes the gun without permission and leaves.

The Meekers own a tavern, and Tim is kept busy doing chores. The war seems far away until Rebel soldiers come to the tavern looking for weapons. They know Mr. Meeker is not a Patriot, and they treat him roughly when he claims to have no weapons. Tim knows Sam is nearby and begs him to come home to help their father. Sam finally agrees, but they arrive too late. The Rebel soldiers

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are gone, and their father is all right. Sam runs off without saying anything to his parents. The only contact they have with him is a few letters.

Soon the time comes to drive cattle to Verplancks Point and sell them to buy supplies for the tavern. It is the first time Tim makes the trip with his father. Along the way, a group of cow-boys, Rebel thieves who steal cattle, stop them. They are interrupted by another band of men who offer the Meekers an escort to Verplancks Point. After selling the cattle and buying supplies, the Meekers head home, but run into a snowstorm. They are again accosted by the cow-boys, who take Mr. Meeker as a prisoner. Tim is able to escape harm by fooling them into thinking an escort is on its way. Tim makes it home by himself. Now he and his mother are on their own. Tim realizes he has changed. He no longer thinks like a boy, but like a man.

In the spring, British troops arrive in Redding. Tim witnesses them killing several of his Patriot neighbors. After these incidents, he no longer thinks of himself as a Patriot or a Loyalist. He just wants the war to end. Later, Tim and his mother learn that Mr. Meeker has died of cholera aboard a British prison ship. Sam is stationed in Redding for the winter and tries to visit them often. One night while he is at the tavern, they hear noises. Someone is stealing the Meekers' cattle. Sam chases them, but the thieves grab him and tell the authorities that he is the cattle thief. At his trial, he is found guilty. The general wishes to make an example of him and sentences him to death. Tim looks on as his brother is shot as a cattle thief.

In the epilogue, Tim is an old man. He tells the reader he has written this story to commemorate the life of his brother. He tells us his life after the war has been a happy one. He reminds us of the cost of the war and wonders if there may have been another way to achieve the same end.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

When Mother was speaking to Sam, she said of Tim, "He's had to grow up fast. He didn't have much choice." What did she mean?

*Tim was forced to grow up when his father was taken prisoner. He had to take on the responsibilities that were once his father's. She probably was also trying to make Sam feel guilty for not being there to help them.*

### Literary Analysis

How does Tim change during the course of the story?

*He becomes more responsible. He changes from a boy into a man. He is at first unsure of which side to support. By the end of the story, he supports neither side. He learns to deal with his grief and gets on with his life. As a boy, he is excited by the glories of war. As an old man, he looks back and wonders if freedom could have been achieved in a different way.*

### Inferential Comprehension

As an old man, Tim Meeker seems to have the same opinion his father had about the Revolutionary War. What do you think led him to have this opinion?

*He personally witnessed the effects of war. Although both sides seemed right at times, both sides committed atrocities against each other and against innocent people. He lost his father, his brother, and many neighbors in the war.*

### Constructing Meaning

How are Tim's chores like the chores of a child today? How are they different?

*Tim helped around his parents' place of business. He also milked the cow, helped plant and weed the garden, and fed the animals. These are things that even children of today might do. Children of today, however, would use machines to do many of these chores. They probably would not have had as many chores to do as Tim did.*

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### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story is set in colonial Connecticut during the Revolutionary War. Other areas of colonial America are also mentioned. Students could read and compare *Johnny Tremain* or another book about this time period to *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. Students could also do short reports on the real people mentioned in the story, such as Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr, or George Washington.

**Understanding Literary Features** One theme in the book was voiced first by Mr. Meeker and later by Mrs. Meeker and Tim. Could there have been another way besides war to achieve the same end? This question could be used in a class or small group discussion. Students might look at the question specifically with the Revolutionary War in mind or in a more general way with regard to all wars.

**Understanding Characterization** Tim Meeker feels strange when he discovers that his brother, Sam, is wrong about something. He had always placed Sam on a pedestal, but now he feels like his equal. People often idolize other people, especially sports stars and actors. We see these people as superhuman and without faults. As a class discussion or writing assignment, have the students describe someone they look up to. Have them explain why this person is so special. Did their heroes ever do anything that made them seem less than heroic? Were they ever disappointed in their heroes?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The story was told in the first person with Tim Meeker as the narrator. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a different main character from the book. Then have each group discuss how the story would have been different if it had been told by that character. For example, if Sam had told the story, the reader would have heard more about life as a soldier. The story would have been more in favor of the Patriots.