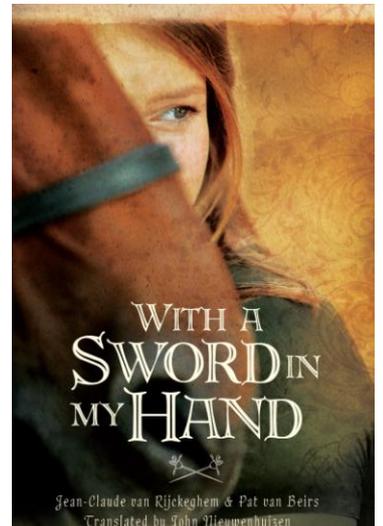


With a Sword in My Hand

Jean-Claude Van Rijckeghem
and Pat Van Beirs,
translated by John Nieuwenhuizen

April 2010 ISBN 978 1 74175 865 8 pb



Summary

With a Sword in My Hand is an engaging and fascinating novel set in the Middle Ages. 14-year-old Marguerite is the heiress to Flanders. Her father is determined to marry her off to his own advantage, yet spirited Marguerite defies his plans.

- Suitable for students aged 13 – 16 years (particularly year 8)
- VELS level 5 (Victoria), Stage 4 (N.S.W.), Standards 3 - 5 - stages 9 to 13 (Tasmania), Year 8 (Queensland), Early adolescence (Western Australia), Middle Years (South Australia), Bands 3 - 4 (Northern Territory) and Early adolescence (A.C.T.)

With a Sword in My Hand is a piece of historical fiction, based on the life of a real person, Marguerite of Male (Marguerite van Male – pronounced [marlə]). Marguerite's father, the Count, is determined to father a son, but Marguerite is his only surviving, legitimate child. The Count wants to marry her off to Edmund of England, making the best economic and political match possible. But Marguerite is a spirited young lady who defies her father's wishes.

Use in the curriculum

Using *With a Sword in My Hand* as a class text (either in English or Humanities/SOSE) would lead to invaluable discussions regarding life in the Middle Ages and the role of women in Medieval society. It is suggested that *With a Sword in My Hand* be studied:

- As an English text:
 - as an example of historical fiction;
 - As an example of a first person narrative;
 - As an example of a fictionalised piece of writing based on a historical figure.
 - as a basis for a detailed piece of work on how life in the Middle Ages compares to life today.
- In Humanities/SOSE classes as an adjunct to the study of Medieval society; war, witchcraft, role of women, everyday life.

Teaching tools to support the study of *With a Sword in My Hand* could include the television series *Merlin* and the movie *Ladyhawke* and books such as Catherine Jinks's *Pagan series*.

Sample discussion questions overleaf.

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In the classroom...

With a Sword in My Hand

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Discussion Questions

1. "It ...It is... a girl," he stutters. Then he turns and slams the door behind him (p. 7) The Count is disappointed that a girl has been born. Why do royal and titled families around the world insist on a male heir? Is this right?
2. Describe how religion shapes the lives of the inhabitants of Male. Give specific examples.
3. Make a list of similarities faced by Marguerite and young adults today. What world events occurred in the text that you can relate to events occurring today?
4. How does the use of the first person affect the reading of the text? Why do authors employ this tactic?
5. 'Every time I see you... I see God laughing at me. Because that is what you are. A joke. God's jest.' (p. 31) How does the quest for a male heir affect Marguerite and her family?
6. '...If you ever looked in the mirror, you must realise that Edmund is not marrying you for your beauty.' (p. 76) 'You had courage. You are a worthy Lady of Flanders.' (p. 92) What does the story say about beauty and courage? Do you see examples of the two going hand-in-hand? Is one more valuable than the other? Explain.
7. 'Women like you impede the moral and material regeneration of the world.' (p. 48) Are Marguerite's tomboy ways at odds with her title as a lady? Explain your thoughts by using examples.
8. 'Women and swords, they don't go together, little lady.' (p. 10). How does Ferre's gift of a sword change Marguerite's life? Would she have become the person she did without it?
9. Marguerite of Male was a real person. Yet much of this story is fictionalised as little is known about her. How accurate do you think this portrayal of her life in the Middle Ages might be?
10. 'There is only one single person who will be able to rule Flanders when I am no longer there, and that is you. You are made of iron...' (p. 124) At the end of the book, the Count's attitude towards his daughter has changed. How did that occur and what do you think the future holds for Marguerite?

Curriculum recommendation and discussion questions prepared by Judith Way.

Judith Way is a teacher-librarian with a Graduate Diploma of Children's Literature and a Master of Arts. She was the recipient of the School Library Association of Victoria's John Ward Award for outstanding contribution to teacher librarianship in 2007 and was awarded the Children's Book Council of Australia Eleanor E. Robertson prize in 2003. She has presented at conferences locally and internationally. Judith writes the Bright Ideas blog (<http://slav.globalteacher.org.au> <<http://slav.globalteacher.org.au/>>) for the School Library Association of Victoria and has compiled the Readers Cup blog (<http://readerscup.globalteacher.org.au> <<http://readerscup.globalteacher.org.au/>>).