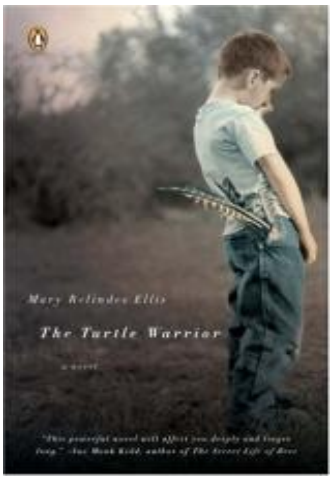
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The Turtle Warrior

by Mary Relindes Ellis



About the Book

The Turtle Warrior is the story of the Lucas family, who live in a beautiful and remote part of Wisconsin inhabited by working-class European immigrants and the Ojibwe. By 1967 the Lucas farm has fallen into disrepair, thanks to the hard drinking of John Lucas, who brutalizes his wife and two sons. When the eldest, James, escapes by enlisting to fight in Vietnam, he leaves young Bill alone to protect his mother with only his own will and the spirit of his brother to guide him. Beautifully written and deeply felt, **The Turtle Warrior** takes readers from the heartland of America to the battlefields of World War II and Vietnam weaving a haunting tale of an unforgettable world where the physical and spiritual, the past and the present, merge.

Discussion Guide

1. Why has Mary Relindes Ellis chosen **The Turtle Warrior** as her title? In what ways is the snapping turtle, both literally and symbolically, important to the novel? Why would Bill call himself the "Turtle Warrior"? In what ways does he come out of his shell by the end of the book?

2. In the novel's opening chapter, Ernie reflects that "allowing words to go unspoken could cause not only harm to oneself but harm to another" (p. 5). His wife, Rosemary, says of him that "He deals with pain like most men, treating it as though it doesn't exist and therefore cannot be talked about" (p. 204). At what crucial moments in the novel does the failure to speak, to communicate one's deepest or most painful feelings, cause harm? Why would Ernie, particularly, feel such grief over words unspoken?

3. Mary Relindes Ellis employs an unusual narrative strategy in **The Turtle Warrior**, retelling the same events from different points of view. How does this way of telling the story affect how we read the novel?

4. Lieutenant Hildebrandt ceases to believe in God when he sees the horror of war in Vietnam. He feels the killing is for

"nothing but old men's dreams of winning the invisible. There were no holy wars. There was nothing but money and games and betrayal at the top" (p. 101). Is his view of war borne out in the novel itself? How do the other characters?Jimmy, Ernie, Rosemany, John Lucas's father?feel about war? In what ways can the manner of Jimmy's death be read as an indictment of war?

5. Rosemary tells Ernie to "think of crying...as medicine. It feels bad now, but it will make you feel better in the long run" (p. 220). She also thinks that "It is those men who do not cry that are in danger and dangerous to hunt with" (p. 224). Why would the inability to cry make one dangerous? In what ways does the open expression of pain and grief save Billy and Ernie at the end of the novel?

6. How would you explain the extreme violence?from John Lucas's abuse of his wife and sons to the war in Vietnam?that occurs in **The Turtle Warrior**? What are the connections between violence in families and violence between nations?

7. Claire asks, "What possesses a man to torture an area of the body meant for pleasure and for giving life? A sacred area. How could he do it to a little boy? His own son?" (p. 306). Why does John Lucas inflict such pain on his son? In what ways has his own father's treatment of him led to this behavior? What enables Bill to break the cycle of abuse?

8. In what ways is Claire's predicament typical of women trapped in abusive relationships? What options does Claire have? Should she have left her husband? Why doesn't she?

9. Bill thinks that "people who were much loved and who died had a way of clinging. Rather than fade, they grew in another dimension" (p. 341). In what ways does Jimmy's spirit "cling" to his family? At what crucial moments does he appear or communicate with the living? What effect do these communications have?

10. When Bill starts reading again, he realizes that he "had forgotten the interior pleasure of sitting quietly and absorbing a story that lifted him effortlessly away from his own life and at the same time strangely affirmed that his own life was real to him" (p. 315). In what ways does reading **The Turtle Warrior** itself offer both an escape from, and a deeper connection with, one's own life? In what ways is it diverting? In what ways does it explore the basic human dilemmas we all experience in one form or another?

Author Bio

Mary Relindes Ellis's stories have been anthologized in **Uncommon Waters: Women Write About Fishing**; **Bless Me, Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood**; **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror**; and **Gifts of the Wild: A Woman's Book of Adventure**.

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