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Age 14

Alison Canar

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Spillebeen, Geert. *Age 14*. Houghton Mifflin, 2009. ISBN 9780547053424. \$16.00. 216 p.

Reviewer: Alison Canar

Reading Level: Young adult

Rating: Dependable

Genre: Historical fiction;

Subject: Child soldiers--Ireland--Juvenile fiction; World War, 1914-1918--Participation, Juvenile--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

May 1915, John Condon receives a disturbing telegram: He is missing in action and presumed dead. In truth, John knows that this missing soldier is actually his younger brother Patrick, who used John's name and birth date to sneak into the military. Patrick's story begins with the end of his school career. Just ten years old, Patrick spends his days in menial labor to provide income for his family. Patrick secretly saves his pocket change and finally leaves his hometown at age 12 to join the militia. Thanks to his large stature, he manages to pass for 17 and starts training. Patrick maintains an idealized vision of warfare, even when he arrives at the front lines in France. However, his harrowing experiences with snipers and chlorine gas make him understand the severity of war. Unfortunately, this revelation comes too late to prevent his untimely death.

Blending fact and fiction, Spillebeen creates a grim depiction of European life during the World War I era. Even before Patrick encounters the violence of the battlefield, excerpts from his life are generally depressing. Posing as an older boy also forces Patrick to encounter other mature issues such as alcoholism and sexuality. The early glimpses of Patrick's troubled family life do allow the reader to see why the military would appeal to him and other young boys. As a translated text, the language occasionally feels awkward and—in addition to the third-person narration—may generate a disconnection between the reader and Patrick's story.

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