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Based on a True Story: John Lincoln Clem, Civil War Drummer Boy

Leah Christopher

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**Book Review**

**Title:** Based on a True Story: John Lincoln Clem, Civil War Drummer Boy  
**Author:** E. F. Abbott  
**Illustrator:** Steven Noble  
**Reviewer:** Leah Christopher  
**Publisher:** Feiwel and Friends  
**Publication Year:** 2016  
**ISBN:** 9781250068378  
**Number of Pages:** 185  
**Interest Level:** Intermediate  
**Rating:** Outstanding

**Review**

Drummer boys in the Civil War are typically ages 14 and up—but the patriotic nine-year-old John Clem secretly jumps on a train to join the Union army. Marching endlessly through the heat of the South, John directs troops with his drum and makes friends with unlikely folks—even a runaway slave. Based on a real account, the book follows John’s three-year stint in the military, including his run-in with General Ulysses S. Grant, who asks him to drum at the Battle of Shiloh, and his success in playing dead at the Battle of Chickamauga. After being captured and later shot in the hip, Johnny is sent home to his family, who believed him dead all these years.

As a historical fiction novel for intermediate readers, *John Lincoln Clem, Civil War Drummer Boy* doesn’t disappoint. The book describes the main conflicts of the war and includes historically accurate information about the era—including popular songs, games, and customs—and about the life of Civil War soldiers—illnesses, injuries, imprisonment, and all. Other helpful resources include maps and primary-source photographs, a glossary of drum calls mentioned throughout the book, and an author’s note on the accuracy or adaptation of details. With endearing characters and swift-moving action, this book would appeal to young readers, who can admire the feats of a character who makes a mark by just being a kid.

*Contains moderate violence in describing Civil War battles.*