

Picture of the Dead

Adele Griffin

Lisa Brown, Illustrator

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The mid- to late nineteenth-century was a time of turbulent change for the United States. The brutality of the Civil War, important strides in technology, and changes in popular religious thought all colored this time period. Each of these topics is woven with great skill into *Picture the Dead*, a mystery by National Book Award finalist Adele Griffin and award-winning illustrator Lisa Brown.

Jennie Lovell is a young woman living with her detestable aunt and uncle. Her twin brother, Toby, and cousins, Quinn and Will, went off to fight in the war. Now, just weeks after a letter came announcing Toby's death, her cousin Quinn has returned and brings with him the dreaded news that Will, who was also Jennie's betrothed, has been killed. The mourning family visits Heinrich Geist, a spirit photographer. Though the photograph Geist presents to the family is a fake, Will's spirit does contact Jennie. She describes his visit: "I open my eyes and Will stands before me in blazing life in his Union uniform...His anger is palpable. He is so real, so alive, that I can inhale the tang of the salt water that he has carried in with him." This prompts Jennie to keep in contact with Geist, and through a series of clues imprinted in Geist's photographs, Will helps Jennie to uncover a dark secret.

Photography was in its infancy in the mid-1800s, and the Civil War was notable for, among other things, being much photographed. Spiritualism, which is central to this story, was popular during this time period, as people yearned for a connection to the young men who died in battle. Complementing Griffin's writing are Brown's detailed black and white drawings of Jennie's scrapbook. The poses, facial expressions, and backgrounds are true to the time period and the characters. Clues are unveiled to the reader even as Jennie is discovering them, and the images help bring the story to life. *Picture the Dead* is entertaining, thought-provoking, and just a little bit spooky. It is also highly educational, though readers will likely be having too much fun to notice how much they are learning!

CATHERINE THURESON (May / June 2010)

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