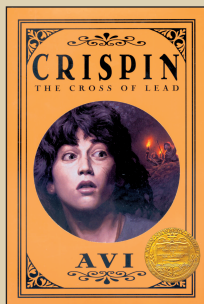


This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and author of *Reaching for Sun*. Visit her Web site at [www.tracievaughnzimmer.com](http://www.tracievaughnzimmer.com) to find hundreds of guides to children's literature.

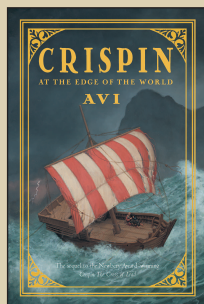
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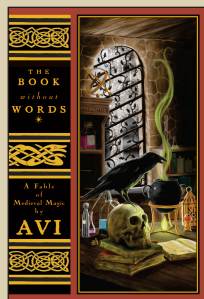
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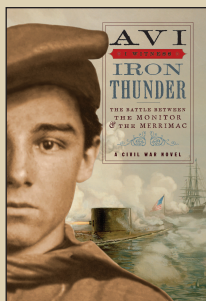
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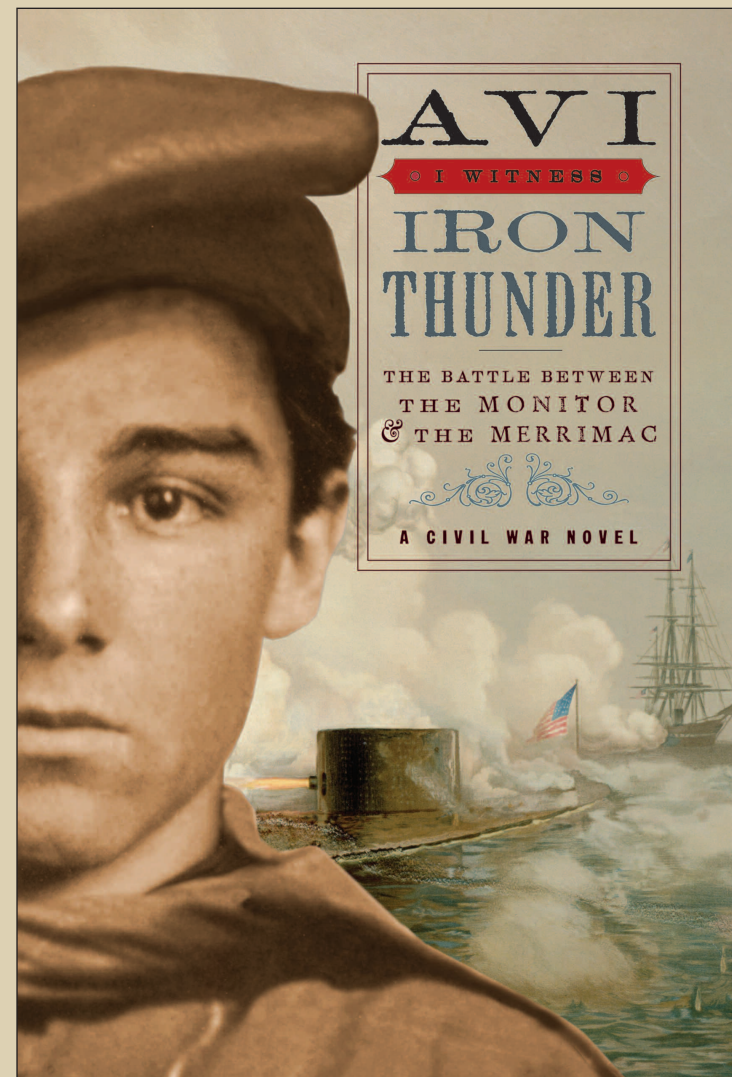
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DISCUSSION GUIDE  
HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When his father is killed fighting for the Union in the War Between the States, thirteen-year-old Tom Carroll must take a job to help support his family. He manages to find work at a bustling ironworks in his hometown of Brooklyn, New York, where dozens of men are frantically pounding together the strangest ship Tom has ever seen. A ship made of iron.

Tom becomes assistant to the ship's inventor, a gruff, boastful man named Captain John Ericsson. He soon learns that the Union army has very important plans for this iron ship called the *Monitor*. It is supposed to fight the Confederate "sea monster"—another ironclad—the *Merrimac*. But Ericsson is practically the only person who believes the *Monitor* will even float. Everyone else calls it Ericsson's Folly or the "iron coffin."

Meanwhile, Tom's position as Ericsson's assistant has made him a target of Confederate spies, who offer him money for information about the ship. Tom finds himself caught between two certain dangers: an encounter with murderous spies and a battle at sea in an iron coffin. . . .

## ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide includes discussion questions intended to provoke thought and insight into the themes of the book, which include duty, family, risk, choices, and war.

## PREREADING

Brainstorm a list of everything you know about the Civil War. Then, try to categorize the information into subject areas. Finally, circle any information that you think may be relevant to understanding the novel.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As the novel opens, what is Tom's biggest problem? What is the exact setting (in both time and place) of the story? How are these clues given to the reader?
2. Why must Tom work? What job does he land? What kind of job do you think you could do to help your family if they needed an extra income?
3. What do you think of the saying "...geniuses were like madmen." (p.19) Who seems to fit this description best? What other historical figures have also been seen this way? Why do you suppose they get these labels?
4. Describe Tom's first encounter with the ironclad. Would you want to be the first to try out an invention like this? What would be an equivalent invention for our time? Why is the ironclad so important to the war effort? What is her main objective? How is the *Monitor* related to her name?
5. Who is Ogden Quinn? What does he want with Tom? Is Tom wrong for accepting food and money even though he hasn't disclosed anything about the ironclad? Defend your answer.
6. Why does Tom begin staying full time on the *Monitor*? How does Captain Worden convince other sailors to join Tom? After losing his own father in the war, were you surprised by Tom's commitment to serve? Would you be willing?
7. What finally happens with the Copperheads? Who would you turn to in such a situation? How do you know who to trust?
8. Explain some of the difficulties the crew has with the mechanics of the Monitor. What problems arise with communication, air quality, and safety? With cooperation they were able to gain control once more. How? Have you ever worked with others as a team to accomplish a difficult task like the *Monitor's* crew? What did you learn?

9. Compare and contrast the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*. What advantages and disadvantages are on both? How do these play out during the battle? Describe what happens between these two amazing vessels.
10. The *Monitor* was like no other ship ever built. What was unique about her? What aspects of her design have stayed with modern navy ships around the world?
11. What was the most interesting thing you learned while reading this novel? How can historical fiction help us better understand an event rather than a straight nonfiction account? Which would you prefer reading and why?
12. John Ericsson invented other things besides the *Monitor*. What were they? Are any important today?

## PROJECTS

### History:

Avi says in the Author's Note that "...the facts—even those put forward by witnesses—can and should be disputed." (p. 200) Why does he feel this way? How can you dispute the facts of an historical event? Research the *Merrimac's* version of the events and write a brief account of the battle through the eyes of a shipman on that vessel as an alternative.

Research one of the terms from the glossary. Create at least three different projects that show your understanding of the term (pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations, art projects, models, primary source summaries, etc.)

Explore these historical treasures at the Library of Congress Web site:  
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tr11b.html#civil>

You can also visit the Monitor Museum online at [www.monitorcenter.org](http://www.monitorcenter.org)  
 It has some wonderful interactive multimedia presentations.

### Science:

On page 51 Tom experiments with a sheet of metal to understand the laws of "force and displacement." Using the chart below create your own experiments with a variety of materials to see firsthand what will float or sink. Discuss your results.

SINK or FLOAT?

Material:	Shape:	Prediction:	Result:

## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

### 1. What brought you to this particular episode in history?

I'm a reader of history. When I came upon the story of the building of the USS *Monitor* and its crucial 1862 Civil War battle with the Confederate *Merrimac*, I found it exciting, fascinating, and all very real. The building of the *Monitor*, like no other ship in the world, its quirky inventor, John Ericsson, its dangerous and almost fatal voyage to Virginia, its arrival at Hampton Roads at a moment of grave crisis for the United States, and the subsequent battle, a battle such as had never been fought before—fairly begged to be told in story form. I was happy to try my hand.

2. What type of research did you undertake in order to write authentically about this period?

There are any number of books about the *Monitor* and its inventor, John Ericsson, as well as published memoirs and correspondence from those who took part. I read as much as I could. Then I went to the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia and looked at original photographs, log books, letters, and telegrams that came from the people who were part of the story at the time it all happened. At the Mariners' Museum I also saw much of the actual ship as brought up from the bottom of the sea. All of these things made a powerful impression on me and helped with the writing of the book.



3. Were there any particular challenges to writing this book?

When you write a novel about something that actually happened there is constant tension between the telling of the facts, and the telling of a story that readers will find alive and exciting. I have no real desire to teach the story of the *Monitor*. But I love the idea of spinning a story that will engage people in the *experience* of the ship and the battle. Then, too, I wanted the book to be full of images about the real people involved in the creation and sailing of the *Monitor*, objects that illuminate the reality, plus charts, maps, and plans, which could give readers a true sense of what was.

4. Are you planning any more titles like *Iron Thunder*?

*Iron Thunder* is the first of a series, the I Witness series. What I've undertaken is to tell exciting stories that are true to actual events, replete with illustrations that reveal the reality of the time, the place, and the people involved.



*Monitor & Merrimac: First Fight Between Ironclads* courtesy of The Mariners' Museum