For the Love of Pete: An Orphan Train Story

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postmaster general, a station much more befitting his opinion of him-  
self. As a result, Holt’s political allegiance to the Union ultimately was  
secured when, as one of the last men left standing in the lame-duck  
Buchanan administration during the winter of 1861, he was appointed  
as secretary of war. From that unenviable position he could do little  
more than witness the fragmentation of the Union firsthand.  

Leonard presents Holt’s biography in a traditional, chronological  
fashion, connecting his personal episodes to the larger political nar-  
rative of national crisis. Her work is well researched and informative.  
She fleshes out her portrait by augmenting evidence from Holt’s per-  
sonal correspondence with an abundance of writings from family  
members and colleagues. Due praise aside, there are some missed  
opportunities. Holt’s relationship to slavery is not explained satisfac-  
torily given its importance. Leonard documents his ambivalence,  
perhaps suggesting more of an antislavery tendency than the evidence  
warrants, but little mention is made of his own experiences as a slave-  
holder, including an inadequate explanation of when the slaves he  
owned were emancipated. More seriously, despite Holt’s achieve-  
ments as the chief arbiter of military law, Leonard shies away from the  
subject of Holt and the law. Absent is any discussion of Holt’s legal  
theory or understanding of the law. Indeed, it appears simply as a  
career, a way to makes one’s way in the world. Given the role that  
Holt played in enforcing and adjudicating issues of confiscation,  
emancipation, and racial justice, this oversight is significant. Occasional  
references to correspondence with Francis Lieber, a noted law reformer  
and author of a code of instructions for military conduct, only whet  
the appetite for a more thorough analysis. The Civil War represented  
the ultimate repudiation of English common law forms and actions  
and their replacement with a new foundation of jurisprudence. Holt  
appears to have played a significant role in that transformation, but  
any such contribution eludes the scope of Leonard’s biography. These  
reservations notwithstanding, Professor Leonard has contributed  
another innovative book to her repertoire. It suggests that we still have  
much more to learn about the Civil War.  

*For the Love of Pete: An Orphan Train Story*, by Ethel Barker. North  
$19.95 paper.
Reviewer Millie K. Frese is the education and outreach manager at the State Historical Museum of Iowa. As the former editor of the Goldfinch, the State Historical Society of Iowa’s children’s magazine, she edited an issue on the orphan trains.

In her debut novel for middle-grade readers, Iowa City author Ethel Barker tells an orphan train story from the perspectives of three New York City street children. In July 1880 a “street rat” named Pete befriends two recently orphaned sisters, Iris and Rosie. A mumblety-peg lesson leads to an encounter with police and placement in an orphanage. From there, “the Reverend” invites them to board a train bound for rural Iowa. (Readers familiar with orphan train history will recognize later references to “Reverend Brace” as allusions to Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children’s Aid Society, whose emigration plan for destitute children eventually became known as “the orphan trains.”) Barker’s characters are placed in separate homes: Pete with a cruel farmer, Iris with an older couple who need a housekeeper, and Rosie with a wealthy—but unhappily married—couple. Chapters are narrated by alternating characters, but their voices are indistinguishable, often sounding more like an adult reminiscing about the distant past. Barker weaves a tale that “is almost too strange to be believed,” to borrow a line from one of her characters.

A Palimpsest article, “The Orphan Train Comes to Clarion” (Fall 1988), piqued Barker’s interest in this topic. From 1854 to 1929, charitable organizations removed poor children from New York City (not all were orphans), transporting an estimated 200,000 to new homes in “western” states. Approximately 8,000–10,000 children landed in Iowa. Young readers interested in learning more should look up The Goldfinch magazine’s spring 2000 issue devoted to orphan trains in Iowa history.


Reviewer Kate Elliott is assistant professor of art history at Luther College. Her research and writing have focused on Western American art.

As Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie series enters its eightieth year of publication, it is clear that the story of the American pioneer continues to enthral young readers. No stranger to the genre of young adult non-fiction herself, Nancy Plain adds to the story of pioneer perseverance with her beautifully illustrated examination of