

# Poverty and Humanity in I Had Seen Castles

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Walk through a door, and enter a new world. For John, raised in home resplendent with comfort and fine things, Ginny's family's apartment above the fruit market is a radically different environment than his own. Economic differences literally smack him in the face, as he enters the door and walks into towel hung to dry. "First lesson: how the poor do laundry" (Rylant 34). In this brief, potent scene, [amidst](#) "shirts, towels, underwear, pillowcases" hanging in a room strung with clotheslines, historical fiction finds crucial expression in the uncomfortable blush of a boy ready for a first date and unprepared for the world in which he finds himself.

Rylant juxtaposes Ginny's poor family, living on a salary that can only be secured within the harsh, unrelenting working conditions of an industrial mill, against John's family who is oblivious to the fear of poverty or hunger. In this juxtaposition, contemporary issues of economic privilege and workers rights influence the budding war-time romance of John and Ginny, and to us, the audience, peering in at them. By gradually magnifying John's discomfort in entering Ginny's "tattered neighborhood," Rylant reveals the historical extraordinariness of wealth amidst squalor in the city of Pittsburgh. "Mills were fed coal and men so Pittsburgh might live," and Ginny's father gives his life to the mill so his family might live, albeit in the walls of this tiny rented [apartment](#) (Rylant 2). Both [historically](#)

realistic and entirely fictitious, Rylant's characters break the "single perspective" of history texts, fleshing out facts with their own stories, and marking our modern time with their experiences (Jacobs and Tunnell 117).

*I Had Seen Castles* primarily chronicles the disillusionment of wartime heroism in the archetypal young soldier, John. His illusions of war sustain Ginny's controversial criticisms, though she infuriates and bewilders him, ultimately demonstrating the chilling effect of patriotic propaganda upon entire American communities throughout WWII. Beyond my diorama depiction of young lovers and a venerable mother meeting beneath clean laundry, the gruesomeness of war lurks and waits. Rylant brings war history to life in detailed, intimate ways, in dismembered, bloody soldiers, in the child with frozen legs that come off in warm bathwater, and in realistic treatment of John's disenchantment; "as the war dragged on through 1944, it became more difficult for us to justify to ourselves why we fought" (81). Yet Rylant also offers a picture of the resilience in human beings, through our undeniable bonds to one another, despite nationality, class or war loyalties.

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