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Which Side Are You On?: The Story of a Song

George Ella Lyon

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Which Side Are You On? tells the story of the classic union song that was written in 1931 by Florence Reece in a rain of bullets. It has been sung by people fighting for their rights all over the world. Florence's husband Sam was a coal miner in Kentucky. Many of the coal mines were owned by big companies, who kept wages low and spent as little money on safety as possible. Miners lived in company houses on company land and were paid in *scrip*, good only at the company store. The company owned the miners sure as sunrise.

That's why they had to have a union. Miners went on strike until they could get better pay, safer working conditions, and health care. The company hired thugs to attack union organizers like Sam Reece.

George Ella Lyon tells this hair-raising story through the eyes of one of Florence's daughters, a dry-witted, pig-tailed gal whose vantage point is from under the bed with her six brothers and sisters. The thugs' bullets hit the thin doors and windows of the company house and the kids lying low wonder whether they're going to make it out of this alive; wonder exactly if this strike will make their lives better or end them, but their mother keeps scribbling and singing. "We need a song," she tells her kids. That's not at all what they think they need. Graphic novelist Christopher Cardinale brings Florence's triumphant story to life in true rip-roaring union style.

Selected as an IRA Notable Book for a Global Society and a 2012 Skipping Stones Honor Book.

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