

★ **Answer Creek**

Ashley E. Sweeney

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Ashley E. Sweeney's novelization of the Donner Party fuses history, realism, and luminous prose.

Ada is nineteen when she's orphaned just after her wagon caravan leaves Missouri for California. Instead of turning back, Ada joins the Breen family with the Donner party, sharing the workload with Ma Breen.

Aware of impending winter, Donner persuades several families to take an alleged shortcut. Ada is reluctant, but she follows out of loyalty to the Breens. Donner's shortcut proves to be more hype than actuality, stranding the group in the mountains as twenty-foot blizzards and starvation take their toll.

As the book juxtaposes the party's desperation against their desire to remain human, its tension is near unbearable. Accounts of friendships, holiday celebrations, and other efforts to carry on normal routines, even while dead friends lie in the snow between huts, leave lasting impressions.

Seen through Ada's eyes, the world unfolds as a minute-to-minute experience. Her accretion of details, feelings, and observations results in intense realism. Hundreds of miles from any settlement, Ada receives rags and newspapers hoarded for personal hygiene as the greatest gift that one woman can give another. Her observations of nature are vibrant and infused with feeling, capturing majestic beauty as well as the eerie pull of vast emptiness.

Both the book's real-life and its fictional characters are made convincing. They act, have personalities, and converse in interesting ways. The best-known historical characters are background players in Ada's story, though, with only her new family, the Breens, stepping into larger roles. Ada's tale is absorbing, and her fortitude and concern for others is an anchoring force.

Majestic, moving, and layered with beauty and horror, *Answer Creek* is a bittersweet and satisfying historical novel.

SUSAN WAGGONER (May / June 2020)

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