

Yankees on the Doorstep: The Diary of Sarah Morgan

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Diaries are personal outlets for many teens, a place to record secrets and observations. Sometimes they become a part of history, such as the one kept by Anne Frank.

As a young woman in the American South, Sarah Morgan also kept a now historical diary that she never expected would be published, let alone inspire this version, beautifully fictionalized by the author of the Hattie Marshall series. In fact, Sarah left instructions that after her death her diary should be burned. Fortunately, this command was ignored by her son. As a twenty-year-old woman with scant formal education, she began writing in March 1862 when the Yankees were about to take the city of Baton Rouge, where she and her sister lived with their widowed mother. She wrote of the family's anxiety about the invaders, their escape with a few treasured possessions to the countryside, and various returns home until the girls were sent to live with a Confederate general's family across the river.

From the Confederate stronghold, Sarah recorded battles, fires, refuges, and the scuttling of the Arkansas by its own men prior to the Essex reaching it in the Mississippi River. Her journals also recorded the fun and romance that the girls occasionally found in exile, and their concern for the welfare of some of the Yankees who had helped their family. They hoped someone would care for their kin wearing gray uniforms just as they had provided comfort to the young men in blue.

Over and above the drama of the war and day-to-day concerns, Sarah had a serious accident that injured her spine. The injury was treated with then-primitive medical procedures and Sarah wrote that she was afraid that she would become a cripple; she wished to die instead. As Yankee forces moved toward where she was staying, and the firing began, she wrote: "Gathered in a knot, we women up here watched in the faint star light the flashes from the guns, and silently wondered which of our friends were lying stiff and dead?"

During the war's dark hours, pen and ink proved to be her best friends. Sarah's diary humanizes ordinary people caught in the tragic crossfire of the Civil War and gives teens a first-hand glimpse of how it affected young lives.

LINDA SALISBURY (September / October 2001)

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