

Sarah's Ground

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Review

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Rinaldi, Ann *Sarah's Ground*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, \$15.95 ISBN 689859244

Left of center

Outside looking in at epochs of American history

Ann Rinaldi, who has had a successful, award-laden career as a writer of historical fiction for young adults, has said she never writes with a specific audience or age group in mind, but rather that she simply writes the novels as they come to her. In all probability, this is a healthy approach for the novelist, but it has not prevented her from being double labeled as an author for young adults and more specifically as a writer for young girls. A reading of just a few of her novels, and there are a good many, should convince most readers that her novels, though they do indeed have a direct appeal to young women, also deserve a wider audience.

Rinaldi's novels always have the advantage of careful and pointed research. She usually provides the reader with an author's note that explains how her fiction is embedded in history and follows this note with a short bibliography. Almost all of Rinaldi's novels are set in the early periods of American history, most prominently the Revolutionary and Civil War periods. The novels are told from the first person point of view of actual young girls from history who tend to have occupied a position just a bit aside from the center of an important and dramatic moment or time in the American past. Among her best novels, for example, are: *Wolf by the Ears*, told from the point of view of Harriet Hemings, the daughter of the enslaved woman Sally Hemings of Thomas Jefferson's household (Jefferson has long been the reputed father of Sally Hemings's children); *In My Father's House*, the stepdaughter of Wilmer McLean tells the story of their family's ironic flight from a site at the center of the battle of the first Bull Run to escape the war's ravages to a peaceful small community called Appomattox Court House; and *My Eyes Have Seen*, based on the observations of

John Brown's daughter Annie as she waits with the future raiders of Harpers Ferry at the Kennedy farm in Maryland.

Rinaldi's latest novel **Sarah's Ground** has the same basic framework as the earlier novels. The young narrator is an 18-year-old young lady who is desperate to escape what she views as her life in a closet within her sheltered family life in Troy, New York. Through a bit of deception about her age, she is able to obtain a position of responsibility as the caretaker of George Washington's Mount Vernon, which has fallen into a state of disrepair and neglect. She moves into the home in that most dramatic moment of American history, the spring of 1861. The story then takes on a three-fold theme. There are the trials and difficulties of keeping the centrally located Mount Vernon estate neutral during the war, a job that requires a good deal of diplomacy with the various groups of soldiers that appear on the property, not to mention dealings with such notable figures of the period as the photographer, Matthew Brady, General McClellan, President Lincoln, and the redoubtable first lady herself, Mary Todd Lincoln. Young Sarah also has to calm her family's worries about her welfare and her unchaperoned state. Finally there is a developing romance. All three of these themes are based in the history of the times, apparently even the young romance, and they are the very stuff of good historical fiction.

Aside from the careful research and the well-chosen themes, what is most compelling about Rinaldi's novels can be found in the nature of her young narrators. They are intelligent young women who are just a bit irreverent about the world they live in and its attempt to control them. Young Sarah's struggles to find her own way are no exception. Her need of independence and her witty perception of the events place Sarah in a more or less constant battle of manipulating her situation for her satisfaction. The Sarah who emerges through it all is an endearing and memorable person. Although **Sarah's Ground** is not as ambitious or as fully developed as some of Rinaldi's earlier novels, it is a nice well-told story, one that will surely speak with a direct appealing voice to the world of young girls. However, this does not mean that the rest of us might not find much that is satisfying about the novel as well.

Larry Olpin is professor emeritus of English at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, Missouri. He is currently at work on a book on Civil War fiction written between the years 1950-2000. Email address olpin@socket.net