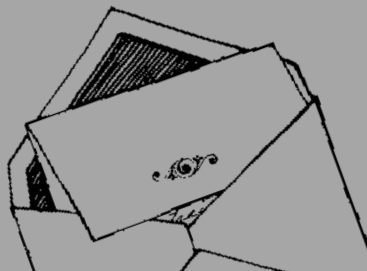


## Opinion: What Have Other People Thought About *Sarah, Plain and Tall*?



### **Award winner**

The most overwhelming opinion of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is that it is award-worthy. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* won the 1985 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction for Children, which is awarded to a commendable book published for children or young adults. The book also won the 1986 Christopher Award, which is “presented to the producers, directors, and writers of books, motion pictures, and television specials that affirm the highest values of the human spirit.” And Patricia MacLachlan’s novel was awarded the prestigious John Newbery Medal from the American Library Association in 1986. These are only a few of the many awards and honors that Patricia MacLachlan’s wonderful story has earned.

Before winning so many awards, the book received a lot of praise from book reviewers and librarians. One reviewer from *School Library Journal* called it “a book that is filled with wisdom, gentle humor, and the practical concerns necessary for a satisfying life.” This means that Patricia MacLachlan has created a story with characters who are sensible and funny, and who care for and worry about one another.

The reviewer went on to say, “Through a simple sentence or phrase, aspects of each character’s personality—strength, stubbornness, a sense of humor—are brought to light. Refreshingly, this novel portrays children as receptive to the love, nurturing, and attention that a stepparent can offer—and the willingness to return the affection.” The reviewer admired MacLachlan’s ability to describe her characters fully with only a few carefully chosen words. The way Caleb and Anna readily accept the love of a stepparent is noteworthy. Blended families were not as common in the past as they are today, and people were less accepting of them. Loving your family, regardless of the way it’s made up, is important and MacLachlan has captured that in this book.

A different reviewer said that *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is “the simplest of love stories expressed in the simplest of prose. Embedded in these unadorned [simple] declarative sentences about ordinary people, actions, animals, facts, objects, and colors are evocations [suggestions] of the deepest feelings of loss and fear, love and hope.” MacLachlan’s characters are ordinary people who live simple lives. But she expresses very deep emotions through them. Anna, Caleb, and Jacob have experienced a great loss, and it has affected each of them. But they continue to love one another and enjoy life. The author uses simple sentence structure and vocabulary to show this. She does not let the important ideas of love and family get bogged down by including too many details or challenging words.

## Historical fiction

Not every reviewer loved *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. One criticism of the novel is that it may not be historically accurate. It is a historical fiction book, which means that Patricia MacLachlan made up a story based on things that really did happen or did exist in history. For instance, you read in the “How *Sarah, Plain and Tall* Came About” section that a woman named Sarah really did exist. She was actually a relative of Patricia MacLachlan and she answered an advertisement to be a wife and mother to a family. The time period and setting of the book also existed in real life. The author has set her book in the 1800s in the American Midwest and has written about things going on in that time period just as they were in reality.

But did she? One critic has said that the only problem with the book is that the time period is not as historically accurate as it could be: “The realities of nineteenth-century social mores [standards] are at odds with the practicality of all of this. It was unusual (although not impossible) for a woman to travel such distances alone, and much more than unusual for her to stay with a man not related to her without another woman in the house. Had she done so, however, it is unlikely that she could return home afterward with her reputation intact . . . the story as told is highly uncharacteristic of its time and place.”

This reviewer thinks it is unlikely that a woman would have traveled alone all the way from Maine to the prairie to stay with a man she does not know. This makes the story seem more made-up than real. The reviewer goes on to say that the characters

don't seem to be doing as much work as they would have needed to do to maintain the farm. Sarah and the children have time to lie in the fields, pick flowers, or go swimming. The reviewer tells us that, in reality, the number of hours of hard work it took to keep the farm going would not have allowed them the time to do these things.

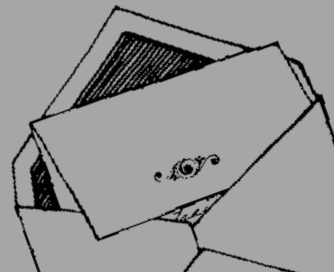
The reviewer also says that it was also not strictly historically accurate for Sarah to have been doing “man’s work” and for Papa to have been doing “woman’s work.” During that time period, people filled traditional male or female roles, even on the farm. Jacob would have cared for the land and the house, while Sarah would have taken care of the people inside the house. Jacob would have done the plowing and roof-fixing. Sarah would have kept the family fed and cared for the children and animals. The two adults would not have done jobs traditionally done by the other very often. The reviewer says: “While none of this was impossible, neither was it typical. Division of labor on a farm was a matter of practicality as well as custom. Papa would not often have been in the house enough to tend bread, and Sarah would have plenty to do without taking up plowing.” The fact that the author has them doing just that throughout the book makes the story less believable for this reviewer.

Although this reviewer found fault with *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, most reviewers argue that the book is perfect. A reviewer from the *New York Times* newspaper wrote that “this gentle book cannot fail to touch readers.” Award committees, parents, teachers, and kids all seem to agree.

**Thinking about what others think about  
*Sarah, Plain and Tall***

- Do you think that Patricia MacLachlan's book should have won lots of awards? Are there other award-winning books you have read that were better or worse? How so?
- Two reviewers said that Patricia MacLachlan uses simple sentences and only a few details to tell the reader a lot about the characters and their feelings. Can you find an example of a sentence or paragraph like this?
- What do you think about the fact that a reviewer said that the book is not completely historically accurate at times? Do you think this changes the importance of the book's messages?

## Glossary



- bonnet** a baby's or woman's hat, tied with strings under the chin
- buzzard** a large bird of prey, similar to a vulture, with a hooked beak and long, sharp claws
- clatter** to bang together noisily
- collapse** to fall down suddenly from weakness
- conch** the spiral-shaped shell of a marine animal
- dune** a sand hill made by the wind near the ocean or a large lake or in a desert
- dusk** the time of day after sunset when it is nearly dark
- eerie** strange and frightening
- feisty** lively or frisky
- fetch** to go after and bring back something or somebody
- flax** a plant with blue flowers and long leaves that produces oil and fiber
- gleams** shines
- gully** a long, narrow ravine or ditch
- hearthstone** stone flooring laid in front of a fireplace
- hitch** to join something to a vehicle
- killdeer** a type of bird with a black chest
- mica** any type of clear or colored minerals that have crystallized and can separate easily into very thin layers

**paddock** an enclosed field or area where horses can graze or exercise

**pesky** troublesome

**plow (plough)** to turn over soil using a piece of farm equipment pulled by an animal or a tractor

**primly** in a formal and proper way

**pungent** when something has a strong taste or smell

**rascal** a mischievous person or animal

**reins** straps attached to a bridle to control or guide a horse

**roamer** a person or animal that wanders around with no particular destination or purpose

**scuttling** a quick shuffling pace

**shingles** thin, flat pieces of wood or other material used to cover outside walls or roofs

**sly** crafty, cunning, secretive

**sputter** to make popping, spitting, or coughing noises

**squall** a sudden, violent wind that usually brings rain, snow, or sleet with it

**squint** to nearly close one's eyes in order to see better

**tumbleweed** a bushy plant in western North America that dries up in the fall, breaks off from its roots, and blows around in the wind

**whicker** a horse's whinny or neigh

**windbreak** a shelter from the wind

**wretched** miserable or unfortunate