

TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

“Poor Mr. Lincoln. It is in his hands to hold a whole country together or watch it fall apart. My hands are calloused and strong from rowing and working the ropes, from lifting and carrying barrels of oil and scrubbing stone floors and spiral stairs, but I do not know if they are strong enough to hold Mother and Father together.”

Newbery award-winning author Karen Hesse’s contribution to the Dear America diaries is a story about trying to hold things together. As Abraham Lincoln tries to hold the country together, Amelia tries to hold her family together. Her mother dislikes her life at the lighthouse on Fenwick Island in Delaware. Mrs. Martin also dislikes the choices her husband has made for the family, and she dislikes his anti-slavery, pro-Lincoln sentiments.

Amelia’s diary recounts the Martins’ life as assistant lighthouse keepers. Aside from the constant tension between her parents, Amelia finds great satisfaction in tending the lighthouse. She loves the sea, but worries about war. Through these diary entries, young readers learn about the Civil War and the conflicts of living in a border state like Delaware. They watch Amelia grow into a courageous and determined young woman who might not be successful in keeping her parents from divorcing, but is successful in continuing to love them both and finding joy in her life at the sea’s edge.

A Light in the Storm

The Diary of Amelia Martin, Fenwick Island, Delaware, 1861

BY KAREN HESSE

Ages 8–14 • 208 pages

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SUMMARY

“So much anger, so much resentment. If only the two sides would sit down and discuss this sensibly. But how?” (May 1, 1861). Amelia Martin, like so many young people who live with angry parents, questions their feuding. She wishes they would talk, laugh, and share good times together—as they did in the past. In Amelia’s mind, her family’s dissension mirrors the tension and discord between the northern and southern states—the abolitionists and the slaveholders. In many ways, the slavery issue is the cause of her family’s problems.

Amelia’s father had been a ship’s captain. As an abolitionist, he harbored the leader of a slave rebellion. When the rebel slave was discovered on the ship, Mr. Martin was stripped of his command. Now he is an assistant lighthouse keeper on Fenwick Island, off the coast of Delaware—a state wedged between the North and the South just as Amelia is wedged between her parents. Amelia’s mother blames her husband for their living conditions, which she insists are killing her.

But slavery is the deeper issue separating the two sides. Amelia observes her mother’s hate and her father’s admiration for Abraham Lincoln. She listens to their arguing about slaves and freedom. As the quarrelling intensifies, she prays for the newly elected President and thinks how she stands—helpless—between the two sides.

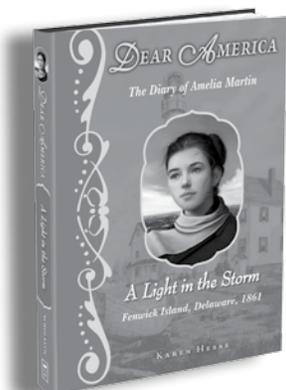
Amelia stands her own watch in the lighthouse tower each day, lighting the lamps, cleaning the glass, and rescuing victims of the Atlantic’s relentless tempests. Those silent hours alone in the lighthouse provide Amelia with time to think, read, and worry about her family and her country. She confides in her diary. “Sometimes, what I write here is all that keeps me calm. Putting the tumble of anger and fear down on paper gives me power over it. Then I don’t feel so helpless...I do need a friend on Fenwick Island. You, dear diary, should do perfectly.”

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Why do you think the author chose to call this book *A Light in the Storm*?
2. Amelia writes that she is often angry with her mother because Mrs. Martin can't seem to see the goodness and the beauty around her. What are some of the reasons for her mother's unhappiness? (Once you have discussed several of these reasons, look at what Karen Hesse has to say about this in the interview at the end of this guide.)
3. Amelia's parents disagree about many things. Is there one topic about which they disagree more than any other?
4. Why do you think Karen Hesse, the author of Amelia's diary, brought the Hale family to the lighthouse and into the lives of the Martin family?
5. Reread Amelia's diary entry for Sunday, August 4, 1861. What was in the package sent to the editor of *The Smyrna Times* and why was it sent?
6. Why did the author choose to set *A Light in the Storm* in the state of Delaware?
7. What does the poem Uncle Edward copied at the beginning of Amelia's diary mean to you? Why do you think Amelia finally understands the poem at the end of the book?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Karen Hesse explains her writing process by saying that she allows her main characters to speak to her but she also tries to find photographs of what she imagines they look like. Create a display of photographs or illustrations representing your visualization of Amelia, her family, and the other central characters in her diary. Share these with your discussion group. Can they identify each character?
2. Karen Hesse says the one thing she would like to ask readers of Amelia's diary is "Why do you think this country fought the Civil War?" Have each member of your discussion group reread the Historical Note at the end of Amelia's diary. How would you answer Karen Hesse's question?
3. Write a letter from Amelia to both her parents, trying to convince them to compromise and calmly discuss the issues of slavery and abolition.
4. There are some things in Amelia's life that remain the same—"constants" she calls them. What are the constants in your life? What changes have you experienced? Draw one diagram to show these consistencies and changes in your life, and another diagram for Amelia's life. How are you similar to Amelia? How are you different?
5. Amelia is concerned that the lighthouse will become obsolete. Using resources in your library and on the internet, research American lighthouses past and present.
6. On July 22, 1861, Amelia's father tells her to "imagine living in South Carolina and supporting the Union, Wickie. If the rebels despise the Union at a distance, how much more they must despise their Union neighbors." Create a short skit or a TV/radio news report that demonstrates the differences between the two neighbors. Be sure to give equal time to both opinions.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KAREN HESSE is the award-winning and critically acclaimed author of many books for children. Her titles include the Newbery Medal winner *Out of the Dust*, *Witness*, and *The Cats in Krasinski Square*, among many others. She lives in Vermont.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN HESSE

In your Newbery Award acceptance speech, you talked about how your discovery of the *Boise City News* provided you with important stories and information as you researched the Dust Bowl era for *Out of the Dust*. Did your research for Amelia Martin's diary lead you to another newspaper or significant source like the *Boise City News*?

Yes. In fact I followed a similar path in doing the research for *A Light in the Storm*. I began with general resources, learned as much as I could about the period and then dove into the newspapers from the period. *The Smyrna Times* was the only daily I could find on microfilm published in eastern Delaware, dating back to the early 1860s. However, Smyrna is north of Fenwick Island, and Smyrna's residents sympathized more with the Union. Fenwick Island, Bayville, and other more southerly towns in Delaware leaned toward the Confederacy. I had to remember always that the newspaper I was studying was biased in a way different from the people I was writing about.

What did you enjoy most about writing in the diary format? What was the most difficult challenge in writing this novel in the diary form?

I love telling a story in journal format. I've employed this technique before and no doubt will do so again. A writer can give the illusion of thoughts flowing effortlessly from the mind and heart of the narrator using the "journal." Readers gain uncensored access to all the subtle ways of the protagonist's character. So much information can be conveyed so quickly, so cleanly. I truly love working that way. Here's a secret though. There is a BIG difference between diary and journal. When I wrote the first version of *A Light in the Storm*, I wrote it as journal. After my editor, Tracy Mack, read that first manuscript, she very gently told me that in a diary there would be less dialogue, less flashback; the differences were subtle but they needed to be considered. She was absolutely right. I had to throw out the entire first attempt

at the book (hundreds of pages of work) and start all over again. I used the same research but I had to think very differently as I shaped Amelia's entries.

It seems surprising that Mr. Martin lost his command for helping runaway slaves. Did you find evidence of similar incidents in the literature?

I certainly did. There was an incident concerning a highly respected Captain who had hidden a rebel slave leader on his ship. The authorities were tipped off and boarded the ship as soon as it docked, searching for the fugitive. He was found, shackled, and taken away and the Captain lost both his ship and his reputation. His career was over.

Why is Amelia's mother so sad? Is it because she really dislikes the island life and the sea or is it because she has fallen out of love with her husband? Is she modeled, at all, after a person you discovered in your research?

Amelia's mother suffers from what is now known as rheumatoid arthritis. Many believe that particular disease is aggravated by a number of things, including stress and damp, chilly weather. Anyone who has been ill with a cold or the flu knows it is difficult to maintain a sense of humor, an interest in others, to motivate yourself when you're feeling miserable. Amelia's mother constantly felt miserable. In addition, she must have been terribly disappointed with her husband's choices, so different from ones she would have made. Yet society at that time judged her by her husband's decisions. She was a vain woman who must have placed a high value on her social position as a captain's wife. Imagine how mortified she must have felt at her husband's disgrace. This was a time when women rarely achieved greatness in their own right. They measured their worth by the power and status of their husbands. Perhaps knowing this makes Mrs. Martin's sadness easier to understand.

What was the most interesting detail you discovered about life in Delaware in 1861? Did that detail help shape the story?

The envelope filled with smallpox scabs sent to *The Smyrna Times* really startled me. I thought terrorism and germ warfare were twentieth-century tactics. It surprised me to find such weapons being used in the nineteenth century. I mention the incident in *A Light in the Storm* though I didn't dwell on it.

In the Epilogue you write that Amelia and Daniel were married but that they spent very little time living together. Why did you make that decision about their lives?

Amelia is very closely based on Ida Lewis, the female light keeper from Rhode Island who kept the Lime Rock light during the mid-nineteenth century. Ida Lewis also married but lived only briefly with her husband. I have no explanation for Ida's arrangement, nor do I offer one in my book for Amelia.

What is one question you would like to ask your readers after they have finished reading *A Light in the Storm: The Diary of Amelia Martin*?

Why do you think this country fought the Civil War? I had always believed the War was fought over the issue of slavery, and at one level, it certainly was. But in fact, Abraham Lincoln did not declare war on the Confederacy because of the issue of slavery, or even the spread of slavery. Our country found itself engaged in civil war because the southern states had done the unforgivable—they had dared to break up the Union. The Civil War was fought to bring those rebel states back into the Union where they belonged. The Constitution would take care of the slavery issue, but first and foremost, the unification of the Union had to be upheld.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN HESSE

What is one thing you hope young readers will take with them after reading *Amelia's diary*?

Even in a time when women were regarded as weak, inferior, second-class human beings, there were courageous women defying those narrow views. Amelia Martin's life was filled with adversity and challenges. It is possible not only to survive such difficulties but to transcend them. Amelia transcended the complications of her personal life, the country's troubles, and the limitations of nineteenth-century gender expectations to become a productive, compassionate, educated, evolved human being.

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