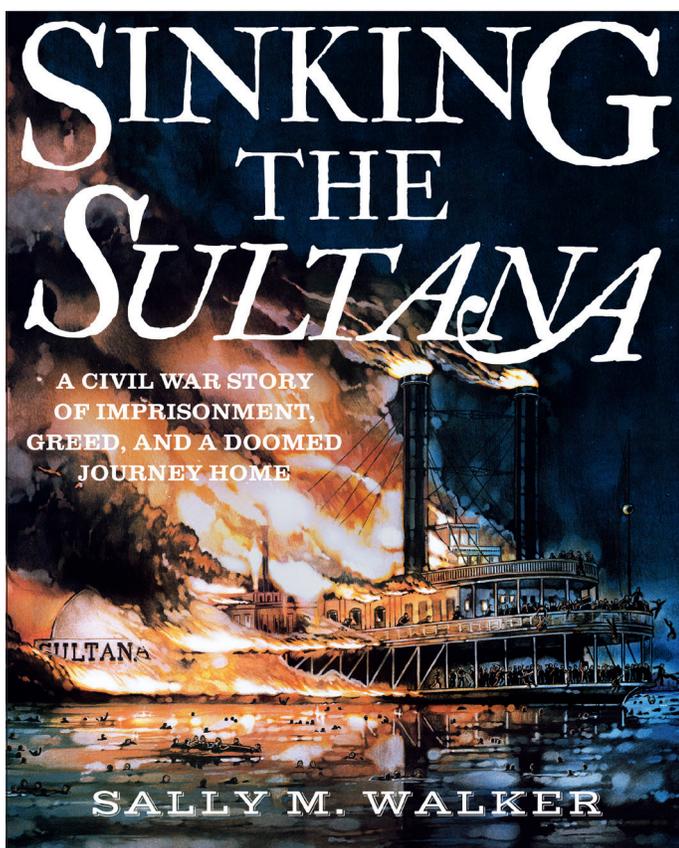


SINKING THE SULTANA

*A CIVIL WAR STORY OF IMPRISONMENT,
GREED, AND A DOOMED JOURNEY HOME*

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ABOUT THE BOOK

When a steamboat sank on the Mississippi River in 1865, more people died than in the *Titanic* disaster. Yet most Americans cannot name that boat, the *Sultana*. All the more tragic, most of the victims were Union soldiers who'd suffered in terrible Confederate prisoner-of-war camps. They were on their way home, at last, when the boilers exploded, fire consumed the boat, and it sank. This vivid account, packed with photographs and other visuals, introduces doomed soldiers and civilian passengers. It exposes the corruption behind the disaster and celebrates the bravery of local people and passengers who rescued others. Everyone should know about this shocking, heartbreaking, and overlooked piece of American history.

Common Core Connections

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are designed to scaffold student learning and encourage questioning strategies that ask readers to tackle textual information. The standards increase emphasis on nonfiction texts. To assist educators with facilitating class discussions and designing class instruction for this nonfiction book, discussion questions in this guide are specifically aligned with the reading informational text standards as well as the speaking and listening standards. Writing and research activities are designed to give students choices and are aligned with the writing, reading informational text, and speaking and listening standards.

Discussion Questions

These questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading: Informational Text Standards for Key Ideas and Details RI.5–8.1, RI.5–8.2, RI.5–8.3; Craft and Structure RI.5–8.5; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.5–8.7, RI.5–8.8; and ELA Speaking and Listening Standards for Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5–8.1.

1. Choose one of the passengers, civilian or military, listed in “Roll Call” (page viii) and discuss their role throughout the book. Address such questions as where the person was from, their job, their relatives, what happened to them during the disaster, and whether they survived.
2. Many of the passengers were Union soldiers who had been in Confederate prisons. Explain the parole exchange system between the North and the South and why it had ended. What were prison conditions like?
3. What were the issues about the boat itself, including the boilers, that contributed to the disaster? Who was responsible for the problems with the boilers? Could the problems have been prevented? If so, how and when?
4. How did the boat come to be overcrowded? What was the legal capacity? What was the estimated total of people on board when they reached Memphis? Break the numbers down into crew, civilian passengers, and military passengers. Who was responsible for having so many on board? Talk about the proven or suspected corruption involved and who profited from overloading.
5. Describe some of the people on the boat who helped others escape during the disaster. What did they do? What do you think motivated them? Identify, too, crew and passengers who deliberately chose not to help others. Why do you think they acted as they did?
6. People who weren't aboard the boat also pitched in. Describe rescuers and what they did to save passengers. Expand this to include people in Memphis and other towns who showed support later, giving specific examples. What do you think motivated them?
7. Analyze the official investigations of the disaster and the trial. Who did the investigating? Why was Frederic Speed the only person tried, and what was the outcome for him? Do you think justice prevailed? Why?
8. Discuss the nonfiction features of the book and how they help readers, including “Roll Call,” the table of contents, the glossary, and the use of subtitles within chapters. Would the book have been as effective without photographs, maps, diagrams, and other visuals? What do they add in terms of information and emotion?
9. Discuss the author's comment that “even though the *Sultana* sank more than 150 years ago, its story still resonates in a way that time cannot erase. Because of this, the tale of the *Sultana*, once heard, is one that people will remember” (page 162). In what ways does the story still resonate? What aspects make it unforgettable?
10. Read the final paragraph of the author's note and talk about connections you made with the story. Walker mentions ways that connections with the story might motivate people to protest corruption or help disaster survivors. Discuss these possibilities and add other reactions that you think would “honor the memory of those who died on the *Sultana*” (page 169).



Curriculum Connections

These activities correlate to Common Core ELA Reading: Informational Text Standards for Key Ideas and Details RI.5–8.1; ELA Speaking and Listening Standards for Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5–8.1; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.5–8.4, 5–8.5; ELA Writing Standards for Text Types and Purposes W.5–8.2, 5–8.3; and Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.5–8.7.

THE GENEVA CONVENTION

Treatment of prisoners of war is now outlined by the Geneva Convention. Have the class do print and online research about the Geneva Convention, its rules, and its history. Each student should compile five of the main points that they find and bring those to a discussion about prisoners of war, their treatment now, and their treatment during the Civil War as shown in *Sinking the Sultana*.

DEAR LOVED ONES

Have your class imagine that they are paroled prisoners of war who are about to board the *Sultana* in Vicksburg to go home. Each student should write a letter to their family, announcing their impending arrival and describing how they feel. They can choose a real person from the book or create a fictional character.

TO THE RESCUE

What if this disaster happened today? Have students envision a modern trip in a similarly overloaded steamboat where the boilers explode at night. What aspects of today's transportation, communication, and medicine would help with the rescue and care of the disaster victims? For example, how might cell phones help? Have each student choose a modern improvement and write an essay, supplemented by research if helpful, that compares today to the past.

THE NEXT OSCARS?

Disaster movies are a popular genre. Have students work in small groups and imagine they are directors of a movie about the *Sultana*. They should decide which soldiers and other people to emphasize as characters in the movie and cast those roles with current actors. They should also decide on an opening scene and a closing one. Have them create a movie poster and present it to the class with an explanation about their decisions regarding actors and scenes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally M. Walker is an award-winning author best known for turning extensive research into gripping narrative nonfiction. Among her other books are *Boundaries: How the Mason-Dixon Line Settled a Family Feud and Divided a Nation* and the upcoming picture book *Earth Verse: Haiku from the Ground Up*. As a child, she went to the public library at least once a week, a habit that she says, along with daydreaming, helped her become a writer. Sally M. Walker lives in Illinois.

HEADLINES FROM THE PAST

Are all research materials, such as historical newspapers, available on the Internet? Assign each page of the source notes to a pair of students. They should list every newspaper mentioned with its date and the article's page number. Have each student take one listing and see if they can find the full text online. If the full issue can't be read for free online, have students try to identify a pay database where it's available (many public libraries subscribe to such databases) or a library that has a print copy.

DISASTERS!

Despite progress, we still experience disasters. Have the class research twentieth- and twenty-first-century disasters involving boats, airplanes, buildings, or bridges using print and online resources. Each student should choose one situation to focus on and then give a multimedia presentation to the class that compares the *Sultana* disaster to the one they've researched, noting place, time, participants and victims, causes, investigations, possible corruption, and more.

DELVING INTO DOCUMENTS

The author has multiple citations to the website www.fold3.com, a digital archive for military records. Have students go to the website, click the Civil War link, and spend time looking through the free records, including those for the *Sultana* disaster (they will need to register for a free account). Ask them to identify at least one record that relates to the book. Then hold a discussion about navigating the website, the records they found, and the challenges of using historic documents like these for research.

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean. She was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents all-day workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on Common Core nonfiction. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.

