



The Indifferent Stars Above

By Daniel James Brown
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Introduction

The Donner Party tragedy was a prolonged and complex event, spanning many months. During those months, Sarah Fosdick and her companions had to make many critical decisions. Some of those decisions were easy to make, and some were very difficult. Some had life or death consequences; others had profound moral implications that the survivors would live with for the rest of their lives. Studying the tragedy gives us a glimpse into how humans under great stress make these kinds of decisions. It also reveals both how different from and similar to ourselves average people like Sarah were in the mid 1840s. As you discuss *The Indifferent Stars Above*, you may want to consider some of these similarities and differences between our generation and hers, and ponder some of the more difficult decisions various individuals made in light of current attitudes today. The following questions are intended to help you focus on some of these issues.

Questions for Discussion

1. We often idealize the pioneer generation as icons of American ingenuity, strength, and resolve, and much of Sarah's story certainly supports that view. On the other hand, some of what unfolded among members of the Donner Party, even before they became snowbound, suggests that they were much more subject to human frailties than the stereotype suggests. To what extent do you think the textbook version of the pioneers that we teach in our schools was a myth and to what extent was it the reality?
2. Sarah Graves married Jay Fosdick at the relatively advanced age of twenty-one. But many of her female peers on the Illinois frontier married as young as thirteen or fourteen years of age. Much of this was for economic reasons, but older husbands sometimes took advantage of their young brides in a variety of ways. And regardless of age, even in loving marriages, the roles of husbands and wives were often rigidly defined along gender lines. What do you think the effects of these early marriages and strict gender expectations were on girls of Sarah's generation?
3. The hardships that Sarah's family encountered even before they entered the Sierra Nevada in October, 1846 were enormous—stifling heat, laborious work cutting roadways, the fear of attacks from Native Americans, epidemic diseases, snakebites, bug bites, the ever present threat of starvation, choking clouds of dust, horrific sanitation, virtually no medical care, etc. If you had no other way to improve your lot in life, do you think you and your family would be willing to endure six months or more of those kinds of discomforts and dangers to find a better life?
4. Do you think you would have survived the Donner Party if you had attempted it at whatever your current age and physical condition are? Do you think you would have survived if you were Sarah's age (twenty-one) and in good health at the time? Would you have joined the snowshoe party and attempted to hike out to California?
5. In a similar survival situation, would you consume human flesh to go on living? If so, how difficult do you think it would be to do so? If not, why not?
6. Women out-survived men in the Donner Party by almost two to one. Do you think women are generally tougher than men? What about mental fortitude? Men seem to have become mentally unstable and to have given up hope earlier than women in the Donner Party. Is this generally true of men?
7. When the elderly Belgian, Mr. Hardcoop, could not keep up with the Donner Party in the Nevada desert, the party was torn on whether or not to allow him to ride in a wagon, but in the long run they left him behind to die rather than burden their oxen and horses. Do you think this was justified? Similarly when Charles Stanton could not continue on the snowshoe expedition and chose to remain in camp, the others continued without him. Are the two incidents equivalent?
8. When James Reed first arrived at Sutter's Fort, he quickly turned around and attempted to return to his family and the rest of the party with relief supplies. However, after he failed in this attempt, he joined the American military campaign and fought against the Mexicans in California for many weeks while waiting for the support of the American government and private citizens to finance a more organized relief effort. Do you think he made the right decision? Discuss why or why not and what actions you imagine you might have taken.
9. When Sarah's father and his peers set out for California, by in large they felt that they had the right to occupy that land when they arrived, despite the fact that it was sovereign Mexican territory at the time. As Sarah traveled across the continent a small contingent of American settlers declared California an independent republic and by the following spring they and the U.S. military had wrested the territory from Mexican control by force. Do you think the seizure of California was justified? Do you think the taking of California has any impact on Mexican-American relations today? Does it have any bearing on the question of illegal Mexican immigration in California?
10. "Hero" is a term that is perhaps overused these days. Do you think that what Sarah and the other members of the snowshoe party did constitutes heroism, or were they merely out to save their own lives? (You may want to use the chart on pages 289-292 to examine who was related to whom when the snowshoe party set out for California).

About the Author

Daniel James Brown is the author of the widely acclaimed *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*. He lives in the country east of Redmond, Washington, with his wife and two daughters.