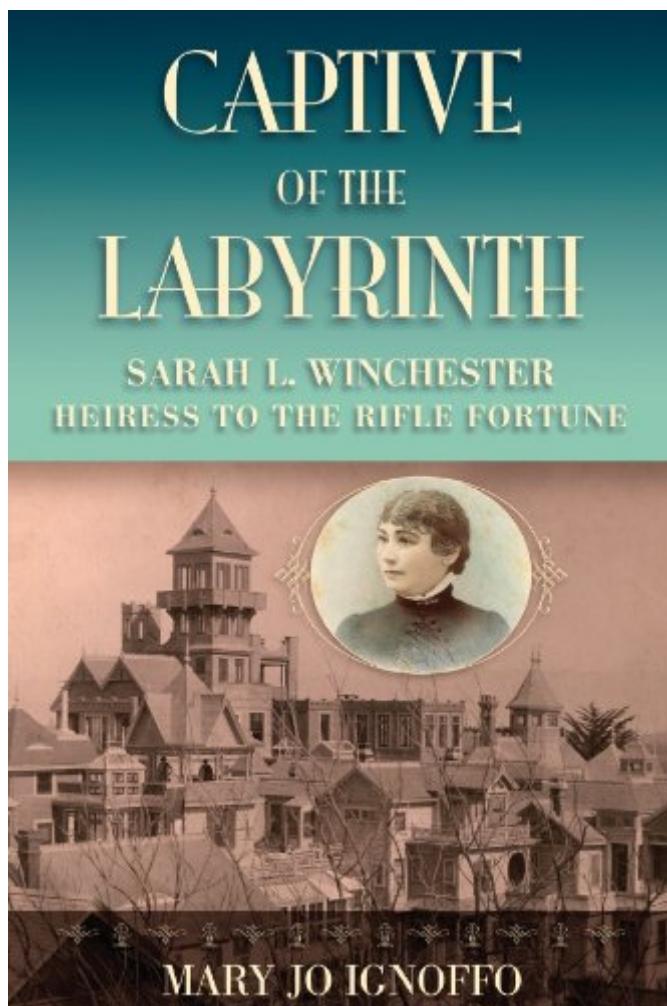


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Captive Of The Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress To The Rifle Fortune



Synopsis

Since her death in 1922, Sarah Winchester has been perceived as a mysterious, haunted figure. After inheriting a vast fortune upon the death of her husband in 1881, Sarah purchased a simple farmhouse in San José, California. She began building additions to the house and continued construction on it for the next twenty years. A hostile press cast Sarah as the conscience of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company—a widow shouldering responsibility for the many deaths caused by the rifle that brought her riches. She was accused of being a ghost-obsessed spiritualist, and to this day it is largely believed that the extensive construction she executed on her San José house was done to appease the ghouls around her. But was she really as guilt-ridden and superstitious as history remembers her? When Winchester's home was purchased after her death, it was transformed into a tourist attraction. The bizarre, sprawling mansion and the enigmatic nature of Winchester's life were exaggerated by the new owners to generate publicity for their business. But as the mansion has become more widely known, the person of Winchester has receded from reality, and she is only remembered for squandering her riches to ward off disturbed spirits. *Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune* demystifies the life of this unique American. In the first full-length biography of Winchester, author and historian Mary Jo Ignoffo unearths the truth about this notorious eccentric, revealing that she was not a maddened spiritualist driven by remorse but an intelligent, articulate woman who sought to protect her private life amidst the chaos of her public existence. The author takes readers through Winchester's several homes, explores her private life, and, by excerpting from personal correspondence, gives the heiress a voice for the first time since her death. Ignoffo's research reveals that Winchester's true financial priority was not dissipating her fortune on the mansion in San José but investing it for a philanthropic legacy. For too long Sarah Winchester has existed as a ghost herself—a woman whose existence lies somewhere between the facts of her life and a set of sensationalized recollections of who she may have been. *Captive of the Labyrinth* finally puts to rest the myths about this remarkable woman, and, in the process, uncovers the legacy she intended to leave behind.

Book Information

File Size: 5566 KB

Print Length: 280 pages

Publisher: University of Missouri; Reprint edition (December 6, 2010)

Publication Date: December 6, 2010

Sold by: A Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B004WPNW1I

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #443,482 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #134 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > New England #350 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > West #413 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Historical Study > Social History > Gay & Gender Studies

Customer Reviews

I'm not a history buff, but I found this book fascinating. Ignoffo's narrative is lively, thoughtful and well-presented. There's a little something of interest for everyone. Gun aficionado? There's great detail on the innovations and early marketing techniques that made the Winchester Rifle the gun that conquered the West. Feminist? Sarah Winchester was a strong, independent-minded woman in charge of a large fortune at a time when most women were little more than domestic servants (just the way she structured her bequests should impress the most accomplished modern economist). Gold rush fan? California history--and especially San Francisco Bay Area history--galore. Who knew they had luxury house boats in Burlingame? But it's not heavy-handed history. And even though Ignoffo completely debunks the Winchester Mystery House marketing scheme of ghosts, guilt and superstition, the book made me want to visit the Mystery House again--if for nothing more than to look at it with a fresh eye and a fresh appreciation for the real Sarah.

This book was long overdue. Sarah Winchester was a very interesting woman and not the superstitious crazy lady you will hear about at the "Winchester Mystery House." Mary Jo Ignoffo did a great job researching Sarah Winchester's history including her husband, family, her husbands' family, and friends. This book was such an interesting read, it was well written, and I'm so glad someone took the time to write it.

For those who are interested in local history, and those interested in a story that vindicates a woman who was ahead of her time and whose reputation has been tarnished by greedy profiteers, this book will be worth your time. Don't be put off by the fact that the book is a bit disorganized and could have used a good editor; the writing is otherwise good and interesting.

If you are reading this because you have been to "the Mystery House" - do not believe what you are told on the tour - this tells the story of quite an amazing but very private person - very good. But there are still questions! On the other hand if you have not been to the house and have read the book - you will be frustrated by the 'mistruths' that you are being told - 'nough said!

This is the latest in Ignoffo's collection of San Francisco Bay Area/Northern California local history, and without question is her best yet. Rather than acquiesce to the long-held stories and legends surrounding Sarah Winchester and the Winchester Mystery House, she dives deeper to get a sense of the woman behind the stories. Incredibly well-researched, Ignoffo goes beyond the simple and obvious to reach a better understanding of a woman who was sadly living in the wrong century. The genealogy involved (another of the author's passions) requires close attention and possibly a cheat sheet, but the writing is genuinely involved and empathetic. Great read.

Really enjoyed the book and it's gave more information then previous books I've read about Mrs. Winchester.

If you search for good writing and reliable history on the life Sarah Winchester you will come across precious little -- but this book charts new territory. It is the first -- and right now the sole -- historical study that clarifies the life of this enigmatic and sensationalized figure. I don't agree with every emphasis the author makes, but her tone is unfailingly reasonable and she brings the tools of real historical scholarship to this very muddled American story. There is simply no way to seriously consider or contextualize the life of Sarah Winchester without passing through Mary Jo Ignoffo's study. The author also brings a personal element to the book that is very appropriate and well-measured. I cannot agree with reviewers who say the narrative goes off on tangents. These aren't tangents, they are history. Sarah Winchester's story cannot be fully told without exploring the development of the nation, and the uses of the Winchester rifle, which the author does with expertise and thoroughness. This is an overdue (and enjoyable) study of a neglected and offbeat figure in American history.

I love the story of Sarah Winchester and this gives an honest account of a quiet, much maligned but genuinely kind woman. My only complaint is that the book goes into the history of the two families and their businesses to a greater degree than I thought necessary. But this book is extremely well researched and gives an honest look at a woman who was savvy at business and who took care of her poorer family relations, all the while being made fun of in the press and public eye.

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