



Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender: The True Story of a Civil War Spy

Carrie Jones , Mark Oldroyd (Illustrator)

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Sarah Emma Edmonds started pretending at a very early age. Her father only wanted sons, so Sarah pretended to be one. Unlike most kids, though, Sarah never really stopped pretending. In 1861, during the U.S. Civil War, Sarah pretended her way into the Union Army, becoming a male nurse named Frank Thompson. Being a nurse didn't quite satisfy "Frank," though. She wanted to keep her fellow soldiers from getting hurt. So when the Union Army needed a spy, she leapt at the chance. While still pretending to be Frank, Sarah also pretended to be a male African American slave, a female Irish peddler, and a female African American laundress. She slipped behind enemy lines time after time, spied on the Confederate Army, and brought back valuable intelligence to the Union. Sarah was not only good at pretending; she was also very brave. Later in life, Sarah Emma Edmonds wrote a book to tell her story. She explained, "I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic." She was also truly a great pretender.

Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender: The True Story of a Civil War Spy Details

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From Reader Review Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender: The True Story of a Civil War Spy for online ebook

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

This picture book tells the story of Sarah Emma Edmonds, a Canadian girl who came as a teenager to the U.S. and, pretending to be a boy named Frank Thompson, became a Union soldier in the Civil War as well as a spy. It's an amazing story that made me want to read some of the adult biographies of her that have been written recently, as well as her published memoirs, quotes from which are sprinkled throughout the book. A picture at the end of the book shows the real Sarah when she was posing as Frank Thompson. I wonder how she was able to disguise her voice? I'll have to read more to find out. This book could stimulate interesting conversation on the lengths women would and, in some cases, had to go to in order to succeed in a male-dominated world. Recommended!

babyhippoface says

Wow. This woman was a spitfire. Sarah Emma Edmonds grew up in the 1860's with a verbally abusive father who was never happy with her, no matter how hard she tried to please him. She thought he wanted a boy, so she tried to be a boy. He still wasn't happy. So Sarah left home. She heard that Union troops were needed, so she dressed as a boy, took the name Frank Thompson, and volunteered.

Sarah Emma/Frank wanted more excitement, so she volunteered to be a spy for the Union. She colored her skin dark with silver nitrate and snuck into a Confederate camp disguised as a slave, then reported back to the Union camp all the things she had seen. Another time she disguised herself as a woman (so yes, she was a woman disguised as a man disguised as a woman) to peddle wares to the Confederates.

Frank (Sarah) was a very successful and lauded spy for the Union until she came down with malaria. She knew she could not go to a military hospital, where her secret would be discovered, and by the time she recovered, Frank Thompson was considered a deserter. To go back to the army now would result in a courtmartial or worse.

Sarah decided to stay Sarah, and become a nurse. Later, she wrote down her memories of her time as the "Great Pretender". Quite a woman, she was. This book would be an entertaining and original addition to upper elementary studies on the Civil War.

Book Chatter-Cath says

I sat and read this with my 9 year old daughter and was pleasantly surprised by this beautifully written and lovingly illustrated book.

At first, I was a little taken back by the rawness of its descriptions, in particular, the fathers dislike of his daughter Sarah and thought that it might be a bit heavy handed.

Overall however, it is riveting, refreshing and carefully laid out for the younger reader. And the illustrations are beautiful in their simple realism.

My daughter thought that Sarah Emma Edmond's story was fascinating and exciting, and another reason for her to seriously consider being a spy when she's older!!

A great retelling of a historical period of time, and an interesting look into the life of a strong willed and adventurous woman. (5/5)

Mandy says

My children and I recently read Carrie Jones's book, Sarah Emma Edmonds was a Great Pretender. I have to admit that I wasn't overly enamoured by either the writing nor the illustrations. However, the story of Sarah Emma Edmonds is fascinating.

Born in the mid 1800's, Sarah was born a girl, which was enough of a strike against her. At the age of 16, she ran away to the States. Unable to support herself selling door to door as a woman, she disguised herself as a man. When she heard that the Union Army needed recruits, she signed up. She became a male nurse in the army and later went on to have a successful career as an army spy, all under the guise of her male persona, playing numerous characters, including both male and female, caucasian and African-American. The story prompted our family to learn more about the courageous young woman.

Disclaimer: A complimentary copy was provided by Lerner Publishing Group.

Bri says

Most children love pretending and make an enjoyable game out of it. From cats in the jungle to doctors to pirates, anything goes when it comes to imagination. But Sarah Emma Edmonds, a young girl growing up in Canada took her pretending to a whole new level, infiltrating the Confederacy, posing as various people, all without revealing her cover to anyone while in the army.

Carrie Jones is the author of the bestselling Need series, but this April she debuts her new picture book from Carolrhoda Books. Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender: The True Story of a Civil War Spy tells the incredible story of a girl who pretended to be several people, even pretending to be different races!

Sarah Emma Edmonds was a Great Pretender opens with Sarah depicted as a boy. Carrie Jones explains Sarah was unhappy about being a boy in 1840's Canada...and so was her father. The story doesn't go into explicit details, only saying "He treated Sarah badly." The use of these statements helps as an excellent framing device for Sarah's "pretending," keeping the story short.

Once in the United States, Sarah sold Bibles door-to-door only to find many people weren't buying. Jones puts a little historical context in here, explaining "It was unusual back then for a woman to travel by herself, and people weren't buying a lot of books." So Sarah turned to pretending to be a man. She cut off her hair, dressed more masculine, and referred to herself as Frank Thompson. The result, Jones adds was "she started selling a lot more Bibles."

Then came the Civil War. As Shelf Employed points out, the war details aren't rehashed for readers in Sarah Emma Edmonds; only brief details are given for Sarah is the heroine here. In 1861, Sarah decides to enlist as Frank Thompson, male nurse. Sarah/Frank volunteered to spy on the Confederacy for the Union, after their spy was captured. This time she became Cuff, a Southern slave and darkened her skin with silver nitrate. While spying, Sarah found out numerous information for the Union, including the fact the Confederacy painted giant logs as cannons!

Sarah Emma Edmonds goes on to pretend to be an female Irish peddler named Bridget O'Shea. Jones points out the depth of Sarah's pretending here was she was a female, pretending to be a man, pretending to be a woman to spy on the Confederacy. Later, Sarah once again pretends to be African-American, this time as a laundress, finding valuable information and almost losing her life in a bullet-battered house.

Jones does an excellent job at minimal text throughout the biography. It'll keep children interested in this woman's fascinating story and she mixes in bits of Sarah's real words from her memoir. I appreciated her conversational tone too, when she'd say things in first person ("Frank – I mean, Sarah"), drawing her reader into the book, as if telling a story aloud. Mark Oldroyd's illustrations are simple and depict Sarah sometimes as both masculine/feminine at once, an artistic choice that really works for Sarah Emma Edmonds. Sarah Emma Edmonds is a great pick for Women's History month and shares a story that probably has yet to hit history textbooks!

Copy for review provided by Lerner Books via NetGalley.

Raina says

This is a story which needs to be told. Sarah Emma Edmonds was a spy for the Union during the Civil War. The Union Army knew her as a man, and she took on a series of roles which crossed both race and gender lines in order to gain information for her side. The illustrations are slightly impressionistic images of Edmonds in her various roles as well as more generalized frames of the period. Some may find problems in the thesis of the text. Jones repeats over and over that Edmonds was pretending to be a man, and in an age of gender politics, it feels strange to not mention even the possibility of a trans or queer identity. It is understandable to not want to get into this complex topic in a children's book, but it does seem odd to emphasize the pretense so monotonously. However, Edmonds' story is fascinating and should be part of our collective memory of the Civil War.

//SSBRC review. Also, I wish that Jones had brought up the fact that all of the roles Edmonds took up as a spy were part of the lower classes. Women, blacks. And she used those roles subversively to gain information from people who treated her as though she didn't matter. And the "pretending" mantra really did bug me.

Christine Turner says

Sarah Emma Edmonds started pretending at a very early age. Her father only wanted sons, so Sarah pretended to be one. Unlike most kids, though, Sarah never really stopped pretending. In 1861, during the U.S. Civil War, Sarah pretended her way into the Union Army, becoming a male nurse named Frank Thompson. Being a nurse didn't quite satisfy "Frank," though. She wanted to keep her fellow soldiers from getting hurt. So when the Union Army needed a spy, she leapt at the chance. While still pretending to be Frank, Sarah also pretended to be a male African American slave, a female Irish peddler, and a female African American laundress. She slipped behind enemy lines time after time, spied on the Confederate Army, and brought back valuable intelligence to the Union. Sarah was not only good at pretending; she was also very brave. Later in life, Sarah Emma Edmonds wrote a book to tell her story. She explained, "I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic." She was also truly a great pretender.

Subject: Women spies -- United States -- Biography -- Juvenile literature.

Nurses -- United States -- Biography -- Juvenile literature

Subject:

Edmonds, S. Emma E. (Sarah Emma Evelyn), 1841-1898-Juvenile literature.

Geographic Term:

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Secret service -- Juvenile literature.

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Participation, Female -- Juvenile literature.

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Women -- Juvenile literature.

Added Author:

Taneka says

I have never heard of Sarah Emma Edmonds, but this picture book was a great introduction. Born in Canada, Sarah ran away from her home in Canada because she knew her father always wanted a boy and would never accept a daughter that pretended to be a boy. She sold bibles and encyclopedias but could not make a sale, because people were skeptical of a woman on her own. So she made up the alias Frank Thompson and sold more material. She signed up for the American Civil War and became a spy for the Union Army.

The author's note in the rear of the book lists selected bibliographies that were used to write the picture book. There is an exert about Edmonds and with a factual photo of Edmonds circa 1862.

Laura says

Very clearly laid out and written. I will definitely take a look at the actual copy of this book since I doubt that the black and white images on my e-reader do it justice. That's an impressive feat, to make me interested in reading it again just to see the differences from the electronic galley. Sarah Emma Edmonds is a pretty cool chick, and both boys and girls will love her story. The danger and adventure is kept without bringing the entire story into too dark territory. I have to assume that her father was pretty terrible and abusive, but the book clearly states that he was kind of a bad guy and then moves on. It clearly discusses people being horribly injured and dying from the war but doesn't glamorize or dwell, it stays in the perfectly appropriate realm. While it is more of a sparse biography rather than telling us a fully fleshed out story that involves Sarah, it still keeps some cutesy stuff such as the almost refrain of calling Sarah a pretender. I highly recommend this great introduction to a really interesting life. Older kids will want to head right out to the library and get a more wordy book about her.

Alexandra Inmon says

If I could give this book more than just 5 stars I would. Sarah Emma Edmonds was a Great Pretender, is an amazing story based off of a real girl back in the civil war times. The story is extremely interesting for both adults and younger readers... really for any age actually! It's incredible how this little girl entered the war and became a spy. She's had more identities than seems possible! I love the way this book was written because in the text, it seems like Sarah even sometimes forgets who she is and who she is pretending to be! The full paged illustrations show incredible detail and keeps the reader intrigued and glued to the pages. Overall this book is a must read, especially if you are teaching your child or children about the civil war era.

Kelly says

Guess what? I'm about to review a book I read on Net Galley. How cool is Net Galley? So. Cool. (As long as, y'know, the publishers give you permission to read the books you want to read so you can review them. But I digress.)

The full title of today's book is *Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender: The True Story of a Civil War Spy*, and it's by my good friend Carrie Jones. Yes, that Carrie Jones - the one who wrote *Tips on Having a Gay (ex)Boyfriend, Love (and Other Uses for Duct Tape)* and *Girl, Hero and Need, Captivate, and Entice*. And she is actually a friend, so you might expect me to be biased and I am, frankly, not going to tell you that you're wrong, because being biased under the circumstances is entirely logical. I am, however, going to tell you what I think about the book anyway, even with you knowing that I'm biased, and we'll go from there, okay? Okay.

The thing is, I was inclined to love this book before I read it, *not* because Carrie wrote it, but because of the following reasons:

1. I know a lot about the subject of the book. I did a shload of research on Sarah Emma Edmonds as part of a project I co-authored with J. Patrick Lewis (poems about spies and spying, still looking for a home).
2. I have a thing for girls in drag, as I believe I've mentioned before. And Sarah Emma Edmonds decidedly walked that walk.
3. I have a rather strong feminist bent, and nothing says feminist like Sarah Emma Edmonds (even if she died long before the actual word/movement exists). Grrl power!

Sarah Emma Edmonds was a fascinating individual. Born in Canada, she made her way to the United States alone, becoming so dedicated to the country that when the Civil War broke out, she decided to serve in the military. (What I didn't know until I read Carrie's book is that Edmonds had a history of dressing as a male that dated back to her childhood. Way interesting.) At that time in history, her being a woman should have made military service an impossibility, but Edmonds didn't let a little thing like gender hold her back: Dressed as a man named Frank Thompson, Edmonds enlisted as a private in the Union Army, where she was assigned to work as a nurse in field hospitals.

Looking for an opportunity to use her ability to wear disguises serve her country and hopefully decrease casualties, Edmonds volunteered to become a spy. She made several trips into Confederate territory to seek out military secrets, dressing first as a young African American male, then as a female Irish peddler, and finally as an African American laundress. If Carrie's description sounds a little bit like something from the movie *Victor/Victoria*, it's understandable:

This time she pretended to be Bridget O'Shea, a chubby Irish peddler. She was a woman (Sarah) pretending to be a man (Frank) pretending to be a woman (Bridget).

This would be confusing for most people, but not for Sarah.

As Edmonds herself said (and is quoted as saying in the book), "I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic—but patriotism was the true secret of my success."

The book is due out on April 1st, just a hair too late for Women's History Month. With its evocative artwork and clear narration, the book manages to be a tribute not only to Edmonds, but to the power of imagination.

Moaning says

Interesting story of a female spy during the Civil War.

Nick says

This juvenile biography is short and informative, but with factual errors which slightly mar its usefulness. Unfortunately, her full name, the military unit she served in, and maybe even her date of birth are incorrect in the book. [There's a conflict between the book and her obituary about her date of birth, but various sources also are confused about this.] With those all wrong, it's difficult to assume that the rest of the information is correct.

Mark Oldroyd's illustrations are very good, and give a feel for the disguises that Sarah used. The author's explanation of her sequence of cross-gender play-acting was delightful, and one of the strong points of the book.

Dolly says

I love finding stories about interesting women for our girls. Not only did this book give us a glimpse into life before and during the Civil War, it also showed us how one woman made her place in American history, even if she had to do it by pretending to be a man.

This is such a fascinating story, and the illustrations are wonderful, too. The story offers a lot of details about Sarah's life, but isn't overwhelming or boring. In fact, the narrative is written with subtle humor and in such a way that it easily held the attention of our youngest, who often finds biographies to be quite boring. We really enjoyed reading this book together.

After reading some of the review here, I see there's another children's book about Sarah called Nurse, Soldier, Spy: The Story of Sarah Edmonds, a Civil War Hero. We'll have to check that one out too.

interesting quote:

"I am naturally fond of adventure, a little ambitious, and a good deal romantic—but patriotism was the true secret of my success."

Sarah Sammis says

I have been interested in the American Civil War since high school. I like reading about it, whether it's

fiction or nonfiction. As soon as Carrie Jones announced her nonfiction picture book biography of Sarah Emma Edmonds called *Sarah Emma Edmonds Was a Great Pretender*, I immediately added it to my wishlist.

Using simple, straightforward language, Carrie Jones outlines Sarah Edmond's childhood and early adulthood. Jones explains that Sarah's father wanted a son and she did her best to pretend to be the boy he wanted. When it was painfully clear that she could never live up to expectations, Sarah left Canada for the United States where she started selling bibles. Through experimentation she learned that she could sell far more books dressed as a man than she did dressed as a woman.

But this book isn't about gender identity per se. It's about her part in the Civil War. She joined the Union Army as soldier (named Frank Thompson) and male nurse. When the army needed spies, she decided to do her duty and volunteer. Jones goes through some of her different missions and her different disguises.

Mark Oldroyd's illustrations show the many faces Sarah wore in her life and her army career. Sometimes she dressed as a woman (or as Carrie puts it, a woman pretending to be a man, disguised as a woman). Throughout all the costume changes, Oldroyd is able to let Sarah's personality shine through so we can see it's still her.

It's a fascinating slice of American history seen through a nonfiction picture book. The book includes a short bibliography in the endnotes and I plan to read through the listed books as time permits.
