

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sarah Prine has a great desire to become educated. What events and people help her to reach this goal? Is education more easily attained by her children?
2. Captain Elliot is portrayed as a courageous and strong man who fights Comanches and Apaches with great resolve, yet he punishes his men when they kill unarmed Indians in a small village. Does he seem like a believable character? Why or not?
3. What is the point of the “Duchess of Warwick and her Sorrows by the Sea?” What does it represent for Sarah?
4. Sarah never reveals her mother’s given first name. Is this significant?
5. In looking at the lives of Sarah’s mother, Sarah, and her daughter, April, do you see any changes in women’s roles among the different generations? What kind of future do you think is waiting for April?
6. Do you like the structure of this novel which is written as a journal? How would the book change if it were written in third person?
7. Do you think a friendship like Sarah’s, with the Indian scout, Blue Horse, would have developed in 19th century Tucson? Why or why not? Do the reactions of other people in the fort seem believable?
8. Why did Sarah marry Jimmy? If he had lived, could they have forged a better relationship from the remains of their marriage?
9. During Sarah’s marriage to Jack, she makes several accommodations to his work in the Army. Does Jack also recognize Sarah’s needs and encourage her goals?
10. Death occurs often in *These is My Words*. What are the characters’ various reactions to the deaths of those around them? Do you think that people in the twenty-first century view death differently than characters in this book?

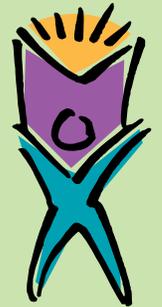
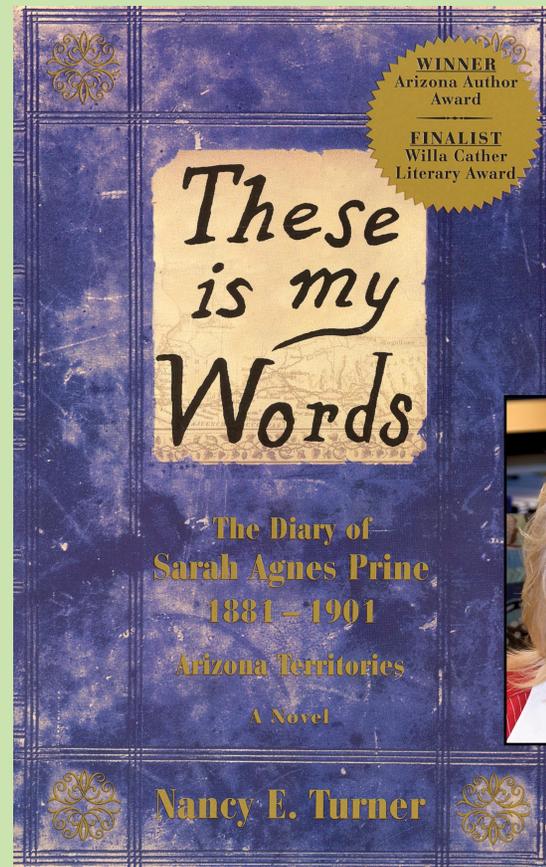
SOURCES:

- Thomas Sheridan, *Arizona: A History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995).
Rupert Norval Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement* (Millwood, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973).
R.G. Carter, *On the Border with Mackenzie or Winning West Texas from the Comanches* (Mattituck, New York: J.M. Carroll, 1989).

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READERS GUIDE FOR *These Is My Words* by Nancy Turner

Created by Dr. Mary Melcher



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These is My Words by Nancy F. Turner

Historic Context and Discussion Questions

Created by Dr. Mary Melcher

Nancy F. Turner's engaging novel, *These is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine*, relates a young white woman's experiences in Arizona and Texas from 1881 to 1901. Written in first person, in the form of a journal, the book describes the West from Sarah's perspective as she recounts conflicts with Comanches and Apaches, several violent encounters with "bad men," along with relationships between people of multiple races, religions and ethnic groups. This work of historical fiction, which is based on actual events, represents some common conflicts and situations in territorial Arizona.

As the book begins in 1881, Sarah and her family are leaving Arizona, traveling by wagon to Texas. They join forces with others and soon encounter warring Comanches who kill several members of their party, in Texas. Here the author plays with historical chronology. The Comanches were confined to a reservation by 1875. Prior to that time, there were many violent encounters between this tribe, travelers, and settlers.

On the other hand, when Sarah and her family battle with Apaches in southern Arizona in May of 1885, the event is historically authentic. At that time, Geronimo and other Chiracuhua Apaches escaped from San Carlos Reservation and raided ranches in Arizona. Geronimo and his band eluded the U.S. Army until finally surrendering in September of 1886.

During Sarah's time in Texas and after the family establishes a ranch in Arizona on Cienega Creek, near the Empire Mountains, she becomes acquainted with people from a variety of religions, ethnic and racial groups. At times, Sarah is somewhat confused by differing customs, but in general, she befriends people from all races and is non-judgmental about religion. She describes conflicts in the wagon train and the gradual reconciliation of people as they face violence and hard times together.

According to historical records, people in the West often crossed racial lines to help each other, especially when trying to survive in hostile country. Although racism and ethnic conflict existed in this region, and minorities experienced segregation and discrimination, when it came to personal relationships between neighbors, families often shared their food and customs. The friendly and helpful relationship that Sarah's family establishes with their Mexican American neighbors represents the bonds that often

developed between families in isolated areas, no matter what their ethnicity. People needed and appreciated each other. On an individual basis, they often established friendships across racial lines, even when the institutional structures of society created divisions.

Another historical issue brought to light through *These is My Words* concerns women's roles. While traveling, Sarah finds an abandoned wagon full of books, one of which is called *The Happy Bride*. This book describes the proper role of the True Woman, a nineteenth century ideal, which required females to be pious, pure, submissive and domestic. When she encounters this ideology, Sarah is a tough young woman who can shoot a rifle as well as her brothers. She maintains her calm in violent situations, defends her family and friends, and performs difficult physical labor to survive. Her life is incredibly distant from that of urban nineteenth-century middle class women who could more easily live as "True Women." Despite the conflict between her present situation and this ideal woman, Sarah tries to become a proper lady. Her story creates a compelling portrait of conflicts between preconceived beliefs concerning women's roles and frontier women's actual lives. Like Sarah, many women found that they could not fulfill traditional expectations associated with proper womanhood. By the end of the story, Sarah has had many experiences as a wife, mother, and housekeeper, but at the same time, she has earned a high school education, operated a ranch successfully and defended herself with a rifle. She has learned her proper place which, due to necessity and her own desires, is beyond the True Woman's limited sphere.

Taken overall, Sarah's story represents common experiences of many white women in Arizona Territory. While it is unlikely that one woman would have experienced so many violent situations with Indians and bandits, she could certainly have learned to shoot a rifle well, given birth with only relatives attending, and made friends with people across ethnic lines. Her daily life would have been defined by domestic duties, caring for family members, ranching and socializing with family and friends. The reader senses the gradual improvement in living conditions on ranches and in towns as technology eases the primitiveness of life. By 1900, people are discussing statehood for Arizona Territory. Life is changing quickly, and strong women like Sarah Prine are ready for the twentieth century!