



A Lantern in Her Hand

Bess Streeter Aldrich

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"Sometimes it all comes over me," young Abbie said to her fiance, "that I can do big things. It's ahead of me...kind of like a light in the woods that shines and stays far away. And when I read verse or hear music...or...sing...it beckons me one, and my throat hurts with wanting to do something great."

Abbie Deal did do something great, even if it wasn't what she had dreamed of. And years later, when her children, raised in a rude sod hut, were prosperous men and women of a thriving state, she could say proudly, "I've seen everything...and I've hardly been away from this yard. I've seen the feeble beginnings of a raw state and the civilization that developed there, and I've been part of the beginning and part of the growth. But it's funny," she added, "I was always too busy filling up the youngsters and getting patches on the overalls to notice that I was part of the epic."

A strong and vigorous picture of pioneer life. The magnificent story of a young girl who went West as a bride -- and helped to build a nation.

A Lantern in Her Hand Details

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Author : Bess Streeter Aldrich

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From Reader Review A Lantern in Her Hand for online ebook

Sally says

This was one of my mom's favorite books when she was a girl, and when I read it after she recommended it to me, it became one of mine as well. It is the story of pioneer woman who tries to maintain culture and civility in the ever changing and growing West.

Jodi says

I read this book for a book group and it is also the state of Nebraska book choice of the year--being a story about a pioneer family moving to and settling in Nebraska.

Since I, myself recently moved to Nebraska because of my husband's work, I did find myself sympathizing with Abbie at the beginning as she tried to convince her husband that there was nothing to go to Nebraska for and her lack of excitement about the move. I too, never thought I'd ever live in Nebraska, but like Abbie, a century later I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

I've had trouble deciding what rating to give this book. I was disappointed at how much time the book covered, from Abbie's childhood clear until her old age and death. I thought it was a little much to cover in a 250 page book. I felt like I was reading a lot of brief descriptions summarizing what happened over a 5 or 10 year period without going too deep into a plot or taking time to let me fall in love with the characters. The second half of the book also had so many characters (with all of Abbie's children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren) I often got confused with the relationships and keeping track of who was who, but that might also be due to my level of sleepiness while reading.

Other times throughout the book the "clock" so to say, would stop for a while and the author would actually take time to tell about a specific event in detail with dialogue between the characters. I seemed to like those scenes much more than the descriptions of the passage of time.

I found it humorous how often the author described or mentioned Abbie's "tapered fingers". I didn't quite understand why the author liked using that description so much. I found myself chuckling each time it was mentioned over and over.

Overall, not a bad book but not a great one either. I've read other pioneering stories that I have enjoyed much more.

Mary JL says

This is a beautiful, poetic moving story of Abby Deal, covering the time of the early pioneer settlements in

the Midwest.

It is a timeless family story of a mother who sees the dreams she is unable to fulfill passed on to her children. Realistic--with both sad and funny parts as in all lives this an excellent classic that is not as well known as it should be. Originally published in 1928 but still readable today because human nature is still the same. the covered wagons have been replaced by autos and planes but a story of interesting people remains a good story. You won't regret reading this!!

Highly recommended for any reader---but young girls with an interest in history will find it especially appealing.

Read long ago before GR so dates unknown.

Lucy says

Originally published in 1928, Beth Streeter Aldrich uses this novel to create a fantastic female character, Abbie Deal. Abbie's story begins in 1854, when she is eight years old and at the start of a three week journey, traveling with her family by wagon from Illinois to Iowa. The fact that I grew up listening to pioneer stories from this era made her voyage very vivid in my mind. I could see the sacks of flour falling out of the wagon and floating in the river and the oxen slowly pulling all the families' possessions along a bumpy buffalo trail. The story ends in 1926 with Abbie's death at the age of 80. The face of America changed dramatically between those years, and Abbie's life changed alongside it.

Part pioneer story, part pride of Nebraska lesson, part farming tutorial, part commentary about marriage - Aldrich ultimately uses Abbie Deal to explain the choices and sacrifices that faced a 19th century woman, or more specifically, a mother.

Perhaps Abbie Deal's selfless mothering is the source of my distress. I've always felt I've lacked in this arena and while I've tried really hard not to compare myself to my friends' and siblings' styles of mothering, I found myself forlorn with the realization that I was no Abbie Deal. Abbie was a natural mother. She postponed her dreams of becoming a singer and learning how to paint the prairie's sunset to follow her husband, Will, to Nebraska at the end of the Civil War.

Originally, she postponed these dreams for the sake of her husband, who needed to carve his own way in life away from his father. Later she postponed them because there was no money or opportunity and every ounce of her energy went into building their home and farm and caring for her young children. Later yet, she postponed them because her children grew and had dreams of their own that required any extra time or money she had saved. Finally, she abandoned them altogether because her talents had left her. Her voice had faded from non-use and her fingers were gnarled and knobby from years of work. In the end, all she was left with was her good name and the pride she had in her children's accomplishments.

Thus started the deep, stabbing pain in my chest. This kind of story, really...the universal story of motherhood, always leaves me feeling a little "damned if you do, damned if you don't". Abbie gave up everything of her own...her talents, her time, her figure (I can really relate to this), her life...for her children. The feminist in me resists....even feels slightly miserable that we women are expected and praised for being noble and altruistic, but void of personal achievement. The mother in me, however, wipes away a tear as I watch life from back stage instead of front and center, but wholly gets that my family is THE point. I get to clap and cheer and know that my efforts made this grand production possible.

Throughout the book, Abbie does women a great service by allowing herself to wonder "what if". What if she had married that other boy who wanted her but who she didn't quite love, the one whose wife now wears all those fine clothes? What if she and Will hadn't moved to Nebraska and avoided suffering through drought and grasshoppers and blizzards? What if she had kept at her singing...developed the talent that everyone acknowledged she had? What if, what if, what if? What if I had? What then? Is the prize for the correct choice happiness?

The fun in discussing this book would be hearing the strong arguments that defend both ends of the spectrum, and all the shades in between. Today, we lucky women choose the shade that fits us best. Do we like how we look?

Abbie Deal chose motherhood but the story did not romanticize her choice. Abbie's story included every distracted husband, every sick child, every annoying friend and every moody child. And yet, in the end, Abbie sat as an old woman and felt satisfied that her five children were a fine product of a life's work.

I recommend this book to every woman out there who enjoys tales of pioneer life or more importantly, empathizes with the difficult decisions made by women everywhere...always.

Beth says

I was curious to read *A Lantern in Her Hand*, written by Bess Streeter Aldrich, who is kind of the runner-up to Willa Cather as a Nebraska pioneer novelist. As with Cather's novels, I enjoyed reading about my (current) home state in the days when it was miles and miles of waving prairie grass and Lincoln was just a tiny town, a long wagon journey away from the characters' sod or log cabin homes, that no one could believe had been chosen as the state capital. Also like Cather, Aldrich deals frankly with the basics of pioneer life:

births, marriages, deaths, and usually lots and lots of hardship in between.

Cindy Rollins says

I read this years ago and remembered loving it so much I suggested our new book club read it. Then I started to second guess my choice. I do not know if the younger women in the group will like it but I loved it just as much, if not more, this time around.

Favorite Quotes:

"And the minister at home had said you could do anything with your life. But that was not so. Life did things to you."

"Abby talked and prayed. "Oh, God, it's such little things we need help in,-such everyday affairs."

"Always the Abbie Deals must be doing something for their children."

"I don't know that we will do a great deal of good, but we won't do any harm, and much of life is an experiment anyway."

"No, Abbie Deal would never get over being a mother."

Lisa says

This was a very interesting book. It was more like I felt my way from cover to cover than read it. I don't even know if that makes sense but the way that the author painted the story - the images, the feelings, the experiences - was so amazing.

This book was first published in 1928 and is about the settling of Nebraska. But it reaches further back and forward than just another pioneer story. It is also about family and a mother's heart, dreams, friends and reality.

I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone.

Kaitlin says

Wow. I only picked up this book because someone recommended A White Bird Flying by the same author and suggested I read this prequel first. I thought it would just be a simple read to get through before reading the next and was not prepared for the profound truths about which this book speaks.

These truths, choosing a spouse, raising your children, dying to self, were so clearly articulated through the fictional character of Abbie Deal. I was both amused and shocked at learning about life on the Nebraska prairie in the late 1800's. But I was moved to tears by the lessons in this book. And through my tears I was smiling at the realization that motherhood is the same now as it was a hundred years ago. And the love

between a husband can be the same if you are blessed with a spouse like Will Deal.

This book made me appreciate what I have. It made me stop and linger while tucking my children into bed. It made me find the beauty and goodness in something as simple as setting the table for my family. It's a book that will likely stay with me forever.

Heather says

I just finished this book and can tell it's going to be one that I reflect on the rest of my life. It was beautifully written and scattered with many tidbits of wisdom. It was so enjoyable to see a whole lifetime lived in one book.

I found myself admiring and learning from the main character, Abbie Deal, through all her stages of motherhood and grand-motherhood. She was so good at loving her children despite their varying personalities, loving her husband for his unique strengths, and snapping out of personal low points through gratitude and hard work. She was fiercely loyal to her friends and lived a simple yet rich life. It was interesting to see the contrast of how her family turned out vs. other families in the story based on the way she nurtured her children and the values she taught them. I also appreciated how she learned to bloom where she was planted. She chose to love the prairie and in turn, it became beautiful in her eyes. I especially enjoyed the author's take on death and her description of what it will be like.

I think the strength I most admired in Abbie was her ability to hold her tongue when she heard her older children and grandchildren share differing opinions with her. In doing so, she maintained close relationships, gave herself room to change her opinions of them as they grew older, and never made them feel judged by her. That one strength left the door open for all of her posterity to want to return to her time and time again and feel nothing but love from her.

Beth says

Ah, a beautiful, bittersweet book. It felt epic in places, sweeping over generations, and yet it contained small vignettes and tightly-wound themes that reminded me of a short story.

Some of the themes included:

* Choices. The choice discussed in the summary between marrying the doctor or the farmer reminded me of the famous Frost poem, about two roads diverging in a wood. That choice really did "make all the difference" to Abbie Deal — and to her posterity.

* Loyalty and Friendship. Loved the friendship between Sarah and Abbie — and even moreso between Abbie and Christine. These women were true to each other, even in hard times.

* Sacrifice. Oh, the sacrifices a parent makes for a child! I was lucky enough to have a mother that gave me many opportunities, ones that she herself never had while she was growing up. I couldn't help but reflect on that as I read.

* Time. The way the author describes the hands on the clock sweeping away the hours is hauntingly beautiful.

* Age. I loved how the story came full circle, and the reader realizes that "Old Lady Deal" that we meet in

the beginning had a full, rich life — full of memories. It made me think differently about my parents and grandparents.

This was so much more than the typical pioneer story. The heroic Abbie Deal is one of my new favorite characters from literature; she was strong and yet unselfish, a strange balance of feminism that is so rare. And she really does personify the poem from which the title was based:

Because the road was steep and long,
And through a dark and lonely land,
God set upon my lips a song
And put a lantern in my hand.
—Joyce Kilmer

Heather says

Abbie Deal was one of the first pioneers to settle in Nebraska and these 251 pages give us a sweeping glance at the many things she witnessed and endured with an abundance of love for her family and unfailing charity for others. The only downside was that at times I wanted more than a sweeping glance.

wanderer says

Bess Streeter Aldrich does for pioneer Nebraska, what Margaret Mitchell does for the war-torn South: makes you want to live there, no matter how bad it was.

No matter how many times I read this book, I finish it with tears streaming down my face. It's not that the ending is so dreadfully sad, it's that the entire book makes me so emotional, and I keep fighting the sob session off until the end, when it all comes out in one gush. My husband caught me at it and said, "Boy, that must be one good book." He knows me well, and he's right.

This time through, I noticed some rather unpleasant writing quirks: over-use of repetition, weird pacing, and ellipses galore. Under some circumstances, this would turn me off a book entirely, but I forgive Aldrich all and quickly go on to her next book.

She makes me feel what it meant to be a pioneer. She celebrates women. She somehow reaches across the years and miles and touches on issues I care about, expresses feelings I thought only I felt, and makes me feel and care and--like I said--cry my eyes ugly.

Abbie Deal is a true literary heroine, in my eyes. She's my great grandma and my mother. She's me, and she's my nieces and greats, someday. She's a women, and she does "what women do."

Alicia says

Loved it! The novel, which describes the whole life of a pioneer woman named Abbie, was beautifully

written and sprinkled with simple yet profound thoughts. I got so attached to Abbie and Will that the book made me all emotional. The writing style was like a mix between L.M. Montgomery and Janette Oke, with something unique added in.

Sometimes a span of 5 years or so was mentioned by only a brief paragraph, which I didn't particularly like, but the author made up for it with detailed descriptions of the times that she did include.

Glad I read this! 4.5 stars.

Megan says

Right from the introduction it is clear this is not going to be a sunshine and rainbows story. It doesn't shy away from the often painful realities of life, and death. Normally I'm not interested in the persevere-in-the-face-of-one-hardship-after-another genre , but for some reason I couldn't put this book down. This bittersweet story gives an interesting insight into how recently the struggle for Nebraska to become established occurred, and perhaps, why the motto of 'The Good Life' is so ardently pursued and cherished.

Jennifer says

This book was beautifully written! I loved it! It was a simple, yet tender story of a pioneer woman-Abbie Deal. It is a book full of wisdom and so much insight. It is a book about mothering, and grandmothering and people and living. It made me reflect on myself, my own mother and grandma. It had so many wonderful quotes. Some of my favorite were:

"Because the road was steep and long,
And through a dark and lonely land,
God set upon my lips a song
And put a lantern in my hand."

Here is another little gem she tells to her daughter,

"You know, Grace, it's queer but I don't feel narrow. I feel broad. How can I explain it to you, so you would understand? I've seen everything...and I've hardly been away from this yard....
I've been part of the beginning and part of the growth. I've married...and borne children and looked into the face of death. Is childbirth narrow, Grace? Or marriage? Or death? When you've experienced all those things, Grace, the spirit has traveled although the body has been confined. I think travel is a rare privilege and I'm glad you can have it. But not every one who stays at home is narrow and not every one who travels is broad. I think if you can understand humanity...can sympathize with every creature...can put yourself into the personality of every one...you're not narrow...you're broad."

And then here is one she tells her granddaughter:

"You can't describe love, Kathie, and you can't define it. Only it goes with you all your life. I think that love is more like a light that you carry. At first childish happiness keeps it lighted and after that romance. Then motherhood lights it and then duty...and maybe after that sorrow. You wouldn't think that sorrow could be a

light would you, dearie? But it can. And then after that, service lights it. Yes...I think that is what love is to a woman...a lantern in her hand."

Ah....I just loved this book-simply lovely! There was so much to gain from this book-it made me want to be a better person. This is why it gets 5 stars.

Kara says

I absolutely loved this book! It had everything I love in a story; history, family, love and timeless wisdom. I really loved how Abbie described the passage of time as being like the hands of a clock that never stops and like the wind that keeps blowing. That is exactly how I view time as my own family grows and changes with new births and deaths. I found this imagery both comforting and sad. Bess Streeter Aldrich also did a wonderful job of capturing the heart of motherhood. Abbie Deal is the picture of a good mother, always putting her children first and looking out for their best interest with "a lantern in her hand." This is beautiful, sentimental book that has quickly placed itself on my list of all- time favorites!

Nicole says

Maybe it's because this author is predictable and I only recently read another book by her, but I am finding that one of the reasons I don't enjoy Pioneer era historical fiction is because it's all very predictable. They all go like this...They head west, the woman doesn't really want to go, but she has no say, so she goes along anyway, promising to visit her family (she never does). They have a hard time getting west and someone dies. They finally make it west, the first winter is hard and someone dies. The first crop is unsuccessful, and someone dies the following winter...slowly the crops might get a little more successful, but more than likely someone will die just about every other year and usually it's a child.

I know it's true to life, but, it's just not a life story I want to read I guess.

Vicki B says

I wonder...if I had read this book at a younger age, would it have moved me in the same profound way? I've raised my children, have grandchildren, worked hard (seemed hard to me, tho' almost laughable comparable to Abbie Deal...who's story more resembles my incredible mother-in-law's) done without, had dreams, given up on dreams. So many of the musings Bess Streeter Aldrich's character has throughout her life resemble my own--some of the later ones I hadn't even given words to!

What a marvelous, exhaustive, thorough reminding of what it took to settle & develop our country this book is to us that have it so very easy. May we continue the telling & never forget.

One thought that stands out is the richness of Abbie's self-sacrificing life as compared to the more shallowness of the next generation who have the time & means to seek out "time for themselves". She had her battles with bitterness from time to time, especially at the loss of some of her girlhood dreams, but in the end when her granddaughter Laura asks her happiest memory she says:

"...I like to think of the table set for the whole family at supper time. The robins are singing in the cottonwoods and the late afternoon sun is shining across the floor. Will, your grandfather, is coming in to supper..and the children are all playing out in the yard. I can hear their voices and happy laughter." (p. 284)

I feel much the same.

Jennifer says

I really enjoyed this book. It feels like finding a hidden treasure when I discover a great book written long ago that I've never heard of. I struggled for a while with the style of the prose, but the story was gripping and I couldn't put it down. I was also impressed with the integrity of the protagonist and the value she placed on her role as a mother. The story is a tribute to mothers of every generation, I think, and the sacrifices they make for their children.

Note: I got my copy from interlibrary loan at our state university and it is a first edition. The original owner (in 1929) pasted a newspaper clipping on the inside front cover. I thought it should be shared here. Unfortunately, the clipping doesn't show the name of the newspaper or when it was published.

"A PIONEER MOTHER: In her new novel, "A Lantern in her Hand," published by Appleton, Bess Streeter Aldrich says she has told many of the stories of the pioneers and the early days on the prairies which she heard from her parents. In describing how she came to write this novel, Mrs. Aldrich says "My parents, having come into Iowa before their marriage, were always full of the experiences of those early days, and so I was steeped in an atmosphere of reminiscences of river floods, storms, drought, ox-team trails, log cabins and snow drifting onto beds. Once in later years after I had begun to write and my mother was a very old lady, I remarked to her how sorry I was that she endured such a hard life when she was young. She looked at me with an odd sort of an expression and said, 'Save your pity. We had the best time in the world.' Suddenly it seemed to me that I would like to catch a little of that spirit in a story sometime--that I wanted to write some day a pioneer mother who, although she endured all the hardships of those days, was sustained through it all by courage and love and a sense of humor. I think I would have written "A Lantern in Her Hand" if I had known a single copy would not be sold. It is my bit to honor the pioneer mother."

Olivia says

This book definitely lived up to its glowing reputation;)

I'm not sure that it's one of my new favorites or anything, but it's...gosh, it's basically flawless. The middle-to-end dragged a bit at times, but overall...MAH GASH. The prevalent feeling I get from reading it is that here is a book throbbing with Life--with the joy, tragedy, injustice, and placidity of the human existence. The main characters were extremely likeable (which is kind of rare for me, I've realized--I don't usually love the protagonists of novels! Weird, huh? The secondary characters are usually my favorites). The WRITING was DELECTABLE. Oh mah heavens above, that woman could WRITE. And she made her characters relatable,

her descriptions vivid, and her understanding of life and humanity really shone. *applause*

All in all...wow, just wow.
