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SINKING THE SULTANA

*A CIVIL WAR STORY OF IMPRISONMENT,
GREED, AND A DOOMED JOURNEY HOME*

SALLY M. WALKER

Discussion Questions

1. Whose story did you find most compelling?
2. If you'd heard of the *Sultana* before reading this book, where did you learn about it and how much did you know? If not, why do you think this chapter of history is so little known?
3. How did privilege play a role in the *Sultana* disaster?
4. Do you think the blame for the disaster lies with any one person more than others?
5. What do you think was going through the minds of the men throwing whatever they could find overboard as they tried to help as many people as they could?
6. How do you think the captains of the empty steamboats like the *Lady Gay* and the *Pauline Carroll* felt when they heard the news of the *Sultana* explosion?
7. What do you think of the investigation into the *Sultana* disaster? Were you surprised by the outcome?
8. Think about what the *Sultana* voyage meant for its different passengers. How would a voyage home be different for the Union soldiers released from prisoner-of-war camps than for the average steamboat passengers who boarded in Vicksburg? Would they react to the disaster in the same way, either while it was happening or in the aftermath if they were lucky enough to survive?
9. The author discusses how the nation's reaction to news of the *Sultana* disaster was tempered by timing, writing that "in a terrible way, the nation had become numbed by death. . . . When the *Sultana* sank, the nation was still reeling from Abraham Lincoln's assassination" (page 161). Why do you think there's a difference in the way we process multiple tragedies at once versus isolated events?
10. Why is it so interesting to read and learn about disasters that have occurred, even though we know how terrible they were?
11. In the book's conclusion, Sally M. Walker draws several parallels between the fate of the *Sultana* and current events we read about in the news: "a war-torn nation, an overcrowded ferry, individuals who place profit above safety, and people who kindly aid suffering victims of disaster" (page 162). What specifically is Walker referring to here? What can we learn from the *Sultana* disaster that could prevent similar tragedies from happening? In what small ways can you personally make a difference?



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