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Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris were engaged to be married, when they were invited to share the Presidential box with the Lincolns at Ford's Theater on the evening of Good Friday, 1865. When John Wilkes Booth crept into the box, the young couple became witnesses to a central tragedy in American history.

But Lincoln's assassination is only one part of this novel--for in researching the lives of Henry and Clara Rathbone, Mallon uncovered an even more dramatic story of passion, scandal, heroism, murder, and madness. Imaginatively re-creating their lives, he tells the larger story of nineteenth-century Victorian America: a society structured above suppressed impulses and undercurrents that grew stronger as the century progressed.

Henry and Clara Details

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From Reader Review Henry and Clara for online ebook

Graceann says

Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris were the ill-fated couple sharing the Lincolns' box at Ford Theatre on April 14, 1865. This awful event foreshadowed many terrible things in their lives, and haunted them forever after. Difficult but compelling reading.

Sandra Mather says

I loved the delicate interweaving of historical facts with thoughtful fictive conjecture. This was a slow read. The prose was more in keeping with the late-1800s than with modern times.

Kathy says

This is one of those amazing historical novels that takes as its characters real people about whom not a lot is known. Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris, raised in the same Republican household as step siblings in upstate New York, were engaged to be married when they were invited to accompany President and Mrs. Lincoln to Ford's Theater. From there, we learn how their life together ended with Henry in an asylum and Clara dead at his hand. Compelling, sad, and complicated.

Tiffany says

I finished this book last night at 10:45. On Friday. Good Friday. April 14th, 2017. Which happens to be exactly 152 years almost to the HOUR of Lincoln's assassination! Totally didn't even plan it. Thumbs up for timing.

I find Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris' story fascinatingly tragic. To be in the very box, sitting beside Lincoln, as he was assassinated. For Henry to have grappled with Boothe as he attempted to flee and having been slashed in the arm by Boothe's knife. To be next to Mary as she screamed over her husband. For Clara to be cover in blood amidst the chaos and confusion. How awful. And to have to carry that burden for the rest of their lives and the tragic end for both of them. Heartbreaking.

So with interest born out of fascination for their story, I plunged into this book. Then ended up slogging through it. It was bogged down with lots of political talk and politician name dropping, especially right at first. And I found myself not really caring for Henry or Clara, at least his portrayal of them. They weren't very likable. But it's the end of their story that kept me going, and even though I knew beforehand what befell them in real life, when I shut the book after turning the final page, I just laid there feeling overwhelmingly disturbed. Wow. So tragic.

Jana says

I'm reading this because I just finished Assassination Vacation by Sarah Vowell and she recommended it. It's about Henry Rathbone, who was sitting next to Lincoln when he was shot. It didn't bode well for the rest of his life....

Finished the book. Learned a lot (fiction, but the historical is there).

Sue says

I like historical fiction, especially when it is done well. Sadly, this historical fiction wasn't done well at all. It could have been a really fascinating story about the couple who was with the Lincolns at Ford's Theater, but I never felt like I knew who the characters were. The author didn't go too deeply into them. It was a classic case of telling, not showing. The beginning of the book was interesting; the end was shocking; the middle was boring.

Jonathan says

Loved this book. Engrossing! Could not put it down!! I got so invested in Clara. I enjoyed Thomas Mallon's writing style and his characters are memorable. Weaves historical figures into narrative so brilliantly! Can't wait to read another of his books!!! Irrelevant if reader knows a lot about the civil war or not. Such a fun read!

Straw says

This is good historical fiction. It is very well-researched.

Barb says

Slow start, but got so much better in the end and was hard to put down. Writing style was average that's why the 3 stars. It changes my perception of history and the lives that are affected from important events. I never thought about the others in the box at Ford Theater that night and how their lives would change. Good read.

Mary says

Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris were recently engaged to be married, when they were invited to share the Presidential box with the Lincolns at Ford's Theater on the evening of Good Friday, 1865. Henry Rathbone - the son of the mayor of Albany, Jared L. Rathbone - had joined the Union Army in 1861 and fought in the Civil War, attaining the rank of Major very quickly.

Clara Harris - a wealthy socialite from Albany, New York - was a personal friend of Mary Todd Lincoln and the daughter of Senator Ira Harris of New York. By an unusual familial inter-connection, Clara was actually Henry's stepsister - as her father had married Henry's widowed mother, Pauline.

Henry Rathbone was sitting with Clara, next to the President and Mrs. Lincoln, when John Wilkes Booth entered the box and fatally shot the President. Henry immediately attempted to stop the assassin, but was stabbed in the arm during John Wilkes Booth's escape. Although he eventually recovered from his wound, Henry was mentally never the same.

He and Clara married on July 11, 1867 and had three children together. Their life together started out rather well and when Grover Cleveland became president, Henry was appointed the consul to Germany. His mental state had been precarious ever since he had returned from the Civil War; however, perhaps magnified by being present at the President's assassination, he was prone to fits of profound melancholia, hallucinations and delusions that people were trying to kill him.

Clara was beside herself. As her husband's mental health continued to deteriorate, she attempted to cover for his frequent mental lapses. She totally adored Henry and nourished her dream that with the proper help, he would eventually recover and they could resume their happy lives.

I really did enjoy this book, but I have to say that if I had one problem with the story, it would be that it covered the politics of the times. I found that I couldn't really keep all the characters straight in my mind. I truly felt sorry for Clara, Henry and their children because their lives were so horribly impacted by mental illness. I give this book an A+!

Paula Weisberger says

3.5 stars

Who knew there was such an intriguing story about the couple who shared the theater box on the night of Lincoln's assassination? Forbidden romance, mental illness, intrigue and murder are just a few parts of Henry and Clara's story.

I enjoyed the descriptions of the day to day things - fashion, pastimes, letters, social mores, etc.

Becky Loader says

Do you ever wonder what would have happened on April 15, 1865, if General Grant and his wife Julia had been in the box at Ford's Theatre with President and Mrs. Lincoln instead of Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris? Mallon has written a very feasible fictional account of Rathbone and Harris, who were last-minute stand-ins because Mrs. Grant was pretty strongly opposed to spending any time near Mrs. Lincoln. Interesting read.

James Cooper says

I did not cre for this book. At times it was a little difficult to get through and at others it was almost

impossible. When I finished this afternoon, I was relieved to be done with it. The chapters that contain letters back and forth are all too common and nothing about them separates them from other books with the same type of letters in them. A lesson learned: Poor Clara waited for her love, her step-brother who came home from the war, mentally damaged. The revelation that Henry made to Clara that he aided Booth's attack on Lincoln only furthered my dislike for the book. At the end of the story, saying that she was merely his sister, Henry "locked" away in an asylum merely goes about day-to-day as though nothing happened, that he did not kill his wife, his step-sister, the mother of his three children.

Crysta says

This fictionalized tale was surprisingly engrossing, tracing Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris, who were in President Lincoln's box the night of his assassination. But their story starts years earlier, in upstate New York, and traces their families' rise to national politics that lead them to befriend the Lincolns. It's a rare novel about the Civil War, including its origins and aftermath, that follows how a family experienced it both on the battlefields and on the homefront. What was Washington like during the war? How about the American experience in Europe in the 1860s and 70s? Lots of interesting perspectives, plus a love story and a lot of PTSD.

Susan says

On April 14, 1865, an engaged couple, Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris, accepted the Lincolns' last-minute invitation to join them in their box at Ford's Theatre. For the nation, the impact of that night's tragedy would be felt at once; for Henry and Clara, the denouement of their own private tragedy occurred years later.

"Henry and Clara" follows the titular couple from their childhood in Albany, New York, where Henry's widowed, ambitious mother sets her cap at Clara's widowed father, Ira Harris, whom Pauline Rathbone sees as a promising politician. A marriage soon follows, and young Henry and Clara find themselves stepbrother and stepsister. Though neither child cares much for the other's parent, Henry and Clara soon gravitate toward each other, and as they mature their feelings grow into romantic love. Before they can marry, though, they must overcome the opposition of their parents, and the outbreak of the Civil War throws yet another obstacle into their path.

There is another difficulty, one the determined and devoted Clara doesn't much want to acknowledge: Henry. For Clara, the mercurial Henry is Byronic, but the horrors of war soon disclose how fragile Henry's psyche truly is. Nonetheless, Clara, deeply in love and not willing to give up easily, presses on with her marriage plans, even after the Lincoln assassination strips yet another layer of sanity from Henry.

Though the story "Henry and Clara" tells is a tragic one, Mallon's wry narrative voice and his sharp eye prevent it from being a gloomy one. His characterizations are superb, with Clara, the main viewpoint character, being a particular success. Even as Clara becomes more isolated and her situation more grim, she never turns into the pathetic victim she might have become with a less skilled author.

If there's a rough patch in the novel, it's at the beginning, where the immersion into Albany politics may be too much for some readers. Persevere, though, and you'll be well rewarded. This was one of the best historical novels I've read.

