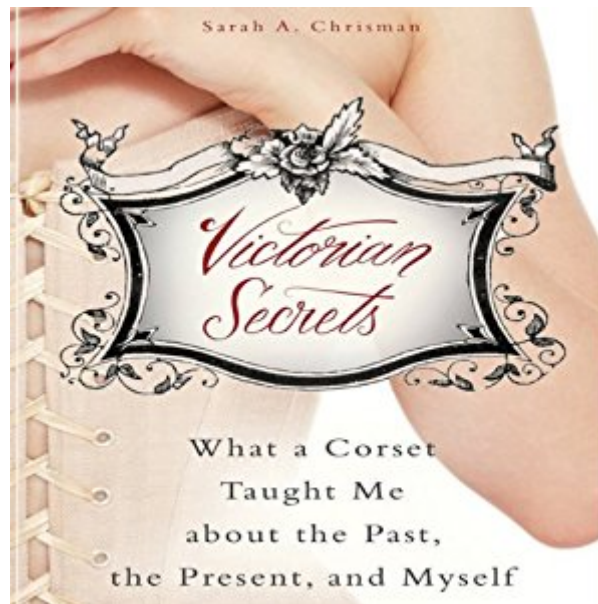


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Victorian Secrets: What A Corset Taught Me About The Past, The Present, And Myself



Synopsis

A true story about discovering positive selfhood, from a woman who moved beyond stereotypes to explore the world of corsetry firsthand. On Sarah A. Chrisman's 29th birthday, her husband, Gabriel, presented her with a corset. The material and the design were breathtakingly beautiful, but her mind immediately filled with unwelcome views. Although she had been in love with the Victorian era all her life, she had specifically asked her husband not to buy her a corset - ever. She'd heard how corsets affected the female body and what they represented, and she wanted none of it. However, Chrisman agreed to try on the garment . . . and found it surprisingly enjoyable. The corset, she realized, was a tool of empowerment - not oppression. After a year of wearing a corset on a daily basis, her waist had gone from thirty-two inches to twenty-two inches, she was experiencing fewer migraines, and her posture improved. She had successfully transformed her body, her dress, and her lifestyle into that of a Victorian woman - and everyone was asking about it. In *Victorian Secrets*, Chrisman explains how a garment from the past led to a change in not only the way she viewed herself, but also the ways she understood the major differences between the cultures of twenty-first-century and nineteenth-century America. The desire to delve further into the Victorian lifestyle provided Chrisman with new insight into issues of body image and how women, past and present, have seen and continue to see themselves.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was really looking forward to reading this book, having read a short review of it on a website. How different the reality! Though I did finish it, I could only tolerate it in small doses. Ms. Chrisman is a good writer and has a way with words, it's true, but her contemptuous attitude towards everyone in the book who was not her husband or of any benefit to her was off-putting to the max. I was particularly offended by her classification of a bus driver who attempted to help her and accidentally unraveled an already loose petticoat ruffle as "a low class southern brute"- she prattles on ad infinitum about her poor abused petticoat having been manhandled, as if the driver recognized her clothing as antique and maliciously decided to destroy it, rather than just trying to help her on the bus. This same petticoat she refers to as one she purchased for herself "for learning to walk again" (NOT!) after having to recuperate from a broken foot for a mere six weeks, part of which time she spent walking in a supportive orthopedic boot. Reading this, I was outraged for everyone who has experienced a genuinely traumatic injury and has had to spend months or years in physical therapy truly learning to walk again. She downs doctors, the healthcare profession in general, people who have misconceptions about corsetry, people who don't dress according to her high standards of historical accuracy, people who may or may not be staring at her in coffee shops, a party hostess that has an unfortunate moment of inattention, and on and on. She has hardly anything good to say about anyone, excluding her husband and a few people who flatter her. It just became downright tiresome to read all that vitriol.

The old expression "pretty is as pretty does" came to mind more than once while reading Sarah A. Chrisman's account of how she adopted Victorian corsetry and dress. Memoirs quite often end up revealing more about the author's personality than they realize, and it's clear that Chrisman has issues. It's not all that hard to unravel them: a self-described "heavy" young woman suddenly has a 22-inch waist and wants to show it off, but she's uncomfortable with the attention; a shy girl who clearly can't confront people to their face hides behind the pen to castigate those who give her even the slightest hint of resistance. She may be a lovely lady in person, but there's a point at which it starts to feel like editorial misconduct to have let her present such an embarrassing self-portrait in print. Worse, this self-appointed "ambassador" to history does a poor job of presenting it. While she makes a good case debunking some of the common myths and misperceptions about corset-wearing and the mechanics of late-Victorian corsetry, readers with little knowledge of corset history might have been better served by a short overview of the practice and how the shifting silhouettes of fashion shaped and reshaped corset wear until it disappeared altogether. She occasionally conflates the anti-corset movement of the late 19th Century with suffragism and

feminism, when in fact the Victorian dress reform movement was part of a health and hygiene philosophy that was only peripherally tangled up with political activism. It's all just a little off and a little muddled. "Perhaps I romanticize," she writes at one point, and that's the crux of the problem.

The book is well written and tells of the author's evolution from first putting on a corset to wearing a corset and Victorian attire every day. She recounts her journey in an engaging manner. The story is, to distraction, sprinkled with disdain for people who make historical garments in modern fabrics (rather than historically accurate ones), ask what are deemed "idiotic questions" about the author's attire or inconvenience her. The hostility toward an elderly woman who chooses to use a public restroom in which the author is dressing for a presentation is disturbing. She is referred to as "a dumpy old woman", "Grandma Bidy" and "crone" in succession. This undertone of judgement detracts from a story of transformation. Perceptively she writes: "People who are unhappy with the situation in their own lives may project that unhappiness elsewhere and exaggerate it in those imagined places. Thus they comfort themselves through a feeling of dominance over those other places, forgetting that they themselves created their peculiar pictures of it." This is an astute observation. The author interprets others to be judging her negatively even in instances when they don't utter a word: "...his dark looks downward were directed...at my waist. He's glaring at my corset! The realization amused as much as annoyed me. I truly wonder how people develop their prejudices sometimes," she writes. It is conceivable this fellow who was waiting in line at a café next to a hospital had other things on his mind. He was (the author notes the badge on his lab coat) a cardiologist. As his eyes fell upon her narrow corseted waist he may have been thinking about the welfare of a patient, about his child, an argument with his spouse...anything.

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