

2014 NV Reads

Twenty Miles From A Match: Homesteading in Western Nevada

Sarah E. Olds (1875-1963)

Book Discussion Guide by Patricia Cooper-Smith



TWENTY MILES FROM A MATCH HOMESTEADING IN WESTERN NEVADA

SARAH E. OLDS

FOREWORD BY LESLIE OLDS ZURFLUH

Twenty Miles From a Match, originally published in 1978, is the autobiography of an indomitable woman and her family's twenty years of adventures and misadventures in a desert wilderness. In 1908, a venturesome woman named Sarah Olds packed up her brood and went homesteading in the deserts north of Reno, west of Sutcliffe on Pyramid Lake. Her ailing husband said, welcoming her to their new home, "There, old lady. There's your home, and it's damn near in the heart of Egypt." Olds tells of the hardships, frustrations, poverty, and other tribulations her family suffered from shortly after the turn of the century until well into the Great Depression. Through it all, however, runs a thread of humor, cheerfulness, and the ability to laugh at adversity. The foreword is by her daughter, Leslie Olds Zurfluh, the fourth of Sarah and A. J. Olds's six children.

1. In 1897, Sarah E. Olds, a young, single woman moved to the California goldfields from Iowa. What kind of personality and character does it take to do this?
2. Family, work, and learning new skills are themes throughout the book. With an ailing husband, Olds quickly realizes she must be a wife, mother, rancher, farmer, and businesswoman. What kind of skills do Olds, her husband, and six children learn to survive and improve the homestead property? What do you know about this time period? Would you want to live at this time or choose this type of life?
3. Olds' characters are her husband, children, neighbors, and people in Reno. She is particularly fond of cowboys. How does she interact with these groups? How do Olds' stories reflect the social values of the time?
4. Weather and the environment are also characters in the book. How does Olds talk about the desert and her property? Does her opinion change over time? How does weather affect the family in their day-to-day life?
5. Choose a character and an event, and put yourself in that character's place. How would you act, react, or solve the problem or challenge?
6. The book is set in a rural area 35-miles northwest of Reno, roughly between the California border and Pyramid Lake, at a time before antibiotics when injury and illness are constant and dangerous threats. How does Olds deal with the various medical issues she encounters?
7. Except for a daughter's foreword, we only hear Olds' point of view. What kind of stories would her children tell?
8. What is your impression of Olds' effort to establish a school for her children? What do you know about one-room schools or school newspapers like *The Tule Mountain Record*?
9. Put yourself in Olds' "shoes". What first comes to mind? What do you know about desert homesteading or ranching now that you didn't before? How does it change your experience or challenge your assumptions?
10. Olds' memories take place between 1907 and 1931. She wrote her memoir in the years after 1931. How would you describe Olds as a storyteller? Is she believable? Did you enjoy her stories? Are her stories interesting and informative? Is it possible for a book to be interesting without "enjoying" it?
11. Have you read other books set in the same time period or with similar themes? How would you compare or contrast Olds' memoir to similar books you have read?



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