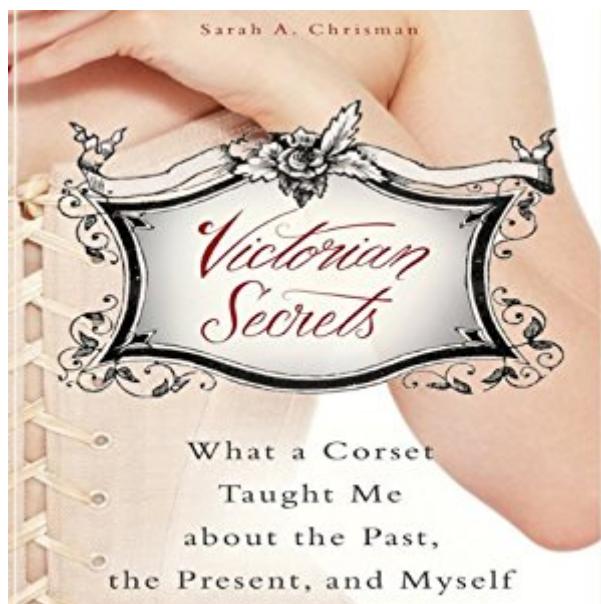


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# Victorian Secrets: What A Corset Taught Me About The Past, The Present, And Myself



## **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**

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hoursÂ  Â andÂ  Â 52 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: November 3, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00FJ7GDYQ

Best Sellers Rank: #22 inÂ  Â Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Lifestyle & Home > Antiques & Collectibles #256 inÂ  Â Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Antiques & Collectibles > Antiques Care & Reference > Reference #596 inÂ  Â Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Antiques & Collectibles

## **Customer Reviews**

I was excited to read this book and initially enjoyed it. However, the author's sanctimonious, self-righteous and downright negative personality became the only thing I was able to take away from this book. Nearly every interaction she has with other people besides her corset-obsessed husband is completely negative and downright strange. She goes off on random rants berating everyone around her for things that literally have nothing to do with the subject matter. This book comes off as a petty diary of an immature girl's teenage years while she also happens to be wearing a corset. I really wish I could mention a redeeming quality about this book. I want to so badly because - hello - Victoriana, corsets, early 1900s fashion- what isn't there to love? Unfortunately, nothing

Fascinating book; once I started reading it I couldn't put it down. Sarah Chrisman is a brilliant writer and the book is well researched; there were so many myths that she disproved. I so enjoyed reading about her immersion into the Victorian era, a time that has always been of so much interest. I had to underline some of the passages so that I could read them to my husband, especially the section where she disproves the myth about Victorians being prudish. We had a good laugh. We could all do well to embrace some Victorian manners and etiquette. This should be required reading for young women! I am now in the process of devouring "This Victorian Life"

Some parts are OK but in general it's still wacky. Too much about the massage school and having a broken leg and of course all the stuff about waist training is nonsense but corsets are cool as is wearing vintage Victorian clothes. Not worth the detour, as they say in the Michelin guide.

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. This would have been a delightful read if Ms Chrisman had stuck to her experience learning to wear her corset, debunking the myths about corseting, and imparting details about Victorian clothing. That's what I really wanted to know. As it is written, she comes across as alternately spoiled, condescending, self-righteously preachy, and self-pitying. My (no doubt unappreciated) advice to Ms. Chrisman: Develop a little empathy for others before you write another book. It will make your life happier and your writing voice stronger.

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. As much as she perceives herself to be living a Victorian life in the modern world, what she's actually doing is picking and choosing aspects of material culture that appeal to her to construct an elaborate role-play. That's impressive, and more power to her - but it's not living a Victorian life. It's

living a Victorian aesthetic. She presents her adoption of Victorian clothing as her everyday wear as an act of choice and demands respect in the name of diversity, but actual Victorian women didn't have a choice. Surely, there were women who didn't find wearing a corset to be "like a hug that lasts all day," or found the "luxurious sensation" of long elegant skirts somewhat lacking when they became tangled in factory machines or farm equipment. Those women could not make the choice to put on a pair of pants and a T-shirt. To those generations of women who spent backbreaking hours of their days sewing, mending and handwashing clothes for themselves and their families, ready made clothing, synthetic fabrics and mechanized washing machines were liberating. Chrisman's focus on the soft, frilly, feminine version of Victorian womanhood doesn't do justice to those that lived it.

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