

### Scrapbook Spies: In Richmond, Two Women Choose Conscience Over Country

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## Review

### SCRAPBOOK SPIES

#### **In Richmond, two women choose conscience over country**

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**Lyons, Mary E. and Branch, Muriel Miller.** *Dear Ellen Bee: The Civil War Scrapbook of Two Union Spies.* Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2000-10-01. ISBN 689823797

In the fictional **Dear Ellen Bee: A Civil War Scrapbook of Two Union Spies**, friendship, intrigue, danger, and courage are woven together to flesh out a little-known story in history. The result is remarkable, and leaves the reader wishing more was known about the real lives of these two fascinating women.

Unfortunately, there is little historical information about Mary Eliza ("Liza") Bowser, the youthful black woman who is one of the heroines of this young adult book. It is believed that an album kept by Bowser was thrown away by relatives in the 1950s. Only slightly more is known about the other heroine, Elizabeth ("Miss Bet") Van Lew, a white southern woman and Liza's former mistress. As the authors note, only 400 pages of Van Lew's 700-page diary survive, and very few factual references are made to her diary in the book. And yet, while it is a work of fiction, it reads like an engrossing nonfiction history.

The concept of using an album or scrapbook to tell their combined story works wonderfully. Keeping scrapbooks was a common activity for women in the 19th century. The books served as a place to record thoughts and to collect and preserve memorabilia. In the prologue, Liza, now 52 years old, presents the scrapbook to her niece, Polly, and explains how it came to include both Liza and Miss Bet's correspondence. To make things easier for the reader, Liza's pages are identified by a leaf, and Miss Bet's pages by a vine. These elements are helpful but almost unnecessary because the distinct personalities and voices of these two women - one a rebellious young former slave, the other a wealthy and privileged white woman - permeate the narrative.

**Dear Ellen Bee** begins in the years before the Civil War and is set mostly in Richmond. Liza is the young daughter of two Van Lew servants and the favorite of Miss Bet, who decides to send her north to be educated. They have a difficult relationship, however. Liza sees Miss Bet's concern for her as bossiness, and becomes determined to show Miss Bet that she doesn't "own" her. She returns to Richmond engaged, and is married despite Miss Bet's initial objections. Liza defies her benefactress again when she insists on living in an unsafe part of town. But despite their frustrations with each other, they have a strong connection. This bond is soon put to the test.

The Civil War, which has been looming in the background of the story, begins to dramatically affect the lives of these characters. Miss Bet, a Union sympathizer, had freed the Van Lew slaves before the War. But her growing concern for the Union prisoners being kept in a Richmond jail spur her into greater action. She secretly begins to spy and plot ways to help prisoners escape. Despite her fear at endangering Liza, Miss Bet asks her to help. Reluctant at first, Liza finally agrees.

Miss Bet arranges for Liza to be placed as a servant in the Confederate White House of Jefferson Davis. And thus is born Ellen Bee, the code name that Liza and Miss Bet use for each other. For about two years, Liza poses as an ignorant servant in the Davis home. She is the eyes and ears for Miss Bet and Union contacts, passing on any information that might be helpful to the North.

Set with the backdrop of the Civil War and including in secondary roles the historical figures of Jefferson Davis and his family as well as various Union and Confederate officers, it is easy to forget that this is a fictional story. Interspersed throughout the book/scrapbook are historical documents or images such as broadsides, press clippings, photographs, and drawings. Again, these lend a feeling of authenticity to the narrative.

As Liza tells her niece in the epilogue: "A young black woman, an older white one . . . together we made history. So now you know who Ellen Bee was, Polly. She was a hero. And now that you have her scrapbook, maybe one day someone else will know it, too." The irony is that we probably will never know the real story, but thanks to authors Mary E. Lyons and Muriel M. Branch, we meet two remarkable Civil War women and get an exciting peek at what might have been.

*Meg Chorlian is the editor of Cobblestone, the American history magazine for young people. The magazine regularly devotes issues to Civil War topics.*