

## When Sounds Collide: A Novel

**M. Day Hampton**

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(514pp)

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*An unlikely couple supports each other in secret in the poignant historical novel When Sounds Collide.*

In M. Day Hampton's tender historical novel *When Sounds Collide*, a young man touches the world despite his limiting circumstances.

In the American South in the late 1800s, Custis, who is Black, comes up with scientific inventions despite the limitations of his racist society. A prodigy, he lives "in a poem," "having both the mind of a scientist and scholar in the heart of a young boy." He observes details that most people don't. But he's also been orphaned and abandoned. After being beaten and left for dead, he is saved by Sarah, a white girl.

Custis learns to read and write in secret, shut up in Sarah's family's house. And Sarah is silent, having lost a parent. The two are drawn to each other in their shared, hidden world. He is mentally nourished by her family and starts to dream of a life of science. Their love is a source of intimate respite against mounting events of bigoted intrusions on Custis's life. Later, Custis heads to New York in hopes of finding racial freedom, but when he takes on a false identity, he realizes he may never see Sarah, or experience their connection, again.

The bulk of the story is told up close, via interactions between Sarah and Custis in her home. The plot is limited by the focus on Custis and Sarah's connection, though. Custis is developed in terms of his mind and inner strength; he quotes Shakespeare on multiple occasions. Still, his narration is quite logical and focused, with limited emotion; even the wound he sustains from a hate crime is described in scientific terms. His voice is also sometimes repetitive to distracting effect, slowing the pace of the story.

At Custis's opposite, Sarah is tender and observant. As she nurses Custis and gets to know him, she reflects on his struggles compared to hers, inspiring her toward growth. She advocates for him despite the taboos of their connection. Still, beyond the couple, the world and those in it are kept vague beyond a few choice details, as of the development of the railroad and the literature of the time.

Further, the couple's love story is underdrawn. Safe in Sarah's home, they are spared from the drama of circumstances beyond themselves. They are earnest about their care for one other, but all they experience happens in secret and relative safety. As such, the transformational power of their love is never realized in full, despite Custis's later gladness over the potential changes in Sarah's life.

In the romantic historical novel *When Sounds Collide*, a boy whose dreams are hard to realize still hopes to help a loved one grow.

GALE HEMMANN (February 4, 2025)

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