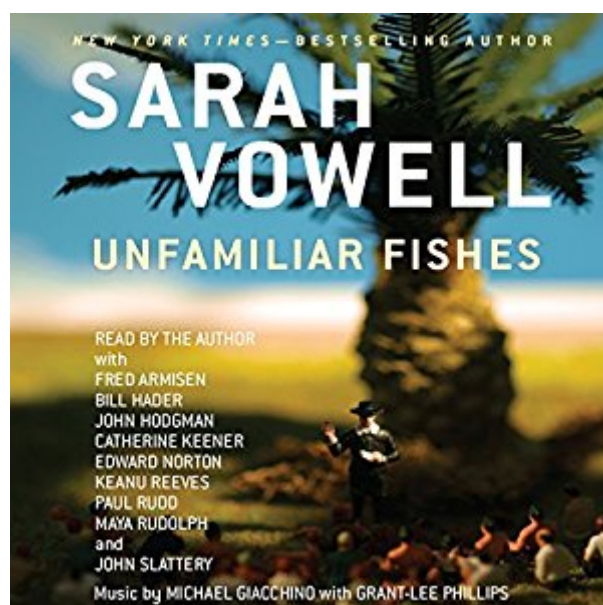


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# Unfamiliar Fishes



## Synopsis

Many think of 1776 as the most defining year of American history, the year we became a nation devoted to the pursuit of happiness through self-government. In *Unfamiliar Fishes*, Sarah Vowell argues that 1898 might be a year just as crucial to our nation's identity, a year when, in an orgy of imperialism, the United States annexed Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Guam, and invaded Cuba and then the Philippines, becoming a meddling, self-serving, militaristic international superpower practically overnight. Of all the countries the United States invaded or colonized in 1898, Vowell considers the story of the Americanization of Hawaii to be the most intriguing. From the arrival of the New England missionaries in 1820, who came to Christianize the local heathen, to the coup d'état led by the missionaries' sons in 1893, overthrowing the Hawaiian queen, the events leading up to American annexation feature a cast of beguiling, if often appalling or tragic, characters. Whalers who will fire cannons at the Bible-thumpers denying them their god-given right to whores. An incestuous princess pulled between her new god and her brother-husband. Sugar barons, con men, Theodore Roosevelt, and the last Hawaiian queen, a songwriter whose sentimental ode "Aloha 'Oe" serenaded the first Hawaii-born president of the United States during his 2009 inaugural parade. With Vowell's trademark wry insights and reporting, she sets out to discover the odd, emblematic, and exceptional history of the 50th state. In examining the place where Manifest Destiny got a sunburn, she finds America again, warts and all. Read by the author a cast that includes Fred Armisen, Bill Hader, John Hodgman, Catherine Keener, Edward Norton, Keanu Reeves, Paul Rudd, Maya Rudolph, and John Slattery. Music by Michael Giacchino with Grant Lee-Phillips. The score contains excerpts from "Hawai'i Pono'i" (words by David Kalakaua and music by Henri Berger) performed by Grant-Lee Phillips.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Those who have visited Hawaii know that it has earned its status as a gorgeous place. However, outside of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the recent history of Hawaii is not something that comes up very often for mainlanders. This book provides an enjoyable lesson on the subject. Sarah Vowell's oddball style of reporting is on display here as she broadly covers the history of Hawaii from the time the first Europeans stumbled upon it. She discusses some of the ancient culture and the clashes with the first missionaries to descend upon the islands from New England. The book culminates with a telling of how Hawaii was annexed to the United States through a joint resolution, since an annexation treaty failed to pass Congress after vehement protests by native Hawaiians. There are admittedly some problems with this book in regard to the writing. At times, sentences seem to drift off and loop back around on themselves. There is also a hefty serving of fragmentary writing, and the transitions are not always easy to follow. However, if you stick with it, there is enough humor and insight to keep you entertained while learning something as well. This book will probably not satisfy die-hard historians or those with very strong opinions on Hawaii's changes over the years. However, for the casual reader it's a great way to learn some of the history of this beautiful land, though it wasn't always a beautiful story. Some may not like the message, but it's a tale that needs to be told. In truth, this book made me feel plenty guilty for having been to Hawaii many times and not considering the steps it took for me to get there without a passport. I'm looking forward to another trip where I can investigate some of the sites mentioned in the book.

This is the first book I've read of Sarah Vowell's canon, and I was very impressed both with the erudition and the writing style. I have visited Hawaii twice (and now realizing what a haole I was), but I'm just not interested in conventional history. What I got from this book was valuable lessons about how the rich prey on the poor, how early the United States had dreams of empire, and how decidedly capitalism seems to overwhelm and reshape a culture. The language and insights are remarkable and often funny. One of my favorite lines was about how Americans "imported our favorite religion, capitalism, and our second-favorite religion, Christianity" to the islands. Vowell describes both the romance of monarchy as well as its abuses of power and tendency toward dissoluteness. She relates the story of New England missionaries who came to do good and did

well, their sons ultimately overthrowing the monarchy and trying to abolish hula. She shows how Americans basically forced Hawaiians to change from a simpler, self-sufficient economy to one dependent on the monoculture of pineapples and their export to world markets in a cash economy. All the while, Vowell is cracking the reader up with sly asides, such as "But if history teaches us anything, upper-class white guys can be exceedingly touchy about taxation." And, relating a story of how an American Mormon developed delusions of grandeur regarding himself and Hawaii: "He dressed in long white robes and called himself the High Priest of Melchizedek and tried to turn Lanai into his own private Waco.

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