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No. 63

MARI SANDOZ

by Helen Winter Stauffer



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Boise State University Western Writers Series Number 63

Mari Sandoz

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Mari Sandoz

Mari Sandoz

Mari Sandoz's overriding mission throughout her life was to bring the world she grew up in, the Great Plains of North America, to the attention of the public. Her own childhood experiences on the Nebraska frontier and the stories told her by her pioneer father and his old friends shaped her understanding of frontier history. Always interested in the effect of humans on the Great Plains landscape and its effect on them, she also reveals in her writing her great love of and knowledge of the natural world. Her themes often focus on the will-to-power individual or country and their influence. In addition she indicates her concern for the underdog, particularly the American Indian.

Sandoz came from an environment unlikely to produce a scholar or writer, and a female at that: a rough, newly settled country, a poor family with little social status, a mother who believed in a traditional, safe role for her daughters, and a fiercely anti-feminist father who, although university educated himself, opposed creative art of any kind. Perhaps Sandoz succeeded in part to prove her father wrong, to show that she was capable of doing something worthwhile in spite of being a woman.

She grew up on one of the last frontiers in the continental United States. Impressions of those early years formed her philosophy. "The underprivileged child," she pointed out, "if he becomes a writer, becomes a writer who is interested in social justice, and destruction of discrimination between economic levels, between

nationalist levels, between color levels and so on" ("Mari Sandoz Discusses Creative Writing," Nebraska Public Television, April 1959). She added that one with such a background is seldom introspective, because in childhood "what he thought had absolutely no importance." Her serious writing, then, is focused primarily on group conflicts: individuals are important as they represent aspects of society.

Sandoz's most powerful writing to some extent evolved—became narrative mode based on historical research—through a series of frustrations. Her major goal for years was simply to become a good writer, and she concentrated on the short story. Her work was rejected repeatedly by editors and publishers until her biography of her father, *Old Jules*, was finally accepted in 1935. While she had always realized that her material should come from her own region, her early stories unsuccessfully embroidered fiction onto the facts. They were unconvincing to Eastern publishers, too morbid and too garish.

Even after *Old Jules* was published, Sandoz continued to write novels, convinced that her talents should include fiction. She also wrote recollections, essays, and occasional pieces, but her longer nonfiction is the strongest of her writing and the basis for her reputation as historian, writer, and expert on the Great Plains and the Great Plains Indians.

Sandoz was born 11 May 1896 (a date she ingeniously falsified), the eldest child of Jules Ami and Mary Fehr Sandoz, Jules's fourth wife, on a farmstead on the Niobrara River in northwestern Nebraska, eighteen miles from the nearest village and on the western edge of the sandhills. The area had been settled by whites only a few years previously and was in a state of flux during most of Sandoz's youth, as settlers came in succeeding waves of migration and left—many of them—as soon as possible.

The Sandoz homestead lay close to an ancient major crossing of the Niobrara, and the road leading into the sandhills went past the house. Thus Mari could watch the peregrinations of almost everybody in the area, whether she was in the house, sitting on the gate post or, because of her shyness, hiding in the asparagus bed between the house and the road. Jules, her father, was the local "locator," who surveyed a settler's claim and sometimes housed the new settler's family until they could move to his claim. Often travelers stopped to see Jules: people he knew from his early days in the region in the 1880s—old hunters, trappers, and gold prospectors from the Black Hills. The Cheyenne and Sioux Indians from the neighboring reservations in South Dakota often pitched their teepees near the house when they came to the neighborhood to hunt, help with the harvest, or visit. People drifted through "like tumbleweeds on the vagrant wind" ("The Neighbor," *Hostiles and Friendlies*, p. 41).

As Mari listened to Old Jules's friends reminisce about the past, the little girl learned Plains history as recalled by those who had taken part in it. It was as a child she first heard Old Cheyenne Woman tell of events Mari would one day incorporate in *Cheyenne Autumn*. It was then she first heard about the Sioux chief Crazy Horse. Sandoz also learned from these raconteurs the techniques of story telling: the colloquialisms, direct dialogue, the means by which to hold an audience, and the vignette, so characteristic of frontier folklore.

The Sandoz household was dominated by the fearsome, choleric Jules, whose temper could be murderous, and whose mammoth ego allowed others in his home to act only in accord with his own concerns. He was a visionary who dreamed of establishing his countrymen and others in the raw new country. He visualized fecund orchards, vines, and crops in the area. He achieved these

goals, but the everyday chores of life he relegated to others.

Mary Fehr took those chores seriously; it was she who did the outside work necessary to keep a ranch going. It fell to Mari, their oldest girl, to do the housework and care for the five younger children. While Mari resented the responsibility of the children and the monotony of the housework, even worse was her fear of her father, who was so often in the house. She was frequently a victim of his anger. Mari feared her father long after she had grown up and had moved away.

Yet, to her credit, she saw beyond her fear to recognize that he had qualities of greatness as well, that he was an important man in the development of the area, and that to some extent he had the commanding characteristics of those who lead others to new lands. Both her fear and her admiration for her father are clearly delineated in *Old Jules*.

She was not so successful in her relationship with her mother, who apparently had little time or desire to establish a close relationship with her oldest daughter. According to Melody Graulich ("Every Husband's Right: Sex Roles in Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*," *Western American Literature*, May 1983, pp. 3-20), Sandoz found the role of her mother so undesirable she could not use her as a role model, and she never found a woman in her region worthy of an extended nonfiction treatment. Her major characters in nonfiction are male, although she did develop interesting fictional female protagonists in Gulla (*Slogum House*), Lecia (*Winter Thunder*), and Miss Morissa (*Miss Morissa*).

Of the childhood experiences that marked Sandoz's later thought and philosophy, one of the most important was her attending school, because it was here that she learned the magic of written words. Mari did not speak English until she began school at the age of nine—she spoke her mother's German-Swiss. Almost immediately

Mari began to read English omnivorously. She also set to work to learn the grammar and spelling of this language and to write little stories shortly after. Feeling isolated both in the community and within the family, her way to social acceptance would be through knowledge and achievement. Her strong motivation for success was generated early.

With the exception of short stories written for the children's page of an Omaha newspaper, nothing Sandoz wrote until she was at the University of Nebraska years later has come to light, but she apparently wrote from childhood. Oddly, for a writer, she seems not to have kept any sort of regular diary or journal for this period.

When Mari was fourteen Jules filed on a homestead claim twenty-five miles southeast of the Niobrara place, in the sandhills, and Mari and her brother James spent part of the summer there alone while the family wound up affairs at the river farm. The new ranch was utterly treeless, open to the searing sun and the bitter winter blizzards. There was a lake nearby, but no rivers, no bluffs. Instead, there were the hills. That summer, as she and James roamed the new area, without the everyday burden of child care and household chores, she formed a permanent love for "the constantly changing tans and mauves of the strange, rhythmical hills that crowded away into the hazy horizon" (*Old Jules*, p. 354). With a mind fitted for the minutest of details, she soon knew the scientific names for local flora and fauna, and her father shared his knowledge of the archaeology and geology of the region.

Mari graduated from country school at the age of seventeen. The following spring she married a neighbor, Wray Macumber. The young couple lived on the Macumber ranch near the Sandoz place, and Mari taught country school intermittently, though with only an eighth grade education, during their five years of marriage. In August 1919, she divorced Macumber, charging extreme mental

cruelty.

Little is known of the marriage. Perhaps she married to get away from her father and home, perhaps because gossip linked the two together, perhaps for love. It was Mari who wanted the divorce. The situation is remarkable primarily because nowhere in Sandoz's voluminous correspondence, notes, autobiographical sketches or recollections is the marriage alluded to. Later friends who thought they knew her well were amazed to learn, after her death, of this early marriage. Apparently, with a few exceptions during her first years in Lincoln, she never allowed herself to admit this part of her life to even her closest confidants.

The psychological aspects of this mental annulment are intriguing: one can find only a few possible traces of bitterness in such writings as her early story "The Vine," in which a young woman goes mad because of the drought on the Plains and a moment of cruelty from her husband. Some aspects are suggested in an early unpublished novel named *Murky River*, and the unlikely and unhappy marriage between Eddie Ellis and Miss Morissa in *Miss Morissa* may possibly be drawn from experience.

In the fall of 1919, after the divorce, Mari Sandoz made a major break with her region and her family, moving over 400 miles east to Lincoln, Nebraska. She was seldom home after that. In Lincoln she attended business school, returned west briefly to teach, then enrolled at the University of Nebraska as an adult special, since she did not have the necessary high school credits to be admitted as a regular student. She found a temporary job and devoted every spare minute to writing. It was to be the pattern she followed for many years.

Those "apprentice" years in Lincoln were as important in determining Sandoz's philosophy as were her years growing up in the sandhills. Entirely dependent upon her own earnings for her

college tuition and living expenses, she was often in real poverty. Her priorities were her writing and her education. Thus, she held a job only when she needed money. In the tradition of the starving artists of romance, she became thin and malnourished. She was regarded as something of an eccentric, but she stuck to her goal, her faith in her writing undiminished except for rare moments of depression.

Although Sandoz was aggressively independent, she received sympathetic support in Lincoln, particularly through networking of women friends. In 1929 Sandoz joined Quill, a group of Lincoln women hoping to find publication for their writings. They met biweekly to report on their work. Several were successful local journalists and among them were a number publishing in national magazines. From this group came a small coterie who gave Sandoz moral and financial aid. Here she met Eleanor Hinman, who became her strongest advocate.

Quill was not an unmixed blessing. Some of the members bored Sandoz mightily. She found some unbearably trivial, but while she eventually succeeded to a greater extent than most of them, they gave her their interest and help. She maintained her ties with Quill for many years after she left Lincoln, and in her turn often gave similar aid to aspiring writers.

At the university, Mamie Meredith, a respected scholar herself, helped Sandoz, particularly during the years before *Old Jules* was published, and was a staunch friend until Mari's death. On a more formal basis, Mari received encouragement and friendship from Dr. Louise Pound, one of the university's most eminent professors, an innovator in the study of American language, literature, and folklore.

From her first freshman English class, the university instructors were interested in Sandoz's writing, aware that she had a special

talent. Her first short story, "The Vine," was published in the English Department's new literary quarterly, *Prairie Schooner*, January 1927, and in the following few years others also appeared there. These are credited to Marie Macumber, the name she was known by when she first came to Lincoln. It was not until 1929, after her father's death, that she settled on Mari Sandoz as her professional name.

Sandoz had advocates in Lincoln, but her efforts to be accepted by national publications met with almost continuous failure. In the late 1920s the young writer turned from short stories to a novel. Never published, it centers on a young woman named Endor, clearly a heroine based on Mari herself. The book begins with Endor's childhood on a homestead on the Niobrara—the Sandoz homestead—and is peopled with characters obviously based on Sandoz's own family. Several incidents in the book later appear in Sandoz's nonfiction. There are a number of improbably dramatic scenes and the development of later characters is unconvincing, but the descriptive passages and Endor's relationship to nature are excellent.

An intriguing aspect is the revelation at the end that Endor, so clearly Sandoz's alter-ego, is not the child of the people who raised her, but an orphan. The theme of illegitimacy, adoption, and clouded birth appears in many of her works: "Youth Rides into the Wind," "The Woman in Grey," "Smart Man," and *Miss Morissa*, to name a few. Of more concern, perhaps, is Sandoz's vindictive depiction of her father. Her anger, hurt, and hate are clearly projected on this character who shows all of her father's faults but none of his graces. A comparison between this version and that given in *Old Jules*, which she wrote just after this, shows the remarkable distance she traveled in dealing with her father.

In 1928, after her father's death, she put aside *Murky River* and

began to form the biography of Jules. She later claimed three years of research and two in writing, but much of the research was begun even earlier.

Old Jules, accepted as the Atlantic Press Nonfiction Prize book of 1935, after it had been rejected by thirteen publishers, earned the author \$5,000 immediately. As the November Book-of-the-Month Club selection, it gave her another \$5,000. Now financially independent, Sandoz quit her current job and devoted her time to research, writing, and the teaching of writing.

Sandoz published her next two books while still in Lincoln. Both were fiction and intended as allegories. *Slogum House* (1937), a grim story of greed and power-hunger, is set in the sandhills. *Capital City* (1939), her only modern day novel, used as its setting a mythical Midwestern capital city. People in Lincoln were certain Sandoz was writing a *roman à clef*, and after publication the author faced considerable hostility there. In 1940 she moved to Denver, ostensibly because of research facilities necessary for *Crazy Horse*, her next book, but also to escape the continual unpleasant incidents she faced from irate Lincolmites.

Her residence in Denver was brief, only three years, but it marked a social high point in her life. She was immediately taken up by the artistic community and was also researching and writing the book she always felt to be her best.

As soon as *Crazy Horse* was published, Sandoz moved to New York, temporarily she thought, in order to be closer to the great Western historical collections in the East and to facilitate working with editors. She had found it too difficult to resolve textual problems via mail and telephone. She also felt she could be of help there to the government during World War II, as she was working with several wartime commissions and organizations. She attempted to enlist in the WACS, but was rejected because of an eye

blinded by the glare of the sun following a snowstorm when she was a youngster.

Sandoz was a resident of Greenwich Village the rest of her life. Eventually she became as involved in neighborhood and city politics as she had been in Lincoln, but she never claimed New York as home ("Outpost in New York," *Prairie Schooner*, Summer 1963, pp. 95-106). She was gone from there months at a time touring the West, promoting her books, researching, or lecturing. She was also instructor for several writing conferences and taught a writing course at the University of Wisconsin for nine summers. Certain from her own experience that everyone could write, she spent much time encouraging writers both in and outside her classes.

"I claim anything west of the hundredth meridian," Sandoz remarked. She always felt Nebraska, and particularly western Nebraska, was home, although she was not able to return there very often. Nevertheless, when she died of cancer in New York in 1966, her wish to be buried at home was honored. Her grave is halfway up a hill on the Sandoz Fruit Ranch between Gordon and Ellsworth, Nebraska. There, amid the flora and fauna of the sandhills she loved and wrote of so well, rests Mari Sandoz.

The Great Plains Series

Willa Cather, another Nebraskan, wrote that the history of a country first begins in the heart of a man or a woman. The history of the Great Plains and the trans-Missouri basin began in the heart of Mari Sandoz.

Just when Sandoz conceived her plan for the six-book series is not clear. In later years she maintained she had thought of it in her early twenties. Her first specific mention of this great project does

not appear in her correspondence until the 1940s, but evidence of her intent appears in her research even before *Old Jules* was published in 1935. At that time she was already collecting material to be used in other works. Her purpose was to cover the history of the region from the earliest advent of humans on the Plains to the present.

Details of the plan changed from time to time. She incorporated some books not originally intended and was unable to complete the one pertaining to oil in the region. For perhaps the only time in her career, she could not locate the documentation she felt necessary for that book. And time ran out. Again and again Sandoz was persuaded into writing something not in her original scheme. These books are useful, perhaps as useful as the oil book would have been, and even without it the series is lasting evidence of the author's vision and goals.

Sandoz did not write the series in chronological order: she began with the last book in point of time, but it was the period with which she had the closest personal relationship. *Old Jules*, the biography of her father, covers the years 1884 to 1928. *Crazy Horse* (1942) encompasses the period of the Plains Indian Wars, 1854 to 1877. *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953) deals primarily with the years 1878-79. *The Buffalo Hunters* (1954) concentrates on the years of the destruction of the buffalo, 1867 to 1883. *The Cattlemen* (1958) focuses on the years from 1860 to the 1880s primarily, and *The Beaver Men* (1964) covers the time that gunpowder and iron were first introduced on the Great Plains to the end of the demand for beaver, the 1830s.

The theme throughout is the issue most fascinating to Sandoz all her life, the interaction between humans and the Great Plains. *Old Jules* is a true and gritty account of the effect one man had on his environment and its effect on him. Nowhere is the theme of humans

vs. nature more graphically handled than in the story of her frontiersman father and his battles to establish a farming community in a new and often hostile land.

While Sandoz designated the book a biography, she aimed to tell the story of the community as well. It begins, in fact, as Jules, a young man of twenty-six, arrives in northwestern Nebraska in the spring of 1884. Little of his life before this period is given. And, typical of Sandoz's works, the first scene begins not with Jules, but with the country into which he comes to settle. While the focus is on Jules and his family, community and area happenings fill a background rich in details, and the book is replete with descriptions of the physical environment. Sandoz succeeded here in her goal of bringing her part of the country to the attention of the reader. The region appears in the list of major characters at the beginning.

Jules, nevertheless, dominates the book. Sandoz makes no attempt to eulogize him. She describes him, as one reviewer remarked, "warts and all." One of the most remarkable features of the book is her dispassionate attitude toward her father, her objectivity. She achieved a balance between the positive and negative aspects of Jules without showing ambivalence. Bernard DeVoto noted in his review ("Violent, Fighting Pioneer," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 November 1935, p. 5), that the "scars of terror and adoration are plainly visible." But she realized that in Jules she had a protagonist worthy of attention:

It dawned on me that here was a character who embodied not only his own strengths and weaknesses but those of all humanity—and his struggles were universal struggles and his defeats at the hands of his environment and his own insufficiencies were those of mankind; his tenacious clinging to his dream the symbol of man's hope that over the next hill he will find the green pastures of

his desire. (Quoted in Bruce Nicoll, "Mari Sandoz: Nebraska Loner," *American West*, Spring 1965, p. 35.)

The book begins in the spring as Jules arrives at Mirage Flats on the Niobrara River, one of the first to attempt settlement there. It ends with his death in the fall of 1928. The events of the intervening years include Jules's establishment of orchards, vineyards, and flower gardens in the sandhills, his continual battles with the ranchers on behalf of small farmers and homesteaders, his work as locator for many of the settlers, and his unflagging efforts to publicize the area and encourage new settlement there.

While Sandoz clearly establishes her father's importance to his community, she also points out his many faults as a human being. He went through four wives and was cruel to his animals and his children. One reader described him as that "strong, coldly savagely selfish, intelligent, lazy, vain, interesting, magnetic, detestable father of hers" (Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, October 1935). One technique by which the author maintained the necessary distance was through the use of the third person. Although Sandoz states in the foreword that she is the Marie in the book, by referring to herself only as "Marie" or "she" she becomes the author telling the story. That alone, however, would not have created a powerful book. Sandoz had to work her way past psychological problems with her material through many years. Undoubtedly the writing was a therapeutic device for her, quite aside from her desire to make her mark in the world of letters. Her early stories and unpublished novel are flawed by her too-close association with the female protagonists. Her obvious identification with the heroine is clearly self-pity. And although the early versions of *Old Jules* no longer exist, those who read them indicate that by the final version she had overcome her virulence and her accusatory attitude.

The book follows a chronological pattern generally, in what Sandoz called "beads on a string" form, with no one major climax. Sandoz herself spoke of it as a chronicle, similar in form to the fictional family chronicles of such writers as Galsworthy. Therein lies the major weakness according to some critics who acknowledge Sandoz as a superb storyteller, but find the sprawling episodic narrative awkward. The fault may not be entirely that of the author, however; Atlantic Press insisted on cutting 15,000 to 20,000 words from her text (which she had already reduced by two-thirds from her first version). She may have had some justification in complaining that the book was being cobbled beyond repair.

However, Sandoz's major battles with her publishers, of whom there were eventually eleven, were primarily over Eastern attempts to edit her sandhills idiom. She felt strongly that the language should be authentic for its region and time, and she believed she was a far better judge of the language than Eastern editors. It was a continual battle for her.

At issue was more than semantics. Sandoz believed the East, and certainly Eastern publishers, were provincial, knowing little about the rest of the country and caring less—a charge made by other Western writers as well (see Vardis Fisher, "The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment," *Western American Literature*, Winter 1967, pp. 244-59). Her experience with her publishers made her only the more convinced that to Easterners the West was merely a colonial region to be exploited, its wealth drained away by Eastern financiers and speculators, a Populist idea she had held since youth and to which she alludes in almost all her works.

Old Jules shocked readers whose stereotyped versions of the Western frontier did not include violence toward women and children, the brutalizing effect of the struggles with nature, and the constant battle with death. But Sandoz lived it. Furthermore, she

relied on enormous research through newspapers, journals, diaries, government records, books, letters, and personal interviews. By far the most important information came from her father's records. Jules apparently kept everything, including drafts for the many letters he sent, for he was a prodigious correspondent, fluent in several languages. These furnished her with priceless documentation.

Sandoz also found a wealth of material in the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln, particularly in the old state newspaper collection. She received encouragement and interest for her work from Dr. Addison Sheldon, the superintendent, who had himself lived in northwestern Nebraska. She worked at the Society at several periods; in the early 1930s she was associate editor of *Nebraska History* and oversaw more than forty individuals working under the Federal Economy Recovery Act in organizing and filing material. Much of her research material came from here.

In finding and recording her information for *Old Jules*, Sandoz established a pattern she followed throughout her career. In only one detail did this research vary from later work: for this first book she kept her information in three of the two-ring, loose-leaf notebooks students used then. The three black notebooks, over 1,500 pages altogether, all holograph notes, are not organized in any particular fashion, although they are roughly chronological, and indicate her interests and her biases in selecting material. These notes furnished background details for *Old Jules*—weather, crop conditions, and happenings in the community.

Never again did Sandoz resort to the loose-leaf notebooks. Shortly she set up an elaborate card file system based on the method of University of Nebraska Professor Fred Fling, who also gave her her methodology for research. Thereafter, she kept her voluminous

research material so that she could retrieve her information quickly. But only in the black notebooks can any vestiges of Sandoz herself be found.

The second book in her series, *Crazy Horse*, was not part of her early plan. A novel based on the Indian chief's life was originally to have been written by Sandoz's friend Eleanor Hinman. The two traveled over three thousand miles the summer of 1930 in a Model T Ford Coupe, visiting the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations in South Dakota, the Little Bighorn and Rosebud battlegrounds in Montana and Wyoming, and other sites important in the Indian wars of the 1800s. They interviewed a number of ancient Indian veterans still living on the reservations, some Sandoz had known in her childhood. Sandoz returned alone to the reservations the following two summers for further information.

Sandoz first began to write of Indian protagonists after the 1930 trip, but Eastern publishers were as little interested in this material as in her other writing. After *Old Jules* was published in 1935 she wished to write novels before she returned to history, and she continued research for a projected Cheyenne Indian book she had long wanted to write. In 1939, at the time she was also feeling the local repercussions from her *Capital City*, she learned that the novelist Howard Fast was writing a fictional account of the Cheyenne trek. Believing that the public would not be interested in two books on the same subject, she put aside her notes.

At that point Hinman offered Sandoz both her notes and her interest in *Crazy Horse*. Hinman had been working on the material for nine years but, as she told me, she could not afford necessary further research. Sandoz began to work on what was to be her own favorite book. She had long had a special interest in this man, not only because of his personal qualities but because as a boy he had lived near, perhaps on the Niobrara homestead land. Once again

she had a physical relationship with the landscape she would write of. Furthermore, Crazy Horse was a mystic, and Sandoz herself was always drawn to the mystical. She and John G. Neihardt, who also wrote of Crazy Horse in *Black Elk Speaks* and in "The Song of the Indian Wars," shared their veneration for the hero.

Once again Sandoz uses the chronicle form for a biography, but there are a number of differences between this and *Old Jules*. Everything in *Crazy Horse* points to the death of the hero at the end. Moreover, in *Crazy Horse* she had a man who manifested characteristics of the classic Virgilian hero. Because of the vast area, the large number of people involved, and the importance of the events to the Indians and the whites, the book is close to the classical epics in subject matter. Sandoz's serious treatment of her materials, her veneration for her hero and his civilization, her sorrow at the destruction of that civilization, all suggest her awareness of ancient Greek literature and history.

In addition, Sandoz applied a rather unusual technique for that time in using Indian terms and idiom to tell the story from their point of view. The method reinforces her objective of relating events primarily from the Indian view, using symbols compatible with their culture. The reader usually knows only what the Indians knew. Seeing events from that perspective, one understands their actions in their conflicts with the whites.

While those steeped in Plains Indian lore found the book excellent, many others had difficulty with the strange terms and the sometimes elliptical comments of the author. Footnotes are scanty and the bibliography lists only her most unusual sources, so researchers wishing to follow up on the book are frustrated.

In spite of these legitimate criticisms, *Crazy Horse* is one of the most important books of its genre in Western American literature, introducing readers to details of Indian belief and life on the Plains.

and bringing out information never before known to the whites about the Indian wars.

Action begins in 1854 with the incident Sandoz considered the fuse that ignited the long struggle, the Grattan affair at Fort Laramie. Lt. Grattan, an arrogant, inexperienced young West Point officer, led his detail of men into a large Indian village near the fort and mortally wounded a major chief there. The infuriated Indians swarmed over the soldiers and killed them all. Among those witnessing the struggle and its aftermath was the twelve-year-old Crazy Horse. In addition to identifying the first incident in the wars, she also describes in this chapter the causes of the conflict and many of the major characters who will dominate the book: Red Cloud, here almost a villain; Spotted Tail, Crazy Horse's maternal uncle, who eventually betrays him; Pretty One, later called Woman's Dress, already jealous and always anxious to belittle or hurt him; He Dog, Crazy Horse's best friend, loyal to him all his life (and one of Sandoz's most important sources in 1930).

One of the strengths of the book lies in the authenticity of detail. As always, Sandoz pays close attention to the importance of the environment in the hunting, the fruit and vegetable gathering, the homes, and the travel: the details of a life attuned to the Plains. She shows, too, the heat of summer, the cold and snow of winter that contributed to the defeat of the Indians.

Sandoz also used great effort to trace the intricate relationships of the Oglala and Brulé Sioux, as she did later for the Cheyennes. Since much Sioux loyalty is based on family ties, this was of major importance in determining the motives of the participants. Her book also revealed for the first time the love affair between Crazy Horse and Black Buffalo Woman and its consequences in later events.

The empathy between Sandoz and her hero is important. Her

close sympathy with him gives power to the story and helps her to succeed in recreating a man and his time as it must have been, one of the primary purposes of a good biographer.

Sandoz's great sympathy for the Indians is also clear in *Cheyenne Autumn*. When Sandoz put away her notes for the book in 1939, she had been researching this tribe and its history for some years. By 1948 she decided the reading public would be once more interested in the story, and she turned again to the material, energetically exploring the country involved and visiting archives in the East and West. In 1949, after five weeks at the Cheyenne reservation at Lame Deer, Montana, ferreting out family relationships, she visited the reservation in Oklahoma from which the Indians fled, then traced the entire route north, observing every battleground except one that had been washed away in a flood.

She also did some exploring near her old home in Nebraska. Following a map given her by a Sioux man who had visited his Cheyenne wife at Chief Little Wolf's hideout in 1879, she located the actual valley where this part of the tribe spent most of that winter, a spot near the Sandoz ranches.

Sandoz was able to gain information from a number of Indian sources, but none were as significant as the stories she had heard as a child from Old Cheyenne Woman and from her father's recollections of his conversations with Wild Hog, another survivor of that winter.

Cheyenne Autumn purports to be a double biography of the two chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf, but it comes closer to being a history of the two men and their followers as they attempted, in September 1878, to return to their old home in Montana from the hated Oklahoma reservation to which they had been sent the year before. They believed they had been promised a chance to return north, and when the whites refused to fulfill their promise, the

group simply left. The book recounts their flight as they try to avoid the military, climbing the ladder of rivers until they reach the Platte. Here the group splits, those under Dull Knife hoping to reach their relative, the Sioux Red Cloud, now on a reservation in South Dakota, the others under Little Wolf determined to continue to Montana. The Dull Knife group are captured and taken to Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Eventually many are killed or injured as they flee, trying to escape being sent back south. Little Wolf's group remain hidden deep in the sandhills of Nebraska during the worst winter months, then work their way to their destination, where they are eventually given a reservation of their own.

From her many years of research for this book, Sandoz was most proud of three instances which she felt contributed important historical information. First was her discussion of the fate of Yellow Swallow, who was, she claimed, the mixed-blood son of Custer and a Cheyenne woman. She also felt she brought together valuable details about events taking place on the Sappa River in northern Kansas that led directly to the massacre occurring there in 1878. Her third outstanding contribution was in locating and interpreting a pictographic account of the flight in a book that had been strapped to the body of a young Cheyenne warrior killed at Fort Robinson. The book later disappeared, but Sandoz located it, mislabeled, in an Eastern museum. Particularly in the last two instances Sandoz felt she had brought out details no other historian had considered.

Inevitably, since this is a dual biography, Sandoz presents the characteristics of the leaders through contrast. The two chiefs represent the two points of view that had long divided the people. Dull Knife, the elder, was of the old order that believed that a man's word, even a white man's, was inviolable, fixed and solid. Little Wolf, still in his prime at fifty-seven, was a realist who recognized that the white man's word was loose and shifting. He believed that

one must meet this slyness with wily response. The two represent the old morality and the new morality; thus they serve a didactic purpose. Through these men the author makes known her own world view: "The idealist might wish that Dull Knife's trust in the white man's word proved the wiser . . ."

While *Cheyenne Autumn* is valuable as history, Sandoz's outstanding accomplishment is her ability to create a work of literary art. Here, as in earlier books, Sandoz's understanding of the classical epic form determines her portrayal of material. Her major theme, to depict the disenfranchisement of a minority by a greedy majority, is threaded throughout. Furthermore, her use of Cheyenne idiom creates the aura of Indian village life, draws attention to the Indian's close relation to the great powers and to nature, and helps to involve the reader in the fate of the chiefs and their followers.

Her use of symbols is once again a unifying factor. In the first scene, the night of the Cheyenne flight from Oklahoma, Little Wolf is wearing his medicine bundle, the concrete symbol of his office as protector of his people, and also a peace medal once given him by the whites, an indication of his long attempt to live in harmony with them. He also carries a gun, an artifact of the whites but used as protection against them. The three objects, carried throughout the journey, are never in harmony until the tribe at last reach their destination.

Cheyenne Autumn received much less adverse criticism than *Crazy Horse*, perhaps because the unusual approach and language of the earlier book had prepared the readers for this one. The major objections came from those who felt she was too obviously sympathetic to the Indians rather than the whites. Since her purpose was to tell the story from the Indian point of view, she evidently succeeded. Some noted her fondness for allegory, and

many saw a comparison between these events and stories coming out of the Korean War then being fought. Some criticized the fact that several minor characters are unaccounted for at the end—since they were actual people she was chronicling, their fates were of concern.

The book was made into a film but the movie deviated so far from the text that almost the only thing in common was the title. Sandoz was bitterly unhappy at Hollywood's treatment of history in this film as she had been earlier at their version of the life of Crazy Horse, much of the material taken from her book although never acknowledged.

The ultimate format and focus of the subsequent three books in the series were not part of Sandoz's original plan. It was at the request of Hastings House, a publishing company interested in Americana, that she agreed quite reluctantly to write *The Buffalo Hunters* for their American Procession Series. She had never written at a publisher's request and did not at first intend to include the book in her Great Plains Series. Eventually the format and the subject matter made it an obvious pattern for the following two books.

Using an animal as the central figure was unique, giving the book both strengths and weaknesses. Clearly Sandoz found the buffalo the subject for romance, as she traced its history from the year 1867 when the four great herds of the Plains numbered in the millions until, less than twenty years later, their destruction was almost complete. She condemns the white man's wanton greed for the wealth to be gained from the buffalo hides, meat, bones, and tongues (sometimes the only part the hunters took from their kill), although at times she seems to express a reluctant admiration for particularly skillful hunters. She blames the railroads, Eastern financiers, and a deliberate government extermination policy for the Indians, who depended almost wholly on the buffalo for life. Throughout her

account, she shows that the destruction of the buffalo was both directly and indirectly responsible for destroying the Plains Indians' life style—and that it was deliberately intended to do so.

Significantly, the book begins and ends with negative images. Sandoz begins by depicting Wild Bill Hickok and his buffalo skinner engaged in specific action and direct dialogue. Because it is not a scene that could have been witnessed by anyone else, this opening set the teeth of historians on edge. True, Sandoz had investigated Wild Bill with great attention for years. She had more file cards on him than on almost anyone else, at one time contemplating a book about him. Her research convinced her that he was so evil she did not want to spend time on a biography. Nevertheless, he appears in a number of her books, here as an underhanded, treacherous villain and weakling. Her account ends with the battle of Wounded Knee, linking the death of the buffalo and the death of the Indians' dream that their old way of life could return, in words strongly reminiscent of the last scene in Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*.

Reverting to the style she first heard as a child listening to the old storytellers, she uses a series of anecdotal accounts to relate events as they pertain to particular men on the scene. Her Western idiom, sometimes "salty" language, gossipy vignettes, and sardonic frontier humor, the latter often missing in the Indian books, make for interesting reading. Occasionally, critics pointed out that using the animal as a focal point causes a lack of cohesiveness, at times confusing the reader who becomes interested in certain people only to find they have disappeared from the story, their fate not disclosed.

The wide canvas and numerous existing events and colorful people in *The Buffalo Hunters* resemble those in Bernard DeVoto's *Across the Wide Missouri* (1947), but in its attention to an animal as

the motivating force it is original. It lacks proper bibliography, indexing, and annotation. Sandoz, recuperating from a cancer operation, was not able to superintend these details, and she strongly criticized the editorial work in those parts of the book.

Although *The Cattlemen* follows the form of *The Buffalo Hunters*, it is in a number of ways better written. It starts, for instance, with a lyrical, almost mythic description of the first cow in North America: "She came first in a mirage, behind a long string of glorious although worn and impatient horsemen, moving out of the heat and shimmer of the west" (p. 3). While most of the book gives attention to the period from just after the Civil War to the twentieth century, the image of the ancient cow and the myths and symbols recalling the age-old association of cow and humankind appear at intervals. Since the scope of the subject is so vast, Sandoz often concentrates on specific individuals, places, and events as representative. She continues to repeat gossip about Western characters, primarily the bad men, but brings in more verifiable information about them than in the earlier book, and to that degree *The Cattlemen* is better.

Her detached style is at its best in displaying suspense, sympathy, and grim humor in such incidents as the 1892 Johnson County War in Wyoming. In her description of the invasion of that county by ranchers and their gunmen attempting to rid the area of both settlers and rustlers, she manages to convey elements of comedy as well as the deadly serious aspects of pursuit, ambush, and murder.

This book has an index and interesting illustrations, and its bibliography is, for the general reader, a rather substantial one.

Most reviewers liked the book. The critic for *Annals of Wyoming* noted her "fine and moving prose" and her phenomenal ear for speech. The *New York Herald Tribune* liked her storytelling approach; the *New York Daily News* made it their book of the week.

Negative reviews came from Lewis Nordyke and J. Frank Dobie, both Texans, who complained that her treatment was not really new.

Sandoz's foreword to *The Beaver Men*, the third of her "animal" books, is rather more than her usual explanation of her ties to the subject. She recalled that one of her first lessons on the treadle sewing machine was making beaver sacks from discarded levis, "to be filled with sand or earth and fastened to steel traps to drag the captured beaver down, drown him before he could twist his foot off and be lost, left a cripple." She also recalled that practically all the old, old stories she heard from the Indians were concerned with the beaver. Here she reiterates her point that as she grew up and discovered how the white man changed the Great Plains, she learned that it was only a repetition of what humans had done to regions elsewhere, from the stone age to the present. In the older regions the process was so gradual the records were lost, but on the Plains the transition was so rapid that tangible records preserved much of the story for those willing to investigate and tell it.

As with the earlier histories, Sandoz uses the animal itself as the central figure, here tracing the destruction of the beaver in the 225 years the white man hunted it to satisfy the fashionable world. As before, she concentrates on the experiences of the "little" men who were involved directly—the hunters, trappers, traders, governors, explorers, Indians. She shows particular admiration for the individuals who were the "spearheads of empire," and her dedication is "to the nameless *coureurs de bois* who penetrated the farthest wilderness . . . and lost themselves among the Indians . . . who welcomed them" She saw the *coureurs* as having been exploited along with the Indians and the beaver. Her scorn was for the great European kings who saw the region only in terms of profit.

Beginning in the early seventeenth century at a Hidatsa Indian

village on a well-traveled crossing of the upper Missouri River, she describes the Hidatsas' first contact with two bearded white men, apparently beaver hunters, whose appearance became the basis for Indian stories still told by the Sioux in Sandoz's time. The two men may also have been the first to bring iron and powder to the Plains, introducing the magic of guns. From this early beginning, the author traces the influence of the white hunters on the region until the end of the demand for beaver in the 1830s. The influence of the two bearded men becomes one of the major threads giving continuity to the book.

Her sympathy for the beaver, an industrious, clean, ambitious, attractive animal, that had lived for untold centuries in amity with its human neighbors, is similar to the feelings she has expressed for human minorities who have something others want and whose admirable qualities are sometimes the very cause of their destruction.

Certain differences in style mark this late book. Since almost all this material came from research on activities ending in the 1830s, allowing for little of Sandoz's own frontier experience to be incorporated, the author brings a more cautious approach to her reporting. She uses episodes as always, describing individuals and their experiences, but she seldom introduces the gossipy tidbits found in the other books. Her often-criticized use of direct dialogue rarely appears here. As one reader noted, in *The Buffalo Hunters* Sandoz seemed to use the buffalo as a sort-of skeleton on which to hang all her stories of the individuals on the Plains; in the later books the structure became more integrated, smoother.

Inevitably, when the fur trade reaches the trans-Missouri region, much that is in Sandoz's early books appears again. Sandoz always made thrifty use of her sources, as her research could be useful in more than one book. But even though the territory traveled by the

beaver is much larger than the trans-Missouri region, she covers it well. The information on her endpaper maps, marking the penetrations of the major fur companies into the land, alone makes this a valuable contribution. She also includes illustrations, a general bibliography, and an index.

Critics varied in their evaluation. While one praised once more her "inimitable and beautiful prose," another complained that she had recast history to accommodate "her isolated datum."

Other Nonfiction

Sandoz's deep and serious concern for the Indians is apparent in almost all of her writing. She was often involved in attempts to alleviate the problems of modern-day Indians as well. From this concern came the small but handsome book *These Were the Sioux* (1961). Developed from a short article, "What the Sioux Taught Me," in *Reader's Digest* and a speech she had made to the Denver Posse of the Westerners, an organization interested in Western history and literature, it presents information from Sandoz's years of study of the Sioux and from her association with them as a child.

She realized she knew aspects of their beliefs, customs, and culture that anthropologists could not. In her foreword she recalls the Oglala Sioux who visited the Sandozes, pointing out that they came into her life before she had any preconceived notions about them, the Indian dress and language no stranger to the little girl than that of others in the area. Her style is easy and informative without any attempt at the Indian idiom of her biographies and short fiction. Replete with detail, the book also shows her regard for her old friends and neighbors. It was well received by the critics and is, again, unique in its field.

Sandoz's affection for other inhabitants of the Plains is evident in

Love Song to the Plains (1967). Written as one of a series on the states published by Harper and Brothers, it is among her finest works, conveying her love for her native area in some of her most poetic prose. Using the old, larger Nebraska territory rather than the smaller confines of the state for her canvas, she draws together the threads of geography, history, politics, and commerce. She begins and ends the book with the land, the environment that shaped the history, moving swiftly from prehistory to the time of European immigration, then with more detail to modern time.

Sandoz may love the land unreservedly, but she turns a quizzical eye on some of its human inhabitants. One goal was to present the Nebraska West as a “tall-tale” area in which the true stories were stranger than fiction, and she includes some of the stories to prove it. Her irony surfaces several times as well. Speaking of the community builder O’Neill, whose townsmen would not claim his body when he died in Omaha, she notes: “It was the treatment builders should expect. Horse thieves are more generally loved and mourned” (p. 226). Sandoz herself seems to corroborate this fact in the attention she gives Doc Middleton, Nebraska’s most notorious horsethief.

The book illustrates her Populist proclivity. One major theme is the drainage of the Western wealth toward the East, first via the ladder of rivers, then by the railroads, themselves governed by Eastern interests. She sees big business and government officials as villains, the causes of much of the poverty of the frontier and later of the farm belt. Repeatedly she ties the development of the Plains to economic factors in the East.

The author dwells with obvious pride on the lovely state capitol building, with its tall white tower topped by the great bronze statue of The Sower. She had watched it being built, slowly, through the 1920s and 1930s, and it was a symbol to her of what humans could

aspire to. She had earlier used the building as an ironic setting for a short story, "Mist and the Tall White Tower," and in *Love Song* she chides Nebraskans for failing to live up to the potential implied by the beautiful building.

Sandoz introduces new subjects here, but *Love Song* is outstanding because of her fine style. Her organization is straightforward, one of the strong points. As is true with her other books, she covers a great deal of time and space, but she has condensed the material into compact and concise history with few digressions. Her language is clear and clean-cut, her similes and metaphors fresh and apt. The tiny eohippus is "tiptoeing like a ballet girl through the geologic ages." The advent of the windmill makes "many western cow towns look like flower gardens with the daisy faces of the windmills turned busily into the wind." Her descriptions of the country itself are lyrical. The book also has a ten-page bibliography and an index.

Reaction was overwhelmingly favorable. She received so many accolades for her poetic language and her manner of presenting frontier history that she was a bit uneasy. She wondered if she should not be writing something more controversial, something that would stir up the thinkers.

Her last book, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, did just that. In 1960 Lippincott asked her to write the book as part of their Great Battles and Leaders Series. Because of her dislike for General Custer, she had refused previous similar requests. Furthermore, she was not as a rule interested in battle scenes. Although she had a great deal of information from numerous sources, she gave few details of the battle in *Crazy Horse* and often minimized war scenes in other books.

However, when Hanson Baldwin, the series editor, outlined his suggestions, she knew she had special information and sources that

would make her handling of the material valuable. The book was to be short, it was to include important maps, and the emphasis was to be on good writing, with the final chapter the writer's own interpretation of what went wrong or right in the battle. It seemed tailor-made for her approach to history.

In recounting the events of the relatively short battle, Sandoz drew on her earlier interviews with Cheyenne and Sioux as well as current materials to recreate the detailed battle scenes and events leading up to them. There is Custer's ambition, his difficulties with Grant and Sherman in Washington, and his well-known propensity for driving himself and his command. The difficulty of the terrain and the fatigue of horses and men are important; the heat, dust, and lack of water are major factors in the battle to come. Sandoz's attention to the details of cavalry warfare brings out an aspect that modern readers might otherwise overlook.

Although Sandoz discusses Custer's role, including his refusal to accept his Crow Indian scouts' evidence of the huge Sioux encampment on the banks of the Little Bighorn, she concentrates on those who survive: Reno, Benteen, Godfrey, Weir, their men, and, of course, the Indians, the victors. Her résumé gives a general overview of the causes for the situation between the Indians and whites on the Plains. Consistent with her view of Western history, she concentrates on the rivalry of ambitious officers for promotion in a shrinking army and the profit motive of manufacturers and contractors furnishing goods for the Army. But she points primarily to Custer himself, who had disobeyed orders before and been suspended for it. Her contention that Custer did what he did because he aspired to be the Democratic nominee for President, that he could best win that nomination if he could prove himself a good Indian fighter once more, is based on the verbal accounts of the Arikaree scouts who reported his statement to them, newspaper

articles of 1875-76, and documents dating back to his West Point days. As she tells it, almost no alternative motive seems justified.

A number of critics cited this book, posthumously published, as her finest, pointing out her careful meshing of multitudinous facts, her novel analysis of Custer's motives, her clarity of description, and her attention to the details of the battle. Others have criticized the strongly anti-Custer attitude or her interpretation of the battle. Sandoz's version was hotly debated, but there is little doubt of the literary merit of her account of this military action. As one reader commented, it has the readability and dramatic suspense of a novel. Another spoke of "a style that sings like one of those Seventh Cavalry bugles."

Fiction: Novels and Novellas

Sandoz was not a first-rate novelist. Her fiction as a rule does not give the pleasure of her nonfiction. Nevertheless, it is an important part of her canon, reflecting her interest in structure and form as well as theme, and indicating her willingness to try a number of innovations and challenges she set for herself. The results range from the least successful, *The Son of the Gambler Man* (1960), in which she set for herself the task of writing a novel based entirely on ascertainable facts, of which she had too few despite years of research, through the mildly entertaining "pot boiler" about a woman doctor on the Nebraska frontier, *Miss Morissa* (1955), first written as a film scenario, to the book that brought the most financial reward, the novella about a Cheyenne boy, *The Horse-catcher* (1957).

Always interested in moral issues, Sandoz was strongly attracted to allegory and symbolism. The three full-length books she labeled allegories are *Slogum House* (1937), *Capital City* (1939), and *The*

Tom-Walker (1947). Although written a number of years apart and not conceived as a single unit, their author intended them as parts of the whole. All are concerned with the threat of fascism. Of the three, *Slogum House* is the least obviously a fable, the characters virile and memorable, particularly the greedy and vicious Gulla. As a will-to-power individual, completely immoral, Gulla is undoubtedly Sandoz's most interesting female protagonist. She illustrates one of the author's enduring theories: the will-to-power individual is motivated by some psychological wound or insult from youth, and probably also has some physical deficiency. Whether Sandoz was drawing on Nietzsche's writing (will-to-power is his phrase) or from some other psychology, it remained a consistent theory of hers. Sandoz's theme is the destruction that unbridled passion, here greed and revenge, could wreak in an area or society in a state of flux.

For her only novel with a sandhills locale, she created an imaginary bend in the Niobrara River and two fictitious counties in the region. The time extends from the late 1800s to the early 1930s. Through the members of her family, the ruthless Gulla achieves power over the region until she controls the entire area. She uses her two older sons as gunmen, representing the use of violence to gain power. The two maim, emasculate, or kill to serve her purpose until they fall under the influence of another evil, her brother Butch, who represents mindless violence, and they are to some extent beyond her control.

Her two pretty daughters she turns into whores, winning favors from county officials in return for their own favors, signifying the prostitution of the local legal and political system. The oldest daughter, Elizabeth, who scorns her mother and her ways, nevertheless attracts potential victims to her mother's roadhouse through her fine cooking and immaculate housekeeping. Elizabeth's good management could well be meant to parallel the well-

run trains and government efficiency Hitler and Mussolini offered their countries. The good, the decent, and the brave are victimized by Gulla and her crew.

Actually, there are very few *brave* among the decent. Often the latter are unable to act because they are too weak, as is true of the young son Ward or of the settlers run out by Gulla's design. Others are too ineffectual because they do not have the strength of character to fight Gulla. Her husband Ruedy, who cannot bear his wife or her deeds, simply withdraws to a little place of his own. Ruedy's behavior is explicable if one equates him with the great western countries at the time Sandoz was writing. She had read Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in 1927 and from that time on feared him. In the mid-1930s she witnessed the League of Nations appease the insatiable Hitler and Mussolini time and again. This behavior parallels that of Ruedy, who backs down from confrontations with Gulla even when his children are in danger.

Sandoz is not a pessimist in spite of this story of violence. Some of the good survive, and the wicked ones are destroyed. But she does not minimize the price paid by the entire community when uncontrolled evil is allowed to grow there. Ward is dead of disease stemming from a beating his mother instigated. The prostitutes are silly, unattractive spinsters. Libby's love is unconsummated. Rene has been castrated. Numbers of little settlers and ranchers have been ruined, churches have been destroyed, and local government has been corrupted.

Slogum House drew mixed reviews. No critic recognized it as allegory, but Howard Mumford Jones called it a powerful, somber novel and Gulla the best character depiction since Balzac. Nebraska criticism was generally a shrill insistence that the real frontier was not as Sandoz portrayed it. Sandoz protested that the book was fiction, but at least some of the scenes and incidents came

from her own neighborhood. Gulla, however, was claimed by many. People from all over the United States wrote that the real Gulla lived in their community. Sandoz was disappointed that so few recognized the allegory, the attempt at social criticism through the graphic, the concrete, the realistic.

She tried again in her next novel, *Capital City*. Here, too, she used a setting and material with which she had emotional ties. She had lived in Lincoln for almost twenty years and had long been at odds with the conservative Republican views that prevailed there. She had seen the ravages of depression there, brought on by economic decline, falling farm prices after the first World War, and the severe drouth of the 1930s. In a number of crises the state and local governments had not responded to the needs of the people. Her early frontier Populism and her later observation of people in need form the background for this proletarian novel.

Many writers of the time were espousing communism as a cure for problems, but Sandoz was never attracted to the left. She had too much fear of the dictators of the time, but she did not see the present working of democracy as particularly effective. Furthermore, as a historian she was interested in state government. She believed that a Midwestern capital city had considerable influence on the culture of its region, and she saw danger in what she considered the parasitical tendencies of the capitals in the Midwest. She feared the hold of the rightist groups that sprang up in America, patterned on the fascists of Europe. She saw the attraction their uniforms held for many. She hated their anti-semitic, anti-Black demagogy that struck out at any minority or ethnic group.

Sandoz attempted an interesting experiment in casting the city itself as the protagonist rather than an individual. She had long stressed that the individual was important to history primarily as a

functioning and contributing member of a social entity, a point she also developed in *The Horsecatcher* and *The Story Catcher*. Applying her holistic world concept to humans, she saw them as similar to simpler biological life forms in their need to adapt to the group. Since humans had first formed collective actions for hunting and protection, they had lost true individuality. Thus, her people in this clearly allegorical work are not intended to be individuals but rather units of society.

Once intrigued with her idea, she drew a map for her mythical state of Kanewa (obviously an acronym for Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa) and named her mythical capital city Franklin. The city and state were wholly places of her mind, she insisted, broadly general to the trans-Mississippi region. The economy was primarily agrarian. The capital city ruled the area, but did not produce. She also made a study of the racist, anti-democratic individuals and forces she read of in current papers and journals. Using her findings as a background, she wrote of a fictional coup by a fascist-type group of silver-shirts.

The leading character, Hamm Rufe, is the son of one of the ruling families in Franklin, but now unrecognizable to old friends and family because of a disfiguring face wound. Rufe returns to the city after years' absence, having learned that he cannot function successfully in a world not shored up by family and position such as he had had in Franklin. He moves, however, into an area of squatters' shacks. From here he observes the machinations of the politicians, many of whom he knows from earlier years, but any attempts he makes to help the victims in the struggle for power are ineffective. Although he is sympathetically presented, Sandoz did not intend him to be an attractive protagonist. He and most characters here are "parasites, created by their environment, deprived of the power of positive action until it is too late," also a

major theme in her earlier *Slogum House*. She disclaimed any attempt to build them on real models. "Actual individuals . . . are too complex, too confused with other human urges. I have to make up all my characters for thematic fiction." Two characters here represent not two people, but two aspects of the artist in a decaying society, for instance. The result is often caricature. The striking truckers and displaced farmers remind one of the heroic figures in a Rivera mural—all muscle, strength, drive, and purity. During the troubles of the 1930s neither strikers nor owners were entirely pure; destruction and violence came from both sides. Thus, even those inclined to sympathize with the downtrodden fail to find an identity with Sandoz's victims of society. Nevertheless, *Capital City* is an interesting experiment and its allegorical aspects are worth consideration. Sandoz's debt to the realists and writers of social conscience is obvious here. But it is not a successful novel.

Sandoz never admitted that *Capital City* was less than a good book, although she did acknowledge that her choice of a city rather than individuals as the focal point caused problems. Sandoz was unashamedly a moralist; and while she recognized that didactic writing was not generally of the highest artistic merit, she felt that if the material was handled well enough, the importance of the message could overcome the artistic flaws.

She tried again in *The Tom-Walker*, in which she depicts the psychological as well as physical damage war brings to society. The title, a nickname for one who walks on stilts, implies that aggressions of wartime, demanded by the public, vault national boundaries as casually as a boy on stilts goes over a rut. Greatly concerned at what she saw as postwar neuroses of society, she centered those woes on experiences of three generations of soldiers in one family as it adapts to society after the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. Each man brings home a severe war injury,

symbolizing the damage war does to society.

Returning from the Civil War with a leg amputated, young Milton Stone finds his family completely uninterested in the major concerns of the war. He begins medical school, but because of the collapse of the economy settles down to become a patent medicine salesman. His son Martin, his lungs gassed in World War I, is caught in the collapse of the economy after that war and homesteads in a scrub area of Wyoming. His son, also named Milton, returning from World War II with a piece of shell in his heart, inoperable and so deep that the slightest movement of the metal could kill him, finds that there is no market for injured engineers interested in public service projects. On one level, *The Tom-Walker* is a study of the veterans, each an embarrassment to his family and community, but allegorically each man's injury symbolizes the damage war has done to his society, the successive injuries less easy to see but more damaging.

The chaotic conditions of the country become progressively worse, the punctured heart of the last soldier representing the death hanging over an unaware world with the usual post-war unwillingness to turn to peacetime moderation and responsibility. The public demands, instead, wartime prosperity, war excesses, sensationalism, and aggression. But after World War II anyone with the atomic bomb could use the power of blackmail. In the novel, Martin II is a helpless bystander as the country succumbs to a fascist dictatorship: a senator gets his hands on the bomb and with the threat of it takes over his own nation and, allegorically, the world.

In all three novels, Sandoz points out the danger of the will-to-power, whether it be in a dominating individual or in a fascist country. The characteristic she most abhorred was greed, whether it was for power or wealth. But in all three allegories, she indicates

clearly that the will-to-power individuals gain ascendancy because of the apathy and ineffectiveness of the well-meaning, the “good” people who cannot or will not stop aggression. She clearly blames the weak as well as the strong.

Sandoz’s three short novels, or novellas, *Winter Thunder* (1954), first published as “The Lost School Bus” in *Saturday Evening Post* (19 May 1951), *The Horsecatcher* (1956), and *The Story Catcher* (1963), are among the most conventional in form. They have in common that they are concerned with the growing-up process of youngsters. *Winter Thunder* was written originally for an adult audience and the other two for young people, but all three are enjoyed by both age groups.

Winter Thunder was written out of the experience of Sandoz’s niece Celia who, together with her pupils, was isolated by the great Nebraska blizzard of 1949. While they found a shack and food supplies for their twenty-three-day ordeal, Sandoz projected her imagination into a situation wherein those amenities did not materialize. Told from the point of view of the young teacher, the emphasis is also on the reaction of each child to the emergency extending over a number of days.

The battered child, Maggie, stoically bears physical pain, but the pampered, selfish outlander Olive goes into mental shock, while crippled Bill stops using his leg brace as an excuse and learns to reach out to the needs of others. The teacher during the long period begins to re-evaluate her engagement to a flashy wealthy newcomer. One feels at the end that she too has come upon some truths during the emergency and that she will not marry this man with whom she really has little in common. The action suggests the isolation of the individual but, conversely, it indicates the sense of community all share at the end: “The awkward queue stayed together” as they went toward the rescuers.

The opening scenes are especially compelling as the school bus, appearing almost like a leviathan in a world of whirling snow, slowly slides, stops, starts, teeters, skids, and turns over in a snowbank, shortly bursting into flame. The portrayal of the little group contending with the blizzard—the snow, wind, and bitter cold—as they grope toward anything that might give them shelter, is vivid. Sandoz gives a superbly graphic description of humans battling the elements of nature with a courageous will to survive.

Although few if any recognized the story as allegory, each child representing a different kind of family upbringing, most recognized the moral once more implicit: the need to accept responsibility early, to face up to personal inadequacies, to achieve self-reliance. Sandoz often stated that while her childhood was hard she would not have had it any other way, that one must learn to cope with life early or not at all.

Those themes were to appear in a somewhat different guise in her other two short novels. Both of these present young Indian heroes maturing into adulthood. *The Horsecatcher*, although intended for twelve- to sixteen-year-old readers, was immediately a bestseller, appearing in *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, and her greatest commercial success. The material that makes it so successful, the detailed picture of Cheyenne community life on the Plains in the 1830s, came from her research of that tribe over most of her adult life. Its protagonist, Young Elk, is based on two famous Cheyenne men from the period. Because too many facts of their lives were impossible to ascertain, she chose to fictionalize and incorporate their disparate adventures into those of one person.

The theme is the responsibility a Cheyenne Indian youth owes to his family, his village, and himself. Young Elk's problem is that he is a nonconformist, a peace man living in a culture dedicated to war. In growing up, he learns that he must not endanger his people

through too much concentration on his own private wishes, and he must somehow reconcile his lack of warlike behavior with his desire for recognition and praise. In his final adventure, capturing and then freeing the fabled white horse of the Plains, all the conflicting tensions are resolved. This little story has much in common with Frederick Manfred's *Conquering Horse* (1959), even to the white horse, although Manfred's hero is a Sioux.

The scenes of village life are full of the details of everyday living. The Plains custom of second mothers is depicted, along with many actions of everyday life—hunting, moving the village, eating, flirting, playing games. *The Horsecatcher* also includes the drama of war—war on other tribes, not whites, who had not yet moved into the Indian country in great numbers.

The Horsecatcher was a Newbery honor book. *The Story Catcher* also won awards, the Levi Straus for 1963 and the Spur award from the Western Writers of America in 1964. Here Sandoz writes of Oglala Sioux tribal life during the mid-1800s. Her theme remains that of a young boy growing up and learning the responsibilities of tribal society. The young hero, Lance, because he has many interests, lacks the concentration and single-minded discipline necessary for a responsible warrior protecting the village from their Indian foes, the Crows, Pawnees, and Arikarees. His many adventures, as he learns to face enemies both human and in nature, teach what he needs to know to avoid either endangering or disgracing his tribe.

Eventually he proves his maturity, and because of his exceptional powers of observation and his skill at drawing, he is allowed to become the student of the tribal historian, a position of respect and honor. He will learn to make the pictographs that are the history for the nonscriptional Indians. As Paint Maker, his teacher, explains, "To be such a historian, such a recorder, you must learn to see all

things, know how they look, and how they are done The picture is the rope that ties memory solidly to the stake of truth."

Here, as in the earlier *Horsecatcher*, Sandoz shows details of village life on the Plains, successfully fusing history and imagination. Some events come from Indian legends or actual adventures recounted by Oglala historians. She also draws from Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* for details of the young boys' training and games. The wounded boy who manages to survive alone for months on the prairie seems based on an actual situation. The contrast between the life of the Loaf-about-the-Forts Indians full of whiskey and debauchery and that of the Indians who stay away from the whites is based on research and indicates Sandoz's view of the sins of civilization.

Most of the story is presented through the eyes of a boy who will become an artist with sensitive awareness of color and form. There is more conflict and more contrast in this book than in *The Horsecatcher*.

Critics found the book appealing. The *Chicago Tribune* noted, "Mari Sandoz's deep knowledge and understanding of the plains Indians shines thru her writing. Her rhythmic prose is beautifully suited to the epic quality of her story" (10 November 1963). Others praised her depth of insight and compassion for another culture.

Both books use the idiom approximating the speech of the Cheyenne and the Sioux. This metaphorical language helps to curtail Sandoz's tendency to give too much historical information. She successfully eliminates white-man attitudes and concerns. Both books are structurally unified and deceptively simple. The details of life are simple but the hero himself is not. The fusion of fact and fiction is successful here, as the lessons of Indian life and belief are mentioned only as they relate to the development of the hero's story as he learns the responsibility of fitting his personality into the

larger pattern of tribal life.

Short Stories, Essays, and Recollections

Although Sandoz began her apprenticeship by working on the short story and by 1933 had written at least seventy-eight (the accounts vary from seventy-eight to eighty-five), she had so little success that one fall day, in a moment of despair, she burned most of them and gave up her writing career. Ill and malnourished, she returned to the sandhills to gain strength and think of another way of life. Within a few months she was writing again, this time concentrating on longer works, and it was the longer works that eventually sold. Nevertheless, a few stories were published and a few others, probably at various editors' desks during the burning episode, have survived. Occasionally Sandoz later turned to the short story to alleviate the tedium of writing serious nonfiction. Some representative short stories are included in *Hostiles and Friendlies* (1959). Among them is her excellent "The Vine," given three stars in Edmund O'Brien's *Best Short Stories of 1927*, depicting a young woman driven mad by the heat and drouth of the High Plains, and "The Smart Man" which develops sympathetically the character of a mentally handicapped man taken advantage of by a shrew. A number of the stories are subtly allegorical.

Suggested as a venture by the University of Nebraska Press, then struggling for survival, and carried through by editor Virginia Faulkner, *Hostiles and Friendlies* is the best approach to Sandoz's occasional pieces and shorter writing. In addition to the short fiction, Faulkner separated the material into recollections and Indian studies. The recollections include two long, important articles first written as college assignments, "The Kinkaider Comes and Goes" and "Sandhill Sundays." Both contain a great deal of

detail that Sandoz later used as background in *Old Jules*. They are well written and interesting in their own right, and they are also valuable in observing Sandoz's use of this early material in her later work. Interspersed autobiographical notes and reminiscences give insight into the author's own ideas of what shaped her life. The Indian studies are valuable historical information, and the stories indicate something of her craftsmanship and growth as an artist and historian.

Sandoz was at first dubious that this would make a good collection and when viewing the stories she wondered that she had been willing to give up all that was worthwhile in life for such poor results. Faulkner succeeded so well in organizing the book, however, that Sandoz for one of the few times in her career praised an editor.

Sandoz asked that there not be a foreword to this book since she felt she was *the* expert in her field and an introduction by someone else would be superfluous. She felt herself in a different category from most Western American writers. They worked until they had a good story, but she worked until she had everything she could possibly use, no matter what happened to the story (for which she was often faulted by critics who felt she sacrificed form to material). A chronological list of Sandoz's publications and awards is included.

Reviewers admired both contents and style. "Miss Sandoz's compressed and iron-biting style, which cuts to the bone," wrote the *Library Journal*, while the *San Francisco Chronicle* spoke of "something of the singing voice and nobility of soul this woman has brought to her writing."

In 1970, the University of Nebraska Press published a second collection, *Sandhill Sundays*, containing ten of Sandoz's recollections, all previously published. All but the last one, "Outpost in

New York," relate to the sandhills. Useful to Sandoz scholars and Western social historians, it lacks the personal comments and autobiographical notes of the earlier *Hostiles and Friendlies*.

Mari's sister Caroline Pifer has published a number of small books containing unpublished short stories and articles that survived the burning or were written later. Again, useful to the Sandoz scholar as examples of her early writing, they do not as a rule measure up to the published material.

Since Sandoz destroyed so many of her early short stories when she turned to book length writing, it is difficult to judge whether she was right when she later deprecated her early work. Those that survive suggest, however, that her themes were those she maintained later and her settings were the sandhills or Nebraska locale. Her stories were seldom happy or "nice." She wanted to write about the unfortunates for whom she always had sympathy—minorities, the poor, the downtrodden, the nameless: whatever might make one an outcast would appeal to her. Seldom did her protagonists succeed in the social world. She once told an audience:

If you believe that all really is right with the world in the end, then read the popular magazines very seriously [and write for them] If you are, however, aware of certain injustices in the world . . . then you are bound to collect rejection slips until you acquire some real distinction in style.

("Anybody Can Write," *The Writer*, April 1944)

It is the second group that will write serious longer works of consequence. She seems to be summing up her own experience.

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