



Mari Sandoz

THE NOTED WESTERN HISTORIAN, novelist, biographer, lecturer and teacher, Mari Sandoz (Marie Susette Sandoz, 1896–1966) was the oldest child of Jules and Mary Fehr Sandoz, Swiss immigrants and homesteaders in the Niobrara River region of northwestern Nebraska. She grew up in a turbulent, impoverished household, dominated by her father's violent temper. When Mari was fourteen, the family moved to the sandhills, twenty-five miles southeast of the Niobrara. The area was treeless, stark, monotonous, and mysterious; the hills both fascinated and frightened Mari.

After graduating from the eighth grade, Mari taught in nearby country schools. She did not attend high school. At eighteen, she married a neighboring rancher, Wray Macumber, and continued to teach intermittently during the next five years. In 1919, Mari divorced her husband and left the sandhills for Lincoln, 450 miles across the state. For the next sixteen years she taught school, held a variety of jobs, managed to get admitted to the University of Nebraska despite the lack of high school credits, and wrote constantly, although with almost no success. During those years, she claimed, she received over a thousand rejection slips for her short stories.

In 1935 Sandoz's biography of her father, *Old Jules*, won the *Atlantic* Non-Fiction Prize of \$5000. From then on her life was dedicated to writing and research. In 1940 she moved from Lincoln to Denver for better research facilities, and also because of hostility in Lincoln, brought on by publication of her *Capital City*, which depicts the political machinations in a mid-western state capital. Lincoln residents refused to believe Sandoz's denial that her fictional capital city was based on Lincoln.

In 1943, after the publication of *Crazy Horse*, Sandoz moved to New York. She wanted to use the great western research collections in the East, and she needed to be near her eastern editors and publishers in order to work successfully with them. She always claimed to hate New York and was often in the West, lecturing, promoting her books, or researching.

Mari Sandoz died of cancer in 1966, in New York. She was buried according to her wishes on a hill overlooking the Sandoz ranch in the sandhills of Nebraska.

Because most of Sandoz's serious writing is nonfiction, critics have sometimes overlooked her literary achievements. But though her major

work, the six-volume Great Plains Series, together with other studies of the Great Plains and its inhabitants, is classified as history or biography, Sandoz's initial intention was to succeed as a fiction writer. That the material from which she drew her sources was historical was to some extent happenstance. She realized that to be successful, she must have close emotional ties with her subjects; those subjects were to be found in the trans-Missouri region, the Nebraska frontier, the sandhills in which she grew up, and Lincoln, where she moved in her early twenties. The people who lived there and the events that took place there held her attention all during her writing career.

Sandoz had formed her theories and opinions, her world view, by the time her first book, *Old Jules*, was published in 1935, and she held to those views consistently throughout her life. She felt she had a mission to elucidate her region to the world. Her apprentice work, written during the years of struggle to learn control of her material and to gain recognition, was based on actual events and the setting was her native Nebraska.

Old Jules, the biography of Sandoz's father, had been years in the writing. It certainly fulfilled her requirement that the subject matter be associated with her emotions, for Jules Sandoz, the subject, was the most important man in her life. An egotistical, eccentric, sometimes brutal man with an explosive temper, he dominated his wife and children not only during his lifetime, but for years afterward. Mari feared her father, but she admired him also, for she knew that he was an important figure in the frontier community he helped to develop. Jules's life story is inextricably involved with that of the Nebraska frontier, one of the last in the United States. Realizing this fact, the author limned the strengths and weaknesses of the man and portrayed the biography of the community as well. The book is successful because she was able to depict a believable—though hardly likeable—man in relation to both family and community background.

Old Jules is so unique it has few imitators. The author's ability to fuse Jules's importance to his region with scenes from his domestic life, which involved Sandoz herself, is rare. In 1935 *Old Jules* shocked many readers, not only because of the domestic scenes but because it showed the public a rough, unglamorous picture of the frontier. The strong language, the sometimes fierce realism, the frankness, were all criticized vigorously, but they make the book powerful. The swearing no longer shocks the contemporary reader, but the realism and frankness are as gripping now as they were then.

That Sandoz's first book varies so slightly in sentence structure, style, organization, and purpose, from her last, published thirty-two years later, is not so remarkable when one realizes that she had been writing seriously for over thirteen years before *Old Jules* was published, and had worked over seven years on this book alone. Sandoz, although familiar with the frontier

and living through many of the episodes herself, researched the background material at length, through newspapers, journals, diaries, publications, and interviews. Jules himself despised authors, and during his lifetime she had not questioned him directly on his activities; nevertheless, he had often talked to her of his experiences.

After his death in 1928, she began in earnest to write the story of his life. But eastern publishers were not eager for the book. It was sent to thirteen publishers, rejected and completely rewritten thirteen times before it won the *Atlantic* Non-Fiction Contest. It was also one of the selections for the Book-of-the-Month Club that year.

The prize-winning version was given serious attention by prominent reviewers. While some were startled, almost without exception they were excited by this new talent and her unusual book with its almost unheard-of locale and strange protagonist. The author's persistence and faith in herself and her subject matter had paid off.

Why a book so well regarded (and to this day selling well) took so long to be published is made clear when one remembers the thirteen revisions. While most of the early manuscripts no longer exist, those who read them emphasize that the later version is much more mature, less vindictive, and written in better style. One of the most remarkable aspects, the aesthetic distance achieved by the author who is, after all, daughter of the protagonist and who figures in several episodes, could have come only through successive rewritings. As John Cawelti points out in *The Six-Gun Mystique*:

Certain unresolved impulses—particularly those growing out of the relations between parents and children in the course of the child's psychological development—are so imperative that if he fails to resolve them in childhood, an individual is doomed to constantly reexperience these impulses and psychic conflict they generate through various analogies and disguises. . . . In addition, this conflict is likely to shape the kind of art he creates and enjoys.

While Sandoz's early work stemming from her own life is charged with too much personal emotion, too much sympathy for her characters, her many reworkings of *Old Jules* to some extent exorcized a too-close tie to her past. The many reworkings were difficult for her, but undoubtedly necessary, for this book and for future writing as well.

A major problem in evaluating the book is its genre. Sandoz identified some of her earlier versions as fiction. She considered the final one non-fiction, and Atlantic Press obviously did also, as did most reviewers, but it reads as if it were fiction. The narrative skills she had developed during her long years of writing are used successfully here, but the result confuses those

who believe nonfiction should use exposition rather than a story-telling approach. The author employs suspense, carefully regulated rising and falling action, direct dialogue, narrative description—what one expects to find in good fiction. Despite an occasional distressed reviewer, however, the reading public liked it. Her combining of meticulous research and narrative mode succeeded so well here that it set the pattern for most of her nonfiction.

Sandoz's skill as a conscious artist is clear when one examines *Old Jules*, even superficially. On the first page she introduces the time, the place, the protagonist, and suggests the conflict between the man and the land. The importance of the physical world to the characters and movement of the story is established in the first few paragraphs:

The border towns . . . were shaking off the dullness of winter. . . . But west of there the monotonous yellow sandhills unobtrusively soaked up the soggy patches of April snow. Fringes of yellow-green crept down the south slopes or ran brilliant emerald over the long, blackened strips left by the late prairie fires. . . . All winter the wind had torn at the fire-bared knolls, shifting but not changing the unalterable sameness of the hills that spread in rolling swells westward to the hard-land country of the upper Niobrara River, where deer and antelope grazed almost undisturbed except by an occasional hunter. . . . And out of the East came a lone man in an open wagon, driving hard.

This emphasis on the land, humans' effect on it, and its effect on humans, was her major theme throughout her life.

The shape of the book is loose, "beads on a string" as Sandoz describes it, as it follows Jules's life, but there is a deliberate structural line. The book begins *in medias res*, not with Jules's birth, his life in Switzerland, or even his arrival in the United States, but with his coming into the Niobrara region, some years later. The story begins with a young man making a new beginning, in the spring of the year. It ends when Jules's life ends, in the autumn. And although Jules has done much to change the country during his long life, actively bringing in settlers, battling cattlemen, developing adaptable crops, and planting orchards, the description of the sandhills on the last page recalls that at the beginning:

Outside the late fall wind swept over the hard-land country of the upper Running Water, tearing at the low sandy knolls that were the knees of the hills, shifting, but not changing, the unalterable sameness of the somnolent land spreading away toward the East.

While one of the most remarkable features of *Old Jules* is the fine sense of detachment the author maintains between her protagonist and herself,

conversely, one of the most successful aspects of her Indian biographies, *Crazy Horse* (1942) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), is her intimate relationship with the Indian community. The closeness the reader feels toward the Indians is achieved through the author's use of language and point of view. The story is told as if by an Indian—someone knowledgeable about their culture, their ideals, their religion and customs. Furthermore, the reader knows only what the Indians know about their situation and can therefore share their emotions as they experience them. His sympathy is with the Indians in conflicts between Indians and whites.

The sense of authenticity pervading the books comes through Sandoz's language. She uses only figures of speech compatible with the Indians' references and way of life. As she says in her preface to *Crazy Horse*, "I have used the simplest words possible, hoping by idiom and figures and the underlying rhythm pattern to say some of the things of the Indian for which there are no white-man words, suggest something of his innate nature, something of his relationship to the earth and the sky and all that is between."

The Indian concept of his physical world is found throughout her books, in which the natural elements seem to be active: "the black shadow of a canyon that humped itself against the western moon . . . as the first sun climbed into the sky, it dried up the little clouds that had slept in the west . . . a steep hill lifted itself against the winds to come . . . a scattering of box elders standing in their fallen leaves . . . lower hills made a wall all around. . . the clouds now seeming to walk on the far hills. . ."

On the literary level, both books are consciously and carefully crafted. Roth are also important as historical writing; Sandoz once again was indefatigable in her research. She had privileged and unusual information and she used it with integrity.

Crazy Horse, the Oglala Sioux war chief who fought successfully against both General Crook and General Custer before his betrayal and death at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, in 1877, attracted Sandoz as a hero more than any other she wrote of. She had heard of him and his tragic fate first from her father's cronies, who used to stop and swap stories with him when the family lived on the Niobrara River. Mari as a small girl sat up in the wood box by the kitchen stove long after bedtime to hear these story tellers. When she learned that Crazy Horse had roamed nearby, probably had been in the very place where she now lived, she was even more interested in him. Sandoz, before she wrote anything, always literally placed herself in the scene. She could then remove herself in her imagination, but that first step as active observer was always necessary for her. In envisioning Crazy Horse as a youngster and young man existing on this very land, she formed a close sympathy for him. Her intensive research only strengthened that sympathy.

While her respect for the two Cheyenne chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf and their band is clear in *Cheyenne Autumn*, Crazy Horse was her greatest hero. Many consider *Crazy Horse* her finest work.

In both books the structure is close to that of the traditional classic epic. *Crazy Horse* begins with the death of the Indians' peace chief, Conquering Bear, and ends with the death of Crazy Horse himself. All events in the book point to that death. The last chapter, "A Red Blanket from His Own," is especially foreboding and filled with symbols suggesting his doom.

In *Cheyenne Autumn* the author's usual circular structure (the end implied at the beginning) is made even clearer through her use of symbols. Little Wolf at the beginning is carrying his chief's bundle, the insignia of his office and symbol of responsibility to his tribe; he is wearing also a peace medal given him in Washington, symbol of his efforts to work with the whites. All during the book he attempts to reconcile the conflicting purposes of the two cultures. At the end of the journey, after months of fighting, fleeing, killing and being killed, the remnant of his tribe is given their northern reservation, and Little Wolf still carries both the chief's bundle and the medal. In both books the author's veneration for the old, lost cultures of the Indians is evident.

The remaining three books of her Great Plains Series, *The Buffalo Hunters* (1954), *The Cattlemen* (1958), and *The Beaver Men* (1964) each develop the history of the West in relation to an animal species. The lack of a major human protagonist and the great amount of detail make these books somewhat disjointed and present a challenge to the reader's memory as events and characters move rapidly across the pages. While these three don't hold one's sustained interest as do the biographies, the author's tales about such well-known characters as Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, General Sheridan, and General Custer, and her ability to bring lesser-known characters to life, make them entertaining. Her use of anecdotes and vignettes, told with her pithy, colloquial western expressions, indicate her belief in the spoken word as it was used by the old story tellers of her youth, a factor in her ability to recreate scenes of visual accuracy or great dramatic action. Although her major purpose was to make her audience aware of the historical and economic importance of the West, she also wanted to draw attention to the tall-tale quality of life in her region and to give readers a sense of healthy skepticism for received, written history.

Strongly affected by her sense of history when she worked with protagonists whom she could identify with her own regions, she wrote powerful and effective works, recreating the people and their world as it must have been, rebuilding lost cultures of the past, emphasizing the moral issues involved when one culture destroys another, whether human or animal, and

illustrating her own romantic view that the individual has dignity and worth.

Despite the success of *Old Jules* and her later nonfiction, Sandoz for years adhered to her determination to be recognized for her fictional achievements, rather than her work in history or biography. *Slogum House* (1937) had been taking shape even before *Old Jules* was published. In this, the only novel based in her native Niobrara region, the setting is a mythical bend in the Niobrara River and encompasses two mythical counties nearby. Gulla, a domineering, villainous woman, as ugly as her name implies, gains land and power by prostituting her own daughters and using her sons as gunslingers. *Slogum House* succeeds in depicting an individual whose will to power overwhelms the good characters because of their weakness or ineffectuality. It is somber and powerful and depressing.

It was also intended by the author as an allegory of a will-to-power nation greedy for world domination. She had read Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and feared him and his purpose. Hardly anyone recognized the story as allegory, because the characters were well developed and the action realistic. But Sandoz believed a serious writer had a duty to express his world view and should write to influence others. All her fiction is didactic to some extent. Her later novels, *Capital City* (1939) and *The Tom-Walker* (1947) are both frankly aimed at correcting some of the world's ills. *Capital City* was based on a study of ten midwestern state capitals, and its characters, so Sandoz claimed, were composites representing traits rather than attempts at human recreations. However, people in Lincoln, Nebraska, were sure the book was a *roman à clef*, that the city described was really Lincoln, and that the characters were indeed based on well-known figures there. They believed Sandoz was repaying them for the poverty and slights she experienced during her early writing days.

The author never acknowledged that any of the charges were true. She did admit the book was an unsuccessful experiment, but it is of interest because some predicted world events later came true, and because of her effort to make a city the protagonist, rather than individuals.

With the exception of her three novellas, *Winter Thunder* (1954), *The Horsecatcher* (1957), and *The Story Catcher* (1963), most of Sandoz's longer fiction was experimental. It was frequently misunderstood and unsuccessful with readers, but is of interest to those investigating the writer's purposes and goals.

Most critics have categorically relegated her longer fiction to a level of lower excellence than her nonfiction. However, the quality of her novels varies widely. *Slogum House* seems the best work at present, but her experimental work may find favor with readers in the future. *Son of the Gambler*'

Man (1960), *Capital City*, and *The Tom-Walker* received very low marks by reviewers, but Sandoz was attempting something avant-garde with the first. Writing of the artist Robert Henri, who lived as a boy in Cozad, Nebraska, she attempted an impressionistic work in fiction to compare to twentieth-century innovations in American art such as those found in Robert Henri's painting. *Capital City* is a protest novel, a type not in much favor today.

Sandoz's use of allegory in her fiction, utilizing the underlying symbols of the human mind, has not yet been seriously investigated in published work, although recently a number of graduate studies have explored that aspect. Her nonfiction often contains allegory as well. It is less obvious, since these books treat actual persons, but the elements are there, stressing the author's belief in the absolute necessity of individual development through struggle, and, particularly in the Indian books, the loss the white civilization inflicted upon itself because of discrimination. She approved her eminent contemporaries Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner in their choice of the allegorical mode to illustrate their world views. Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* and Faulkner's *A Fable* ranked, she felt, with *Moby-Dick* and *Steppenwolf* among the world's great books.

Sandoz's work reflects the world view of one imbued with the myths of the West. As with other western writers, Sandoz's close identification with nature and the land is evidenced throughout her books. Listed with the rest of the characters in *Old Jules*, for instance, is "The Region: The upper Niobrara country—the hardland table, the river, and the hills." The Plains and the cycle of nature form the unity in almost all her books.

This western world view is overlaid by the archetypal patterns Sandoz found in ancient classical traditions of myth, epic, and tragedy. The heroes in her nonfiction, particularly, are larger than life and move on a vast landscape. The heroic characteristics of Sandoz's protagonists, the sense of doom for the Indian heroes, the classic battles of man against fate, all have ancient prototypes. Her sense of the mythic is the means by which she presents her historical vision.

Sandoz's understanding of myth accords with that of other western realists as described by Max Westbrook in "Conservative, Liberal and Western: Three Modes of American Realism" (*South Dakota Review*, Summer 1966), in which he points out that western writers are concerned with the sacred unity of life. Since this is the major theme of the Plains Indian religion which Sandoz so much admired, it is to be expected that she would agree. She accepted as well the importance of the unconscious, basing her ideas on Jung's concept that the archetypes of race memory are inherited by all, that the unconscious, the intuitive, is primary, and that conscious reason is unrealistic, "a bifurcation of the human soul."

Sandoz's biographies in particular demonstrate Westbrook's idea that for the western realist determinism and belief in the human spirit can live side by side. Just as in the ancient Greek stories of Phaedra, Oedipus, and Orestes, Sandoz's heroes are defeated by forces they cannot control, but they maintain their struggle, knowing they cannot win but continuing because their own integrity demands it. The fates of Dull Knife, Crazy Horse, and even to some extent Old Jules, were determined by forces beyond their control; nevertheless they remained formidable until the end.

Sandoz's view of life remained remarkably consistent throughout her writing career. While she left no written evidence of a consciously formulated philosophy, there is consistent evidence of the themes stressed in an epic vision: the workings of fate, the power of evil, man's inhumanity to man, and, paradoxically, humankind's essential nobility.

As with most western writers, Sandoz was a "loner," a member of no group or school or movement as such, although during her Lincoln years she knew and talked writing with other young eager authors, an experience most exhilarating to the young woman fresh from the isolation of the sandhills. She felt it true that the American writer in particular suffers from creative isolation, for in the great periods of world literature, in other cultures, there was a great deal of natural contact and friction. But even during her New York years, when she was near contemporary writers, Sandoz maintained her independence.

Her impetus came, instead, through her travels, research, and reading. A prodigious reader, consuming on the average seven to ten books a week, she read everything current and everything having to do with subjects interesting to her. Few American writers affected her directly, however. With the exception of Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather, she was more impressed with Europeans. She credited two as most important to her: Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy. Conrad's books she read as a child, Hardy's shortly after coming to college. Their treatment of an individual in his physical environment seemed similar to her own experience. And when she began to read Greek drama and history in college she clearly recognized the similarity between those myths and attitudes and those of the nineteenth-century Plains Indians.

The only western writer who affected Sandoz in a literary sense was John G. Neihardt, whose *Black Elk Speaks* and *Cycle of the West* she admired. Although she was familiar with much western writing, she seldom discussed western authors individually in her letters, and when she did she judged them primarily in relation to the amount and accuracy of their research. She tended to approve or disapprove of an author on the grounds of how well he presented history, especially after she began to think of herself as a historian.

When the inevitable comparisons were attempted between her work and that of Nebraska author Willa Cather, Sandoz pointed out that they were writing of different eras and different locales. The pioneer region of Cather's Red Cloud, in south-central Nebraska, was quite different from the sandhills; it was more settled, closer to railroads, and more populated in 1860 than the western area was when her father arrived there in 1884. But the real difference lay much deeper, according to Sandoz. It was between an artist of Cather's calibre and an ordinary frontier historian with a desire to write. Robert Overing in his Master's thesis said of them: "Miss Cather looked at the prairie through a telescope; Miss Sandoz looked at it through a microscope. Miss Cather, poised and sure, shot her game with an unerring bow and arrow; Miss Sandoz used a scattergun, recording everything it hit." The two shared one major passion, however, their love for the land.

Sandoz has a respectable twenty-one books to her credit, in addition to short stories, recollections, and articles. Her work is uneven, the fiction in particular showing weaknesses. On the other hand her vast knowledge of her subject matter and her conscientious and careful craftsmanship give her nonfiction significant literary quality. As one reviewer said of her last book, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, "Her brain was the last repository of unrecorded minutiae of the Plains Indians and the pioneer whites. Nobody can ever again acquire the intimate knowledge she had of the Sioux, early fur traders, trappers, buffalo hunters, and cattlemen. As she once said, posterity will have to take her word for some of it. . . . Her style sings like one of those Seventh Cavalry bugles, and [her words] race along at times like raindrops making light running sounds over the dry earth of the prairies she knew so well."¹

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Note

1. Rudolph Umland, "Just Take Her Word for Some of It," review in *Kansas City Times*, July 8, 1966.

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