



Mari Sandoz

1896-1966

The fears, the passions, and the distinctive speech of the Western Nebraska homesteader come alive in the writings of Mari Sandoz, daughter of Swiss immigrants Mary and Jules Sandoz. Mari was born on Mirage Flats, south of Hay Springs, Nebraska, May 11, 1896, the first of six children. As a child, she was a great storyteller with an intense desire to write, scribbling stories when she was not cooking, working in the garden, or caring for her brothers and sisters. Mari was a voracious reader. Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy were two of her favorites. Conrad's stories of the sea reminded her of the rolling countryside, the isolation, and the privations of the Sand Hills. Hardy saw life as grinding, as something on must endure while struggling to attain some goal. The harshness of the environment and the many conflicts those on the frontier faced dominate Sandoz's books, essays, and short fiction.

Sandoz has left us a Great Plains legacy of social novels, sympathetic Indian biographies, and histories enlivened by dramatic episodes. Probably her best known work is *Old Jules*, the biography of her father's years as homestead locator, agronomist, and fighter for agrarian rights. The concerns of *Old Jules* appear again in Sandoz's later books—concerns for the rights of the poor, the dispossessed, and for those who face discrimination. Her writing champions the worth of the Native American, the need for just laws, and the role of government aid.

Six books form the center of Sandoz's work. She referred often to these, her Great Plains Series. Though not written chronologically, the series begins with *The Beaver Men*, the story of the early fur traders and Plains Indians, and continues with *The Buffalo Hunters*, a work that details the destruction of the bison. Next, *The Cattlemen* traces the coming of cattle to the Plains and the many struggles among cattlemen and between cattlemen and grangers. *Old Jules* tells of the struggle of the immigrant homesteaders.

Published long before most Americans were ready to listen, two books about American Indians, *Cheyenne Autumn* and *Crazy Horse*, give Sandoz's impassioned view of the persecution of the Northern Cheyenne and Oglala Sioux and of the near destruction of their culture. Only her death kept Sandoz from writing the seventh and last work of the series; she had completed much of the research. This unfinished work was to emphasize the importance of oil to the world and the struggle of those in the plains states to provide oil, destroying more of the environment in the process. Once again, Mari Sandoz was ahead of her time.

Sandoz was aware of the importance of women to the West and of how few of their experiences had been told. *Old Jules* chronicles many stories of the brutal abuse of pioneer women by their husbands and fathers, telling of the death, insanity, or, in more fortunate cases, determined survival of these women. Sandoz also writes of the independence and endurance of single women homesteaders in *Old Jules*. In her novels Sandoz often places women in roles that traditionally have been primarily male. *Miss Morissa* is based in part on the careers of three women who were plains physicians; Dr. Mary E. Quick, Dr. Phoebe A. Oliver Briggs, and Dr. Georgia Arbuckle Fix. In *The Tom-Walker* one woman is a political writer and academician while another is a labor organizer. Gulla Slogum in *Slogum House* terrorizes the community as she gathers land and influence by any means she can in her attempt to control the county.

Nature, its danger and its beauty, is often celebrated by Sandoz in lyrical passages, passages that sometimes appear unexpectedly in the midst of her usual reportorial style. She knew her land and her people, and in each book her sly humor satirizes society, urging awareness of human vices that threaten the environment and the welfare of people.

Sandoz was the recipient of many accolades and awards. Her honorary Doctorate of Literature from the University of Nebraska (1950) read: "Mari Sandoz, distinguished Nebraska historian, biographer, novelist, story writer, authority on Indians of the Nebraska territory and neighboring states . . . widely known teacher in creative writing at several state universities." In 1954 Sandoz received the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska for her "sincere and realistic presentation of Nebraska as it was." Also in 1954, the Chicago Corral, the parent group of the Westerners, announced that she had four books on their list of one hundred best books about the West (Stauffer *Story Catcher* 181, 202, 209). A Mari Sandoz Award, to be given annually to "a person who has made specific, significant contributions to the Nebraska book world through writing (books, stories, poetry, plays, reviews), film production, or other related activity" was established by the Nebraska Library Association in 1969. A bust of Mari Sandoz stands in the State Rotunda, State Capital Building, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Mari Sandoz died of cancer March 10, 1966, and is buried on a hillside overlooking the Sandoz Sand Hills ranch, south of Gordon, Nebraska. She worked until the last month of her life finishing *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. She died as she had lived, with spunk and grit and a determination to leave behind a blunt, accurate, and caring record of the region she so loved.