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## Book Review: America's Agatha Christie: Mignon Good Eberhart, Her Life and Works

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*America's Agatha Christie: Mignon Good Eberhart, Her Life and Works.* By Rick Cypert. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005. 319 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$57.50.

Mignon Eberhart occupies a singular place in the history of American crime fiction. She began writing in 1923, at the beginning of what would become known as the "golden age" of detective fiction. The age was golden both because of the quality of some of the writers who took up and reshaped the form and because publishers discovered that marketing detective stories could make them a lot of money. Eberhart became one of the best-known mystery writers of her times. H. R. F. Keating called her a "star writer" and Gertrude Stein described her as one of the "best mystifiers in America." And she made herself and Random House a lot of money. But whether she belongs among the greats of detective fiction is open to question.

In his biography Rick Cypert includes details of Eberhart's life that, from one point of view, appear to be encyclopedic. Readers can follow Mignon Good's journey from University Place, Nebraska, through her career at Nebraska Wesleyan University, to her meeting with civil engineer Alanson Eberhart and their marriage. While following her peripatetic husband's career moves, Eberhart began writing short stories and then, for her first novel, *The Patient in Room 18*, invented the character who would become her bread and butter, nurse Sarah Keate. The second Nurse Keate novel, *The Mystery of Hunting's End*, won the Scotland Yard Prize, and with that Eberhart had made it into the limelight. While she became one of the reliable best sellers among mystery writers, Eberhart stood outside of the mainstream of the genre. As Cypert notes, she never liked blood: Eberhart always skated over the violence and the moral and mortal implications of detective fiction. In the tradition of Anna Katherine Green and Mary Roberts Rinehart, Eberhart's success came from her descriptions of suspense (had-I-but-known) and preenlight-

enment women's issues revolving around social decorum, matrimony, and materialism.

Cypert has rounded up a lot of detail about Eberhart's life. We know when she moved and where, and we have the opportunity to read some of her correspondence with her friends and associates. Sadly, however, in spite of his occasional attempts to provide deeper insight into episodes like her marital problems, readers come away with only an exterior picture. On the literary front, moreover, readers leave even less satisfied. Eberhart wrote at the same time as Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler, to name only a few of the luminaries. But Cypert has far too little to say about detective fiction and Eberhart's place in its development. And that's too bad.

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