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MARI SANDOZ: STORY CATCHER OF THE PLAINS, by *Helen Winter Stauffer*. (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982. 322 pp. \$22.50).

Few writers have succeeded as well as Mari Sandoz (1896-1966) in recreating for modern readers what life was like for both Indians and whites on the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century. Her biographies, among them *Old Jules* and *Crazy Horse*, and her histories, including *The Buffalo Hunters* and *The Cattlemen*, have earned her a prominent place among historians of the West. Her novels, such as *Capital City*, *Son of the Gambler Man*, and *The Story Catcher*, are commonly regarded by critics as less successful than her ventures into history.

Helen Stauffer's biography, the first full-length study of Mari Sandoz to appear, is a revision of her doctoral dissertation done at the University of Nebraska in 1974. Although it focuses on Sandoz's life in relation to her published works, it eschews psychological analysis. Moreover, it does not attempt seriously to evaluate Sandoz as a historian.

The daughter of the redoubtable Old Jules Sandoz was born and grew up in the Nebraska Panhandle. As a teenager, she taught country school, was married briefly to Wray Macumber, and thereafter moved to Lincoln, where she intermittently attended the University of Nebraska and learned about the use of primary sources from Fred Fling and the importance of the frontier thesis from John Hicks. But she was even more deeply influenced by several professors of literature, especially Melvin van den Bark. She was determined to become a writer—not so much a historian as a novelist. After years of discouragement, she was thrust into the limelight with the publication in 1935 of *Old Jules*, the biography of her father, a pioneer of the upper

Niobrara country. Thereafter she produced a stream of novels, short stories, histories, and biographies, but despite their varied excellencies, none attracted the acclaim won by her first book. In 1940 Sandoz left Lincoln for Denver and from thence in 1943 for New York, where she resided until her death in 1966.

There is something of a mystery about Mari Sandoz and Stauffer helps a great deal in solving it. Why did genuine greatness as a writer elude her? Why has her historical and biographical work held up better than her fiction? Conversely, why are some historians reluctant to acknowledge her as an outstanding practitioner of their art? Although Stauffer does not ignore Sandoz's weaknesses, she amply demonstrates her strengths: a passion for authenticity and insistence on accuracy, her wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of the West, and her extraordinary mastery of the sources of western history. Although Sandoz, like her father, could be stubborn at times, she understood very well the need for rethinking, restructuring, and revising her work.

The heart of the Sandoz paradox is that she conceived of herself as a novelist, but she usually thought and worked as a historian. When she wrote as a novelist, her imagination seems to have been inhibited by her devotion to historical accuracy. Apparently unable to structure her novels to the satisfaction of her critics, she tended to string historically authentic anecdotes together, all at the expense of strong thematic development. But the paradox runs deeper than that. Her insistence on authenticity led her to violate the basic canon of historical writing that one may present nothing as fact (as distinguished from interpretation) that cannot be supported by documentary or other admissible evidence. She believed that she could invest her history with a higher level of authenticity by using literary devices—liberties most historians refuse to take. Thus, to mention the most obvious example, she did not hesitate to invent dialogue. As one of her friends described her attitude, "Mari would always hold her ground: what she caused an Indian or cavalry officer to say was not only plausible but truer than any documented record because, she would argue, it fitted the nature of the man in the context of the situation; and in this matter of context her knowledge was based on far more historical research than many scholars are willing to undertake." (p. 160)

Sandoz was thus unwilling to separate adequately the historian's craft from the novelist's art. (p. 102) At heart a novelist, Sandoz refused to be bound strictly by the rules of historical evidence. She even had the habit of referring to her biographies as novels. It is not surprising that some historians have refused to take her work seriously. When a historian claims a knowledge of a time and place so profound that he is free to fictionalize in the name of a higher authenticity, he consorts with propagandists. Authoritarian regimes in all times and places have manipulated history to serve their versions of higher truth. The deepest

irony in this is that Sandoz herself was a courageous and outspoken foe of fascist totalitarianism, as her *Capital City* testifies.

Still, for all that, Sandoz remains a major western writer. Stauffer's biography is well researched and carefully written. A few minor errors of fact (e.g., Broken Bow for Loup City, p. 77, and *The Populist Movement* for *The Populist Revolt*, p. 86) do not detract seriously from the excellence of this welcome biography.

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