

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1984

Review of *Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains* By Helen Winter Stauffer

Robert Gish

University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Gish, Robert, "Review of *Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains* By Helen Winter Stauffer" (1984). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1745.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1745>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains. By Helen Winter Stauffer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Photographs, notes, bibliography of Sandoz's works, selected sources, index. xii + 322 pp. \$22.50.

Invariably the name of Mari Sandoz is associated with the Great Plains and more particularly with Nebraska. As Helen Winter Stauffer's comprehensive biography, *Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains*, makes clear, such an association had both its advantages and disadvantages in Sandoz's life and in her career as a writer. Like other authors who for better or worse come to be known as regional, Sandoz had to reconcile knowing her home intimately and being inspired by the "spirit" of that place with the need to transcend and universalize her home and her life stories through the very form and meaning of her work.

Mari Sandoz's biographies of her father, the crotchety Swiss immigrant, Jules Sandoz, and of the mythically heroic Sioux warrior Crazy Horse are now famous. In Stauffer's portrayal of Sandoz and her projection of autobiography into her writing an important theme is the absurdity of some of the reactions and assumptions of Sandoz's contemporaries concerning regional writing and history. All writers, Stauffer's biography of Sandoz confirms, are deeply influenced by the place of their childhoods, by both the genealogical and geographical forms that surround them as they mature.

Sandoz's final identification as a western regional writer and historian, and especially as a master biographer, was given shape by the sandhills and prairies of Nebraska. She was born there in 1896 and she experienced firsthand the trying circumstances of early settlement life and listened to the stories of earlier generations related by her father and mother. She returned to the home of her surviving family periodically throughout her life, most often from New York where she wrote more than one of her dozen or so novels, biographies, histories, and her many short stories and articles. Although she was living in the East when she lost her twenty-year struggle with cancer, Sandoz's ties were clearly

with the West and western writing—a fact both eastern and western publishers and readers came to celebrate.

In this traditional, book-by-book, youth-to-adulthood account of Sandoz's life and art, Helen Stauffer succeeds in showing just how integral and dear the Great Plains and its people were to the life of a writer who more than coincidentally happened to be a western woman. Finding herself in a hostile but fascinating world of powerful forces—a brutal climate and stark landscape, a tyrannical and eccentric father, a condescending eastern publishing establishment, hard economic times, mutability, and disease—Mari Sandoz, like the legendary Sioux story catcher of the plains, was very much a part of her own histories, her own stories. Helen Stauffer's fine biography of Mari Sandoz allows us to know in newer, fuller ways the details and significance of just such a catching.

ROBERT GISH
Department of English
University of Northern Iowa