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Winter 1997

## Review of *Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real* By Carol Miles Petersen

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Rippey, Barbara W., "Review of *Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real* By Carol Miles Petersen" (1997). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1965.

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*Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real.* By Carol Miles Petersen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 237 pp. \$35.00.

Bess Streeter Aldrich, Nebraska author (1881-1954), believed that if people want to do something badly enough, they will find the time to do it. Carol Miles Petersen, her biographer, tells us that Aldrich wanted so much to write that care of a husband, four children, and a home failed to deter her. The early death of Aldrich's husband added an economic impetus to her initial drive. She published a dozen books and numerous short stories and articles in meeting her artistic and family responsibilities. Moreover, during depression years, she aided her community substantially by offering quiet financial help to the Elmwood bank she partially owned and managed.

Aldrich displayed the kind of relentless effort, cheerfulness, and faith in the initial goodness of life that permeates her protagonists, all early Midwesterners. Abbie Deal is such a heroine in Aldrich's best known work, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, a tribute to the author's mother and maternal grandmother. Brisk sales of *Lantern* suggested that the country, soon caught in a severe depression, welcomed the "healthy morality" and "wholesomeness" her story provided. These qualities have continued to appeal to enough readers to keep *Lantern* in print since its publication in 1928.

Only one of the Aldrich books, *Miss Bishop* (1933), made it to film (*Cheers for Miss Bishop*, 1941), although Aldrich, a film fan, worked to get *Lantern* accepted (her agent hoped that Helen Hayes might play Abbie Deal). When

Aldrich traveled from Elmwood to New York City for the opening of *Cheers for Miss Bishop* at Radio City Music Hall, she wrote her daughter about being amazed at the sight of her name in the subway advertisements.

Petersen's book is rich with such homey Aldrich observations, many of them made on Aldrich's promotion tours, or as she worked on location with Hollywood contacts to advance her works, or on trips like the one she made to a Washington dinner honoring Eleanor Roosevelt. These characteristically humble yet assured reflections by the woman who once said that the pioneers never seemed heroic to themselves will please longtime Aldrich fans. New Aldrich readers will appreciate the brief synopses Petersen provides for many of the short stories and novels.

Aldrich's loyal readers are generally comforted by her view of the world, which Petersen characterizes as that of a "Romantic Realist." It offers a version of the past that deliberately neglects aspects of the human condition she considered neither "clean" nor "decent." Bess Streeter Aldrich chose to write about the world familiar to her, the world she saw daily and that lived in her memory and her imagination, a world many today would call idealized.

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