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COLLATERAL DAMAGE VETERANS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MARI SANDOZ'S *THE TOM-WALKER*

KATHY BAHR

The reputation of Nebraska author Mari Sandoz has never reached the status of her contemporary Willa Cather, but she is the undisputed matriarch of literature produced in and about the northwest region of her state. Sandoz's biographer, Helen Winter Stauffer, refers to her as a "noted western historian, novelist, biographer, lecturer, and teacher."¹ Her histories and biographies, particularly *Crazy Horse* and *Old Jules*, have received considerable recognition, but her fiction has been somewhat less successful.

Key Words: Civil War, Cold War, emasculation, fascism, post-traumatic stress, World War I, World War II

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Although Sandoz explores powerful, universal themes through her regional settings and characters, she sometimes subordinates her narrative realism to a political and social agenda. Betsy Downey identifies two purposes in Sandoz's approach to writing history:

[O]ne was to draw the reader into the story of the past through her narrative and the other was to increase the reader's social awareness and commitment to a just society. These purposes and the way she carried them out were incompatible with conventional rules of historical writing.²

Her literary method, particularly with respect to her long fiction, is similarly conflicted.

Sandoz had finished the biography of her father, *Old Jules* (1935), although it had not been published, when she began work on *Slogum House* (1937). The first in a series of three thematically related novels, *Slogum House* allegorizes the rise of European fascism through the self-aggrandizement of its main character, Gulla Slogum. *Capital City* (1939), the second novel in the trilogy, attempts to represent fascist tendencies in the United

States through the machinations of right-wing politicians in a fictitious Nebraska city. Finally, *The Tom-Walker* (1947) associates domestic violence on a national scale with the domestic violence of veterans returning home after the Civil War and two world wars. This novel anticipates both the rise of McCarthyism and the long shadow cast by the atom bomb over the years constituting the Cold War.

These novels, her first longer works of fiction, suffer in varying degrees from an attempt to hammer a precautionary tale into the reader. In *Slogum House*, Sandoz creates a masterful portrait of a “will-to-power individual,” Gulla Slogum.³ Gulla’s mythological proportions and her gender proved a little troubling to readers. Glenda Riley says, “Not only did Sandoz baffle her readers with allegory, but she also confused them by choosing a woman.”⁴ But *Slogum House* admirers would probably agree that Gulla is a convincing and compelling character—perhaps so much so that the allusion to fascism escapes most readers. On the other hand, by trying to make a city in Nebraska the symbolic protagonist of *Capital City*, Sandoz loses her readers in a miasma of quasi-factual historical events pointing toward a midwestern brown-shirt uprising. The last of this trilogy, *The Tom-Walker*, combines the best of Sandoz’s realism with her worst attempts at moralizing. Unable to divine exactly what political configuration right-wing post-World War II sentiments might take, Sandoz nevertheless feared a fascist uprising in this country. Perhaps because these concerns dominated her thoughts at the time, she allowed her didacticism to control her art. As a result, *The Tom-Walker* descends into foggy, allegorical nonsense in the final chapter. But in spite of its flaws, this novel demands a closer look.

While *The Tom-Walker* can be a difficult and possibly tedious read for some, it is remarkable in its depiction of the ugly, almost unmentionable effects of war on the domestic lives of individual veterans. Sandoz, like a number of her contemporaries, was particularly concerned about the horrors of war, but unlike many writers, she focuses on the home front and on the



FIG. 1. Mari Sandoz. Photograph by Phillippe Halsman, 1947, silverprint. Courtesy of Great Plains Art Collection, Great Plains Art Museum, Gift of Col. Robert Latimer, 0029.1981.

victimization of veterans by opportunists and corrupt politicians. For her time, she shows an impressive understanding of the effects of post-traumatic stress as she lays out the domestic conflicts of her characters.

Sandoz may not have an exclusive claim on the theme, but her novel is unique in scope and setting. Certainly, Sandoz scholars have thoroughly explored the symbolism in *The Tom-Walker* and have made it the focus of their analyses. However, I want to look more carefully at those aspects of Sandoz’s fiction that take us into the fractured lives of veterans and their families and reconstruct the social fabric of three postwar eras. In the context of life in the Great Plains, the stories of three men offer

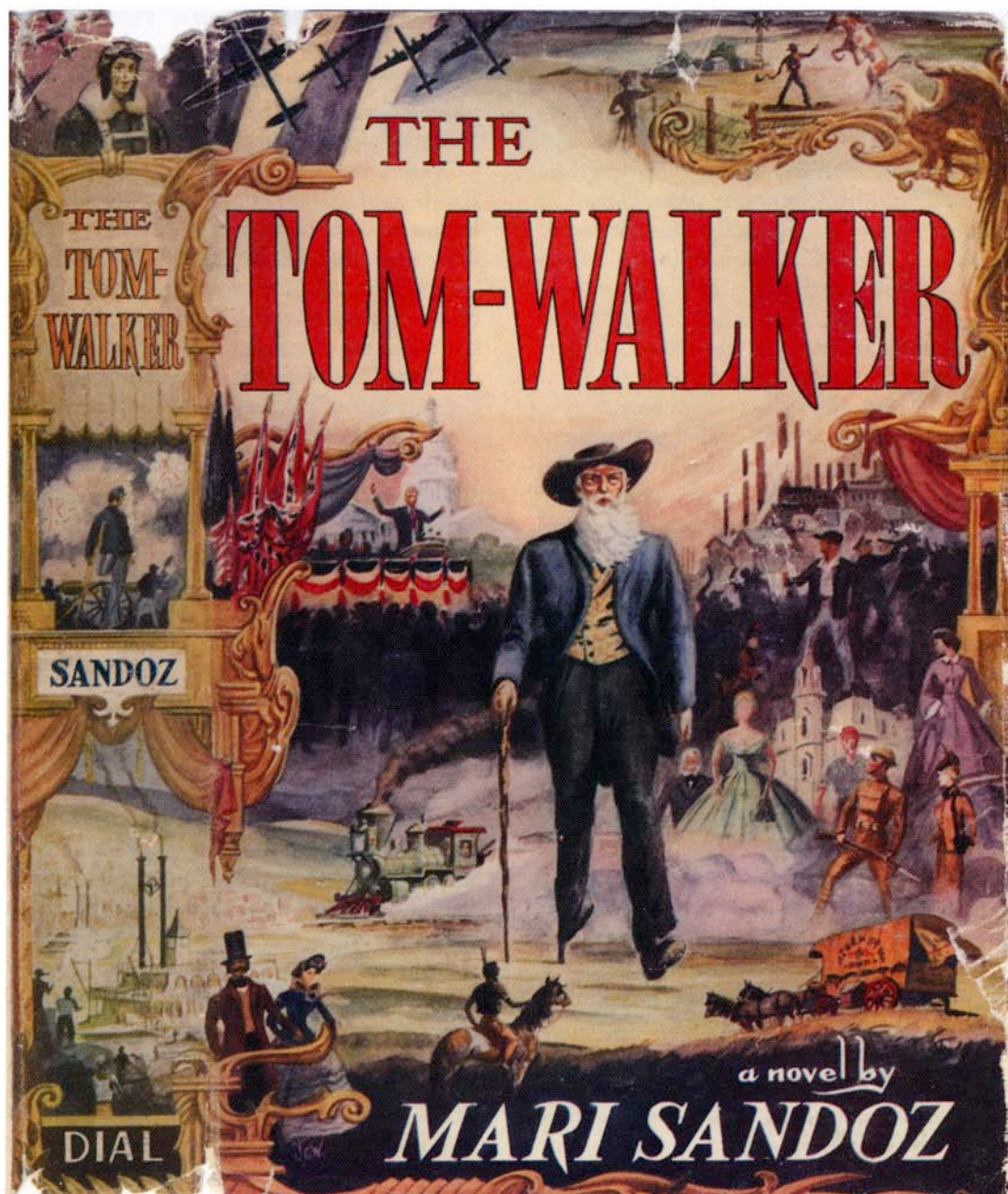


FIG. 2. Jacket cover of *The Tom-Walker* by Mari Sandoz; jacket painting by John C. Wonsetler (Dial Press, 1947). Courtesy of Great Plains Art Collection, Great Plains Art Museum.

a fresh perspective on the shameful treatment of American veterans dating back to the Civil War. Thus, my analysis might prove as provocative for scholars of war literature and Great

Plains studies as I hope it will be for those with a special interest in Mari Sandoz.

First, I briefly discuss the connection between national Domestic violence and

familial domestic violence that creates the central, organizing theme in *The Tom-Walker*.⁵ Next, I follow the episodic organization of the novel through its three “books,” each of which depicts the aftermath of war as experienced by a succession of Stone family veterans and their wives. These books vary in style, but all of them contribute to the portrait of veterans and domestic violence that rises above the novel’s faults.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Sandoz writes about the aftermath of war, about the traumatized soldiers’ return to the home front following the first wave of parades and patriotic fervor. In her episodic accounts of three veterans, stretching from the American Civil War to World War II, she depicts the collateral damage war inflicts on families in the form of an intimate, personal, domestic violence brought on by what World War II era psychology was just beginning to diagnose as post-traumatic stress syndrome.⁶

But a second definition of domestic violence is at work in the novel. Sandoz also describes America’s collective hostility toward its veterans once the war is over, a hostility that develops as the men begin demanding the jobs, medical care, and pensions promised them. Scapegoated by politicians, the protesting veterans, along with other displaced workers, become the objects of abusive propaganda and the victims of gas attacks by riot police. Sandoz, with varying degrees of success, tries to connect each veteran’s dysfunctional and abusive family relationships with a growing national war-induced psychosis of Domestic violence.⁷

I first became interested in this topic while reading *The Tom-Walker* and an issue of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* around the same time. The magazine has a regular feature called “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” in which a marriage counselor shows troubled couples how to reconcile their differences. The February 2006 issue would, I suspect, have

touched a nerve with Sandoz. The marriage-to-be-saved involved an American veteran of the Iraq war. At the beginning of therapy, his wife laments, “The fun-loving, upbeat guy I married is now dark, defensive and short-tempered. He scolds fast-food workers, swears at other drivers and picks fights with me. He has started smoking again, has lost his sex drive and is constantly telling me he needs ‘space.’ I feel like I have lost my best friend.” She concludes, “I still love my husband, but I don’t like him anymore.”⁸

These lines reminded me of the anger, the defensiveness, and the sexual dysfunction so graphically portrayed in the lives of the three protagonists and their wives in *The Tom-Walker*. And I began to see other parallels. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* husband, like the two Milton Stones (grandfather and grandson) in the novel, is somewhat self-reflective: “I’m still living in a state of heightened sensitivity—a ‘combat mode’ that probably saved my life in Baghdad but doesn’t work at all on the home front.”⁹ The counselor’s assessment that both husband and wife are suffering from a kind of post-traumatic stress is a commonplace observation in this day and time.

Sandoz was familiar with the psychological difficulties experienced by World War II veterans, as her correspondence with Eleanor Hinman reveals. She helped some of them with book deals, but observed, “I know what their anger can be.”¹⁰ With her keen sense of the psychological impact of war, Sandoz uses strategically placed dreams and flashbacks to demonstrate a state of mind-under-siege. More important, she uses those dreams and flashbacks to connect the vet’s emotional and physical attacks on his family to his combat-induced mental disorder. Further, this dysfunctional behavior is an individual manifestation of a collective, national behavioral disorder, which Sandoz depicts through many historical events, such as the Ku Klux Klan’s violence against racial minorities and police attacks on striking workers. These are the realistic elements that connect Sandoz’s fiction to a universal experience.

WAR BETWEEN THE MATES: MILTON AND
LUCINDA STONE

The novel's first episode begins in Ohio with a Civil War veteran, who soon moves his young family west to Iowa. Feeling only half a man, young Milton Stone returns home with a missing leg. He is rushed into marriage with his teenaged sweetheart, Lucinda, before the two of them can have a private moment. His parents deny them the much-needed time to allay his feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy and to soften her shock and confusion. On his wedding night, Milton slips out to drink and has his first violent domestic encounter when he slugs his draft-dodging cousin for bad-mouthing veterans:

"Oh, so you don't bandy words with a bluecoat crip? No, by God, but you took good care to see you stopped no bullets, you god-damn bounty puke!" he said, and knocked his fist in his cousin's mouth, short, neat and quick, as he learned in the army, leaving Sumner gap-mouthed, spitting bloody teeth.¹¹

The fist becomes Milton's way of dealing with his detractors, "as he learned in the army." He clearly feels assaulted by the deprecating attitude toward vets that has become the national stance, adopted even by his own immediate family, and he responds in kind. Unfortunately, in this state of mind, he goes to his wedding chamber.

Marital problems are symptomatic of emasculation fears throughout the novel, and Milton's difficulty relating to his wife starts on their first night together. Lucinda comes into the bedroom in her gown only to find Milton sprawled across the bed, passed out in his clothes. She cries herself to sleep, feeling his rejection very deeply after she has resolved to take him as he is. The marriage is not consummated for weeks. Eventually Milton goes to a prostitute with whom he has no difficulty performing—he feels at home with her coarseness. However, in the morning she

thoughtfully informs him that he had better take precautions against the clap. Her warning becomes the occasion for a life-changing visit to the apothecary Charley Powell.

The apothecary gives Milton a new lease on life. Powell assures him that he will function well enough with an artificial leg. But more important, Powell understands Milton's psychological wounds: "The real cat in the meal tub was the marital situation, particularly considering the widowing effect of war's violence on some soldiers, a sort of emasculation, a temporary unmaning, a sort of hypo to be busted up as soon as possible" (TW, 34). Disapproving of the couple's wasted wedding night, Powell encourages Milton to consummate the marriage by taking Lucinda on a little honeymoon outing, and he also plants the idea that Milton might learn to practice medicine. The prospects of having a career of sorts and of acquiring an artificial limb lift Milton's spirits and enable him to carry out the plan to court Lucinda. Leaving the apothecary, Milton, like a "tom-walker," temporarily towers above his own wounded ego.¹²

Accounts of social and political violence provide a context for Milton and Lucinda's marital difficulties as talk of conflict swirls around their daily lives. Family gossip includes the assassination of President Lincoln and urban riots during which "[f]reedmen and their families [were] killed wholesale, their homes and churches burned" (TW, 26). The veterans share in the national craziness: "Dead niggers won't be taking the bread out a our mouths' some of the job-hunting soldiers told each other" (TW, 26). Sandoz connects the emergence of the Klan with the violent intensity of the veterans' hunger for food and work. Pitted against other societal rejects, they have to fight for their share of America's bounty just as they had fought for their lives in the foxholes. Sandoz has a way of making us see the veterans' violent behavior in the context of their own victimization.

As Milton tries to settle back into his family life, dinner conversation involves a hearty discussion of the profits to be made by running

guns, never mind to whom. Someone at the table remarks that it hardly matters whether you sell defective guns to Indians or soldiers. Overall, he argues, everything evens out because both sides experience the firearms blowing up in their faces. Milton is outraged that members of his own circle harbor such indifference to the human devastation wreaked by profiteers. By describing a flashback to Milton's experience in the military hospital, Sandoz cuts through their facile rationalization, exposing it as part of the national delusion that depersonalizes violence. He remembers

the face of a soldier in the next cot, the lower jaw blown off by an exploding gun, the tongue gone too, the man trying to feed himself through a tube, making gurgling, crow-cawing noises when he tried to talk, or to keep his crying quiet, until the night he wadded his undershirt into the horrible hole, choking himself to death. Godamighty, putting guns like that into the hands of the poor devils a purpose! (TW, 28)¹³

This passage reminds me of my mother's description of working in an arsenal during World War II, where she was appalled at the carelessness with which some of the other workers assembled weapons. "They couldn't seem to imagine the consequences of their acts," she has said, but her imagination was much more vivid. I believe that Sandoz felt compelled, as a writer, to imagine for the benefit of those who could not imagine, what a blown-off face looks and feels like. She convincingly presents this image through Milton's thoughts, avoiding the narrative stiffness that mars the book's final episode.

The context of remembered violence and horror leaves little room for love. With each married pair Sandoz depicts in the novel, she plays variations on the theme of marital strife, always emphasizing the sense of emasculation created by a soldier's wounds, by a soldier's woman, by a soldier's family, or by a soldier's country. All of these experiences ring true in their specific application. Milton's young wife,

Lucinda, is a sympathetic character who has to overcome some of her finishing school notions and romantic expectations. She inadvertently pushes Milton's buttons with casual remarks that denigrate his soldiering and, hence, his manhood. As they ride on their honeymoon outing, she chides him, "Oh, Milton, you soldiers are always exaggerating!" (TW, 43).

He suppresses his anger, but "[h]e wanted to grab the whip from its socket, bring it down on the mare a dozen times, whip her until she went wild, battle-shot, crazy wild, and then pull out West" (TW, 43). To his credit, he controls the impulse. The beating of a horse, both imaginary and actual, is an image of domestic violence that seems peculiarly western, even though horses were ridden everywhere at the time. In any event, Sandoz develops the image fully when she turns to Martin Stone in the second book.

The ride contains a series of similar interactions. Milton does open up to his wife a little, and just as he is "beginning to enjoy this talking about himself, even to a woman-piece, a girl," Lucinda tells him that when he came home for a visit with his arm in a sling, all the girls thought him handsome and romantic (TW, 47). Instead of feeling flattered, Milton is reminded that an arm in a sling is romantic, but a missing leg is not. However, "he held his tongue and took it out on the little mare, whipping her into a rolling sweat, Lucinda holding to the side of the buggy and afraid" (TW, 47).

But when he finally reveals to her the horror of his experiences in the war (as the *Ladies' Home Journal* counselor would now advise him to do), she responds, "Oh, Milton! I didn't know" (TW, 49). He touches her gently for the first time, but he still can't discuss his hospital recuperation, which he has shared with the prostitute. Milton, like each vet in the novel, has his outlet, his rough and practical woman, around whom he feels less dirty, less unmanned. Nevertheless, Milton and Lucinda form the most sympathetic couple in the book and are the least violent with one another.

These events have received more symbolic interpretations, but what is to be gained by

reading Lucinda symbolically as “society, resenting having to live with the war damage, the loss of the leg, and choosing instead to focus on shallow romance”?¹⁴ The universality of Milton and Lucinda rests with the accurate portrayal of their particular relationship, whose dynamic is recognizable even in our experiences of contemporary veterans.

Sandoz shows how Milton’s self-pity prevents him from acknowledging his wife’s pain. Lucinda has troubles of her own. She becomes pregnant with twins, but when they die at birth, she feels like half a woman. Milton fails to make a connection between her sense of injured womanhood and his own feelings of emasculation. Instead of sympathizing with her, he remonstrates with her and takes a mistress. Their conflicts intensify until he actually strikes her. Again, Sandoz sets the domestic violence in a wider framework: Milton is outraged because Lucinda makes disparaging remarks about a group of unemployed men—Kelly’s California Army of Industrials—marching across the countryside in protest.¹⁵ Thus Sandoz allows the reader to view this national movement as it unfolded across the Plains.

Martin fetches Lucinda to see the spectacle: “‘There it is, Lucie,’ he cried, using the old name for the first time since the day the twins died, ‘there’s the greatest spontaneous movement of Americans since the Revolution!’” (TW, 131). Lucinda, repelled by the rabble, cannot respond appropriately: “‘Oh, Milton, not those tramps! Why they ought to have their britches taken down!’ she said, before she could stop her tongue” (TW, 131). In her condescension, she echoes the sentiments of the nation. She could hardly have been more belittling, and Martin backhands her with full force in the face. Lucinda’s inability to make the connection between “those tramps” and her husband goads him to uncharacteristic violence toward his wife.

In the end, they reconcile. She admits to him her cowardice in refusing to risk another pregnancy because she was told she might die, a cowardice that made her avoid being a wife

to him. When she did accidentally conceive, she arranged an abortion, another form of personal violence shared by other wives in the book. In their old age, the couple does have a son, Martin, who appears at the beginning of the second book as a World War I veteran with lungs injured by gas. More than anything, Milton wants his son is to be spared his own fate, life as a cripple, but the cycle repeats itself.

WORLD WAR I: MARTIN AND PENNY STONE IN THE TRENCHES

Perhaps because world war was an intensification of mass violence, Sandoz intensifies the family violence in the second book. Whereas Milton had whipped his mare a little and backhanded his wife once, Martin savagely abuses animals and attacks his young son. Images of jobless men trekking across the country are replaced by images of veterans gassed in front of the White House as they demonstrate for their pensions. Some of the integration of violent historical events with the violence of the protagonist is awkwardly handled, but the portrayal of Martin himself makes Sandoz’s case far better than her attempts at allegory or political commentary.

Martin’s wife, Penny, is more of a threat to his masculinity than Lucinda was to Milton’s because she is highly capable and independent. She has worked at a job in Lincoln, and she knows more about homesteading than Martin does. Her every accomplishment is a foil to his wounded ego, even though he is a talented farmer. He cannot handle livestock, and he uses the animals to vent his rage at his wife. Even before he first meets Penny, he discovers that Nancy, the girlfriend he expected to marry after the war, has already married someone else. In a vindictive rage, Martin kills Nancy’s dog, and Sandoz portrays this act with such horrifying detail that many readers will lose sympathy with him:

And when the ragged little dog came running after, to smell his heels in friendliness,

Martin whirled and kicked him in the belly with the expertness of an infantryman taking out a Heinie. In sudden exaltation he ran after the dog, kicking him again and again, until he lay a helpless and broken lump of hide and bone while Nancy screamed her anger from the porch. (TW, 148)

Although Sandoz represents Martin as a victim of war, she makes us recoil from his brutality. Still, using phrases such as “with the expertness of an infantryman taking out a Heinie,” she carefully connects his transformation into an abuser to his war experience.

On the rebound from Nancy, Martin meets Penny Turner on the train. Penny has lost her fiancé in the war, and the two decide to “throw in together” and homestead. Right away Martin feels threatened by the Turner family members who seem to have it all under control in spite of their hard luck. Sandoz creates a psychological profile that establishes the motive for Martin’s brutality. He sees the Turners’ efficiency as demeaning to him: “Much had been done in the last three weeks, with the Turners, particularly Penny, managing it all like HQ laying out a campaign, or the nurses at McHalvey chopping up a man’s time” (TW, 158-59). This assessment does not bode well for his marriage. On their wedding night, Martin and Penny speak of the necessity for good dreams to begin their new life. But ominously, Martin dreams of a fellow soldier, the boy from western Nebraska who was shot between the eyes.

Throughout the second book, a buckskin colt named Pete bears the brunt of Martin’s brutality:

But Martin had struck the buckskin over the head with the bridle for snorting, back when he was still a greenhorn with horses. The bit caught Pete in the eye, a pulpy string of blood running down the black nose, the horse rearing back into the corner of the corral in pain and fright. Furious, Martin held him there, slashing at him again and again with the bridle, cursing himself breathless, until the horse finally stood still,

but shaking, his bloody nostrils flaring, his uninjured eye wild. (TW, 175)

Penny watches this scene in “anger and contempt” (TW, 175). After she scolds Martin for the abuse and then soothes the animal, her husband beats the bridle to pieces on a post and disappears for three days. Later Penny discovers that prior to this incident, Martin had heard some dismal news about the plight of some jobless veterans, and thus again Sandoz connects the familial domestic violence to the national Domestic unrest. The abuse of the horse is horrific, and no excuses are made for Martin. However, Sandoz, like a psychologist, makes us understand the true source of his deep anger.¹⁶

But the real bee in Martin’s bonnet is his wife’s competence and independence and his corresponding sense of emasculation. This is a new world to which the soldier has returned. If Penny makes any comment at all about needing to look after the animals, implying that he is incompetent or negligent, Martin reacts with spite, letting the turkeys wander loose or allowing the cow to escape. When his wife gets pregnant, he experiences a temporary ego boost, “But even when she had to run out behind the house with morning sickness as she cooked his breakfast he couldn’t keep up with her cutting squaw corn” (TW, 177). While he is partly crippled by the damage to his lungs, his wife is fully functional, even while pregnant, and Martin reads her competence as a rebuke. Sandoz follows her narratorial comment about the irritating effect of Penny’s competence with an observation about Martin’s attendance at an Armistice Day celebration. Disgusted with the self-congratulatory speeches about how much the country has done to help its veterans, he projects the national condescension toward vets onto his wife, and resents her for what he imagines her to be feeling.

When Penny gets pregnant the second time, Martin is angry, as if she has deliberately planned to keep him down. He tries to talk her into an abortion, but she won’t have it, so he thinks of her as having the child out of spite, “knowing children were a snare and an

entanglement to a poor man, particularly a sick one" (TW, 180). Penny had enraged him, "[s]o Martin went up over the hump with the hoe to take it out on the rattlesnakes" (TW, 180). Again, his rage against his wife is violently displaced onto dumb animals.

Like his father, Martin has his share of sexual dysfunction. He wants Penny to try some tricks he learned from a whore in France, but she fires off the right verbal ammunition to rebuff him: "When you get so far gone you need such practices, you just go to the experts and I'll find me a man who is still a man!" (TW, 182). Predictably, her words fill him with fury, and he goes for the horse:

He jerked the buckskin, whipped him into a lather, spurred his sides to bleeding by the time they got to the Turtle Shell, Martin wondering if he hadn't ought to keep riding, ride off before something happened, with that woman getting him so damn mad. (TW, 182)

These scenes play out over and over. Martin cannot abide attacks on his injured manhood, even when he provokes them, but rather than beat his wife, he strikes out at the unfortunate Pete.

One night after he has verbally abused Penny, she tells him he will be homesteading alone if it ever happens again. His failure to inspire fear in her actually makes him incapable of beating her, but she falls asleep, "not letting him know how long she held her breath against the thought of his hands on her throat, choking her down as he did the buckskin" (TW, 200).

Over and over, Sandoz portrays Martin's anger at his wife and his abuse of Pete. When his daughter, Rita, is born, he adores her, but by age two she runs from his footsteps. He hits one son, young Marty, with his fist because the boy looks at a picture postcard showing the grave of Penny's former fiancé in France. Penny goes after her son to calm him,

and at this [Martin's] anger against the woman rose until he could have twisted her

neck, or the neck of anything else that stood in his way, even the little Rita in her blue dress, with Bruno beside her, playful and watching. Everything—he could break and destroy everything, but mostly the woman. (TW, 233)

He then imagines Penny judging him for his jealousy, for his violence against the animal, and worst of all, for his violence against his own child.

Just when Martin seems most contemptible, he realizes that his anger isn't due to the postcard but to his having heard news that police were gassing unemployed demonstrators in front of the White House, "gas against hungry Americans, vets and all, at their own president's door" (TW, 234).¹⁷ Identifying with the vets, he both remembers and imagines the gas filling his own lungs. With a rather remarkable flash of self-awareness, Martin mentally inventories his escalating violence—kicking Nancy's dog to death, striking his own son—and sadly recalls that he had once loved animals and protected them. In this moment, we see the change in the man and the forces behind that change.

The narrator somewhat awkwardly forces our understanding by way of Martin's abrupt epiphany. Yet knowledge does not change his behavior; he cannot control himself. He throws Penny out the bedroom window one night because he wants sex, and it is the wrong time of the month. She understands that she is his scapegoat: "His anger was against her as one of those who sold him out, those who stayed home and sold them all out. That she could understand, grieve over, break her heart over with him" (TW, 253). Again, the narrator forces the connection between the war and domestic abuse through Penny's intuitive assumptions about her husband's motivations. But still, she fears for her children. On the Plains in the 1930s, there was no *Ladies' Home Journal* marriage counselor.

Sandoz moves on to another theme of domestic conflict when Martin meets his father, Milton, the Civil War veteran and former labor sympathizer. Milton, or Old Iron Leg, as he is

now called, has turned right-wing conservative and talks about shooting the striking miners. Martin feels betrayed by Old Iron Leg's abandonment of his former principles. Through this family conflict, Sandoz recreates the hostile national mood toward striking workers and personalizes a nation's short memory of its veterans' sacrifices.

The climax of Martin's violent abuse occurs after he gets the news about another attack against the protesting vets. He strikes his son, Milton, on the shoulder with a manure fork. Next, Martin hears about the death of a friend and reacts by torturing the buckskin until Penny shoots it. She leaves the still-loaded gun on the ground, and Martin picks it up: "At this his hand tightened on the gun, his whole body taut as he slammed it shut, his finger slipping to the trigger, his black eyes going beyond to the woman who had seen all his humiliation and his failure since the day he came west to Nancy" (TW, 262-63). With Penny, he cannot pretend to wholeness, and he cannot shoot her because she is fearless, so he leaves. He does not return to the homestead until his son, Milton, comes home as a wounded World War II veteran.

Sandoz convincingly presents the workings of Martin's tortured psyche. We understand the threat to his manhood posed by his confident wife, reinforced by the dismissive mood of the nation, and we conclude that the domestic violence is Martin's expression of it all. Of Sandoz's three protagonists, Martin best drives home the paradigm of the returning soldier who cannot help fighting his own family—the paradigm that is the core of her work.

NUCLEAR THREAT: MILTON II AND HAZEL

In the final book of *The Tom-Walker*, Sandoz brings the second Milton Stone home from World War II with a bullet lodged in his chest, pointing toward his heart. Ironically, his wound occurred in China after the war, and like his grandfather, Old Iron Leg, and his father, Martin, he comes home long after the fanfare of returning veterans is over and the reneging on benefits has begun. His wife,

Hazel, has started her brilliant career as part of the entourage of the nefarious right-wing Senator Potter. Sandoz pursues her theme of emasculation through Hazel's kind condescension toward Milton and her complete independence from him. Their daughter, Kathie, born during Milton's absence, is sent to camp when her mother travels—removed from Milton's love and influence. The couple's conjugal visits are rare, but when Hazel does get pregnant again, she has an abortion. Unlike Lucinda, Hazel is neither well drawn nor sympathetic, and her motivations for the abortion remain less clear. Nevertheless, violence against the unborn is yet another manifestation of domestic conflict repeated in the novel.

In contrast to his father, Milton is educated and civilized—he does not immediately strike out at loved ones in impotent rage. His family is broken apart by Hazel's preference for her job, but Sandoz concentrates this section of the book on the wider Domestic sphere—the national scene—as Hazel and the plot complications both move to Washington, DC. There, Senator Potter is planning to take over the government, one way or another. In the third book, Sandoz attempts to portray the wider cultural psychosis in the aftermath of war. She is less concerned with the war's effects on Milton and Hazel personally than with political mayhem—she is concerned about what the war has done to people's thinking. Sandoz inserts hints about Senator Potter's might-makes-right philosophy in an attempt to make her national psychosis coalesce into a single representative politician.¹⁸

In the first book, we had the social conversation about running defective guns. In the third, the unimaginative, violent, postwar mentality is conveyed through a dinner table discussion of atomic weapons. Young Marty, Milton's brother (who has not fought in the war), says, "I claim we got to use the A-bomb quick. Bomb the Russian cities off the map, the English and Canadian too—anybody who won't give up to us, let us run their industries, mines, everything. We got to bomb everybody down and keep 'em down'" (TW, 299). No one in the

company objects to Marty's diatribe. As narrator, Sandoz compares the casual talk of nuclear weapons to "talking like the Germans who knew of the Buchenwalds and saw no horror, felt no guilt—all struck by the same horrible disease, a swift and dreadful paresis that spread even to remote Seep Creek" (TW, 299).

It is hardly possible to escape the indictment in this comparison—a comparison of the American indifference toward brutality and unnecessary force to the same indifference exhibited by the German populace toward Nazi atrocities. This is the root of Domestic violence on the national scale, this indifference, this lack of imagination. In Sandoz's book, the returning veterans are the conscience of the nation, and even that conscience hardens over time. We see Old Iron Leg and his son, Martin, harden to the plight of those who suffer and become part of the national psychosis. The second Milton, Old Iron Leg's grandson, appears to be the exception, but even he has to restrain himself from lashing out at family, "against all those he had left in the world to love," during the A-bomb discussion (TW, 299-300). Like the bullet in his chest, his anger is buried deep.

This simple domestic chat about the A-bomb, rather than the garbled narrative at the end of the novel, carries the weight of Sandoz's indictment of national Domestic violence. Milton recalls that the pilots of St. Lo had wept at their mistake in bombing their own troops,

while around this table there was joy in perversity—in these people and in all the others who were determining the future of the world around their dinner tables; joy in their destructiveness, deliberately willing to know nothing, to feel nothing except hatred for the responsibilities they would neither face nor recognize. (TW, 300)

Milton's family life disintegrates as his wife devotes herself to Senator Potter—in more ways than one, rumor has it. Hazel uses Milton as a sideshow at one of the senator's parties, trying to cover her discomfort at her husband's

presence by making a fuss over his wounds. In Sandoz's story, Hazel's use of her husband is perhaps too obviously analogous to the country's parading veterans for its own purposes. But the scene itself is a convincing display of spousal misunderstanding.

Consequently, Milton finally hits Hazel in public, striking her once as his grandfather had struck Lucinda, and for much the same reason. Then he reflects on what he has come to, hitting a woman, his own wife at that. Like his father and grandfather before him, he turns to a mistress for physical confirmation of his masculinity, but in his case, also for sympathy with a political orientation that he does not find at home. Mary, his nurse and lover, mentions "a test coming up," a remark unfortunately lost in some obtuse writing, so that the reader finds the narrative at the end of the book disconnected and startling (TW, 356).

Sandoz hints at some dark political intrigue but seems incapable of making the threat concrete and plot-driven rather than vague and allegorical. The novel's conclusion involves Milton's journey to Washington, DC, for surgery to remove the bullet from his chest. But this hopeful scenario becomes garbled with accounts of Senator Potter's fascist takeover of the government. When Milton meets with Hazel to impart the news of his impending "cure," she gives him a gun and expresses the hope that he will stop Potter, who has already assassinated the Secretary of War. The political coup takes place on the Senate floor, but Milton, watching from the visitor's balcony, cannot bring himself to fire the gun at Potter. A red flash indicates an A-bomb explosion (Potter is carrying some kind of wired board), and Milton runs toward the gun-wielding guards during the ensuing riot.

The next thing we know, Milton is awakening from anesthesia and speculating that Potter's *putsch* was only a drug-induced dream. Sandoz follows this revelation with a clumsy description of a gilt-framed photo on the wall that reminds Milton of "the cheap official pictures he saw blowing around the bombed-out streets of Berlin, or found hidden in good

Nazi beds" (TW, 372). He wonders what such a picture would be doing on the hospital wall in Washington. Then he realizes the man in the photo is not literally a Nazi, but Senator Potter. Alternatively, confronted with much bad writing, readers might decide that the atomic-bomb-inspired coup was not a dream after all, and that Milton is in the hospital looking at the successful Potter's portrait-of-a-dictator. But that leaves the question: Why would he be having his scheduled surgery after such a catastrophic event—or was he shot during the riot?

I think it is a shame that Sandoz chose a cheap device to end the novel, though the image does make the parallel between Nazi and Domestic brutality. Unfortunately, in emphasizing the senator's image, Sandoz loses the power conveyed in her earlier depiction of the family's discussion of the A-bomb, a microcosm of the popular indifference and lack of imagination that pave the way to totalitarianism in all its guises. In her haste to create allegory and to warn the world about an internal fascist threat, she sacrifices character and plot to a poorly constructed symbol. The story of Milton II and Hazel disappears before our frustrated eyes, replaced by a mechanically drawn Senator Potter.

Thinly veiling her sermon in Milton's thoughts, the narrator sums up the crux of Domestic violence in its dream state of postwar psychosis:

Now all the world was sick, the danger terrible and immediate and complete, but nobody caring what happened the other times—domestic rape, the great international economic and industrial combines tom-walking, with hunger and the A-bomb used like a club everywhere, and the people blinded, refusing to see, moving in an uneasy dream. (TW, 357)

These words convey the essence of Sandoz's fear that the victimized would become the victimizers, and that the cycle of abuse would perpetuate itself through the veterans of the next war, and the next, and the next. Unfortunately,

they also reveal the writer's fear that her characters and stories could not adequately get her point across. The narrative in the third book recalls that of *Capital City*, whereas the narratives in the first two books contain at least some of the realistic characterization and dramatic plot achieved in *Slogum House*. Had Sandoz consistently illustrated those conflicts through her protagonists, the book might have been more successful. After all, domestic ignorance is better conveyed through a dinner table conversation than through an awkward, symbolic portrait or editorial sermonizing. But in the end, she subordinates realistic fiction to her mistaken notion that an allegorical style would best serve to warn her readers about the threat of nuclear power in the hands of fascists.

CONCLUSION

In attempting to reclaim *The Tom-Walker* from relative critical oblivion, I have turned to a close reading by way of illustrating Sandoz's realistic characterization and setting. Sandoz's letters leave no doubt that she expected her readers to appreciate the novel as an allegory with a strong social message. She wrote to Blanche Knopf:

Properly finished and properly presented WE'LL SOON HAVE YOU BACK AGAIN [her original title for *The Tom-Walker*] might help save us from the chaos towards which we are certainly headed, unless all those of us who know the danger point it out, graphically and with passion. This speaking up in times of stress has always been the premise of the serious novelist; it shall always be mine. (LMS, 208)

Katherine A. Mason, Barbara Wright Rippey, and others have provided thorough analyses of the novel's symbolism, and I think Mari Sandoz would have been gratified that at least some of her critics "got it." For example, Mason says of the three veterans in *The Tom-Walker*, "Although their physical wounds are important, these characters are significant because they

symbolize the society which is wounded by the power of war, with its corruption and greed."¹⁹ Probably, Sandoz would have agreed with this interpretation. But perhaps their physical and psychological wounds are significant precisely because believable characters suffer them in very personal ways.

Sandoz did not seem to see that the best way to deliver the message was through her carefully selected accounts of individual men and their families. Contrary to Sandoz's belief, the literary and historical value of *The Tom-Walker* lies in its psychological realism rather than in the allegorical pretensions that ultimately make it a flawed and little-read novel.

The roots of domestic (and Domestic) violence find fertile ground in the rage of returning veterans, and each of the couples in *The Tom-Walker* allows us to experience the collateral damage of war firsthand. Furthermore, we are reminded of the particular hardships facing these veterans as they attempt to eke out a living on the changing landscape of the Plains and in the hostile social and economic landscape of the nation. If these couples appear as familiar to us as the couple in "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" then Sandoz, as a "serious novelist," has established continuity between each succeeding generation of veterans in this country. Some things, it seems, never change.

NOTES

1. Helen Winter Stauffer, "Mari Sandoz," in *A Literary History of the American West*, sponsored by the Western Literature Association (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), 764.

2. Betsy Downey, "She Does Not Write Like a Historian: Mari Sandoz and the Old and New Western History," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 11.

3. Helen Winter Stauffer, ed., *Letters of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 208, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as LMS. In this letter to Blanche Knopf dated March 15, 1944, Sandoz explicitly connects Gulla with Hitler.

4. Glenda Riley, "Mari Sandoz's Slogum House: Greed as Woman," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 32.

5. In this paper, to avoid the confusion between "domestic" violence in the family sphere and "domestic" violence in the national sphere, I will refer to the national violence as Domestic violence.

6. See Eric T. Dean, *Shook All Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Dean shows that Civil War veterans exhibited post-traumatic stress and argues that the Vietnam War was not particularly unique in its effects on combatants. Like Sandoz, he talks about the veterans that returned after the parades and about their alienation from civilians and boredom with civilian life. Domestic violence increased and so did forms of violence specifically related to experiences in the field (167). According to Dean, "In the North, two-thirds of all commitments to state prisons were men who had seen service in the army or navy, and in some state prisons commitments were up by 400 percent" (98).

7. Sandoz explicitly talks about war-induced psychosis in an interview with James Olsen. Referring to her motivation for writing *The Tom-Walker*, she says, "I was very much disturbed over the psychotic aspects after the Civil War, after the First World War, and then after the Second World War." See *Song of the Plains: The Story of Mari Sandoz*, DVD, Nebraska Educational Television documentary, 1978-79.

8. "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, February 2006, 94.

9. Ibid, 100.

10. Sandoz to Eleanor Hinman, March 14, 1946, Caroline Sandoz Pifer Collection, Mari Sandoz Great Plains Heritage Center Archives, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE.

11. Mari Sandoz, *The Tom-Walker* (New York: Dial Press, 1947), 19, hereafter cited in the text as TW.

12. The term "tom-walker" refers to the circus performer who walks on stilts. Milton becomes "Iron Leg" when he exchanges his artificial leg for a piece of iron pipe. Sandoz overworks Milton's monikers tom-walker and Iron Leg by having them signify his status as the hero of regional tall tales. As the novel progresses, Sandoz also uses "tom-walker" to signify politicians and other tricksters. My analysis leaves out Sandoz's mythologizing of Milton, but here is a sample for the curious:

Seemed he could use it [the iron leg] for everything from batting out balls for the kids to whacking back the bullets Wild Bill once fired at him. Whack'd 'em back so hard he put a couple holes right through Bill's hat, he did. Then there were all those flowing wells that people talked about up north. Seemed Iron Leg bored them.

Just grabbed up his coattails and whizzed around on that pipe until water came spouting out like a gusher, though mostly it settled later to just boiling up a couple feet out of the ground. (TW, 112)

13. Sandoz most likely would have read Dalton Trumbo's best-selling antiwar book, *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939; reprint, New York: Citadel Press, 1994), published about eight years before *The Tom-Walker*. The protagonist is a wounded World War I soldier whose face and ears have been blown off, as well as his arms and legs. Her image has a strikingly similar effect.

14. Joan Bell, "The Tom-Walker: The Last Stone," unpublished MS, Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center Archives, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE.

15. Kelly's Industrial Army was one of a number of "industrial armies" spawned by the panic of 1893. In 1894 Charles T. Kelly rallied 1,500 unemployed men and boarded boxcars bound for Washington, DC, planning to join Jacob S. Coxey's army, which had marched from Ohio to the capital. The railroad threw them off at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Many continued on foot.

16. Sandoz takes a similar tack in *Old Jules*. She is capable of presenting her father's horrific acts of physical abuse accompanied by accounts of his motivation—disappointment in love, financial hardships, etc. Likewise, we readers are distanced from Martin's viciousness through an intellectual maneuver that makes his violent acts a part of what he has experienced in and after the war.

17. Not incidentally, Jules Sandoz was vicious in his treatment of horses and his wives: "He had been known to run a horse to death, and he was sometimes brutal to Mary." Stauffer, *Mary Sandoz*, 21.

18. Sandoz apparently refers to the Bonus Army that marched on Washington, DC, in 1932. Spurred by depression conditions, World War I veterans gathered to protest the delay in receiving a bonus promised them in 1924. President Hoover approved the removal of the protesters, and the veterans were pursued with bayonets and tear-gassed, largely as a result of the actions of General Douglas MacArthur. There are, of course, many historical accounts of this situation, but I have relied on Donald J. Lisio, *The President and Protest: Hoover, MacArthur, and the Bonus Riot* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994).

19. If the book were widely read now, readers would be struck by the way Senator Potter foreshadows the real-life Senator Joseph McCarthy. In later years, Sandoz certainly saw the similarity. In a letter to Marguerite Young dated March 5, 1954, she wrote: "However, I suspect McCarthy is really the senator of my *Tom-Walker*, and that no one of the general's [Eisenhower's] outfit will stop him" (LMS, 267). Apparently, some people also associated the character with Richard Nixon. In a letter to Joseph Balmer on September 20, 1952, Sandoz wondered "why anyone would expect our Republican vice presidential candidate to be honest now when he was not considered so before he was nominated. . . . Even his colleagues in the senate call him Tricky Dick" (LMS, 249).

20. Katherine A. Mason, "Greed and the Erosion of the Pioneer Ethic: Selected Novels of Mari Sandoz," *Platte Valley Review* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 98. Some other important contributions to the examination of allegory in Sandoz's trilogy of novels are Joan Bell (note 14) and Barbara Wright Rippey, "Three Allegorical Novels of Mari Sandoz: *Slogum House*, *Capital City*, and *The Tom-Walker*" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1981).