

The Enduring Mari Sandoz

By David L. Bristow

This article first appeared in Nebraska Life, Jan/Feb 2001.

As reward for the first publication of one of her short stories, eleven-year-old Mari Sandoz was beaten by her father and locked in a dark cellar. Fiction, thundered “Old Jules” Sandoz, was for hired girls. He would not tolerate its presence in his family.

“You know I consider artists and writers the maggots of society,” he told her years later.

If Old Jules felt any pride in his eldest daughter’s accomplishment, he kept it to himself. He did not seem to find it remarkable that this scrawny little girl—unschooled, illiterate, and speaking German until she was nearly nine years old—should have so quickly demonstrated her proficiency with the written English language. But then, Old Jules was not a man to dwell on things like that.

When Mari Sandoz was born near Hay Springs, Nebraska in 1896, she began a childhood that could reasonably be expected to crush whatever innate creativity and intelligence she might possess. Her father, though educated, was a brutal, self-centered man who resented women. Her mother was critical, unaffectionate, and prone to treating Mari as the family workhorse—the child who had to cook, clean, wash dishes, and care for babies even while her siblings played. Mari’s schooling started late and was interrupted frequently. Though an avid learner, she did not finish the eighth grade until she was seventeen—and no one thought of sending her to high school. She grew up in an isolated part of state, was rarely allowed off the farm by her tyrannical father, and at age eighteen began an unhappy marriage that ended five years later with a divorce petition citing “extreme mental cruelty.”

And yet she was not crushed. Though scarred by her early years—both physically and emotionally—Mari Sandoz went on to become one of Nebraska’s most important writers. From *Old Jules*, the stark 1935 biography of her father, to *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, published posthumously in 1966, Sandoz wrote more than two dozen books—history, biography, and fiction—and earned acclaim for the vigor of her language, the thoroughness of her research, and the depth of her

understanding of both the white and Indian cultures of the Great Plains. Hers is a story of the last days of the American frontier, a story of talent, intelligence, and artistic vision, and—as much as anything—a story of astonishing persistence in the face of repeated failure and rejection.

It is anyone's guess how many children have been born with literary potential equal or superior to that of Mari Sandoz, but who, due to poverty, cruelty, low expectations—any of humanity's belittling influences—have been maneuvered into lives of futility and wasted talent. That Sandoz escaped is a miracle. In *Old Jules* she writes,

When the little Marie was three months old and ill with summer complaint, her cries awakened Jules. Towering dark and bearded in the lamplight, he whipped the child until she lay blue and trembling as a terrorized small animal. When Mary [her mother] dared she snatched the baby from him and carried her into the night and did not return until the bright day.

One cannot help but notice the technique—referring to herself in the third person, using—without explanation—an earlier version of her name (born “Mary” but called “Marie,” she became “Mari” only as an adult). By her own admission, writing about “Marie” served to create some emotional distance between writer and subject—as though she was writing about someone else.

The passage continues, tellingly,

But the night's work was never to be undone. Always the little Marie hid away within herself. She never cried out in the terror of her dreams or walked the house in her sleep as did the little Jule [her brother], but from the time she could walk she hid away, retreating into fancy.

And so Mari cultivated her imagination, living within herself. She became the quiet child, the unobtrusive one whom Old Jules allowed to stay up late and listen to the stories of his guests. They all stopped at Old Jules' place—the soldiers, the traders, the gold miners back from the Black Hills, the Indians. They all told stories, talked about their lives in the West, told of the things they had seen and heard. And Mari listened, taking it all in.

In time, even Old Jules himself came to confide in this daughter, telling her countless stories of his earlier years on the plains. Perhaps he recognized her interest, her passion for the West. Perhaps he noticed the way she was coming to love and understand the high plains and the Sandhills country the way he himself did. Or perhaps it was enough simply that Mari would always listen and never criticize or argue.

From this complex relationship sprang the greatness of *Old Jules*. In writing about her father, Mari Sandoz took on a formidable challenge: writing a book about a man that readers were sure to dislike. Yet Old Jules was not without his admirable qualities: his courage, his persistence, his refusal to be driven from the land by hostile ranchers, his tireless struggle on behalf of the rights of his fellow settlers, his orchards and his horticultural innovations, his integrity. “I am not in this business for the money,” he once said. “I’m trying to build up the country.” And he meant it.

The genius of Mari’s treatment of her father in *Old Jules* is in the careful balance she maintains between Jules as monster and Jules as pioneer hero. “Only the strong and courageous, the ingenious and stubborn, remained,” she writes, describing hard times in the Panhandle. Old Jules embodied such qualities. His daughter’s portrayal of him is, therefore, a complex portrait, part tribute, part exposé. Within a single scene, even within a single sentence, Sandoz could mingle joy and sorrow, nostalgia and outrage. Writing of her mother—who performed the physical labor that Old Jules usually avoided—she recalls,

The early cherry season was a happy time for them all, even Mary, whose fingers were permanently crooked from the hoe handle, her arms cramping at night.

Though her mother lived to see the publication of *Old Jules*, Sandoz did not write it until after her father’s death.

As a child Mari was terrified of her father, but in time she began to assert her independence. At age 17, the year she finished the 8th grade, she secretly rode 18 miles to Rushville to take the rural teachers’ exam. Weighing only 75 pounds and looking like a little girl in her pink gingham dress, “it seemed impossible that she could pass. All the other

candidates were well-dressed young ladies and she was a child, but she must get away—peacefully if she could, because of her mother, but get away.”

Though she passed the test and became a schoolteacher, Mari did not truly get away from her old life until after her divorce in 1919, at age 23. That fall, she moved to Lincoln and began her long literary apprenticeship.

Mari’s years in Lincoln were a time both of development and of struggle and failure. Known by her married name, Marie Macumber, Mari worked a series of low-paying jobs, took classes at the University of Nebraska when she could, and—most of all—wrote whenever possible.

Despite her rural teaching experience, Sandoz lacked a high school diploma and was therefore ineligible to enroll at the university. She was allowed to take classes only by the intervention of a sympathetic dean, who told her that she could enroll with impunity as long as she didn’t apply for a degree. Following his advice, Mari never declared a major and never graduated. Seeking neither degree nor husband, Mari used higher education entirely for her own peculiar purpose—to improve as a writer.

For more than a decade and a half, Sandoz filled a scrapbook with rejection letters from magazines and book publishers. She was poor, staying just above starvation—and not always by much. She looked painfully thin and unhealthy. She wore old clothes, mismatched and threadbare, and was often seen walking briskly across campus, an enormous pile of books under one arm. Her friends suspected that she lived on the tea, sugar, and crackers that were freely available in the university dining hall.

She did not lead a normal life, no getting around that. Though friendly and fun-loving, fond of going dancing at the ballrooms in town, Mari nevertheless let nothing—not friendship, not love—interfere with her writing. She was difficult to get close to, never spoke of her family or of her failed marriage, and seemed unable to tolerate conflict or intense emotion. She often spent hours at a time in a dank basement of the State Historical Society, reading old newspapers—by flashlight if necessary—as research for her future writing.

In 1929, the year after Old Jules' death, she changed her name from Marie Macumber to Mari Sandoz. The unconventional spelling of her new first name reflected a European pronunciation, MAH-ree. It was the way that Old Jules had pronounced her name. In this way, her new identity reflected both an independence of spirit and a deep, though painful, bond with her dead father, whose biography she was now in the process of writing.

As a writer, Sandoz continued to struggle during the early 1930s. Finally, in the fall of 1933, she gave up. Malnourished and in poor health, suffering from migraine headaches, Mari told her friends that she was going back to live with her mother in the Sandhills. *Old Jules* had been rejected by every major publisher in the country, and Sandoz had sold little else. She was 37 years old, living in poverty in the midst of the Great Depression, a failure as a writer, tired, sick, lonely... and now she was finished. Calling in a few friends to help her, Mari gathered up more than 70 of her manuscripts and burned them in a wash tub in her backyard. Then she left Lincoln, as far as she knew, never to return.

But she found she could not stop writing. Back home with her mother, Mari was soon at work on a novel, *Sloghum House*, a dark and bitterly realistic tale of a ruthless Nebraska family. By January 1934, she was back in Lincoln with a good job at the Nebraska State Historical Society, where—among other things—she was the associate editor of *Nebraska History* magazine.

It was there, little more than a year later, that Sandoz received a telegram that would change her life. *Old Jules* had been spared the flames, and though Atlantic Press had already rejected it, Mari entered a revised version in their 1935 nonfiction contest. When the unexpected telegram came, it announced that *Old Jules* had won and would be published.

At first, she refused to believe it. Showing the telegram to the Society's president, A. E. Sheldon, she asked what he thought it meant.

"This is where we lose you," he replied.

By the end of the year, *Old Jules* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and selling enough copies so that Mari, for the first time in her life, could truly make her living as a writer.

Success, however, did not make her life easier. Though naturally pleased with *Old Jules'* success, Sandoz soon found herself facing two new challenges with which she would struggle for years: her ongoing battles with editors to preserve the integrity of her manuscripts, and public wrath over the language and content of her work.

Right from the start, Sandoz began fighting with the *Atlantic* editors over their proposed changes to her manuscript. There were numerous points of contention, but perhaps the most bitter was over her peculiar use of language. Even in her narration, she employed—without apology or explanation—a Western vocabulary, saying, for example, “horsebackers” for “horseback riders,” “as high as” for “as many as,” or “four-five” for “four or five,” and dropping certain nouns entirely, as in referring to a passenger train simply as a “passenger.” Such expressions were woven into sentences that the Boston editors felt were often too complicated, too jarring or staccato in their rhythm. In short, they wanted to standardize her language, to Easternize it, and Mari fought them for every inch of ground.

Her faith in the power of the Western idiom can be gauged by the passage she selected as the epigram for *Old Jules*. In it, she quotes “Big Andrew,” one of the early pioneers:

One can go into a wild country and make it tame, but, like a coat and cap and mittens that he can never take off, he must always carry the look of the land as it was. He can drive the plough through the nigger-wool, make fields and roads go every way, build him a fine house and wear the stiff collar, and yet he will always look like the grass where the buffalo have eaten and smell of the new ground his feet have walked on.

When the public objected to Sandoz’s use of language, it had nothing to do with her use of Western idiom and a great deal to do with her use of profanity (“nigger-wool” not being found objectionable, of course). Though *Old Jules* sold well and garnered good reviews, its unflinching portrait of frontier life did not square with the popular view of an idyllic past in which God-fearing pioneers built up the West through cheerful, honest toil.

Public outcry swelled with the release of her next two books, the novels *Sloghum House* (1937) and *Capital City* (1939), both of which provoked hate mail and threats. The

former was commonly misinterpreted as a slander of rural Nebraskans; the latter was seen as an attack on the city of Lincoln (which, in part, it was). Stung by the backlash in her home state, Mari moved first to Denver, then to New York City, where she lived for the rest of her life.

Now Sandoz began exploring a subject that was to be one of her most important: the Indians of the northern plains. As a child, Mari had known many Indians, including some of the old-timers, for Old Jules had always treated them with friendliness and respect.

In 1942, Sandoz published *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*, her monumental biography of the great Lakota (Sioux) leader. Among the book's many remarkable qualities, perhaps the most startling is the way it is written from within the Lakota world-view, using Lakota concepts and metaphors, even—as well as it could be rendered in English—Lakota patterns of speech.

For example, when Crazy Horse learns of the death of Spotted Tail's daughter from a white-man's disease, Sandoz describes the scene as follows:

Now she had been carried away to the Holy Road by her father, to the road that had brought her this dying as it brought so many bad things to them all; and as Crazy Horse thought of these things, his breast filled with a boiling as when hot stones are thrown into water, so he went out into the darkness where the sky was far and there was room for an angry man.

The scene is partly fiction, for Sandoz had no way of verifying precisely what Crazy Horse was thinking at that moment. In the same way, her use of invented dialogue elsewhere in the story is also the work of a fiction writer. Yet these things were based upon thorough research and upon an understanding of the culture that was about as complete as an outsider could hope to acquire. This understanding of the Plains tribes would appear in later books such as *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), *The Horsecatcher* (1957), and *The Story Catcher* (1963).

At times Mari Sandoz was a controversial writer. At other times she was virtually ignored—at one point in her career, both *Old Jules* and *Crazy Horse* had gone out of print, while *Cheyenne Autumn* was meeting with rejection from publishers. As a writer, she tended to be ahead of her time. Gradually, however, public respect and numerous honors began to accumulate. Among these was an honorary Doctorate of Literature from the University of Nebraska in 1950. It was an honor deeply appreciated by the writer/historian who had launched her distinguished career with no academic credentials beyond an 8th grade diploma and a rural teacher's certificate.

No more distracted by honors than by rejection, Mari Sandoz kept writing, right up to the last, to within a month of her death from cancer in 1966. She is buried near Gordon, Nebraska, on a hillside overlooking her family's Sandhills ranch. More than a generation later, her literary legacy endures—still read, still loved—a rare accomplishment for a writer. Despite the passage of years, her best work still seems fresh, timeless, and as relevant today as when it was written.

© 2001 David L. Bristow

www.davidbristow.com