



MARION MARSH BROWN

A CONTINUING LEGACY IN NEBRASKA WRITING

BY DAN HOLTZ

On April 21, 2020, at Baxter Arena, the University of Nebraska-Omaha will host best-selling author David Baldacci, the fifth writer in the Marion Marsh Brown Writers Lecture Series. Sponsored by Mrs. Brown's son and daughter-in-law, Paul and Djel Brown, and their children, the series has celebrated the joy of reading by bringing a favorite writer to UNO the past five springs. Beyond that, the series has provided a modern-day link to a legacy of Nebraska writing, a legacy that began with Cassius H. Marsh (born in Brownville, Nebraska Territory, in 1863) and continued with his daughter Marion, who was the author of twenty published books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles and short stories.

A contemporary of Bess Streeter Aldrich, John Neihardt and Mari Sandoz, Brown wrote primarily for young teenagers. Although she first gained attention with books about nationally known historical figures such as Nathan Hale and Francis Scott Key, Brown reflected her Nebraska roots in later books about Cather, Neihardt, and noted Native Americans

such as Susan La Flesche Picotte. Because she spent all of her nearly seventy-year professional life writing and teaching English in her home state (except for extensive travel), some called her the “most Nebraskan” of Nebraska writers. Reflecting Brown’s upbringing in the Loess Hills of southeast Nebraska, some of her Nebraska-set books portray a topography different from the prairie landscapes of Aldrich and Willa Cather.

Brown’s roots in Nebraska connect to the state’s earliest days. Her great-uncle Stephen W. (commonly called “Squire”) Kennedy was a noted southeast Nebraska settler who came to Nemaha County in 1856. A farmhouse he built between Brownville and Peru was much enlarged by the time Brown was born there on July 22, 1908. By then it was the home of her uncle George Kennedy and his family; George had married Marion’s Aunt Annie in 1883, bringing the Marsh and Kennedy family lines together.¹

Christened Marian Elizabeth Marsh, Brown was the only daughter of Cassius and Jenevie (Hairgrove) Marsh.² Cassius was an early Nebraska newspaperman, who began his career in the late 1870s at age fourteen working for *The Nebraska Advertiser*, then owned by Robert W. Furnas, Nebraska’s third governor.³ Cassius later worked for the *Nebraska Farmer* in Lincoln and came to be a stockholder for that publication and its secretary-treasurer. His early death from tuberculosis in 1924 when he was sixty brought Jenevie to Peru where she served as a Dormitory Assistant and, eventually, acting Dean of Women at Peru State College until she retired in 1947. In later years after Brown became successful, she credited her father’s love of reading (he had a complete set of Charles Dickens’ works from which he often read to the family) and his newspaper career as reasons she decided to become a writer.⁴

Her desire to write was evident early on. She was ten years old when her first published story appeared in a contest for the Children’s Page of the *Omaha Bee* newspaper. In later life, she said

she could not recall what the story was about, but she remembered the prize, a big light blue book with the title *I Wonder Why*. She said that prize was “so appropriate” and that anyone who wants to become a writer “needs to wonder why” about almost anything.⁵ Despite her early start, she was forty-one when her first fictionalized biography, *Young Nathan*, was published. Thereafter, she had a book published about every two years until the early 1990s.

At the time of her *Omaha Bee* story, she was attending a one-room country school, District 17, less than a quarter-mile from the family’s farm home between Brownville and Peru. As an adult, she referred to that school as “the best education you can get” and used it as a prototype in a number of her books and stories, including *Marnie* and *The Mystery of the Little Red Schoolhouse*, which was serialized in the young people’s publication *Trailblazer for Juniors* in 1951.⁶ She further credited her rural upbringing as a stimulus for her imagination and, consequently, her writing. In an interview not long after the publication of *Young Nathan*, she said, “You have time to daydream, wander through the woods,

Early twentieth century postcard view of Peru, Nebraska. RG2304-8-44



maybe sit in tree houses in the orchard, or tunnel through hay in the hay mow. The beauty that you see and the time for thinking can be a mighty stimulus to the imagination.”⁷

Brown left District 17 when she was only ten years old after she passed the countywide eighth-grade examinations. She graduated from high school in Auburn at 14.⁸ Her father died when she was a 15-year-old, second-semester freshman majoring in English at Nebraska State Teachers College at Peru. Given that Brown always credited Cassius’ influence on her writing career and “lovingly” dedicated her book *Frontier Beacon* to him, his loss had to have been devastating. In a 1953 letter Brown’s mother wrote, “When I read the dedication . . . tears got the best of me, in a big way. . . . When you . . . were growing up [your father] thought nobody ever lived that could quite come up to his little girl.”⁹ Nonetheless, Brown excelled at Peru, earning her A.B. degree with high honors after only three-and-a-half years. Brown felt, though, that her father’s premature death had exacted another price. In a 1984 interview, she said she had not wanted to finish college at age nineteen. However, her family had encouraged her to get on with life, even though “she felt it was a social handicap to be so young in college and certainly wouldn’t recommend it for any child today.”¹⁰ The family’s economic challenges, stemming from life on a not-particularly-prosperous hill farm, made Brown’s early maturity a necessity.

At Peru she wrote for both the newspaper, the *Pedagogian*, and the yearbook, the *Peruvian*. She was also a member of the Everett Literary

Society and Sigma Tau Delta, an international English honor society that the 1926 *Pervuian* described as an “honorary fraternity for those who write.”¹¹ She found time for other activities as well. In 1925 the student body elected her Peru State’s “Representative Woman,” an annual award given to the student “most truly representing the School Spirit.”¹² In an autobiographical sketch later prepared for one of her publishers, she wrote of her college days: “I went out for amateur dramatics and played everything from ‘Jo’ in *Little Women* to ‘Kate’ in *Taming of the Shrew*. I gave my first piano recital, in my first evening dress. I played tennis. . . . Life here was as rich as it had been on my father’s farm.”¹³

Following graduation from Peru in 1927, Brown went to teach high school English and Latin at Steele City, Nebraska, a small town near Fairbury. She was only nineteen. She stayed just one year and followed this assignment with stints at Curtis and Franklin, Nebraska, as well as her alma mater, Auburn High School, where she taught English and dramatics for two-and-a-half years.¹⁴ By July 1931, she had also completed her M.A. in English from the University of Nebraska, with her thesis (the first of her works on Cather) titled *A Critical Study of Willa Cather’s Novels*. All the while she was also reporting “news from the towns in which [she] taught to city newspapers,” particularly the *Omaha World-Herald*, and even writing script for radio stations.¹⁵ In June 1936, she had a substantial article about the benefits of social clubs for freshman at Peru State College published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, an achievement she regarded as an important step in her writing career.¹⁶

Brown was able to gather information for this article because she had returned to Peru by mid-November 1934 as an assistant professor of English and advisor to the college newspaper, the *Pedagogian*.¹⁷ Students evidently liked her. One former pupil said she was a very good teacher, “demanding, but in a nice way.”¹⁸ Another, in a small handwritten note, said, “I thought I had another period to tell you how much I’ve enjoyed Modern Poetry. It has been the very loveliest class I’ve ever had, and I hate so much for it to end.”¹⁹ The *Pedagogian* staff, upon Brown’s imminent departure from the college in December 1937, also wrote: “We admire the fact that husband and home mean more to her than does teaching school, but we will miss her. . . . No one can tell the why of the friendship of English majors for Mrs. Brown. It is just naturally that way.”²⁰ Brown’s departure was precipitated by her marriage to Gilbert S. Brown, an

Brown was born in 1908 in the home of her uncle George Kennedy between Brownville and Peru. Photo by author



Omaha attorney, on June 11, 1937, and she left by the end of the year to establish her home with him.

She was on the way to fulfilling the last of three great objectives. In later years, she would often say or write in a manner similar to the following: "When I was ready to go to college, I knew there were three things I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a wife and mother, I wanted to write, and I wanted to teach. Life has been good to me, for it has granted all three of my wishes and much besides."²¹ Brown became a mother when her only child, Paul, was born in February 1940, and both she and he said that the direction of her writing, for a number of years, coincided with his development.²² Short stories such as "Lighthouse Boy," which deals with a young boy's embarrassment about living in an unusual place, began to appear, this one in *Friends*, a magazine for children nine years and younger. During this time, Brown was submitting stories to a number of children's magazines and Sunday school papers, including *Highlights for Children, Jr. Language and Arts*, and *Light and Life Primary Paper*. Like "Lighthouse Boy," many of these were object lessons about learning from one's mistakes.

Brown's inclination to write for young people, though, did not stem only from her desire to write things Paul might like, even though the dedication to *Young Nathan* states: "TO MY SON for whom it was written."²³ During her years of high school teaching, she saw that plenty of books existed to satisfy the needs of high school students, but found a dearth of material for those in junior high school. For an interview in 1962, she said: "The younger teenagers are a most difficult age group to write for and also the most difficult age to find material for, which is exactly the reason I started writing. I try to tell a good story for that age group . . . and give them something that can have value for them."²⁴ She couched that value in what she regarded as a straightforward style. She did not use specific word lists or devices to keep her books readable and said, "I have tried to keep my style simple enough so the slow readers who have difficulty finding things to read can enjoy them, but I have no method."²⁵

Regardless of Brown's stated reasons, her first book for this audience seemingly came about through a combination of accident and intent. Originally submitted in April 1947 for a contest sponsored by The Westminster Press in Philadelphia, *Young Nathan* had been written as an historical novel with the title *One Life to Give*.²⁶ Gilbert, Brown's husband, whom she described

as a history buff, had suggested the topic because he believed that Nathan Hale had been too long neglected by historians. Brown had finished the manuscript substantially before 1947 but had decided not to submit it for publication during World War II because of its inherent anti-British sentiment.²⁷ Early in August 1947, she received a letter from William Heyliger, a Westminster Press editor, telling her that the book had not been accepted for their Annual Award. However, if it were rewritten he thought it could "be made a very fine fictionalized biography . . . for the older boy and girl," and he was "prepared to give every assistance in making [it] the fine book it can be."²⁸ From then until the book's publication in October 1949, Brown received Heyliger's suggestions for revisions through a long trail of correspondence. She also received his congratulations. When *Young Nathan* was chosen as a Junior Literary Guild Selection (which guaranteed an initial distribution of 10,000 copies), he wrote, "Very seldom does a first book earn this honor."²⁹

Brown followed the success of *Young Nathan* with another fictionalized biography, this time writing about Francis Marion, the American Revolutionary war hero commonly known as the Swamp Fox. His nickname became the title for the book, which, like *Young Nathan*, also received national recognition, earning a Boys' Club of America Book of the Year Award. The book also garnered national attention in another way when Brown, on May 4, 1959, signed a contract with Walt Disney Productions. For \$2,000 Disney Productions gained the "right to make and/or cause to be made motion picture and photoplay versions, sequels or adaptations of every kind and character of and/or based upon said Work."³⁰ Disney's resulting television series starred Leslie Nielsen as Francis Marion and ran from October 1959 to January 1961.³¹

With *The Swamp Fox*, Brown continued her practice of traveling to the locations about which she wrote. To "get her facts straight," she, Gilbert, and Paul traveled to South Carolina in spring 1949, and she and the family had "spent one summer in New England while [she] gathered data about [Nathan] Hale at the Yale Library in New Haven, Connecticut."³² She didn't have to travel far, though, for her next book, a 1953 novel titled *Frontier Beacon*.

This book tells the story of Jud Stuart, whose family established a settlement in the southeast corner of Nebraska Territory in the mid-1850s. Brown said the fictional settlement "Stuart's

Landing” was really Brownville.³³ In addition to drawing on her hometown, the story mirrors events in her father’s and paternal grandfather’s lives. Like Marion’s father, Cassius, Jud Stuart learns the printing trade at an early age, and Jud’s father, like Cassius, dies prematurely of a lung ailment. Like Brown’s grandfather and other Brownville residents, Jud also travels to Colorado during the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush. Notably, *Frontier Beacon* also features images which are rather unique for a novel about Nebraska—a landscape different from the prairie, sea-of-grass vistas found in the works of Bess Streeter Aldrich and Willa Cather. Early in the story, Brown writes:

Jud’s ax rang clear and loud through the forest as he felled trees for the new cabin. Though he still regretted this move to the wilderness, he had begun to feel the challenge of the frontier. His father had made a good choice in this spot. There was a natural stone landing, where their boat, on which they were now living was tied up. Extending back from the river a half mile or so was a level bench of land which was ideal for farming. Beyond it, tree-shrouded hills fanned out as far as the eye could see.³⁴

Brown repeated this kind of imagery when writing about her roots in *Marnie* (1971). Although *Frontier Beacon* and *Prairie Teacher* (1957) draw on facets of Brown’s life or the lives of people she knew, *Marnie* is the most autobiographical. The book’s imagery does not picture distant horizons, the great dome of the sky, or wide-open spaces. It never mentions the “sea of grass” that Great Plains literary scholar Diane Quantic says permeates so much of Great Plains fiction.³⁵ Instead, the book contains passages like this: “[Marnie] was remembering the black walnut trees that had been cut from their grove for lumber. The stumps that were left and the gaping holes in the forest had made her feel sick when she first saw them.” Or this: “In one way [Marnie] hated to think of going to high school, because she would have to stay in town during the week, unable to watch the sunrise peeping over McClusky’s hill or to run headlong down the steep timber paths . . .”³⁶ Although Nebraska is never mentioned as *Marnie*’s setting, some passages undoubtedly arose from Brown’s rural childhood, such as: “Everything seemed beautiful to Marnie as she trotted down the dusty road: the hop vines on fences, dangling their pale-green puffballs like clusters of green grapes, the

dried cornstalks in the fields beyond, golden in the sunlight, their heavy ears hanging head down.”³⁷

Other elements of the novel also reflect Brown’s life. The main character’s name, “Marnie Marston,” seems a transposition of “Marion Marsh.” The novel is dedicated to Brown’s brother, Carl Oliver, and like Brown, Marnie has a younger brother. He, like Carl, is nicknamed “Twist.”³⁸ Just as telling is this passage: “There had been other girls with little brothers, other girls who had gone to country school then to town to high school. There had been other girls who had dreamed of going to college and of becoming writers. But never another Marnie Marston.”³⁹ As Brown would later say about this character, “I knew how she felt.” Accordingly, Brown called *Marnie* “probably the best thing I’ve done.”⁴⁰

By the time *Marnie* was published, Brown had ended her full-time teaching career. After leaving Peru for Omaha, in the late 1940s she began teaching adult education courses for the Omaha Public Schools but did not want a full-time job then. In 1954, she joined the English Department at the Municipal University of Omaha. As with the writing of *Young Nathan*, her husband seems to have influenced the decision. In a 1987 interview, Brown said that Gilbert thought she would be happier if she were still teaching and had asked if she wanted “to get into the University.”⁴¹ During her years at the Omaha campus, she taught such courses as Freshman English and Creative Writing and eventually became supervisor of student teachers in English. With a thirteen-week course on “fundamental English techniques,” she also became one of the University’s early faculty members to teach a course on television.⁴² With the publication of *Learning Words in Context: A Workbook for Vocabulary Building*, which she used in her teaching after 1961, she combined her teaching and writing careers. In 1968, though, she decided to focus solely on her writing and retired at the age of fifty-nine. She said, “Dr. [Ralph] Wardle [the English Department chair] was utterly amazed when I said to him that spring day, ‘I’m going to quit.’” She said her decision sprang from the facts that she had seen her son, Paul, through law school, that she didn’t need the money, and that she wanted to spend more time writing. She said, “I’ve retired from teaching, but I’ll never retire from writing.”⁴³

Brown could not abandon, though, her fondness for sharing knowledge and experience with young people. By 1974, she, in collaboration with her



In 1925 the student body elected Marion Marsh as Peru State's "Representative Woman," an annual award given to the student "most truly representing the School Spirit." The Peruvian of Nineteen Hundred and Twenty Five, Vol. 18, 138.

Marion Marsh taught high school English, Latin, and dramatics in Nebraska high schools for several years before joining the Peru State College faculty.



This odd angle camera shot, above left, shows future teachers getting brushed up on English in Miss Marion Marsh's classroom.

cousin's wife, Ruth Kennedy, had restored the District 17 schoolhouse she had attended as a girl. The building had opened for classes in November 1870 but came into the hands of the Kennedy family in 1948 after land on which it sat was no longer used for a schoolhouse site.⁴⁴ Brown and Kennedy began inviting grade school children from area schools and even from Omaha to experience a day of country school, a day which included writing on slates, gunny-sack races, the bucket brigade game, popcorn balls, homemade cider and the like. Judging from some of the many thank-you letters Brown received from students, the day was often a unique experience. An Omaha girl wrote, "Thank you for letting us spend a day in your old schoolhouse. It was really [sic] neat. . . . It was a lot different from regular school. I haven't ever seen anything like it."⁴⁵ Another student wrote, "Thank you for letting us come. . . . We had lots of fun, the best one I like is doing math on the slacs [sic]. . . . I will remember this lovely [sic] trip on till I'm 20 years old."⁴⁶ Not all students from urban areas could spend a day at the school, though, and Brown wrote a spiral-bound book titled *Little Schoolhouse on the Prairie* which was published by Omaha Public Schools and used in their curricula for eighth-graders in the mid-1970s.⁴⁷ Primarily a compilation of diary entries by a fictional teacher named Nettie Edwards, the book's intent was expressed by Brown in the foreword:

Early Nebraska school children experienced many hardships: blizzards howling across the wind-swept prairie as pupils trudged homeward; the lack of modern plumbing facilities; textbooks that were meager, dull, and prosaic.

Early Nebraska school children experienced many joys: the camaraderie of learning from

one another; the excitement of cutting their own Christmas tree; the ecstasy of seeing wild geese in flight; or of finding the first tender crocus in the spring.

This blend of hardship and joy combined to make sturdy but compassionate stock of pioneer Nebraska school children.⁴⁸

During and after the 1970s, Brown turned more and more to writing about Nebraska subjects. With Ruth Crone she co-authored *Willa Cather: The Woman and Her Works* (1970), followed in 1971 by the aforementioned *Marnie*. Brown then wrote about her hometown in *The Brownville Story: Portrait of a Phoenix, 1854-1974*, published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1974. She co-authored another biography with Crone, *Only One Point of the Compass: Willa Cather in the Northeast* (1980), and wrote *Homeward the Arrow's Flight* (1980), a fictionalized biography of Susan La Flesche Picotte, the first Native American to become a medical doctor. These books were followed by two other fictionalized biographies: *Dreamcatcher: The Life of John Neihardt* (1983) and *Susette La Flesche: Advocate for Native American Rights* (1992).

The Cather books were in some ways a departure from Brown's earlier work, but in other ways a reconnection. She intended both books for adult readers, but returned to subject matter that had interested her for years. She had been in her early twenties when she completed her master's thesis on Cather and had given numerous talks about Cather to Peru State gatherings and other audiences over the years. Brown also returned to collaborating with Ruth Crone, a student of hers at Peru in the 1930s, and a woman with whom she had co-written *The Silent Storm* (1963). A fictionalized biography, this book tells the story of Anne Sullivan Macy, the woman who helped Helen Keller learn to communicate. It is also a book which apparently helped bring Brown out of a temporary "writing slump" following her husband's death in January 1960. She said that she had been searching for new material and had appealed to Crone, who as a child had "read everything in the Beatrice Public Library on Helen Keller" and who obliged her by suggesting this topic.⁴⁹

Brown believed that both Cather books were groundbreaking. With the first, she particularly noted the manner in which research for the book had been done, and with the second she mentioned the book's focus on Cather's residences

in the Northeast, an emphasis which she said had not been explored before.⁵⁰ Of the first book, she said, “This approach is different in that we have based it on personal interviews and letters from people who knew Cather in her lifetime,”⁵¹ and she noted the “widely differing views” of Cather that she and Crone had uncovered.⁵² Crone’s research, for example, took her to Red Cloud to interview Carrie Miner Sherwood, one of Cather’s girlhood friends, as well as to New York City to speak with Edith Lewis, Cather’s longtime companion. For her part, Brown traveled as far as Gstaad, Switzerland, for a “most memorable” interview with world-renowned violinist and Cather friend Yehudi Menuhin at his summer mountain chalet.⁵³ Although both Brown and Crone gathered information for the book for about three to four years and traveled “to every area where Cather lived and worked,” Brown credited Crone for the “major part of the research.”⁵⁴ Over the years Crone had saved literally “everything written about . . . Cather” that she had found, according to Brown.⁵⁵

Their collaboration, although fruitful, did not produce exactly what the two had desired for the first book. They faced the difficulties of working with three different editors, and the resulting book was much shorter and directed toward a younger audience than they had intended. They wanted to call it *The Many Faces of Willa Cather*, and Crone said they had wanted to make the book a “compact and quite comprehensive” biography which would give readers a “solid grasp of Cather and her works.” The difficulties began when their editor left Charles Scribner’s Sons. Crone said this woman was as good as any editor with whom she had ever worked and that she had done a “splendid job” with their manuscript. However, the second editor had different plans. He wanted to make the book part of a series about famous women intended for younger readers, which it became.⁵⁶

During this period from the 1970s on, Brown published the only nonfiction history book she ever wrote, *The Brownville Story*, and all of her fictionalized biographies about Nebraska people. For four of these five books, she drew extensively on the resources of the Nebraska State Historical Society (today’s History Nebraska). Of writing of *The Brownville Story* in the early 1970s, Brown said, “I went to Lincoln with my little electric typewriter and sat in the Historical Society’s building basically full time for two years going through materials.”⁵⁷ This book, which Brown intended for the general reader rather than professional historians, chronicles the rise and fall and rise

again of this southeast Nebraska village, which produced some of Nebraska’s notable firsts. These include the state’s first telegraph reception and transmission and its better-known granting of the first Homestead Act claim to Daniel Freeman on January 1, 1863. Although the book focuses on Brownville’s meteoric years—from 1854 until the early 1870s when residents finally failed to get a railroad built—it also takes readers to the 1970s, which saw Brownville’s rebirth as a haven for artists, artisans, and musicians.

About five years after completing *The Brownville Story*, Brown returned to the State Historical Society to gather information for her fictionalized biography of Susan La Flesche Picotte. Likewise, she did the same for her later book on Dr. Picotte’s sister, Susette La Flesche Tibbles. She also wrote a fictionalized biography of Sacagawea and said, “I’ve always had a great sympathy for the Indian cause.”⁵⁸ For the book on Picotte, which appears to have been the first one written about this groundbreaking Native American doctor, Brown drew primarily from papers donated to the State Historical Society by one of Picotte’s sons.⁵⁹ Fortunately, they included a number of letters Picotte had written home when she was a teenage girl attending school in the East. Brown used these to recreate what she saw as Picotte’s courage and ever-present inquisitiveness but also the loneliness and cultural ambiguity she sometimes felt. In

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Marion Marsh Brown in her study, undated.



Brown with her son, Paul.



typical fashion, Brown also traveled to the Omaha Reservation in northeast Nebraska and to Bancroft to see the La Flesche family's cemetery plot and to copy information from tombstones there.⁶⁰ Her book's title, *Homeward the Arrow's Flight*, stems from the fact that Flesche is the French word "flesche," meaning arrow. As Picotte's father, Iron Eye, says in the book, an arrow goes "straight and true—and often far—to its mark," which Brown believed Picotte did in her life.⁶¹

Although Brown wrote about both Susan and Susette, she evidently found Susan a more satisfying subject. She told an interviewer in 1980, "Because Susette's means were more flamboyant [possibly referencing Susette's notoriety because of the Standing Bear trial], Susan's efforts are unknown to many." However, Brown said, Susan "had an absolute determination to spend her life caring for her people.... She certainly did work both ends of the clock and everything in between,"⁶² a reference to Picotte's dedication to caring for the more than 1,300 Omaha people living on the reservation during the time she practiced there. For Brown, writing about Susette was more of a challenge. When she submitted the manuscript to Mary Reidy, her Children's Press editor, she wrote about being disappointed that Susette was "not the letter writer that Susan was." She also seemed to imply some disappointment with the manuscript. She said, "I hope it pleases you. Frankly, I found Susette a less interesting character than Susan."⁶³

Though Brown may have been disappointed with her book on Susette, which was one of her last two, she was not disappointed with her career. For a 1995 interview, she said: "I'm proud of the response I've had from my readers. They seem to have gotten out of my books what I wanted them to get. There are basic values in [them]. When [readers] see them, it does you good."⁶⁴ For Brown, those values included "courage in one form or another," or "the meaning of the freedom we... take for granted. Someone had to struggle for these things, and I try to explain this in my books."⁶⁵ As her career progressed, she was aware that many people, editors and publishers included, considered her old-fashioned, but she chafed at suggestions that she needed to write differently. For an interview in 1976, she said, "A girl in a story can't do just girl things and a boy can't do just boy things. They must all do things equally. I haven't changed my approach and don't intend to." She said she would rather go unpublished than bow to an editor who would distort her values.⁶⁶ Here, Brown was responding to a manuscript's rejection because the publisher wanted stories about independent women and wanted to get away from storylines, like hers, in which the heroine gets engaged at the end.⁶⁷ For Brown, the hundreds of letters she received from students who could relate to her books or to the message in one of her talks or readings attest to the kind of audience appreciation she sought. A Nebraska City youngster, for example, wrote, "Today our teacher... finished reading to us your book Marnie. We liked it so much that we decided to write you. It is very interesting to me because I live on a farm, go to a country school, and have two little brothers."⁶⁸ Another letter expressed another facet of this appreciation. Written by a teacher, it said: "We certainly enjoyed your talk; our students never had an opportunity to meet an author.... I think one of my students summarized this very nicely on the way home that Saturday. Doug (who is 16) commented, 'You know, she was a regular person.... I could understand what she was talking about.'"⁶⁹

Brown continued writing through the last decade of her life. She was eighty-four when her book about Susette La Flesche was published in 1992, and she later submitted a manuscript about Pomp, Sacagawea's son, which was rejected for publication in September 1998 by the University of California Press.⁷⁰ During this same period, she also had surgery to implant artificial knuckles (calling them her "falsies") in her right hand, followed by


five months of healing and rehab. Rheumatoid arthritis had made using a keyboard extremely painful, and she wanted to be able to work on her manuscripts.⁷¹ Her selection as the Nebraska Humanities Council Sower Award recipient in 1994 must have been a welcome recognition during this time, as were earlier selections by the Nebraska Library Association for the Mari Sandoz Award and the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English, which named her one of Nebraska's ten most important writers in the late 1950s.⁷²

Although she primarily wrote for young people for five decades, she believed that she wrote for wider audiences as well. She often said her books were for "young people from the ages of nine to 90" and that they could be appreciated by adults as well as teenagers. Certainly, with the scores of articles she wrote for magazines and newspapers, she was writing for adults and writing on a variety of subjects. Her articles not only appeared in the *Omaha World-Herald's* weekend magazines but also in other publications such as *Mexican World*. They featured titles such as *Viva La Mexico!*, *How to Feel at Home in the Orient*; *People Watching*, *Japanese Style*; and *Bagpipes Issue Call to Dinner at Banff*—testaments to Brown's love of travel.

Brown died in February 2001 at the age of ninety-two. Though none of her books is still

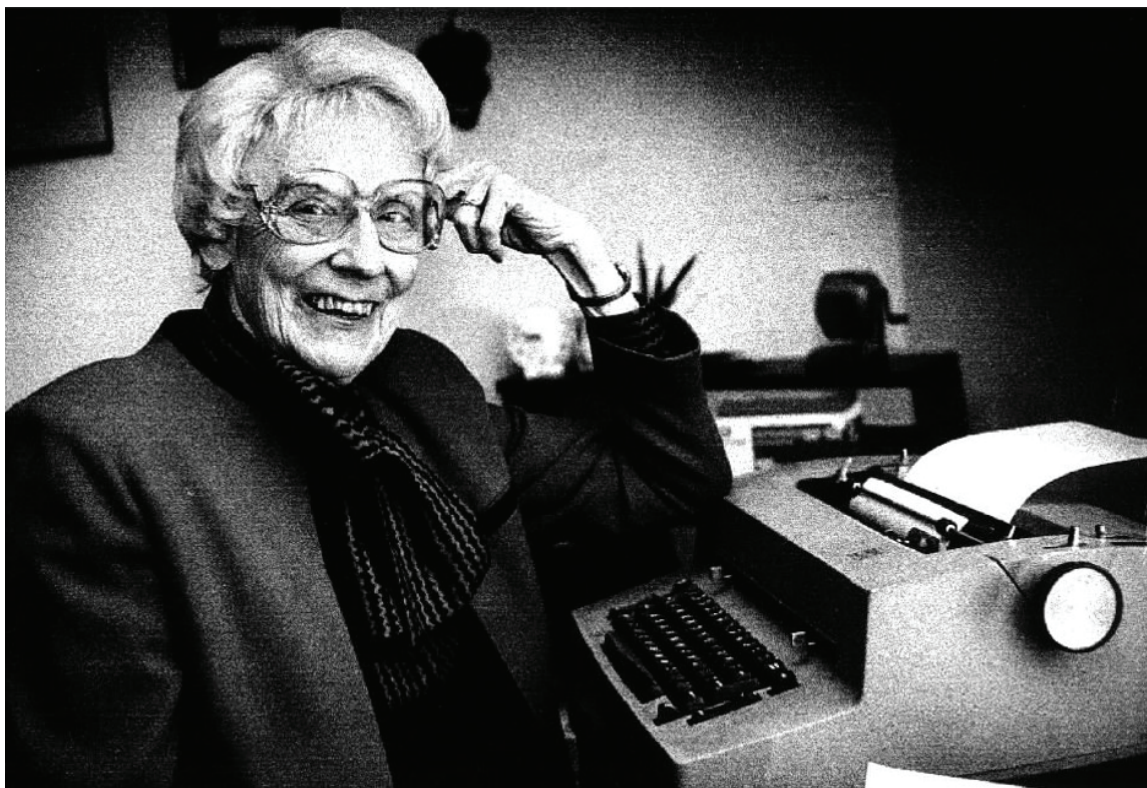
in print, they can be purchased through online booksellers, including Amazon and eBay. They can also be found in many public libraries across the state. In February 2017, Peru State College continued to recognize Brown with a student-led presentation about her life and works, which was part of the college's yearlong series of Sesquicentennial events.⁷³

Brown left a legacy for Nebraska and beyond. She spent many years teaching and guest-speaking in Nebraska's elementary and secondary schools (she once said, "I've probably been in every school in Omaha"⁷⁴) as well as institutions of higher education, and was dedicated to writing about national historic figures and notable Nebraskans, including Native Americans and Nebraska writers.

She wrote primarily because she saw a need for more and better books for teenagers, but also because she admired and was intrigued by Nebraska writers, because she believed Native Americans had been treated unjustly, because she wanted to recreate the stories of pioneering and settlement in the plains, and simply because she loved to write. She said in a 1992 interview, "The composing—I love the words and the way they come together as of their own volition. It's fun."⁷⁵ In writing for a lifetime, Brown created a notable body of work as well as a notable life. 



Marion Marsh Brown and Ruth Kennedy had restored the District 17 schoolhouse she had attended as a girl. Brown and Kennedy began inviting grade school children to experience a day of country school, receiving many thank-you letters and drawings from students.



Marion Marsh Brown in 1988.

NOTES

- ¹ *A History of Nemaha County* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1987), 196; "Sudden Death," *The Granger*, Feb., 2, 1915, 1.
- ² *Baby Dear: A Chronicle of Baby's First Year*, 6. This is the baby book of Marion Marsh Brown in the personal collection of her son, Paul M. Brown of Omaha. In this source her first name is spelled Marian. A "Marsh Family Group Genealogy," compiled by Alice D. Dudley, indicates that Brown changed the spelling of her first name to please her maternal grandfather, Francis Marion Hairgrove, whose middle name was spelled with an "o."
- ³ Untitled video recording (hereafter called PSC video) of a lecture about her life and writing that Brown gave at Peru State College on January 17, 1983. The video is available in the Peru State Library.
- ⁴ "Cassius Marsh Was Early Day Newspaper Man," *Nemaha County Herald*, Mar. 21, 1924, 1; "Former Peru Woman Buried at Brownville," *Auburn Press Tribune*, Oct. 19, 1965, 1; PSC video.
- ⁵ Richard D. Brown, "Marion Marsh Brown has 19th book published since Book of the Month in '49," *Metro Monthly*, June 1992, 20; PSC video.
- ⁶ *Reflections in time: Marion Brown*, KYNE-TV, 1987, videocassette. This story was serialized in eight consecutive issues of *Trailblazer for Juniors* from Jan. 14 through March 5, 1951.
- ⁷ "Novelist: Mrs. Brown's Husband Suggested Book Topic," *Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, Oct. 9, 1949, C16.
- ⁸ Rhonda Stansberry, "Author, Author: Omaha Woman Devotes Life to Writing," *Sunday World-Herald*, Feb. 19, 1995, E4.
- ⁹ Jenevie H. Marsh, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, Feb. 19, 1953.
- ¹⁰ Jan McMullen, "An Interview with Marion Marsh Brown," (unpublished paper), Fall 1984, 2.
- ¹¹ *The 1926 Peruvian*, Vol. 19, 150.
- ¹² *The Peruvian of Nineteen Hundred and Twenty Five*, Vol. 18, 138.
- ¹³ Marion Marsh Brown, "Autobiographical Sketch of Marion Marsh Brown (Mrs. Gilbert S. Brown)," July 1966, 2. This was prepared for *Young Wings*, a monthly magazine for subscribers to *Junior Literary Guild*.
- ¹⁴ *Scarlet and Green 1929*, Vol. 26, (Auburn, NE: Herald Print), 65.
- ¹⁵ Brown, "Autobiographical Sketch," 2.
- ¹⁶ Marion Marsh Brown, "Clubs for College Freshmen: Jolly Get-to-Gether Ways of Enjoying Leisure," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 2, 1936.
- ¹⁷ "Miss Marsh Is New Instructor," *Peru Pedagogian*, Oct. 23, 1934, 1.
- ¹⁸ Louise Shires, interview by author, Oct. 10, 2000.
- ¹⁹ "Dear Miss Marsh," a handwritten note from a student named Majorie in the Marion Marsh Brown Collection at the Peru State College Library. Brown donated the bulk of her personal papers to Peru State in April 1980 and added materials after that. The collection contains all, or at least one of these, of the following items—first and final drafts, galley proofs, outlines, or research notes—for all but three of her books.
- ²⁰ "Mrs. Gilbert Brown," *Peru Pedagogian*, Nov. 16, 1937, 2.
- ²¹ "Brown, Marion Marsh 1908 -," *Something about the Author*, 36. This is one page which has been removed from its published source and put into the "Marion Marsh Brown Agreement Articles," envelope in the Marion Marsh Brown Collection.
- ²² Paul M. Brown, interview by author, Sept. 12, 2000.
- ²³ Marion March Brown, *Young Nathan*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949).
- ²⁴ Jane Ely, "Young Teenage Reader Is Her Market: Marion (Mrs. Gilbert) Brown Writes Stories with a Meaning," *Benson Sun*, April 12, 1962, 72.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Olga Edmond, postcard to Marion Marsh Brown, April 11, 1947.
- ²⁷ "Her First Novel Hits the Jackpot," *The Douglas County Legionnaire*, Oct. 6, 1949, 7.
- ²⁸ William Heyliger, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, Aug. 8, 1947.
- ²⁹ William Heyliger, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, July 27, 1948.
- ³⁰ *Swamp Fox Contract*, between Marion Marsh Brown and Walt Disney Productions: 2400 West Alameda Avenue; Burbank, California, May 4, 1959.
- ³¹ "The Magical World of Disney (1954-1991): The Swamp Fox: The Birth of the Swamp Fox," IMDb TV, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0561211/>.
- ³² "Novelist: Mrs. Brown's Husband Suggested," C 6.
- ³³ PSC Video.
- ³⁴ Marion Marsh Brown, *Frontier Beacon*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 13-14.
- ³⁵ Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 157.
- ³⁶ Marion Marsh Brown, *Marnie*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 35, 147.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127-28.
- ³⁸ Stansberry, "Author, Author," E1.
- ³⁹ Brown, *Marnie*, 148.
- ⁴⁰ *Reflections in time*.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² "Omaha Authoress Is Hit with 'Forgotten Teenagers,'" *Benson Sun*. Information in this article indicates that it was published in the fall of 1958. However, the date and page number are missing from the source, which the author found in Paul Brown's collection.

⁴³ *Reflections in time.*

⁴⁴ Marion Marsh Brown, "The Ragged Beggar Gets a Facelift," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands*, May 5, 1974, 11.

⁴⁵ Jeanie Offenburger, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, Oct. 14, 1975.

⁴⁶ Susan Beam, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, Oct. 14, 1975.

⁴⁷ Ruth Crone. "MMB Vita," Oct. 27, 1998, 3. This material was used to nominate Brown for an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

⁴⁸ Marion Marsh Brown, "Foreword," *Little Schoolhouse on the Prairie*, (Omaha Public Schools, 1975-76), n.p.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Flynn, "'Storm' a-Brewing 2½ Years for Co-Authors of New Book," *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter abbreviated as *OWH*), July 28, 1963, E1.

⁵⁰ Diana Failla, "Former UNO professor writes of Cather's life and Indian's story," *The Gateway*, Sept. 26, 1980, 3.

⁵¹ "O.U. Professor Pens Cather Book," *North Omaha Sun*, Dec. 28, 1967, 6.

⁵² Robert McMorris, "Discovered by New Generations: Pages Don't Fade in Omahan's Books," *OWH*, 14. The date is missing from this source in the Marion Marsh Brown Collection, but information in the article indicates that it was published in 1973.

⁵³ Frances McCoy, "They Followed Long Trail to Write Cather Book," *Sunday World-Herald*, Oct. 11, 1970, E6.

⁵⁴ "O.U. Professor Pens," 6.

⁵⁵ McCoy, E6.

⁵⁶ Ruth Crone, telephone interview by author, Dec. 18, 2000.

⁵⁷ Richard D. Brown, 20.

⁵⁸ Mary A. Heng, "Author Successfully Merges Family, Career: Marion Marsh Brown Satisfied With Her Life," *OWH*, March 11, 1992, *Metro Extra* 1.

⁵⁹ *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche*, by Norma Kidd Green, sponsored by the Nebraska State Historical Society and published in 1969—has a chapter about Susan La Flesche Picotte and her sister Marguerite. Brown's book, though, is the first full-length work about Picotte that I have been able to identify.

⁶⁰ Failla, "Former UNO professor writes," 3.

⁶¹ Marion Marsh Brown, *Homeward the Arrow's Flight*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 1.

⁶² David Krajicek, "Author Tells Little-Known Story of First Indian Woman Doctor," *OWH Morning Edition*, Aug. 26, 1980, 4.

⁶³ Marion Marsh Brown, undated letter to Mary Reidy in the "Susette and Her Sisters Correspondence" envelope in the Marion Marsh Brown Collection.

⁶⁴ Stansberry, "Author, Author," E1.

⁶⁵ Judy Bradley, "A Writer Sharpens Tools: Research Takes Her from Swamp to Alps," *The Gateway*, April 15, 1966, 3; Ely, "Young Teenage Reader," 72.

⁶⁶ Robert McMorris, "Publisher Rejects Happy Ending," *OWH*, April 23, 1976, 2.

⁶⁷ Brown took the "traditional" path of marrying and having a son, but she was in many ways an independent woman. She, for example, always served as her own literary agent. Like Susan La Flesche Picotte, whom she greatly admired, she did not marry until she was in her late 20s; she pursued a demanding career outside her responsibilities as a wife and mother; and she knew in her elementary-school years the kind of career she wanted to pursue.

⁶⁸ Letter to Marion Marsh Brown by student from country school, R.R. 2, near Nebraska City, March 23, 1976.

⁶⁹ Cecilia Hall, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, April 16, 1974.

⁷⁰ Daniel Poeder, letter to Marion Marsh Brown, Sept. 1, 1998.

⁷¹ Stansberry, "Author, Author," E1.

⁷² Humanities Nebraska, "Sower Award in the Humanities," Dec. 10, 2018, <http://humanitiesnebraska.org/about-us/about-us.html#stq=&stp=0>. This annual award honors an individual who has made a significant contribution to the public understanding of the humanities in Nebraska. Nebraska Library Association, "Nominations are open for . . . the Mari Sandoz Award," Dec. 11, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/NebLibraries/posts/10155226017145388>. This annual award recognizes significant, enduring contribution to the Nebraska book world through writing, film production or related activity.

⁷³ Like the state of Nebraska, Peru State College, which is Nebraska's oldest higher-education institution, celebrated its Sesquicentennial in 2017.

⁷⁴ Richard D. Brown, 20.

⁷⁵ Heng, 1.