

Someone said they'd heard we were in jail. And yes, we said, it was true. Devil's Island, the Chateau D'If, Dannemora and it's cold, hard walls, the pitiless cliffs of Sing-Sing. . . . None were strangers to us now.

And more, they insisted, tell us more. So we did. Safe on the domesticated sands of Tyler State Park, back among the familiar pines and chokeberry bushes of East Texas, we rambled on and on about forbidden pleasures and riotous nights, about this and that and such and so and a thousand other things.

The silly, inconsequential business of the football scholarships never even came up.

MELODY GRAULICH

Gettin' Hitched in the West

In "Just Married," a chapter from *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrlich describes the "complimentary 'Care Package,'" she and her husband were given at the Wyoming county courthouse where they were married. It is "a Pandora's box of grotesqueries: Midol, Kotex, disposable razors, shaving cream, a bar of soap—a summing up," she supposes, "of what in a marriage we could look forward to: blood, pain, unwanted hair, headaches, and dirt" (87). But in reality her marriage brings her quite a different kind of caring: "'Here's to the end of loneliness,' I toasted quietly, not believing such a thing could come true. But it did and nothing prepared me for the sense of peace I felt—of love gone deep into a friendship" (87).

Later in *Solace*, Ehrlich visits a Sun Dance, and the contrast between Anglo and Plains Indian cultures leads her to a speculation which helps explain why she was so unprepared for the peace and happiness marriage brought her. "We live in a culture that has lost its memory," she says. "Very little in the specific shapes and traditions of our grandparents' pasts instructs us how to live today, or tells us who we are or what demands will be made on us as members of society" (103). And yet Ehrlich might have discovered the "shape" of her marriage in the work of her literary grandparents, in the Western literary tradition. In another Wyoming love story that turns out even "better than . . . dreams," Owen Wister's Virginian finds peace and communion during his mountain honeymoon with Molly: "He never would have guessed so much had been stored away in him, unexpressed till now" (308, 312). Or Ehrlich might have remembered another Wyoming writer, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, who describes herself in a chapter called "The Homesteader's Wedding" as marrying a "good man" and as "one who is truly happy" (184, 191).

So one of the solaces of the open spaces of the West is sharing them with someone you love. Not all Western writers present marriage so positively; instead of communion, some find the "blood, pain . . . headaches

and dirt" Ehrlich initially associates with marriage. Yet whether presented as "the end to loneliness" or the beginning of a lifelong headache, marriage has always engaged Wyoming—and other Western—writers, including, for instance, Hamlin Garland, Gertrude Atherton, Mary Hallock Foote, Frank Norris, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, O. E. Rølvaag, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Dorothy Scarborough, John Steinbeck, Zane Grey, Mari Sandoz, Jack Schaeffer, Vardis Fisher, A. B. Guthrie, N. Scott Momaday, Ivan Doig, Jeannie Watkins and James Houston, Louise Erdrich, and many others.

Of course, marriage—as theme and as narrative device—pervades literary history, from *Arabian Nights* to Shakespeare, Jane Austen to *Anna Karenina*. Yet critics of Western American literature have focused on the lone male who resists ties to women and civilization to wander off into the wilderness, overlooking—to use a mild word—the centrality of relations between women and men in Western literary history. One of the few writers to call our attention to this tradition is Wallace Stegner who describes in "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" a theme he calls "pervasive" and "inescapable," "as inextricable from Western writing as the theme of color is inextricable from the literature of the South," the interplay between "the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman," a theme he sees as originating in Western writers' interest in their parents' marriages (195-96):

Long before I had heard this theme stated, and before I knew enough western literature to state it myself, I had put it into Bo and Elsa Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Almost every writer who has dealt with family stresses on the frontier has found it in his hands because he probably grew up with it in his own family. Male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed. (195)

The roving man and civilizing woman are stereotypes in Western literature, and Stegner's use of the word "versus" suggests how their values have often been presented as in essential conflict; Jane Tompkins refers to such conflict as "literary gender wars" (42). In the version of Western history suggested by Western mythology, either one side or the other lays claim to the West, to its past, to its future. Huck Finn heads for the territories to escape those civilizing women; Scratchy puts away his guns when the bride comes to Yellow Sky. And hundreds of voices mourn the loss of the frontier.

Many Western writers and critics have privileged one set of values over the other, but Stegner grants them equality by calling them "the legitimate inclinations of the sexes" ("History, Myth, and the Western Writer," 195, my emphasis). I argue—and I think he would too—that it is the

wedding of these opposing themes and values that characterizes Western literature and history; marriages do not represent a crossing of class boundaries or a defiance of familial expectations, as they often do in British novels, for instance, but an effort to braid together apparently antagonistic elements of Western history. Unlike Ehrlich, Stegner has not lost touch with the past, with what he calls the "guides to conduct that a tradition offers," as some of his comments about writers he admires imply. In "The West Authentic: Willa Cather," he describes Cather's view of Western history as symbolically akin to his own:

It is as if Miss Cather conceived the settlement of her country as a marriage between a simple, fresh, hopeful young girl and a charming, worldly, but older man. ("Three Samples" 239)

Stegner's interest in marriage, therefore, is wedded to his understanding of a Western literary tradition. Although the narrator of Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, Lyman Ward, a Western historian, initially believes he is "not writing a book of western history . . . [but] about something else. A marriage, I guess," he and his readers come to understand that in writing about his grandparents' marriage, he writes the kind of revisionary Western history his creator believes is necessary to reinterpret the past and connect it to the present, to challenge the myths Stegner claims the West "has already relied on . . . too long" ("Born a Square" 183).

Stegner directs our attention to a fundamental dualism in Western literature, best captured in treatments of marriage: the West is characterized by a merger of two sets of contradictory impulses, defined by their opposites, externalized in female and male character. Western literary marriages suggest that we must move beyond binary, polarized thinking about this pattern; only when these apparent contradictions are brought into relationship can we see the whole. Like the West, marriage may be the frontier where a synthesis can take place between women's and men's opposing needs, dreams, desires, and values—or it may be the territory where the "legitimate inclinations of the sexes" remain permanently at odds. Stegner symbolically explores this question when Lyman Ward envisions his grandparents as parallel lines that never intersect, never "touch each other," but eventually sees them as coming together in an "arch." *Angle of Repose* closes with Lyman—and Stegner—still looking for the keystone to that arch. Much of my own work on Western literature has been in search of that arch, the rainbow bridge between women and men.

Revisionist Western historians share Stegner's view that an understanding of marriage is central to understanding Western history; to quote just one example, John Mack Faragher suggests that

Despite the vitality of such frontier themes as violence and rowdyism, Indians and mountain men, freedom and the open life, the dominating social motif of the nineteenth-century West was the homestead: a . . . farm . . . sustained by a husband, wife, and children. (144)

Yet in his role as literary critic, Stegner is unusual in placing the enduring relationships between women and men at the center of a Western literary tradition—and he is particularly unusual in granting women's concerns equal legitimacy. Why, to return to Ehrlich, have we lost our memory about this literary tradition? Why haven't critics seen what Stephen Crane's none-too-bright sheriff from "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" recognizes: "that his marriage was an important thing to his [Western] town" (281)?

Faragher's comment suggests one answer: one of the most cherished myths in American studies is the story of the self-reliant rebel who escapes civilization and heads West to find the freedom from authority and tradition that Turner and many others associated with the frontier. Trailblazing cultural historians like Bernard De Voto, Henry Nash Smith, and Leslie Fiedler explored America's "collective fantasy": the obsession with the lone male, the rugged individualist who rejects society's conformity, constrictions, and capitulations for a quest in nature in search of his identity and moral values. As Nina Baym and others have argued, women appear in this myth primarily as antagonists to the story's implicit values, as obstacles to the male hero's freedom, the hypocritical, repressive Miss Watsons who force Huck to wear shoes and go to school, or, as Annette Kolodny has shown in the aptly titled *The Lay of the Land*, as sexual territories to penetrate. Until recently this myth has dominated interpretive paradigms for understanding Western literature, its presence so powerful that even feminist critics must grapple with it, asking questions like "Did the West liberate women" and mournfully—and too simplistically—answering "No." In her wonderful satiric exploration of Western myths and stereotypes, *The Mountain Lion*, Jean Stafford mocks the myth's inescapable influence on our imaginations by having her young male protagonist interpret an American anthem as "O Beautiful for Spacious Guys" (32).

A revisionary look at "Rip Van Winkle," the literary progenitor of Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, Deadeye Dick, Lassiter, Shane, and Clint Eastwood suggests that only half of the story has been told. In "The Return of Mr. Wills," from *Lost Borders* (1909), Mary Austin revises from a woman's point of view that classic story of the lone male's escape into the wilderness, a story that begins with a portrait of a marriage. Austin focuses on how the actions of the wanderer affect his family. Mr.

Wills is initially a likeable enough fellow, a Western dreamer, but his obsession with searching for lost mines, the female narrator comments, is "the baldest of excuses merely to be out and away from everything that savored of definiteness and responsibility" (54). His family, like Rip's, suffers, and his wife becomes "hopeless." Finally, like Rip, he disappears.

Instead of following Mr. Wills into the wilderness, Austin stays with Mrs. Wills in the small Western town of Maverick. Having "lived so long with the tradition that a husband is a natural provider," she at first feels abandoned, but she soon discovers that she and her children can support themselves and realizes that "she not only did not need Mr. Wills, but got on better without him" (54). She feels a "new sense of independence and power" (54).

Unfortunately, Mr. Wills does not stay away for twenty years but returns, settling on his family "like a blight," announcing "There's no place like home' . . . or something to that effect" (55, 56). Yet the story ends with a covert expression of Mrs. Wills's new-found independence when she happily realizes that her husband will inevitably wander off again, perhaps forever. While "Rip Van Winkle" implies that wives inhibit men's freedom and repress their characters, "The Return of Mr. Wills" asserts that husbands inhibit women's independence and stifle their growth. If "The Return of Mr. Wills" were accepted as an archetypal expression of the relations between the sexes, as "Rip Van Winkle" has been, then men as well as women would be forced to acknowledge their role as antagonists and obstacles to others. In 1918, Austin argued that "Civilization as we now have it is one-eyed and one handed. It is kept going by man's way of seeing things, and man's way of dealing with the things he sees. . . . What women have to stand on squarely [is] not their ability to see the world in the way men see it, but the importance and validity of their seeing it in some other way" (*The Young Woman Citizen* 17-19). Wedded together, these two treatments of the consequences of marriage give us a literary tradition with two eyes and two hands—and a new look at old traditions.

As I have just done in talking about Irving and Austin, critics of Western literature have tended to focus on men's or women's literature about the West, seeing them responding to each other but never really meeting. For example, in *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins argues that the "Western answers the domestic novel [written by women]. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture" (39). Responding to the dominance of the myth of the lone male Westerner, Annette Kolodny and many historians have argued that women writers create the West as "a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity," as a "new home" (*The Land Before Her* xiii). Yet I believe that women writers like Mary Hallock Foote, Austin, Stewart, and Ehrlich

are attracted simultaneously to what Austin radically defined as central to Western history, "the happenings of the hearth," and to the liberating possibilities of the Western landscape. And male writers like Hamlin Garland and Stegner have sought "homes" in the West, have claimed the importance of their mother's lives and contributions. Like Lyman Ward's grandparents, the polarized themes do intersect *within* many Western works; many writers have discovered that an exploration of marriage is a way to bring women's and men's concerns into relationship with each other, to achieve the kind of synthesis of the history of both women's and men's cultures historians like Gerda Lerner have argued will yield a truly universal history—or mythology. As David Potter suggested as early as 1962,

many of our social generalizations which are stated sweepingly to cover the entire society are in fact based on the masculine population . . . [I]f we took the feminine population into account, the generalization might have to be qualified, or even run in an entirely different direction" (319). Potter begins his critique of such historical generalizations with "Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis." (319)

As my discussion of "The Return of Mr. Wills" has already demonstrated, Potter is certainly right that Western generalizations would look quite different from a woman's point of view. One of the most persistent themes in Western women's literature about marriage, for instance, provides a new view of one of the most discussed themes in Western men's literature: violence. As Richard Slotkin—and many, many others—have suggested, the Western hero often achieves "regeneration through violence." When women characters like Molly Wood or Jane Witherspoon oppose this violence, they are told they don't adequately understand "how it must be about a man" (*The Virginian* 298).

Yet even a quick look at Western women's literature reveals an unexplored consequence of the Western male's obsession with violence: that women are often the victims of the West's celebrated freedom. Eliza Farnham, Agnes Cleaveland, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Agnes Smedley, Mari Sandoz, Meridel Le Sueur, Janet Campbell Hale, and Tillie Olsen suggest the widespread physical and emotional abuse of pioneer women, abuse Sandoz sarcastically calls "every husband's right" (412). "Somebody must say these things," writes Austin, recalling how a friend came in the night "with a great bloody bruise on her face" and describing "the unwiped tears of [her] mother's face while the two women kept up between them the pretense of a blameless accident" (*Earth Horizon* 142). These writers recognize what the historian Carl Degler has more recently argued, that "Marriage has been many things, but at all times, it has been

a relationship of power, however muted or disguised it may be in any particular case" (29). The frontier's mythic gender roles seem darker when we question whether the "real" Dan'l Boones, Natty Bumppos, Virginians, and Ben Cartwrights took for granted a patriarchal authority that sanctioned woman abuse as every husband's right, whether the frontier's cherished freedom and individualism might have encouraged the violent domination of women. Indeed, some Western works present violence against women as darkly heroic; in "High Plains Drifter," for instance, the "hero," Clint Eastwood, rapes a woman within the first ten minutes of the film, an act the film asks its audience to applaud.

Children, of course, internalize the gender roles they see played out in their parents' marriages. In one of the grisliest scenes in Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*, Mrs. Blaska's husband uses her love for her sons to "coax" her back after she dares to leave him. After she is found dead, "stripped naked, in the open chicken yard," her husband admits he "whipped her, as is every husband's right. She started to run away again and, handicapped by his crutch, he sent her sons to bring her back. They held her while he pounded her" (412). Laura Ingalls Wilders's classic *Little House* books remind us that not all children learned such brutal and destructive lessons from observing their parents' marriages. Yet in Western literature we often see a portrait of marriage through the eyes of a youngster—Joey Starrett in *Shane*, Niel Herbert in *The Lost Lady*, the narrator of *This House of Sky*, the young boy in Tomas Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, the seven-year-old internee in *Farewell to Manzanar*, the multiple narrators of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*—and such works often suggest that to grow up Western is to grow up confused about masculine and feminine roles and inheritances. I'd like to explore this point more fully in two of the finest Western stories, Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* (1935) and Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943). Both works are autobiographical and both present submerged revisions of Western history which depend upon their portrayals of marriage. Both suggest that Western identity is shaped by the struggle to make sense of—and to internalize—those opposing forces Stegner identified as masculine and feminine.

Sandoz's book, *Old Jules*, purports to be a biography of her pioneer father, a "big man" in frontier Nebraska, the archetypal frontiersman who demands absolute freedom, a "prophet . . . a sort of Moses working the soil of his Promised Land," a classic American dreamer (398, 406). But Sandoz's American Dream is inextricably mixed with nightmares.

When the little Marie was three months old and ill . . . , 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 [her mother] Mary dared she snatched the baby

from him and carried her into the night and did not return until the bright day.

But the night's work was never to be undone. Always the little Marie hid away within herself. (215)

This tyrannical patriarch towers over Sandoz's narrative. Married four times, Jules beats each of his wives, and his daughter presents these scenes in ever more graphic detail. She also makes clear that Jules is no more brutal than many other men and is, in fact, most representative when he is beating his wives or children. Yet Sandoz presents her abusive father as her story's hero, for he, after all, possesses the traits of the hero of the Western myth. Jules Sandoz found the freedom Turner imagined, but the Promised Land did not pay off on its promises to his wife Mary.

The child who learned to hide away within herself also learned that one story can be hidden in another. The covert subject of *Old Jules* is a woman's history of the West, focusing on the frontier marriage and its institutionalization of male power and violence, on women's powerlessness, on how watching a mother become a victim of male aggression affects a daughter's complex identification with and resistance to her mother's life, and on her struggle to free herself from her mother's role as victim. Sandoz's women lead seemingly unbearable lives, and she is clearly fearful and angry that her mother is preparing her to follow in her footsteps. In fact, Sandoz, who claimed she found her "emotional identity" in the West, is the central figure in her fine book, which reveals her uncertainty about whether to identify with her father's or her mother's West, clearly separate worlds. Sandoz wanted to claim the dream for herself—and to escape the nightmare. Recognizing her kinship to her mother but rejecting her circumscribed, powerless life, she coveted the freedom, power, and vision the West seemed to offer her father. The great themes of Western history belong not to Mary but to Jules. In her later histories Sandoz "hides away" the women's story and turns to the classic masculine West and its themes, to what she calls "the romantic days," though she does grant women a starring role in some of her novels ("Pioneer Women" 59). Through her portrayal of her parents' marriage, Sandoz expresses her confusion about her "emotional identity" as a Western woman writer.

The young hero of Stegner's family saga, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* faces a similar dilemma at the story's end. As he would later in *Angle of Repose*, Stegner suggests that classic Western themes—in this case, identity—are defined in relation to marriage. The novel originates in a moment when Bruce Mason thinks that if "a man could understand himself and his own family, . . . he'd have a good start toward understanding everything he'd ever need to know" (436), which leads him to realize

the importance of trying to imagine his parents' lives and feelings from their points of view: "if you could look back through many funneling memories instead of one or two, you might be able to escape the incommunicable identity in which you lay hidden. You might remember your mother's memories, or your father's, contain within yourself the entire experience of your family" (499). *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is Stegner's attempt to do just that, to narrate the story of his parent's marriage from their perspectives—and finally to attempt, not fully successfully, to understand it from his own.

Bo and Elsa Mason embody the dichotomized gender roles Stegner called "the legitimate inclinations of the sexes." Bo is a rough and ready dreamer, violent, selfish, charming; Elsa is nurturing, home-loving, self-sacrificing, without, her son believes, giving up her self. Separate, they might be Western stereotypes, but it is their attraction to each other and what keeps them together that obsesses their son—and their creator. Like Lyman, Bruce is initially determined to see his parents as estranged, as separate lines, but many moments force him to recognize the intersections between them:

When she came out that morning with the queer look on her face and said that she'd found a big lump in her breast, their eyes jumped to meet each other, and it seemed to me that all of a sudden I could see what living together twenty-five years can do to two people. They asked and answered a dozen questions in that one look. (440)

Through thinking about their relationship, Bruce realizes that his parents are more complicated than they appear, that his "anti-social" wandering father was drawn to and committed to his mother and their family, that his placid, domestic mother expressed a need for adventure through her love for Bo, with his wild humor and melodramatic scheming. As Bo says to Elsa, "I just can't live without you. . . . That sounds dippy, but it's true. And you can't live without me, either. Can you?" (178). Dippy, realistic lines like this have metaphoric implications in the richness of Stegner's art: Bo is right that in terms of narrative, he and Elsa only come alive in relationship to each other.

They are brought together in their son whose identity is shaped by the interplay between the two sets of values his parents represent; like Sandoz's, this story belongs simultaneously to the parents and the child. The boy loves and identifies with his mother and hates his father, a hatred that "seems to arise from two things: his violence to me, and his inability or unwillingness to see that he was misusing my mother" (439). He sees his father as a "completely masculine being" who bullies him for not living up to that ideal, for being a "cry baby" (561); in this book's grisliest scene, Bo punishes his son for being afraid of the dark by rubbing Bruce's

face in his own excrement. But by the book's end his father's contradictions—"this anti-social monster could be nobly generous on occasion, could be affectionate, could weep like a child"—somehow overshadow his mother's consistencies and continue to obsess him (561). (In fact, some thirty years later in *Recapitulation*, Stegner would return to Bruce Mason, an *unmarried* middle-aged man still trying to make sense of his father.) "[He] was more talented and more versatile and more energetic than she," he has to grant. "Refine her qualities, and you would get saintliness, but never greatness. His qualities were the raw material of a great man. Though I have hated him, and though I can neither honor nor respect him now, I can not deny him that" (562).

Stegner spent his entire career mulling over the dozen questions one can see asked and answered in one look between a wife and a husband, pondering the interplay between and contradictions within these two sets of competing values: "male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and the tamed." He presents the possibility of their reconciliation as his hope for the future of the West. As thinking about gender and marriage has led Stegner to a revisionary view of the West, and particularly of Western masculinity, so do Bruce's feelings about his parents and their bond lead him to seek a more complicated definition of manhood than his father's:

Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, a subtle blending of masculine and feminine, selfish and selfless, stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned. (563)

Masculinity and femininity are married within Stegner's Western hero. Stegner finds hope in such a marriage, while Sandoz can only envision such a union, any union, as threatening; after *Old Jules* she turns away from the thought. Ultimately Stegner's struggle to understand such a marriage would lead to his interpretive slant on Western history as characterized equally by cooperation and individualism, by civilization and wilderness, by family ties and isolation, by a desire for stability and for movement. Indeed he might be his best representative Westerner, for he embodies all of these qualities and values them equally.

Two celebrated contemporary Montana writers parallel Sandoz and Stegner in their explorations of marriage. To return to and turn about Ehrlich's line, both Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew dedicate themselves to recreating a culture that has lost its memory and find much in the specific shapes and traditions of their grandparents' past to instruct us how to live today and tell us who we are. Both write family memoirs

that are simultaneously autobiographies, and, I would suggest, because both *This House of Sky* and *All But the Waltz* are constructed around readings of marriages, marriage is central to the authors' understandings of the Western self.

Despite the subtitle's focus on landscapes, *This House of Sky* is framed with three marriages which the narrator comes to understand as shaping his "western mind." Doig's memoir opens with a question very like Bruce Mason's, with the narrator's attempt to understand what drew and kept his parents together: "I wonder at all I know and do not know of this set of lives," he says, making clear that he defines their lives in relationship (5). He establishes his "self" in relationship to this "set."

Doig next explores his father's turbulent marriage to Ruth, a marriage based in biology rather than understanding. "They were a pairing only the loins could have tugged together, and as with many decisions taken between the thighs, all too soon there were bitterest afterthoughts" (71). The child watching this "slow bleed of a marriage" recognizes the way his father and stepmother wound each other, but has the "creeping feeling . . . that the arguments in our house meant more than I could see" (73). But he does come to see that this marriage, which has no "middle ground," represents inflexibility, lack of compromise (93). The stubborn and unyielding passion that unites them also informs each partner's need to dominate and control the other. Although the neighbors worry that the "little child in the midst of" the marriage will be damaged, in fact the narrator learns from it to recognize in himself what he sees in his parents: opposing feelings can simultaneously co-exist, though perhaps not always harmoniously: "It was exactly that twinned mix—apprehension and interestedness—that I felt all during Ruth's startling time in our lives" (76).

But the real heart of the book, the real foundation of *This House of Sky*, enters when Bessie, the grandmother, begins to build her "edgy alliance" with his father. (In fact, only after the grandmother enters the narrative can the narrator dream "the house of sky" image.) More than any other, the narrator sees himself as the product of this alliance, which he carefully builds piece by piece until

at last, whenever it had happened that they found the habit of being together counted more strongly with them than the natures pushing them apart, my grandmother and my father had become some union of life all their own, quite apart from the abrupt knot of bloodline they had made for my sake. (239)

But their union is far more than habit. Now seeing them as a "linked pair" he must help "endure . . . together in their own home," the narrator concludes that

across twenty years, I had watched the two of them wear grooves into each other until at last the fit of their lives became a mutual comfort, a necessity bridging between them. Their time together had passed through armistice into alliance and on to acceptance, then to affection, and at last had become one of the kinds of love. (293)

The slow building of this bridge, the narrator sees as the "real triumph" in his father's life. Speaking to his father's memory, he expresses his greatest pride that "you and Lady had made your way to a cherishing of each other" (274). The narrator grows up in a household in which a hard-won love is also slowly growing, and he is nurtured by that accommodating love. Despite their differences, together his father and grandmother created him and gave him his greatest gift, another "triumph"—the "cadences" and stories of his book, which unites their voices.

In *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, Doig's narrator suggests that when "a marriage begins to come apart, the stain spreads into wherever it can find." Doig's work, like much of Western literature about marriage, contains simultaneously contradictory themes, for *This House of Sky* suggests, to rephrase the line just quoted, that "when a marriage, a bond, is carefully built over the years, the connection spreads into all the lives it touches." From those who raised him, Doig learned that differences can be bridged, connections built. His Western mind seeks to synthesize, to bring together. Inevitably, then, his work will challenge and break down the dichotomies that have too readily characterized our understanding of Western literature.

Now of course Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer are not literally married. But in devoting so much attention to the building of the bond between a parent and a grandparent, Doig directs our attention to another important recurring theme in Western literature, the ways writers look to grandparents as a way of "marrying," if you will, the Western present to the Western past. Despite the critical obsession with the lone Western character who breaks all ties to head west, Western literature is in fact replete with grandparents, who consistently offer the younger generation ways to live today and lessons in who we are. Wallace Stegner has written repeatedly and eloquently about this pattern, most particularly in *Angle of Repose*.

My own interest in Western literature begins with my grandparents and their marriage. When I grew up in the foothills of California, I lived next door to my grandparents, who really raised me. It is fitting that I tell this story in a digression because I learned from my grandfather that the *real* story often emerges in a narrative digression, something he may well have learned from Twain's Jim Blaine or other Western tale tellers.

Born in the Badlands of South Dakota, or so he said, my grandfather was a tall handsome drifter who rode buffalo, sang about a girl named Duckfoot Sue, and was descended from Geronimo—or, on alternate days, Sitting Bull.

Rambling with me in the mountains, Gramps taught me through his "prevarications" the freedom of self-definition that comes in storytelling. Informing me daily that *he* had wanted to name me Rebel, he let me know I could do anything boys could do.

Gramps had a lot more control over his tall tales than over his life. As I grew older and recognized some of his failings, his alcoholism, my view of him was shaped by the name he had intended for me: I saw him as a flawed visionary, an outlaw from a seedy conformist society, a man who would "go to hell" before he'd compromise. In my own stories—like this one—he became the quintessential American hero. His rebellious, freedom-seeking footsteps led me directly to American studies, and I began a dissertation on male writers and their narrative escapades about the West.

A few years after his death, I was confronted with some unwelcome implications of the Western myth my grandfather had personified for me. One night my mother described for me a scene that had occurred many times throughout her childhood: my grandfather beating up on my grandmother. Recalling details of 35 years earlier—"he yanked her from the car by her hair"—details she had never before talked about, she recounted how she had felt powerless, embarrassed, responsible. In retrospect I find it surprising that I didn't protest the truth of the story she was telling me about the man I knew to be affectionate and loving, the man who had twice cried through *The Incredible Journey* with me, but somehow I could see the beatings happening, as if I shared my mother's eyes. Although parts of me seemed to have been yanked raggedly apart, setting into new, uncomfortable relations, I accepted this information about my grandfather calmly, meanwhile gathering all my unconscious psychological strategies to hold onto my feelings about him. When I saw my still-living grandmother the next day, I was appalled to discover that I could not identify with her suffering, that I wanted to keep my distance from her. Her experience recalled for me only the dark side of my beloved grandfather, whom I had to find a way to explain and excuse.

My work on violence against women in Western literature grew out of this personal story, and it's taken me many many years to reclaim my grandmother from the role of victim in which the story cast her, to remember how she giggled when she gave someone the queen in hearts, how I learned to sew, garden, crochet, and make dolls from her. I now teach courses not only about Western literature but also about women's literature about domestic arts, particularly quilting. That is to say, it took

me many years to claim both sides of my inheritance, to hear and let speak both voices, to "marry" them in my work and my life.

I believe my grandparents loved each other but they could not break out of the roles in which they had been cast. Their story reminds me of the power of those cultural roles and how the stories we tell can entrap us. Sometimes we have to let our stories grow, give up our metaphors. Stretched bonds will finally snap is one of the key lines in Mary Clew's *All But the Waltz*. If *House Made of Sky* suggests that the "Western mind" is shaped by created bonds, *All But the Waltz* shows how central the breaking of marriage bonds was to five generations of a Montana family. Her broken marriage is central to Clew's identity: she describes herself as "a failed 'little wife,' an uppity woman who somehow got the idea in her head she knows something" (36). Clew's grandmother's central advice "To her daughters . . . [is] *Don't marry*" (*Balsamroot* 168). Only one took her advice, Clew's aunt Imogene, the subject of *Balsamroot*, whom Clew imagines as stuck between two harsh alternatives, a marriage that inhibits her freedom or a lonely life of caring for others. While early in *All But the Waltz* the narrator ponders her grandparents' wedding portrait, seeing "in the reflection, superimposed over [her grandparents]. . . the Snake river . . . roll[ing] toward its confluence," women and men separate more than converge in her book. *Balsamroot* closes with the real symbolic confluence in Clew's work as the narrator and her daughter head "home toward the confluence of rivers in the deepening Idaho twilight"—a hardwon and complicated bond between women. This is only a quick glance at Clew's complex portrayal of family, but she leaves us to ponder what is perhaps a surprising irony: by and large the male Western writers I've discussed have recognized, accepted, valued the compromises inherent in marriage. For the women writers, and their characters, marriages prove much more constricting.

In an essay largely about achieving balance, it seems fitting that I head back to Gretel Ehrlich to conclude. Ehrlich's marriage takes place midway through her book, but she presents everything in her Western experience as preparing her for it. Like Stegner, she's out to challenge Western myths, and her revisionary viewpoint, like his, originates in gender confusion. Initially the West causes her to lose her gender identity: "I had the experience of waking up not knowing where I was, whether I was a man or a woman, or which toothbrush was mine" (ix). She goes to Wyoming, she says, "to 'lose myself,' in new and unpopulated territory" in accordance with the lone male myth, but as we have seen she also yearns for the end to loneliness (3). Unlike Sandoz's, her gender confusion proves personally and intellectually liberating. Doing ranch work, she learns to "accommodate" opposing viewpoints and needs:

The toughness I was learning was not a martyred doggedness, a dumb heroism, but the art of accommodation. I thought: to be tough is to be fragile, to be tender is to be truly fierce. (44)

Internalizing contradictions leads her to accept paradox as part of the Western point of view. Echoing her title, she writes to a friend, "True solace is finding none, which is to say, it is everywhere" (41).

Ehrlich presents the art of accommodation as central to her understanding of Western themes, activities, and values. It causes her too to reinterpret Western masculinity; she claims for *her* spacious guys a *sweet* land of liberty. In a chapter called "About Men," she presents a revisionary view of the cowboy:

If a rancher or cowboy has been thought of as a "man's man"—laconic, hard-drinking, inscrutable—there's almost no place in which the balancing act between male and female, manliness and femininity, can be more natural. If he's gruff, handsome, and physically fit on the outside, he's androgynous at the core. Ranchers are midwives, hunters, nurturers, providers, and conservationists all at once. What we've interpreted as toughness . . . only masks the tenderness within. (51)

She believes the attempt to deal with such dualities—"contradictions of the heart between respectability, logic, and convention on the one hand, and impulse, passion, and intuition on the other"—determines the "wide-eyed" look with which Westerners view the world (52).

As one of her chapter titles suggests, Ehrlich feels comfortable living in two worlds. Halfway through her book she meets another "culture straddler," a man who "cried during sad scenes" in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and who proposed to her on horseback, saying "Want to get hitched?" (86). On her honeymoon she goes to the National Rodeo Finals in Oklahoma City, which leads to a reinterpretation of that classic Western activity, which she sees as an "individualist's sport [that] has everything to do with teamwork" (96). In it, she claims, "partnerships are celebrated" (96):

The point of the match is not conquest but communion: the rhythm of two beings becoming one. Rodeo is not a sport of opposition; there is no scrimmage line here. No one bears malice . . . ; no one wants to get hurt. In this match of equal talents, it is only acceptance, surrender, respect, and spiritedness that make for the midair union of cowboy and horse. Not a bad thought when starting out fresh in a marriage. (101)

And not a bad thought when starting to rethink literary history. One of our newest Western writers, Alice Walker, reminds us that "Folks what can look at things in more than one way is done got rare" (*The Third Life*

of *Grange Copeland*). Ehrlich and the others have taught me the importance of bringing an accommodating perspective to binary thinking about men and women in the West. We might borrow a critical perspective from the "last one of the old gang" in one of the first stories to parody the rigid gender roles in our literary tradition, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (286). The gunman Scratchy offers a comic analysis of what happens to all the old Western myths when we look at marriage (286). "Married!" he exclaims. "Married? . . . I s'pose it's all off now" (289). He puts away his guns and perhaps discovers a new kind of regeneration, the kind Ehrlich finds in the West, and the kind of hope for the future Stegner offers us: "When [the West] fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the pattern that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlasted its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery ("Some Geography, Some History" 38).

WORKS CITED

- Austin, Mary. *Earth Horizon*. 1932. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1991.
- _____. "The Return of Mr. Wills," *Western Trails: A Collection of Stories by Mary Austin*. Ed. Melody Graulich. Reno: U of Nevada P, 1987.
- _____. *The Young Woman Citizen*. New York: Woman's Press, 1918.
- Baym, Nina. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly* 33.2 (Summer, 1981): 123-29.
- Blew, Mary Clearman. *Balsamroot*. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- _____. *All But the Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. 1923. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Crane, Stephen. "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" in *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories*. Ed. Richard Chase. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
- Degler, Carl. *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Doig, Ivan. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*. New York: Atheneum, 1987.
- _____. *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Ehrlich, Gretel. *The Solace of Open Spaces*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Faragher, John Mack. *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Houston, Jeanne Watkasuki, and James D. Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar*. Rpt. New York: Bantam, 1983.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- _____. *The Lay of the Land*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Potter, David. "American Women and the American Character," *The Character of Americans*. Ed. Michael McGiffert. Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1970.
- Rivera, Tomas. *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. 1991. Houston: Arte Publico, 1995.
- Sandoz, Mari. *Old Jules*. 1935. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1962.
- _____. "Pioneer Women," *Hostiles and Friendlies*. Ed. Virginia Faulkner. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1959.
- Schaefer, Jack. *Shane*. 1954. New York: Bantam, 1983.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Stafford, Jean. *The Mountain Lion*. 1949. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983.
- Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1971.
- _____. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. 1943. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983.
- _____. "Some Geography, Some History," "Born a Square," "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," and "Three Samples," *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980.
- Stewart, Elinore Pruitt. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader 1913-14*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. 1989. New York: Prentice Hall, 1994.
- Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970.
- Wister, Owen. *The Virginian*. 1902. New York: New American Library, 1979.