EDNA FERBER'S WOMEN CHARACTERS, 1911 – 1930, AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM THROUGH A FEMALE LENS

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ABSTRACT

Edna Ferber (1885-1963) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and one of the most popular writers of her time. Today, however, she is rarely read in schools or colleges, although her plays are still produced, and the films based on her novels, plays and short stories continue to be appreciated by classic film lovers. This thesis demonstrates how Edna Ferber created female characters in the early years of the twentieth century who struggled against the constraints of society's traditional female roles, who were the first in their nontraditional professions, and who achieved their own version of the American Dream. Edna Ferber also revisited American history with stories that highlighted women's contributions to America.

This thesis first introduces Edna Ferber, her background and her early years drawing from Ferber’s two autobiographies, A Peculiar Treasure, 1939, and
A Kind of Magic, 1963. Second, it discusses the New Woman at the turn of the century; the American Dream, historically and in relation to Ferber’s female characters; and Edna Ferber as a middlebrow modern writer whose literary output had powerful cultural agency. In addition, it shows how Edna Ferber used small town Midwestern settings to explore and resolve the female conflict between commitment to family/community and self-actualization. The focus is on Edna Ferber’s work written between 1911 and 1930: the short stories about Emma McChesney in three collections, Roast Beef Medium 1913, Personality Plus 1914, and Emma McChesney & Co. 1915, and six novels, Dawn O’Hara 1911, Fanny Herself 1917, The Girls 1921, So Big 1924, Show Boat 1926, and Cimarron 1930, written during a time of significant change for women in America. In conclusion, the thesis demonstrates how, at a critical juncture in American history, these stories of independent, successful women served as both model and inspiration to Ferber’s large female audience. Edna Ferber’s bedrock belief in America and American women is what allowed her and her female characters to interpret the American Dream through a female lens.
This paper is dedicated to my mother, Eva Ostroy Efman, who came to the big city, New York, and returned home to Wilkes Barre, PA. as a young married woman to run her family Dry Goods Store. And to my father Sam Efman, who first left Russia and then Galena, Illinois because he wanted no part of his father’s, antiques shop.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... ii
DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................... iv
INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 1
CHAPTER ONE: THE EARLY YEARS ...................................................................................... 6
CHAPTER TWO: THE MIDWEST, ITS PEOPLE AND ITS VALUES ........................................... 14
CHAPTER THREE: THE AMERICAN DREAM ........................................................................ 20
CHAPTER FOUR: THE EMERGING ‘NEW WOMAN’ AT THE TURN OF CENTURY ............ 29
CHAPTER FIVE: MIDDLEBROW MODERN WRITERS AND MASS APPEAL ...................... 39
CHAPTER SIX: DAWN O’HARA AND EMMA McCHESNEY: CHANGE IN THE FEMININE OBLIGATION ................................................................................................................ 46
CHAPTER SEVEN: FANNY HERSELF, TRIUMPH OF ART OVER MATERIALISM ............... 55
CHAPTER EIGHT: PIONEERING WOMEN AND THE WESTERN, SO BIG AND CIMARRON ............................................................................................................................... 63
CHAPTER NINE: THE GIRLS AND SHOWBOAT, THE GENERATIONAL NOVELS ............ 76
CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION ............................................................................................... 87
BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................................... 92
INTRODUCTION

Edna Ferber’s female characters, in her short stories and novels written between 1911 and 1930, embodied the American Dream, the idea that with intelligence and hard work there are no limits to individual success. These women blazed new trails in a white, male-dominated society and engaged in professions previously only envisioned for men: farmers, pioneers, newspaper publishers, traveling saleswomen, and business women. Her characters were independent, successful, self-supporting, and visionary in terms of women’s liberation. Her heroines were also pioneers in literature in revealing the important role women had played historically in the growth of America since the Civil War.

Adopting and adapting the promise of the American Dream for themselves, Ferber’s women served as models for the New Woman working at a time of rapid industrialization in the United States and expanding opportunities in the workforce. Edna Ferber also revisited traditional American historical narratives with her female characters at a time when women’s contributions to American history had not been acknowledged because “mythical commemoration in America so often fixates on male achievement.”¹ Through female characters who were entitled and emboldened on their journey to self-definition, each story and

novel in this twenty year period reveals a process that helps those women self-actualize, leading to individual achievement, self-fulfillment, contributions to family and community, and the dream attained.

This thesis will discuss Edna Ferber’s three short story collections about Emma McChesney, *Roast Beef Medium 1913, Personality Plus 1914*, and *Emma McChesney And Co. 1915*, and six novels written between 1911 and 1930, when her cultural agency was at its highest and when she was part of a select group of writers, dubbed middlebrow moderns, who “advanced the cultural debate over domesticity and women’s work, marriage and reproduction, assimilation, consumer culture and capitalism, and the rise of new technologies.”² Her books sold exceptionally well and their authority and impact derived from their powerful message that a woman could use all of her faculties and competitive drive in the service of her own ambition and this drive would not diminish her femininity but rather enhance it. Additionally, Ferber demonstrated that in the journey to realize her dreams a woman could hold on to old-fashioned values and artfully balance her time-honored commitment to family and community with her more modern pursuit of success.

Edna Ferber’s own life and career were the embodiment of the American Dream and the wellspring of her intensive literary output. She was intelligent, 

disciplined, hard-working, and possessed extraordinary business ability. She rose from humble beginnings—without a college degree—to become a bestselling and prize-winning author and playwright. Edna Ferber is relevant because she dared to explore and integrate old and new worlds of feminine accomplishment. When Edna Ferber died on April 16, 1968, her obituary ran on the front page of The New York Times with a full page inside chronicling her life and work. There was a photo of Edna Ferber with Katharine Hepburn and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, printed under the headline “Novelist who chronicled America is dead at 82.”

It was a stunning tribute from the benchmark of American journalism, recognizing her status as a significant writer. The obituary stated, “Her books were not profound, but they were vivid and had a sound sociological basis.” Additionally it noted, “She was among the best-read novelists in the nation and critics of the nineteen-twenties and thirties did not hesitate to call her the greatest American woman novelist of her day.”

In her lifetime, Edna Ferber penned twelve novels, published twelve short story collections, collaborated on nine plays—six with George S. Kaufman, twenty-five of her works were adapted into screenplays, and she won a Pulitzer Prize in 1925 for her book, So Big. When she could take time away from her writing, she

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
had a seat at the exclusive Algonquin Round Table. To appreciate the depth of her popularity, when she was a twenty-seven year old reporter covering the 1912 Republican National Convention, Presidential nominee Theodore Roosevelt, after meeting her, asked her how she was going to resolve the marriage issue in her serial *Emma McChesney*. He wrote, “I wonder if you feel that I am hopelessly sentimental because... I would have liked somehow to see not only the boy marry, but poor Emma McChesney at last have the chance herself to marry somebody decent with whom she was in love!”

According to *Publisher’s Weekly*, from 1900 to 1960, “only turn-of-the-century novelist (sic) Winston Churchill outperformed Ferber.”

Ferber’s trajectory from small Midwestern towns to the big cities, Chicago and then New York, gave her the insight she needed to understand and chronicle the struggles of her largely female, lower and middle class, and immigrant audiences. Unable to afford college, she entered the workforce at the age of seventeen as the first female newspaper reporter for the *Appleton Daily Crescent* (Wisconsin) and continued working daily for over sixty years until her death in 1968. Through hard work, self-discipline, and ingenuity she rose in the world,


and although raised Jewish, she would describe her Judaism as “the source of her ‘Puritan’ conscience.”

*The New York Times* stated, “In everything she undertook, whether civic improvement, books, plays, causes against prejudice, she had burning determination.” This same determination is found in each of her semi-autobiographical female characters. In her stories written between 1911 and 1930, and especially in the novels of the 1920s, she wrote with authority about women who maximized their intelligence, their business talent, and their ability to persevere against difficult odds in the service of their ambition and their goals.

This thesis will reveal how Edna Ferber’s childhood and Midwestern values nurtured her positive view of women and their ability to compete in society. Additionally, it will show how Ferber was able to reach large audiences by capitalizing on new technologies that ushered in mass circulation magazines, Hollywood movies, monthly book clubs, and national advertising and marketing campaigns. Finally, although the road to success is different and evolving for each female character, the thesis will demonstrate how Ferber explored and resolved the conflict between commitment to family/community and self-actualization, thereby removing the obstacles to achieving the American Dream.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY YEARS

Born in 1885 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to an American-born mother of German descent and an Hungarian-born father, Edna Ferber came of age before women had the right to vote or many chances to realize the benefits of full, participatory citizenship. A woman’s future was tied to her family status if she was not married or to her husband’s career if she was. Everything during this time centered in and around the home for women, the domestic sphere. A woman’s home reflected her fine sensibilities and it was a full time job to maintain home and family. Beginning in the late eighteen hundreds, women ventured out and into the fields of teaching, social work, and social science, but rarely combined work and family. Women took pride in their self-reliance, strong work ethic, and commitment to their community and the society. Ferber’s body of work and her own lifestyle celebrated these very qualities.

At the age of nine Edna Ferber boasted of having read, “all of Dickens, but I also adored the Five Little Pepper books, the St. Nicholas Magazine, all of Louisa Alcott. . . . I read all the books in the house. . . . all the books in the very inadequate little public library.”1 By the time she entered high school, she was reading a book a day. When she reached her job at the paper, all of her reading began to show

results: “Now, when I needed it, I found myself equipped with a fair vocabulary. . . .

O’Henry, the writer of short stories with the snapper ending, was the model after which every young writer patterned himself. . . . Now, unconsciously, I copied his style; but there was a strong dash of Dickens, too; . . .”

She identified with O’Henry’s strong observations about the little folks, the ones who populated the small towns across America. There was some similarity in the writers’ backgrounds. They both served as shop clerks, he at his uncle’s drugstore and she at her parent’s dry goods store. They both picked up the patois of the masses. They were both negatively impacted by dishonesty in business; O’Henry, accused of stealing from the bank he worked at, would serve time in a Federal prison, and Edna would see her dream of going to college dismantled by an employee who not only stole from the Ferbers but indirectly caused their bankruptcy. In an interview in The New York Times in 1915, she claimed, “I never aimed to wear O’Henry’s mantle, or his shoes, or his cloak. . . . I wrote about the woman who interested me—the business woman. It happened that O’Henry was interested in her, too.”

This working-class American woman, venturing out against difficult odds and competing in a business world dominated by men, would remain the focus of all of her writing.

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Ferber’s parents, in following their own American Dream, traveled to the small towns of Kalamazoo, Michigan; Ottumwa, Iowa; and finally Appleton, Wisconsin; to set up a general store. Her father was not adept at business and tragically began to lose his eyesight at an early age. Mr. Ferber’s weaknesses forced her mother into the dual roles of head of the household and breadwinner. Early on, Ferber saw that real women could rise through hardship and be successful in the business world of men. The uprooting from one small town to another with stops in Chicago, at the home of her maternal grandparents, enhanced Ferber’s feelings of isolation and helped develop her abilities as a keen observer. She states:

the towns of my early childhood provided me with the terror and loneliness of Selina Peake in the novel *So Big* when she came as a schoolteacher to the little Dutch settlement of High Prairie just outside Chicago; Sabra Cravat of the book *Cimarron* when she came with her melodramatic husband Yancey Cravat to the wild strange life of the Indian Territory’s opening of Oklahoma; the child Magnolia Hawks of the floating theatre in *Show Boat*.  

In the Progressive Era in America, 1890 through 1920, women began to adopt the model of the self-made man and use it for their own self-making. Women were beginning to access higher education and the growing consumer culture gave them opportunities to become entrepreneurs. Independence and upward mobility were opening up to women in brave new ways. “If popular literature generated imaginative models for female enterprise where none existed

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in reality, it nonetheless was marked by an ambivalence toward women’s capacity to reconcile the tender qualities of femininity with the cutthroat world of marketplace competition."⁵ Ferber, whose childhood and young womanhood took place at the beginning of the Progressive era, was able to meld the values of the nineteenth century woman’s fictions with her competitive new businesswoman characters. Ferber’s mother and the farm women who traded at their store gave her a bedrock belief in women’s strength. In her historical narratives, she often revisits women abandoned or left behind to secure the dream for her family, a woman who is liberated out of necessity to assume the traditional patriarchal role. Edna Ferber’s two autobiographies, Peculiar Treasure written in 1939 and A Kind of Magic in 1963, and her niece Julie Gilbert’s biography, Ferber: Edna Ferber and Her Circle, 1978, demonstrate her desire for women to achieve and her belief in the power and strength of women.

All that happened in her own family prepared Ferber to demand the dream for women and reinterpret history through the lens of her female characters. Her women were strong and smart, and they embraced their responsibilities in intelligent ways; they were survivors not victims. Whatever propels them into the workforce, necessity or desire for new areas of fulfillment, is turned into a motivating force. This redefining of female characters set Ferber apart from her contemporaries. Her women are self-made and are successful

⁵ Jeffrey Louis Decker, Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xxviii.
when measured by the traditional standards of American society that valued domestic success for women and professional and monetary success for men. “Through her heroine, Emma McChesney, the author [Ferber] attempted to resolve the contradiction for enterprising women who wished to remain faithful to the ideals of true womanhood.”

The women in Ferber’s writing are independent thinkers who strive for personal fulfillment and serve as examples for millions of women readers of what this new, workingwoman can look like. As her niece Julie Gilbert states, “She was a precursor of the Women’s Liberation Movement by depicting every single one of her fictional heroines as progressive originals who doggedly paved large inroads for themselves and their ‘race.’”

Edna Ferber’s mother Julia was a businesswoman out of necessity, as many of Ferber’s female characters would become. Watching her mother buy, sell and maneuver in man’s world was the first hand experience that helped Ferber envision her female protagonists. When speaking of her mother, Edna Ferber recounts the fountain from which all her strong female characters emanate.

She belongs definitely to that race of iron women which seems to be facing extinction in today’s America. They braved the Atlantic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; they crossed a wilderness of plain and prairie in the eighteenth; they plunged into business and the professions in the

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6 Jeffrey Louis Decker, Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 25.

nineteenth through a storm of horrified disapproval. Hardy, indomitable, of the earth and its fullness. We shall not see their like again.\(^8\)

Edna Ferber, who was surrounded at home and in the store by hard working women, celebrates the American woman, her strength and her courage, and she revisits history by giving American women their honored place in it. Ferber passionately believes that her women should serve as models and inspiration in business and history. She wrote:

The major women of all my novels, plays, and short stories written in these past fifty years and more have been delineated as possessed of strength, ingenuity, perception, initiative. This is because I think that women in general—and certainly the American female of the United States—is stronger in character, more ingenious, more perceptive and more power-possessing (potentially) than the American male. \(^9\)

Ferber’s childhood experience in the small town of Ottumwa, Iowa, from ages five to twelve, showed her the dark side of the American Dream. Her father brought an employee to justice for stealing, but when the trial began, no witnesses would testify on Mr. Ferber’s behalf. Their employees, their neighbors and their town abandoned the Ferbers. “Child though I was, the brutality and ignorance of that little town penetrated my consciousness.”\(^10\) Ferber describes walking to


school or the store in this small town and hearing kids hurl anti-Semitic remarks. With only seven Jewish families, there was little protection for the Ferber girls whose parents spent their days in their store. The feelings of being an outsider gave her the depth to understand what it felt like for all outsiders, immigrants, African-Americans, Native Americans and women, who were still trying to gain a foothold in America.

It was in Ottumwa, Iowa that her fantasies of escaping and becoming famous began. The Ferber family enjoyed the traveling theater shows that came through town and brought ideas about the outside world. Years later Ferber would say, “God bless the theater for what it gave to a frightened fun-loving family of four.”\(^{11}\) It was also here that her father began to lose his eyesight and she read aloud to him the Potash and Perlmutter stories from the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was a powerful lesson to watch a man who was going blind listen to these stories and laugh so hard he began to cry. And here, in 1897, Ferber went to her first movie—an animatograph.

Therefore, at an early age, Edna had already encountered her passion for reading, for the short story, and for the theater. Her ability to write novels, short stories and plays allowed for a multi-disciplined platform for her talent. She never wrote consecutively in the same form, switching from novel to short story

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 56.
to play—and she liked doing it all. At the end of a novel or play, she often traveled, but when writing she never broke the momentum.

A pattern had already evolved: what was bitter or hard and could certainly derail any American Dream is transformed into a lesson in strength and resolve. To Ferber, this promise of America is always there. Her women are the underdogs who battle against hardship and discrimination and win; these women are the emotional backbone of all of her writing. Although her family had been bankrupted by the lawsuit in Ottumwa, in later years when she visited Iowa Edna Ferber claimed:

For the first time in my life, out of the deep well of repression where they had so long festered, I dragged those seven years of my bitter little girlhood and looked at them. And the cool clean Iowa air cleansed them, and I saw them then, not as bitter corroding years, but as astringent strengthening years; years whose adversity had given me and mine a solid foundation of stamina, determination and a profound love of justice.\textsuperscript{12}

CHAPTER TWO

THE MIDWEST, ITS PEOPLE AND ITS VALUES

Edna Ferber maintained a spiritual home in the Midwest, long after she ceased to live there. The Ferbers’ move to Appleton, Wisconsin, when Edna was twelve, restored her faith in the promise of America. "Appleton represented the American small town at its best. A sense of well-being pervaded it. It was curiously modern and free in the best sense of the words. Cliques, malice, gossip, snobbishness—all the insular meannesses—were strangely lacking in this thriving community."¹ The Appleton Synagogue, Temple Emanu-El, with its forty Jewish families mostly from a small town in Germany called Gemuden, was also a source of support. Edna Ferber loved her high school and, in her senior year, was the State of Wisconsin declamatory champion.

Temporarily devastated by the lack of funds that prevented her from attending Northwestern University and achieving her goal of becoming an actress, Edna Ferber went downtown to the Appleton Daily Crescent in 1902 at only seventeen and was hired as a reporter. After a year and a half, a new editor arrived, and she was dismissed and she moved on to the Milwaukee Journal. In true Ferber fashion, she remembers this experience as the best thing that could have happened to her, stating repeatedly that she learned more being a

newspaper reporter than she ever would have learned at college. In addition, she always prided herself on her claim that, “‘I was once a newspaper man myself.’” ² Years later she would describe how difficult it was to leave her father. “I wonder now how I ever had the courage to leave that blind invalid. It takes real courage to be selfish. . . . I am certain I never should have written if I had not gone.”³ Many of Ferber’s women are torn between their commitment to family and their need for independence and self-fulfillment, and cannot decide whether their drive to self fulfillment is justified or selfish.

Working in Milwaukee and living in a boarding house, she was able to experience what many young women of her day did—coming to the big city to find work. The city served as the Garden of Eden, a chance to remake themselves like Adam, reborn with all the possibilities available to the New Woman, out of sight of family and community. Here, she was also able to zero in on the scope of Midwesterners daily lives, the social events that get reported, and to investigate the underside of the town. At the Milwaukee Journal, Edna chased stories through rough weather and walked hundreds of miles a week. She became ill and returned home after fours years, physically and emotionally exhausted. However, she recovered from her ordeal by writing her first novel, Dawn O’Hara, and then her first short story, The Homely Heroine, which she sent to Everybody’s Magazine


³ Ibid., 129.
where it was accepted. Although still clerking part time at the family store, her new career as a writer had begun.

Edna Ferber had no interest in emulating the Europeans or the Russians in writing style or content. Her ideology was close to the founding fathers and early literary giants—America and Americans as reborn and possessing the talent to devise a literature that reflects the new continent. Like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, she wanted a national literature, “‘commensurate with our mountains and our rivers. . . . We want a national drama in which scope shall be given to our gigantic ideas and to the unparalleled activity of our people. . . .’”

Edna Ferber wanted to write in “American.”

Here in America, I thought, there was lightness, buoyance, and an electric quality in the air. Here everything was still to be done. . . . Between us and the Russian way of thinking—or, for that matter, the English, the French or the German—there lay three thousand miles of cleansing salt water; and, still more effectually separating us, a bulwark of freedom of speech, of thought, of conduct. Here was a new fresh country. Why not write in American? 

Edna Ferber was in love with American small town life. “What a country it is! . . . In the very quality of the soil itself there seems to be something that makes for vitality and excitement, an electric element very disconcerting to the European

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visitor.” She said many times she would love to sit on a corner anywhere in America and watch life go by. Her language is that of working class Americans whose struggles she chronicles to reflect what was happening socially and politically at the time.

Edna Ferber liked to write about the American Mid West and the West. “The Middle West, the Far West stimulates and excites me more than any other section of America. . . . It seems to me to be fresher, more vital, an integral part of the American way of life.” She also favored writing about the working class: “it is the middle-layer working people who have the real cockiness and flavor—or did have. . . . But the man and woman with a job—or not long without one. . . . they still retain a kind of primary American freshness and assertiveness.”

Edna Ferber’s work also embraced Regionalism, which became important after the 1850s because it gave women the opportunity to explore the conditions and conflicts affecting them by observing their immediate surroundings.

Women writers used geography as a way to talk about gender; ‘under cover of regionalism . . . these women writers explored the territory of women’s lives . . . They were regionalists—but not solely in the ways critics have conventionally thought. The geography of America formed an

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7 Ibid., 255-256.

8 Ibid., 365.
important part of their work, but essentially they charted the regions of women’s lives, regions both without and within the self.’

Edna Ferber would become known for her regional and generational novels, where after careful research she would develop narratives that combined history with place and, especially in the early novels, recast the woman’s role and establishes her contribution to that historical narrative. Ironically, the Regionalism also hurts Ferber’s critical reception. As Angela Januzzi writes in her thesis, *Faulkner, Ferber, and the Politics of 20th Century Canon Formation*, “Ferber made her settings the centerpiece of each book rather than creating them as mere backdrops, and this left her actual story-telling to be completely contingent upon regional descriptions, rather than the opposite.”

At the height of Ferber’s popularity, her stories about Midwestern small town life, its people and their struggles were closely aligned with the mainstream marketers of literature. The mission of the Pulitzer Prize, created in 1917, was to “select a novel reflecting the ‘whole,’ or alternately the ‘wholesome’ atmosphere of American life,’ as well as ‘the highest standard of American manners and

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Nicholas Murray Butler would go on to dominate the prize selections and extol this idealized good American citizen as coming from “one of the hundred or more small cities and towns in the Middle West.” Simultaneously, the most popular magazines of her day, “cultivated an audience in the new cities of the Midwest, often aiming explicitly at salaried white collar workers and their wives.” It was these “Main Street” writers who “readily acknowledged the open borders they hoped to create between life and art, seeing their literary work as social ‘potions,’ intraclass allegories, patronage of social classes, and scripts for living.”


12 Ibid., 14.

13 Ibid., 15.

14 Ibid., 19.
CHAPTER THREE

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The promise of America that was critical for the Puritans during the nation’s founding was the promise of a better life for themselves and their children. In his book, *The American Dream*, Jim Cullen states:

Their [Puritans] confidence—in themselves, in their sense of mission for their children, and in a God they believed was on their side—impelled them with ruthless zeal to gamble everything for the sake of a vision. In the process, they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream: they became masters of their own destiny.¹

In the founding of the Republic, the Declaration of Independence became the Bible of the American Dream for the aristocrats who created it by espousing Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Although significant groups were excluded—women, African Americans and Native Indians—in the end, those groups who were excluded used the language of absolute rights in their battles for those same rights.

All notions of freedom rest on a sense of agency, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their life. Agency, in turn, lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock premise upon which all else depends. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, the Dream assumes that one can advance confidently in the direction of one’s dreams to live out an imagined life.”²


² Ibid., 10.
Cullen refers to Benjamin Franklin, as “Founding Father of the American Dream” 3 and the embodiment of the self-made man. Franklin’s philosophy, a “trust in the basic decency of human beings, a belief that earthly and heavenly rewards are broadly consonant, and above all, a serene confidence that both can be attained—reflected the core convictions of a great many Americans of his time.”

As the nation grew, philosophers, theologians and Presidents were able to espouse their personal ideas and to reflect on the promise and possibilities inherent in the American Dream. President Andrew Jackson, the first president who came from humble beginnings, was an exemplar of the American Dream. “Born poor in a near wilderness, he had forged success largely on his own, by his strength, his iron will, his exertions and convictions.” 5 The dream of a better life and upward mobility continued to dominate political discourse. Abe Lincoln, speaking to Civil War soldiers in 1864, said, “Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest among us are held out the highest privileges and positions.” 6


4 Ibid., 65.

5 Ibid., 69.

6 Ibid., 97.
Cullen explains:

If there is one constant in the Declaration of Independence, it lies in the way no version of the status quo is ever completely acceptable. It provides us with (often imperceptibly shifting) standards by which we measure success but simultaneously calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience...the Declaration was born and lives as the charter of the American Dream. It constitutes us.  

In the timeframe of these books, written by Edna Ferber between 1911 and 1930, it was accepted that the ability to rise from humble beginnings to become President of the United States or chairman of the board was the exclusive domain of men. Consequently, stories of upward mobility and self-making were the domain of men as well. 

In his book, *The Apostles of the Self Made Man*, John Cawelti examines the image of the self-made man, that individualistic exemplar of the American Dream. Cawelti describes three principal 'traditions' about the self-made individual and the 'ideal of success' in America: First, the Protestant work ethic, based on the belief that piety, honesty, hard work, and frugality bring a person both success in this life and salvation in the next; second, the vision of the self-made man as an economic success, with initiative, competitiveness, and aggressiveness replacing the old virtues in a late nineteenth-century atmosphere of increased industrial development; third, a tradition of success 'tied to individual fulfillment and social progress rather than to wealth or status.'  

However, these principals also strongly reflect the complex set of strengths and character traits in Edna Ferber’s women. They are virtuous enough to be elected and competitive enough to be successful, and success is tied to self-

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7 Ibid., 58.

fulfillment and social progress. In her autobiography, *A Kind of Magic*, Ferber states:

They were and are books of the American dream, of the American nightmare, of the smallness and greatness and beauty and sordidness and romance and tragedy of a people in the United States of America. I am not at all embarrassed to say in deep and quiet satisfaction that these books have been read by four generations. . . . The books will be read in the next fifty years by another four generations if this world still manages to pick its way out of the path of the missiles and the space ships. Make of this what you will.⁹

The bulk of this statement is true; they were and are books about the American Dream, but in Edna Ferber’s writing the dream belongs to women, dramatically re-aligning a woman’s place in the workforce and re-imagining historical narratives concerning the West. “Ferber was one of America’s most prominent historical novelists, a writer whose uniquely feminist, multiracial view of the national past deliberately clashed with traditional narratives of white masculine power.”¹⁰ Her power was further enhanced when these novels were translated to the movie screen. Although translation to the screen marginalized her women protagonists, they still had authority.

Ferber’s novels consistently employed narrative elements and themes that directly countered Hollywood’s ‘way of seeing’ history, human agency, and the American experience. The novel’s female protagonists were scarcely subordinate to male history makers or victimized by social conventions

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and conditions, as Hollywood typically would have it, but instead actively, 'drove the course of American history.'  

In the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1968, Abigail Hamblen, writing to acknowledge Edna Ferber's death, wrote about Ferber and the American Dream.

Reading a Ferber novel is an engrossing experience. The Ferber magic makes the American Dream, as we have seen, a very vivid concept... Here is an author concerned principally with the materiality of the American Dream... For the most part—at least in her major fiction—she ignores the unsatisfied, the failures, the brooding sadness of those for whom the American Dream has been a sneering delusion. Hamblen is correct in saying that Ferber does not deal with the disillusioned, especially in her early work. However, contrary to what Hamblen states, Edna Ferber was not “concerned principally with the materiality of the American Dream.” When her female characters are successful, most eschew materialism for personal fulfillment and work on behalf of their own self-interest and the welfare of others, and they work for social progress. By placing a positive connotation on rewarding those who persevere, Ferber brings the possibility of the American Dream to a vast swath of American women whose values she wishes to shape and whose direction she wants to steer towards the Promised Land. She did not write about the failed dream, because her women always emerge from the


13 Ibid., 408.
struggle victorious, although they have experienced some adjustment to their goals in the journey. Her beliefs were close to that of the writer William Dean Howells who wrote, “that the American, ‘breathes a rarified and nimble air full of shining possibilities and radiant promises.’”\textsuperscript{14} The success of her women against incredible odds was proof of Howell’s dictum.

One of the frustrations that Edna Ferber experienced as a writer was that critics and readers failed to understand her satire. “In \textit{Cimarron} I wrote a story whose purpose was to show the triumph of materialism over the spirit in America, and I did show it, but perhaps I was too reticent about it. . . In \textit{So Big} I used the same theme . . . Same result. Terrific sales; about nine people knew what I was driving at.”\textsuperscript{15} Ferber was addressing many serious issues: pioneer women who wanted to transform the new frontiers to look like the established cities they left behind; nativism, the poor treatment of immigrant populations; racism against African Americans and Native Americans; and the illusion of limitless land and limitless wealth. Although disappointed that her satire was not understood, if you study her reading public, young women, immigrant women, and women striving for new frontiers of their own, their reading her stories as satire, and not uplift, would completely undermine their power for the women who read them.

\textsuperscript{14} Sally Elizabeth Peltier Harvey, \textit{Willa Cather: Redefining the American Dream} (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1948), 16.

As American small towns were shifting from a producer-to a consumer-based economy, the opportunity for upward mobility was disappearing. The stories that chronicled the upwardly mobile, including the Horatio Alger stories, became more popular than ever during this time of expansion in the early nineteen hundreds. These stories gave hope to those at the margins, immigrants, African Americans and women. In most of Ferber’s stories, after her female characters succeed on a professional level, they gain in security and are allowed to succeed on a personal level. Readers could not see the satire because Ferber’s women characters, no matter how reluctant, strident or unaware, succeed by traditional standards and were not victimized by the system in the pursuit of their dream. Ferber also maintains some of the values, dedication to family and community, that had been lost in the aggressive world of early twentieth century America when many worshiped materialism over all else. Her women are self-made, but softer and more thoughtful in their aggression and climb to success. Consequently, Ferber was able to create women who exemplified a more balanced dream in contrast with the rugged individual who strove for success at any cost. A good example of this is the Emma McChesney series where “the virtues of true womanhood that Emma brings to her occupation—dignity, cordiality, good health and maternal sacrifice—create the conditions for her success.”¹⁶ The males in Ferber’s stories are either a new type of partner, a companion who is intelligent

¹⁶ Jeffrey Louis Decker, Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 27.
and secure enough to allow the female to live an independent and fulfilling life, or they are conveniently eliminated.

Adversity, in which the female heroine needs to summon all of her determination, hard work, and intelligence in order to extricate herself from difficult situations and become the master of her own destiny in the service of her dream, is a mainstay of all of Ferber’s women characters between 1911 and 1930. In *Emma McChesney*, the title character, Emma, is a single mother who starts as a stenographer and ultimately rises to a top position at her factory. *Dawn O’Hara*, her first novel, recounts the trials of a young bride/newspaper woman who escapes a mentally unstable husband and works hard to stay dedicated to her marriage and ultimately her own career goals. In *Fanny Herself*, Fanny's mother’s death leaves her alone in the world except for a brother whose musical studies she continues to support. Although successful in business, Fanny gives it all up for her art and a job as an illustrator chronicling the ills of society. In *The Girls*, Isaac Thrift, the patriarch builds a strong business that is almost ruined by his son-in-law's embezzlement but rescued by his daughter Carrie Payson, who has the business talent needed to run the company and provide for her family. In *So Big*, after Selina DeJong’s husband’s death, she takes over his farm and single handedly brings his hardscrabble acres to life with new vegetables that command a high price in the marketplace and whose varieties make her famous. In *Cimarron*, Sabra Cravat, rather than fall apart during her husband’s long absences, manages
the newspaper he started, his affairs and their home successfully. In *Showboat*,
three generations of women evolve with increased freedoms and responsibilities
to keep their careers and the showboat alive.

The American Dream, the idea that one can begin anew and not be limited
by his/her history or regressive societal norms, is particularly relevant for
Ferber's characters in two ways. First, her women are not constrained by society's
very limited and limiting view of a woman's rightful place, and they can therefore
branch out into new areas of work and fulfillment. Secondly, in her historical
narratives, as layers are peeled away and women's contributions to history are
acknowledged, women are elevated in authority and stature, thereby giving them
equal status in relation to their male counterparts. In book after book, these
heroines deal with the promise of the American Dream, where hard work and
determination pay off, and they rather than the heroes are rewarded.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE EMERGING ‘NEW WOMAN’ AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

In her book, *Women’s Fiction*, Nina Baym, describes the criteria for women’s fiction written between 1820 and 1870. “They are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women. They chronicle the ‘trials and triumph’ of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them.”¹ This standard could be used to describe Ferber’s fiction, only with a changed setting. Ferber takes the moral values and work ethic from women’s fiction of that earlier time and incorporates them into her successful businesswomen’s fiction and her historical narratives.

Edna Ferber’s statement that at a young age she had read all of Louisa May Alcott helps to explain the background of Ferber’s female characters. As Elaine Showalter notes in her book, *A Jury of Her Peers*, “The heroine of women’s writing in the 1870s was ‘the coming woman,’ the emancipated woman of the future.”² After the Civil War, and what was assumed as a victory for civil rights, women’s rights became center stage in women’s literature. “Radical abolitionists had


promised that after the emancipation of the slave would come the emancipation of the woman.”  

3 As Julia Ward Howe states:

‘I looked to the masculine idea of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. . . . The new domain now made clear to me was that of true womanhood—woman no longer in her ancillary relation to her opposite, man, but in her direct relation to the divine plan and purpose, as a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility. This discovery was like the addition of a new continent to the map of the world, or of a new testament to the old ordinances.’  

4 It has been written about Louisa May Alcott that “Little Women, (1868) is ‘the American female myth,’ and Alcott’s heroine Jo March has become the most influential figure of the independent and creative American woman. . . . Through the figure of Jo March, Alcott explored alternative models for the woman artist.”

5 In Little Women, Alcott tries to give the independent Jo an egalitarian marriage and show how, with certain accommodations, a partner could support her in her work. In Work, her heroine Christie Devon, widowed, is liberated to lead her own life: “Christie has the credibility of the widow without the burden of the wife.”

6 Many of Ferber’s characters follow the same pattern; they are independent women trying to affect supportive relationships so they can continue to work with


4 Ibid., 165.


some degree of independence. Those who are single have the opportunity to strike out on their own, out of necessity. When they do find a partner, it is someone with a strong female valence, who offers emotional support and allows the heroine to be on an equal footing. Edna Ferber’s ideas are close to Alcott’s heroine Rose who cries out in, *Rose in Bloom*, “We’ve got minds and souls as well as hearts; ambition and talent as well as beauty and accomplishments; and we want to live and learn as well as love and be loved. I’m sick of being told that is all a woman is fit for!”

In many of Ferber’s stories, one of her characters comes to the defense of the working woman saying, “Any work is woman’s work that a woman can do well.” Ferber proves this statement by placing her women characters in jobs usually thought of as exclusively for men. Ferber made eloquent pleas to women in her autobiography to make the most of their lives. “Yet if each woman from eighteen to eighty would quietly take stock, determined to live up to her mental and physical and spiritual potentialities for one hour a day—even for two hours a week—our frantic world of today could be saved from itself.”

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Edna Ferber’s women want to be treated as equals, in the workplace and in marriage. Most of them face the life journey alone. They are divorced or widowed or single, but rather than allowing this to be a hardship, this becomes a source of strength. Ferber does not try to paint the dynamic of a happy marriage: all of her characters, in her early novels, are in the process of trying to effect a relationship that will lead to a companionate marriage. At the end of the *Emma McChesney* series, Emma does marry, but she spends the first few weeks after marriage visiting her son and daughter-in-law, alone. Although Sabra Cravat in *Cimarron* is married, her husband is away much of the time. Ferber’s single women, through hard work and self-reliance, summon all of their strength and independence in the service of their own dreams.

As America approached the turn of the century, the choices for women in society were growing exponentially. The New Woman challenged the limited roles that had circumscribed the range of possibilities in her mother’s generation. As Showalter states:

> The prewar years were a period of exhilarating female solidarity, in the suffrage movement, in feminist clubs and professional communities. . . . The new term ‘feminism’ replaced the ‘woman question’ to suggest a quest for intellectual, political, sexual self determination as well as the vote, and active feminists joined the New Woman.\(^9\)

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This sentimental heroine before the Civil War found it difficult to exist in the real world because her nature was thought to be more fragile than competitive. Her influence extended only to her home and her family. By contrast, the New Woman who emerged at the turn of the century was vital and energetic. “She was athletic, healthy, eager to take on challenges in a nondomestic world.”\textsuperscript{10} It could be said that the old virtues of the True Woman, purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity, gave way to the New Woman. She was “better educated and trained than the woman of the past; willing and able to earn her living. . . was less dependent on men, both economically and intellectually.” \textsuperscript{11}

In her early fiction, Edna Ferber situates her women in the workforce and highlights how they will improve their own situation as well as that of their families, their co-workers, and the community that surrounds them. With the revolution in the workplace, the addition of significant numbers of women workers, Ferber draws women who prove their worth to society without threatening that society or shortchanging family or community in the process. Ferber sees a woman in the workplace as positive and nurturing and as a model for balance between work and family. However, she also gives them access to


their aggression and competitiveness, tools they need to get ahead. Marty Brooks states in his thesis *Self-Made Woman*:

The feminine upward mobility narratives written between 1900 and 1930 were part of a move away from maternal justifications of middle class women’s public work and toward more liberal conceptions of feminine influence in the public sphere, influence based on self-interest and self-assertion. The narrative of ‘American success,’ working one’s way up in society through one’s industry and gumption, became a vehicle through which writers could imagine the impact that women workers might have on society in ways that were not strictly limited to ‘maternal’ function. It allowed writers both to ‘test’ the impact the ‘new’ working woman might have on society and to imagine the role that these women workers might take. It also allowed writers to envision how ‘feminine’ reform of American Society might take place.12

Ferber states in her autobiography that Jane Addams and Ida Tarbell were heroes of hers. Jane Addams was the founder of Hull House, one of the earliest settlement houses in the country, which served the poor immigrant population of Chicago. Ida Tarbell was a muckraking journalist who exposed the monopolistic practices of the Standard Oil Company. In her early work, Ferber always includes some aspect of Jane Addams’ conflict between the family and the social claim, a daughter’s struggle to be released from family obligations so that she can fulfill important contributions to society. This social claim surfaces even as Ferber’s women are in their upwardly mobile climb. It is an effective way of bridging the gap between generations, as many of Ferber’s stories begin in the late nineteenth century. The female hero usually rescues someone less fortunate, an immigrant

factory worker, an orphan, or someone caught in the legal system. The magic here is the rescuer who, because of her work in helping others, gains in vitality and intellect and heightens her value in the workforce. Ferber is trying to prove that women, although working outside of the home and outside the traditional settings of women’s work—teacher and social worker—could bring the model of good works and good values to any workplace.

Addams also advanced the idea of cultural feminism. This philosophy argued that women were more humanitarian, caring and down-to-earth than men were. By restricting women’s freedom and keeping them in the home, the larger society showed it was corrupt and unjust. Everyday life functioned poorly because it was based on male values and ethics. Society would be radically altered through the inclusion of values other than the display of power and force, characteristics of men. All of Ferber’s work is impacted by these ideas of Jane Addams. While Ferber allows her New Woman independence, she softens the conflict between self-sacrifice and self-realization.

By the early nineteen hundreds, the New Woman was increasingly engaged in work outside the home. Marty Brooks writes:

...the prime change in the workforce was in the type of women entering the labor force and the type of jobs they occupied. ...Women in the working and immigrant classes always worked, but suddenly they were being joined by their well-heeled sisters. And these ‘new’ women workers were
appearing in places, department stores and offices that made them highly visible. 13

By 1910 thirty-eight percent of the clerical workforce and twenty-eight percent of the sales force were women. This was a significant increase from the end of the 19th century.

A steady stream of time-saving new products—vacuum cleaners, washing machines and even automobiles—were releasing women from the drudgery of housework and allowing them to take on new roles outside the home. Women’s economic enfranchisement gave them increased economic power and social freedom. Whereas the vote was critical for women in the early years, it did not prove as dynamic a force for change as economic opportunity. In Unruly Tongue, Martha Cutter states:

When the furor over the New Woman subsided, it became apparent that women had used the new image to claim personal, political, linguistic, sexual, and social freedom. The domestic realm and the domestic discourse would never again have the same sanctity as women’s ‘natural’ destiny. The chains had been broken; the cage had been sprung. 14

The New Woman impacts Ferber’s historical narratives and her generational novels. Her historical narratives revisit American women’s contributions to society, placing them in frontier settings and valorizing their contributions to the growth of the nation. Ferber’s generational novels always _______________________


highlight women, in small businesses, on the farm, or on the prairie, who were often the brains and the backbone of these successful enterprises. Without the emergence of the New Woman, Ferber’s short stories and her historical novels would not have had the credibility to offer this vision of feminine power, and consequently the ability to posit an independent American Dream for women.

In an interview with R. Heylbut Wollenstein in *The New York Times* on May 11, 1924, entitled *Girls—Seen by Edna Ferber*, Ferber crystallizes her thoughts about the New Woman. Ferber compares the flapper of the twenties to the more serious college-educated woman, who although still evolving, is more self-assured. “These two types are going to merge into one some day, and she’ll be the real, vital, worthwhile, representative twentieth century woman.”

Ferber believed that the First World War and the resulting changes in society had not allowed women to realize their full potential for growth. However, in looking to the future, her words reflect William Dean Howell’s shining possibilities—the promise that the dream will be fulfilled. Here Ferber says:

I wouldn’t want to trade the last ten years for any twenty that went before. It’s been glorious to actually see the changes come in women’s dressing and thinking and living and planning. I can hardly wait to see what the next ten will bring. There’s been vast motion forward: the act of progressing toward a new type of woman. Only we of today haven’t arrived at her crystallization. We haven’t gotten to a destination; not even a stop-over. We’re still on the way. But in waiting for my twentieth century woman to

crystallize, I can only look at the more or less ephemeral girls of today, so vivid, so exquisite, so sure of themselves, and wish I were ten years younger!¹⁶

The power of Edna Ferber’s message came from her cultural agency and that agency was fueled by her ability to reach large audiences during a time of dramatic change. Ferber’s popularity (at a time when writers, who worked at the intersection of popular culture, literature, theater, magazines, radio and movies saw the widest distribution of their work) made inroads with the New Woman who was seeking models for her upward mobility and her cultural education.

“The term middlebrow was devised to condemn the attempts of educators and writers to democratize culture.”¹ The popular magazines of the day included Ferber’s short stories as well as her novels, in serialized format. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the editors of American’s popular magazines were powerful arbiters of literary and cultural tastes, and they influenced politics as well. “Though moderns sneered at women’s magazines, they represented an influential middlebrow ‘culture of letters,’ in the twenties and thirties.”² They published Ferber’s work enthusiastically. However, the intelligentsia resented the


² Ibid., 119.
fact that the average man “was not only the center of the political system, but the arbitrer, to a very considerable extent, of literary and artistic destinies as well.”

By 1926, Ferber had become one of the most popular writers in America. She had made the bestseller lists and her books were selected by the popular new monthly book clubs, Book-of-the-Month Club and Literary Guild, and many of her books, short stories and plays were already made into Hollywood features. Her relationship with Hollywood was one of the most successful in history. It began with the sale in 1918 of Our Mrs McChesney, (a play she co-wrote with George Hobart that was a success on Broadway staring Ethel Barrymore), and continued through the sale of Ice Palace, purchased in 1958 by Jack Warner for Warner Brothers for $350,000 and 15% net profit from the film. In the introduction to Middlebrow Moderns by Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, Edna Ferber is grouped with women writers who, “deliberately targeted ‘middle’ audiences for maximum distribution and profit.” They go on to conclude that “each of these women writers struggled to claim a voice within a largely male, aesthetically exclusive literary establishment; each bridged the chasm of popular and critical

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3 Christopher P. Wilson, White Collar Fictions: Class and Social Representation in American Literature, 1885-1925 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 12.

acclaim, yet never received the level of respect such an achievement typically commands.”

The sheer numbers of readers of popular magazines during the Progressive era created a platform for New Woman literature. Editors were aware that the inclusion of popular fiction in their magazines was key to retaining current readers and increasing circulation. The numbers are staggering. 

*Cosmopolitan*, which published some of the *Emma McChesney* series, had a circulation of one million by 1915. In 1911, the *Woman’s Home Companion*, realizing it could expand its readership with fiction, began to publish serialized novels and short stories in every issue. In 1927, the *Companion* reached two million viewers and writers, including Edna Ferber, were paid up to $85,000 for a novel serialization. It was estimated that for every subscription there were an additional three to five readers, boosting the potential reading audience into the millions and prompting critically well-reviewed writers, including Willa Cather and Edith Wharton, as well as popular male writers like Robert Chambers, to look to serialization to earn a living.

Ferber and Hollywood both used history as a way to enhance their craft. “Part of Ferber’s uniqueness certainly lay in her ability to connect the revisionist historical trends in American social and cultural historiography during the first

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5 Ibid., 19.
half of the twentieth century with the cultural power of Hollywood.” Hollywood was looking for material for its large female audience and Ferber supplied that material. Her approach to history, women and race, “fit with Hollywood’s own ambition to produce a national historical genre that appealed to women.”

Ferber’s original female businesswoman and her generational novels explore the transition to modern life and the freedoms that new generations of women gained in that process. Many artists addressed the issue of women’s roles and the dynamic change that was taking place.

…but the middlebrow writer publishing in a mass medium operated in a narrative landscape of archetypal characters representing old and new ways of being, as well as traditional and modern conceptions of woman’s place in the developing industrial order. They were thus able to draw more clearly the battle lines in a gender war over how women were to fit into the modern world of new technologies, educational opportunities, and changing cultural values.

Edna Ferber took the process of marketing her literary products seriously, thereby enabling her reader to access her stories through many media. The broad coalition of American women who read her books, through traditional and new media, was neither highbrow nor lowbrow, but part of the vast middlebrow, the little folks who Ferber was writing about. It was this commercialization of culture

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7 Ibid., 29.

and the goal of providing access to her work by a wider audience that threatened and diminished Ferber’s critical reception. The book *So Big* had three adaptations in Hollywood with legendary stars like Barbara Stanwyck and Jane Wyman. *So Big* was serialized in the *Women’s Home Companion* from December 1923 through March 1924 for which Ferber received $35,000. When *So Big* was first sold to Hollywood, it was made into a silent film and Ferber received $20,000. When talking pictures came in the film was remade in 1931, the studio paid her another $20,000. The irony here is that the book *So Big* is about a woman who turns a truck farm into a successful enterprise, but who is not swept up in materialism. Instead, she uses her monetary gain to reinvest in her farm and appreciate the natural beauty of the art and architecture that surround her.

Edna Ferber did the same with the money she received from the sale of her books. She kept to a rigid schedule of writing each day, long after it was clear that she did not need the money. It was not that she was materialistic, although she did enjoy material things; rather she needed to work for her own satisfaction. *So Big* was a bestseller, spending sixteen weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list and selling three hundred and twenty-three thousand books before the age of book clubs. The success helped Ferber stay true to her craft, and the sale of one book allowed her to write another.

In a letter written to the Pulitzer Prize committee Edna Ferber’s friend William A. White, a member of the Pulitzer committee and editor of the *Emporia*
Gazette, makes a plea for the choice of So Big as the winner. “The contention of her book is that America needs creative spirit in something besides finance; that we should express ourselves in beautiful things—beautiful architecture, beautiful lives and that beauty is the sad and vital lack of America.”\footnote{9} White would go on to write an introduction to a collection of her stories and state, “In So Big, Ferber wrote a story that celebrated life and the spirit, not success.”\footnote{10} Each of her novels was a literary enterprise, run like a business with an eye toward maximum sales in all media. Although offered large sums of money, Ferber never rushed out to Hollywood to write screenplays like her counterparts Anita Loos or Lillian Hellman. Frankly, she was not desperate for the money, and she did not like Hollywood.

Edna Ferber would also be considered an original in terms of branding. When she sold a book to Hollywood, her contract stated that all printed materials and posters reflect her name first, before the film’s name. Her movies appeared as Edna Ferber’s Cimarron or Edna Ferber’s So Big. This is still true today. In addition, she invented the idea of selling limited rights to develop her story or novel. In the case of the movie rights for any book, she insisted on limited rights, the use of her product for a limited time. When the period expired, she renegotiated and got an additional sum. Even in the twenties, before the advent of

\footnote{9} J. E. Smyth, Edna Ferber’s Hollywood: American Fictions of Gender, Race, and History (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 45.

\footnote{10} Ibid., 46.
TV, she always sold only the film rights and insisted that she keep the radio and TV rights for herself. Later in the fifties, she was able to negotiate a percentage of the film’s profits along with the initial purchase fee. She read Variety and the other trade publications of the film industry daily to monitor her brand and maintain both control and income.

Edna Ferber was an astute observer of American small town life. She was schooled in newspaper work and the Ferber family store and her literary talent, business acumen, determination, and intimacy with the lives of the women she was chronicling intersected to create her mass appeal. A study of middle-class female consumers by Eric Lofroth, prepared in the 1930s, concludes:

The middle-class female readers. . . found themselves the objects of the burgeoning middlebrow culture industry of the 1920s which proposed to use literature as a vehicle for self-improvement, to protect literary and cultural values in a moment of enormous cultural flux, and perhaps most importantly, to sell books in an increasingly fluid literary marketplace. ¹¹

CHAPTER SIX

DAWN O’HARA AND EMMA McCHESNEY: CHANGE IN THE FEMININE OBLIGATION

_Dawn O’Hara, The Girl Who Laughed_, written in 1911, and the _Emma McChesney_ series ( _Roast Beef Medium, Emma McChesney & Co._ and _Personality Plus_), written between 1911 and 1915, are important works in Edna Ferber’s oeuvre because they make the case for the workingwoman by highlighting how she can enhance the workplace, serve as a model for balance between work and family obligations, and still be liberated and entitled to follow her own dream. Although each character’s initial reason for working or continuing working is predicated on monetary needs, Emma to care for a son and Dawn a husband, the journey through work liberates them. Dawn is a newspaper reporter and ultimately publishes her first novel, and Emma rises to the number two position of the Featherloom Petticoat Company. Ferber is showing how a woman can fulfill her feminine obligations without shortchanging herself. The family obligation is an impetus rather than an impediment to achievement, and both women are ultimately not victims of family responsibilities.

Dawn and Emma are both workingwomen trying to make it in a man’s world. Each is alone after a bad marriage: Emma leaves her dishonest husband who has a drinking problem and Dawn’s husband is institutionalized after suffering a mental breakdown. Dawn, exhausted, returns home to the nurturing and support of her Midwestern family and Emma travels throughout the same
Midwest where she believes the people are the best reflection of America. Dawn struggles with self-doubt and feels conflicted about the obligation to stay in her marriage because her husband is unable to care for himself. Emma bursts on the scene full speed ahead, not allowing a bad marriage or a child to hold her back. Nothing is going to stop her journey to become a self-made woman, and she is happy to articulate what is needed to reach this vaulted position in business.

When we meet Emma, she has been on the road for ten years, has worked her way up the corporate ladder and handles the prime Midwest territory for her employer, T. A. Buck, President of the Featherloom Petticoat Company. She is in the process of raising a son to be an upstanding citizen—taking on the man’s role of teaching him the ropes, demanding and shaming him into working hard—while simultaneously helping her boss, now T.A. Buck, Jr., take an interest in his familial inheritance. As in many of the Cinderella stories of that time, she ultimately does marry her boss, but only when they are on an equal footing that Emma refers to as “a closer corporation” and after she has single-handedly raised a son, saved the company, and helped T.A. Buck, Jr. realize his full potential.

Emma McChesney exemplifies the New Woman, vital, energetic, and hard working, whose intelligence is melded to a strong personality, and it is the personality that helps her succeed. When Emma’s rival, fat Ed Meyers, is questioned as to why his company did not sell as many petticoats in South America, he explains. “It isn’t Featherlooms. It’s McChesney. Her line is no better
than ours. It’s her personality, not her petticoats.”¹ She has learned a great deal in her progression from stenographer to assistant saleswomen and finally to saleswoman for the coveted Midwest territory. She sells petticoats, she wears petticoats, and she knows the product better than the president of the company, the factory workers who made them or anyone out on the road selling a similar product. She is a storehouse of knowledge about her buyers, the needs of the territory she covers, the cities she visits, and the routine needed to maintain good health and optimism. She is competitive and not afraid to use her knowledge to get the jump on the competition or to use a bribe as she does while in South America. To land a sale, she uses any means she can, from dinners to theater tickets. Emma exemplifies the emerging white-collar businesswoman; she is driven, determined and as competitive as any man. She uses her maternal instincts to model healthy self-interest with regard to herself, her son, and her organization. This serves as a model for workers who can now incorporate these lessons and feel comfortable reaching beyond home and hearth.

All her drive and success is sublimated to the fact that she is a mother first and foremost and she must provide for her young son. However, the zeal with which she enjoys her work and the energy she gets from the sales process connote a changing view of a woman who works and how she can be both saved and a savior. When she visits her new grandchild out west, she comments on her

daughter-in-law’s friend’s lack of energy, “the placid, black-silk, rather vague woman of middle age, whose face has the bland look of the sheltered woman and who wrinkles early from sheer lack of sufficient activity or vital interest in life.”

Emma’s thoughts ran to her home, “to the big, busy factory with its humming machinery and its capable office staff . . . to all the vital absorbing, fascinating and constructive interests with which her busy New York life was filled to overflowing.” Her drive is not conflicted because she is able to achieve a balance between work and family, succeed at both, and devise a way to use her material instincts into helping others in her workplace. Helping poor immigrants and low wage earners to their own measure of success signals a solution to the problem of immigrant workers and how to deal with them in the American workplace.

Dawn O’Hara struggles as a woman working at a New York newspaper while supporting an ill family member. At the outset, Dawn is sad about her breakdown, her bad marriage, and her need to push for a career. She says, “All my life I have envied the loungers in the parks . . . . They always seemed so blissfully care-free and at ease—those sprawling men figures—and I, to whom such simple

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3 Ibid., 122.
joys were forbidden, being a woman, had envied them.” This is an odd reversal of roles and speaks to her internal drive.

Dawn leaves New York to work at a Milwaukee paper, becomes best friends with the city editor, who embodies a Horatio Alger story within the story, and romantically sees her doctor, Dr. Ernst Von Gerhard. Her take on newspaper reporting is a model for women.

If a woman reporter were to burst into tears every time she saw something to weep over she’d be going about with a red nose and puffy eyelids half the times. Scarcely a day passes that does not bring her face to face with human suffering in some form. Not only must she see these things, but also she must write of them so that those who read can also see them. And just because she does not wail and tear her hair and faint she popularly is supposed to be a flinty, cigarette-smoking creature who rampages up and down the land, seeking whom she may rend with her pen and gazing, dry-eyed, upon scenes of horrid bloodshed.

Dawn has to be strong—without emotion—at work, but is able to develop in her new companionate relationship with Dr. Von Gerard, and he takes her work and her feelings into account. “O dear Lord, don’t bother about my ambitions! Just let me remain strong and well enough to do the work that is my portion from day to day. . . . Let this new and wonderful love which has come into my life be a staff of strength and comfort instead of a burden of weariness.” Dawn’s book is accepted, and she moves into a new realm of freedom. This fulfilling moment,

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5 Ibid., 159.

6 Ibid., 246.
above monetary gain and clearly directed at inner-fulfillment, is Dawn O’Hara’s American Dream. “It won’t mean money—at least, I don’t think it will. But it will mean a future. It will mean that I will have something solid to stand on. It will be a real beginning—a breathing spell—time in which to accomplish something really worth while—independence—freedom from this tread-mill.”

The empowerment and understanding that Emma McChesney brings to women’s transformative role in the workplace is reflected in her popularity with readers; after thirty-two stories about her, *Cosmopolitan* offered Edna Ferber the opportunity to write the serial indefinitely. Ferber refused for fear she would not grow as a writer if she continued, but in the minds of her readers, the thirty-two stories were enough to be an important legacy. “Full of inspiration and transformation, this cycle of stories constituted, in many respects business fairy tales of will, personality—Victorian female ‘faculty’ that had become white collar ‘capability.’”

Emma’s greatest contribution—greater even than modeling the intersection of hard work, personality and access to a competitive nature—is her ability to manage female workers not by fear or reprimand but by the example of

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7 Ibid., 255.

her behavior as the one who gets ahead by listening to the desires and struggles of the women working at the Featherloom plant. “Emma offers a vision of progress based on sorority, empathy and the upward mobility of the office—the merit of work and the loyalty of fashioning oneself on one’s superior ‘mothers.’”\footnote{Ibid., 83.} Emma’s main themes—that women belong in the workforce, that a woman can be as competitive as the next guy (Ed Myers), that caring for and nurturing female employees both encourages them and is good for the company, and that a working woman still is able to take the time to make men of her boys, her son (Jock) and her boss (Buck, Jr.)—were provocative for their time.

_Dawn O’Hara_ was written while Edna Ferber was recuperating from a nervous collapse. She had been a reporter on the _Milwaukee Journal_, and after four years of chasing stories, she was forced to return home to rest and rebuild her strength. Even though she worked part time as a sales clerk in the family store, she was able to finish her first novel, much as Dawn does in _Dawn O’Hara_: writing a novel while working at a paper and recuperating from a nervous collapse. Ferber was not pleased with the book and claimed that her mother submitted it to the publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, behind her back.

Ferber’s serial _Emma McChesney_, ran in _The American_ magazine, the publisher of the Horatio Alger stories, and then in _Cosmopolitan_, the highest
circulation magazine of its day. Over the course of three years, these thirty-two short stories made Edna Ferber a household name. In her book, *A Feeling for Books*, which discusses the rise of the Book-Of-The Month-Club and literary tastes, Jane Radway explains, “Middle Class readers... value books not for linguistic innovation, but ‘because they are seeking a model for contemporary living and even radical advice about appropriate behavior in a changing world.’”

*Emma McChesney* is an original character in American literature—the first businesswoman. “*The New York Times*, in a review of *Emma McChesney & Co.*, had recognized the achievement of Ferber’s heroine when they crowned her ‘a defier of precedent’ and ‘the pioneer among traveling saleswomen.’” In an interview in *The New York Times*, Edna Ferber explains that Emma McChesney was so original that after her first story appeared, Ida Tarbell encouraged her to write an additional one. Edna Ferber states:

She is so new—she is only 10, or, at the most, 15 years old! She is so new she is worth talking about. But ten years from now a talk like this will be an anachronism. The idea that anyone ever questioned the propriety of a woman’s going into business, or thought that such an act on her part was inconsistent with domesticity, will be as obsolete as milestones.


11 Jeffrey Louis Decker *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 27.

As the country industrialized and there was a need to include millions of middle class and immigrant women in the workforce, modeling how this dramatic change would play out and how a woman could contribute to the change in positive ways was critical. This modeling is what Edna Ferber accomplished in both the *Emma McChesney* short story series and the *Dawn O'Hara* novel. In *White Collar Fictions* this is referred to as “cultural work.” “In part this term has been coined to describe the way in which popular or critically prominent authors, in their own day, articulate and propose solutions for the problems shaping their historical moment, thus providing their readers a way of ordering the world and attributing meaning to it.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

FANNY HERSELF, THE TRIUMPH OF ART OVER MATERIALISM

In 1917, Edna Ferber wrote the semi-autobiographical *Fanny Herself*. It is the first novel or short story in which she highlights the conflict inherent in the American Dream: the struggle among professional success, personal fulfillment and the need for artistic expression. The setting is yet another Midwestern town, Winnebago, Wisconsin. Fanny, a young girl, watches as her widowed mother takes control of the family store and runs it, like a man would, in order to support herself and her two children. It was a time when there were “plenty of women wage earners in Winnebago, as elsewhere; clerks, stenographers, school teachers, bookkeepers.”¹ However, Fanny's mother is different. “But here was Molly Brandeis, a Jewess, setting out to earn her living in business, like a man. It was a thing to stir Congregation Emanu-el to its depths. Jewish women, they would tell you, did not work thus. Their husbands worked for them, or their sons, or their brothers.”²

After Molly Brandeis dies, Fanny sells everything and sets her goal on earning ten thousand a year without sacrificing like her mother did. Fanny puts the selfish part of herself first. Edna Ferber tells the reader:


² Ibid., 11.
There came to Fanny Brandeis a great resolve. She would put herself in a high place. Every talent she possessed, every advantage every scrap of knowledge, every bit of experience would be used toward that end. She would make something of herself. It was a worldly, selfish resolve, born of a bitter sorrow, and ambition and resentment. She made up her mind that she would admit no handicaps. Race, religion, training, natural impulses—she would discard them all if they stood in her way. She would leave Winnebago behind. . . . In her place she would mold a hard, keen-eyed, resolute woman, whose god-head was to be success, and to whom success would mean money and position. . . . she had retained in her memory this one immovable truth: A straight line is the shortest distance between two points.  

Fanny carefully assessed the skills she had learned at the family store and set her sights on working in the mail order business. She subliminally responded to her mother’s warning that the mail order business would be the monster that swallows up all the small family businesses across America. When a contact tells her about an opening at Haynes-Cooper, the giant mail order house in Chicago, she lands a job, and the combination of domestic and work skills learned in Winnebago delivers the fresh ideas that are desperately needed by management. Many women were entreated to bring their efficiency and skills learned at home to the workplace; Fanny does it. Michael Fenger, the manager, admits, “Now, as a rule, I never employ a woman when I can use a man. There’s only one other woman filling a really important position in the merchandise end. . . . I’d rather have a man in her place; but I don’t happen to know any men glove-geniuses.”

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3 Ibid., 91-92.

4 Ibid., 115.
At Haynes-Cooper, Fanny implements so many good ideas so quickly that she is promoted within a few months and rapidly moves up the corporate management chain. Her married boss falls in love with her, but she does not get involved and warns him strongly that she will be sure to let everyone know if he steps out of line. Fanny will not permit herself to be a victim here and will not be lured into an inappropriate relationship, a danger that besets many women her age in the big city. At this point the author steps into the novel to say:

Myself, I confess I am tired of these stories of young women who go to the big city, there to do battle with failure, to grapple with temptation, sin and discouragement. So it may as well be admitted that Fanny Brandeis' story was not that of a painful-hand-over-hand climb. She was made for success. What she attempted, she accomplished. That which she strove for, she won. She was too sure, too vital, too electric, for failure. No, Fanny Brandeis' struggle went on inside. And in trying to stifle it she came near making the blackest failure that a woman can make. In grubbing for the pot of gold she almost missed the rainbow.  

In an odd passage, as if a conscience had been awakened, Ferber, the author, warns the reader about Fanny and the perils of success she may encounter as she moves up the corporate ladder and replaces the infant's wear buyer. Ferber clearly sets up the struggle here between monetary success and self-fulfillment. She warns the reader that the drive for materialism is at the expense of beauty and happiness.

For my part, I confess that Fanny Brandeis begins to lose interest for me. Big Business seems to dwarf the finer things in her. . . . You, too, feel that way about her? That is as it should be. It is the penalty they pay who,

5 Ibid., 111.
given genius, sympathy, and understanding as their birthright, trade them for the tawdry trinkets money brings.  

Fanny does make it to the top but her conscience is provoked by two special events. After a buying trip in Europe, she lands in New York only to witness a labor strike. Unlike Emma McChesney, who tried to outshine the labor organizers who enter her factory by showing off the workingwoman's superiority, Fanny takes time to sketch the strikers and capture the struggle in their faces. As laborers pass by one group's sign haunts her, Infant’s Wear. Her childhood friend, Clarence Heyl, encourages her to sketch these women so that others might witness them as well. She dismisses the idea of a career as an artist for, at that moment, sketching did not seem like a career.

Theodore, her long lost violinist brother, arrives from Germany. He has studied there for years thanks to the sacrifices of Molly and Fanny Brandeis and is home sulking after a bad marriage. He observes Fanny’s business position and instead of feeling proud, he feels regret. “And then Theodore, the careless, the selfish, the blind, said a most amazing thing. Fanny, I'll work. . . And I'll take you out of this. I promise you.” He felt sorry for her. She still pushes on with her work, but a tiny spark, some feeling of solidarity with her marching labor sisters, has reached her. Her brother, for all of his moderate success in music, is a failure

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6 Ibid., 128-129.

7 Ibid., 240.
as a husband and a human being and can not exhibit understanding or compassion for anyone other than himself. He has not grown emotionally since he left home.

After Haynes-Cooper is restructured and profit sharing allows the women working at low pay scales to be remunerated adequately, Fenger, the manager, decides to cash out and develop his own mail order business. He is all greed, has little regard for the salaries of the workers, and is driven to make more money—solely for himself. Fenger is miserable at home, hates his wife, and only feels excitement in the struggle for more wealth. Fanny has visited his handsome home, and although for a moment she wished for a home just like it, she has seen how empty his life is even with the material trappings of a successful man. At this point Fanny knows that this dream of ten thousand a year, an apartment on Lake Shore Drive and a driver – has not fulfilled her on a deep personal level. There is something missing. The author says, “The trouble was that Fanny Brandeis, the creative, was not being fed. And the creative fire requires fuel.”

The judgment of Clarence Heyl, her childhood friend, that she had sacrificed herself and been a slave to success, begins to absorb her. Heyl states:

I don’t say you’re wrong in wanting to make a place for yourself in the world. But don’t expect me to stand by and let you trample over your own immortal soul to get there. Your head is busy enough on this infants’ wear job, but how about the rest of you -- how about you? What do you suppose all those years of work, and suppression, and self-denial, and beauty-

8 Ibid., 135.
hunger there in Winnebago were meant for! . . . They were given to you so that you might recognize hunger, suppression, and self-denial in others. 

He goes on to say that there is a fighter revealed in all of her sketches and that fighter will never die. At this point, Fanny cannot agree with him because she had set her course so rigidly that to let anything or anyone question it would surly distract her focus.

She proceeds with her work, but when Haynes-Cooper officially moves to profit sharing and Fenger crosses the line in his attempt to coerce her into being his business partner, she runs away and does not come back. She sets out for the mountains of Colorado where Clarence Heyl keeps a cabin. Now that she has achieved her business goals, she is free to nurture her spirit by sketching those in the labor movement and exposing society’s ills. Here her self-fulfillment trumps monetary success, and Fanny finds a balanced middle ground in her new calling. Initially, Fanny was trying to reach her dream the traditional way, by achieving material success. When the dream comes up empty, she looks to more genuine self-fulfillment, the kind that results from maturity and melding one’s passions and talents. She realizes her American Dream in her new role as an artist and learns a great deal about who she is during the journey.

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9 Ibid., 161.
Before sitting down to write *Fanny Herself*, Edna Ferber was doing a lot of soul searching about her own life’s direction. She had just finished *Our Mrs McChesney*, which opened at the Lyceum Theater on October 19th, 1915.

Now I settled down for the long pull of novel-writing. I had put it off as long as I could, dreading it. It was January 1916; *Dawn O’Hara* had been published in 1911. In between I had published a volume of unrelated short stores, three volumes of McChesney stories, and had written the McChesney play in collaboration. This seemed to me a pretty poor performance. Aside from the creating of the character of Emma McChesney, I had done no solid thing. ¹⁰

Edna Ferber admits that most of her characters are based on people she knew in Appleton, including her mother as Molly Brandeis and herself as Fanny. But in a revealing moment in her autobiography she says, "The trouble was that in the middle of the book I killed Molly Brandeis because she was walking off with the story under the heroine’s very eyes. When Molly Brandeis died the story died with her. She was too sustaining and vital to dismiss."¹¹ It speaks to Ferber’s ongoing struggle with her mother Julia and the battle to break out on her own. All of her female characters struggle to break away from their mothers and the familial roost, to try to create their own lives and individuate themselves on behalf of their own dreams.

As in all of her books, Edna Ferber acknowledges her heroes, Jane Addams and Ida Tarbell, for their work with the underserved in America. The social claim


¹¹ Ibid., 223.
is thrown up to Fanny as a women striking out not in service to society but in service to herself. Clarence Heyl, her friend and love interest, tells Fanny that she is a failure. “Jane Addams would have been a success in business, too. She was born with a humanity sense, and a value sense, and a something else that can’t be acquired. Ida Tarbell could have managed your whole Haynes-Cooper plant, if she had to.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

PIONEERING WOMEN AND THE WESTERN, *SO BIG* AND *CIMARRON*

*So Big*, Edna Ferber’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel written in 1924, contrasts the bitter struggle between old hard-working pioneer values and new post-World War I fast money and materialism. She extols the virtues of the Victorian era by placing the novel in the late nineteenth century and highlighting the evolving changes in society through the First World War. “*So Big* was the first of Ferber’s novels to consider the legacy of the pioneer woman in the development of the nation.”¹ At the turn of the century, Selina Peake is forced to live in High Prairie, a farming town outside of Chicago, because it affords her a job as a schoolteacher after her father’s premature death when she was nineteen. She could have chosen to live in New England with two spinster aunts, but she is independent and wants to earn her own way.

Lonely in High Prairie, she marries a widowed farmer, the handsome Pervus DeJong, and is tied to his land and the rough work of farming for ten years. Her husband is of Dutch ancestry and, like all the farmers in High Prairie, his farming methods are old country. “What was good enough for my father, is good

enough for me.” Selina is in love but she ages overnight and her intelligence is all but overlooked by a husband who is incapable of hearing her. He was a “husband who looked upon conversation as a convenience, not as a pastime.” On one of his trips to the Chicago market he spends the evening outside in the rain, catches pneumonia, and dies soon after. Selina is left with the farm and a young son to care for. She does not stop to mourn. Shortly after her husband’s death, she drives to the Chicago market on her own with produce from the farm, unheard of in those days. Everyone admonishes her, “A women she don’t go to market.” She replies, “This woman does.” Selina feels liberated when she takes the reins of the horses, and like all of Ferber’s women, she will not be a victim.

Here was Selina DeJong driving up the Halsted road toward the city instead of sitting, black-robed, in the farm parlour while High Prairie came to condole. In Selina, as they jogged along the hot dusty way, there welled up a feeling very like elation. Conscious of this, the New England strain in her took her to task. ‘Selina Peake, aren’t you ashamed of yourself! You’re a wicked woman! Feeling almost gay when you ought to be sad. . . . Poor Pervus. . . .the farm. . . .Dirk. . . .and you can feel almost gay! . . .You should be ashamed of yourself!’ . . .Youth was gone, but she had health, courage; a boy of nine; twenty-five acres of wornout farm land; dwelling and outhouses in a bad state of repair; and a gay adventuresome spirit that was never to die.

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3 Ibid., 93.

4 Ibid., 111.

5 Ibid., 115
After Pervus’s death, Selina implements all the ideas she has had for improving his twenty-five acres. She takes over the farm, defends herself by stating that she needs to support her son and refuses to give up her dream of making the farm a success. Instead, she becomes a pioneer: first because she takes over the farm and runs it on her own and second because she plants new varieties of asparagus and hothouse tomatoes.

Many feminist historians of women on the American frontier have argued that ‘instead of freeing women from social constraints, the West isolated women from other women, heightened their vulnerability to men, and increased their domestic work load.’ Certainly, it was Selina’s sense of personal and physical isolation that caused her to mismarry the stolid Pervus DeJong and wreck her youth with hard work. Selina sees this not as a tragedy but rather as an opportunity to embrace life, the landscape, and America’s glorious future for productivity. In Selina’s world, women work harder because they do the work of both sexes, but unlike men, they can succeed at doing all sorts of work.6

In making improvements to the farm, she is helped by a loan from the wealthy and successful father of an old school friend who comes upon her peddling her vegetables in a swanky Chicago neighborhood. After careful work and years of devotion, her farm pays off handsomely, and her products are sought a year in advance at prices her poor dead husband could only dream of. She has succeeded on her own and earned enough money to pay for her son’s education as an architect.

After years of farming, Selina is self-sufficient and feels a great sense of accomplishment in making her vegetables famous. At this important moment, she is like Adam, “self reliant and self propelling.” Kristina K. Groover, states in *The Wilderness Within*:

While nature does appear as a metaphor for the spiritual realm in women writers’ texts, it is more often as a garden or other domesticated outdoor space. Mediating between untamed nature and the domestic realm, the metaphorical garden serves as an extension of both, thus suggesting the fluidity of boundaries between the temporal and spiritual worlds. Further, the substitution of the garden for the wilderness reinforces the idea that the spiritual may be located in quite ordinary spaces of everyday lives, rather than on the horizon.  

Selina finds the land beautiful and it sustains her and her family. She has reached the apotheosis of her spiritual journey, not in heading out west but by heading into her own twenty-five acres.

The conflict of the generations arises in Selina’s view of her son, Dirk DeJong, also known as So Big. She is troubled by the next generation, especially her son and his friends. Dirk embodies the material dream without the values of hard work and sacrifice. He decides to give up his profession of architecture because it would take a lifetime of hard work while earning little money to get ahead. He goes into selling bonds because he wants to make money fast to support his extravagant lifestyle; he runs around with a married woman and a fast

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8 Ibid., 18.
crowd that is involved in parties and charities and affords him many contacts. Selina believes this next generation has lost its values, as it admires capitalism strictly for material gain. She sees her son as a man with no conscience. “Ferber’s faith in pioneer values and her revulsion against postwar materialism also appealed to hundreds of thousands of American readers, many of whom had not moved to the cities, experienced the First World War and its aftermath of ‘disillusionment,’ or fled to an artistic exile in Europe.”

Ralph Poel, the young man whom Selina met upon arriving in High Prairie and whom she helps to escape the hard life of farming, returns triumphant from Europe. He is a successful sculptor, he is self-propelled and self-reliant and he has come up the hard way like Selina. She has played a part in settling the Midwest and modernizing agriculture. While she began as a pioneer woman working alongside her husband, after his death she took the brave step of running the farm on her own. “Ferber’s Selina shares the re-envisioning of the American frontier landscape and the role of women in developing that ideal.” Selina does not succumb to the material trappings of the dream but stays close to the land and her bedrock values of hard work, self-reliance and discipline. She cannot save her son from the false dream. She feels he will come up empty, and he does by losing the love of an independent woman artist who feels he does not have the integrity she


10 Ibid., 41.
is looking for. Both Selina and Ralph Poel have achieved their American Dream with hard work and discipline, and she realizes her dream of educating her son and growing fine vegetables.

_Cimarron_, written in 1929, is Edna Ferber’s first true Western. Her friend William A. White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, and his wife encouraged her to write the story of the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889, where thousands of men, women and children crossed the country in covered wagons for a chance at free land from the American government. Ferber refused, thinking it was a story that should be written by a man. Nonetheless, she was taken with the background stories, the oil rich Indians in fancy cars and her meeting with Elva Shartel Ferguson. Elva was raised in Kansas and married Thompson B. Ferguson in 1885. As a couple, they participated in three land runs and moved permanently to Watonga, Oklahoma Territory, in 1892, where they established the *Watonga Republican* newspaper. As her husband moved into Republican politics, he was appointed governor of the Oklahoma Territory in 1901, she assumed full responsibility for the paper. Edna Ferber, who stayed at Elva Shartel Ferguson’s home and took meticulous notes, was able to recover the women’s experience in this episode for her reading public. Elva states, “The wagon trip to Oklahoma, the
The founding of the paper, the description of the town, the events surrounding my family and newspaper were used in my own words as I told her the story.”

In direct contrast to the established male dominated history of the West, Edna Ferber, a Jewish woman, writes a successful epic Western. “Edna Ferber’s address of the frontier heritage, particularly the pioneer woman in Cimarron can be understood as an engagement with an existing tradition that until that time was almost entirely the province of male writers.” Although she concerned herself with how she would tell the story in a new way, “Ferber offered a new perspective on western history, one that privileged the perspectives of two groups often ignored in traditional accounts of the frontier—women and Native Americans.”

Yancey Cravat is the quintessential American hero; he stakes his claim in the new territory only to leave after it is settled and becomes too conventional. He entreats his wife to join him in the land rush by explaining what type of women make the rush, alone if they have to. “Women with iron in ‘em. Women who

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wanted land and a home. Pioneer women.”  

When Sabra’s family questions him about the type of woman that will live in this new territory, he makes a passionate, revisionist speech about the women who settled America.

It’s women like her who’ve made this country what it is. You can’t read the history of the United States, my friends . . . without learning the great story of those thousands of unnamed women . . . Good women, with a terrible and rigid goodness that comes of work and self-denial. . . .their story’s never really been told. But it’s there, just the same. And if it’s ever told straight you’ll know it’s the sunbonnet and not the sombrero that has settled this country.  

Yancey Cravat, dreamer, orator, newspaperman and lawyer, does convince his young bride, Sabra, to make the land rush to Oklahoma in 1889. As soon as she arrives, Sabra makes it clear that, “I don’t want to be a pioneer woman. . . . I can’t make things different. I liked them as they were. Comfortable and safe. . . . Let’s make it a town like Wichita. . . . with trees. . . . and people being sociable. . . . not killing each other all the time. . . . church on Sunday. . . . a school for Cim.” She fails to understand why so many men are not working. Yancey explains the American government displaced the cattlemen and the cowboys. “The free range never belonged to them really, but that they had come to think of it as theirs. . . . The range is cut up into town sites, and the town into lots, before their very eyes.

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15 Ibid., 19.

16 Ibid., 117.
Why, it must have sickened them—Killed them almost—to see it.” Yancey is the traditional questing hero, who settles the territory only to leave in search of newer, more unsettled lands. It is Yancey who brings Sabra to the wilderness, but as in all tales of the West, she wants to domesticate it and turn the wilderness into a garden and the town into a proper city like the one she left.

Sabra begins the book as a young bride who stays put and runs the newspaper and her home while her husband is away for long periods, making runs into the new territories of Cuba and Alaska, and he ultimately leaves to fight in the First World War. Sabra begins to self-actualize during his long absences, especially when she is at the helm of the paper and must make hard choices in business as well as family matters. Although young and naive, she observed early in her arrival that:

Men make such a lot of work of nothing . . . . It was her first admission that the male of the species might be fallible. . . . These last three weeks had shown her that the male was often mistaken, as a sex, and that Yancey was almost always wrong as an individual . . . Also that he was enthralled by the dramatics of any plan he might conceive, but that he was often too impatient of its mechanics to carry it through to completion. 18

She acknowledges that she enjoys the freedom of Osage and her independence from her family in Wichita, Kansas. “Sabra was emerging slowly from her role of charming little fool. By degrees she was to take more and more of a hand in the assembling of the paper’s intimate weekly items, while Yancey was

17 Ibid., 114.

18 Ibid., 107.
concerned with cosmic affairs.”19 Sabra spearheads the drive by the Osage women to create a good environment in which to raise children. She builds the weekly Oklahoma Wigwam into a daily and finally a paper with morning and afternoon editions. She begs Yancey, who is mentioned as Governor, to take the job as a way of showing her family that she made the right choice, but he has no interest in settling down or in politics. “He would go on the stump to make others Congressman and Governors, but he himself would not take office. ‘Palavering to a lot of greasy office seekers and panhandlers! Dancing to the tune of that gang in Washington! I know the whole dirty lot of them.’ ”20

Yancey returns home at pivotal moments in the book and for the historical backdrop of the novel. At first he defends Dixie Lee, the local woman of ill repute, against his wife and her group who want to run Dixie out of town. As Ferber comments, “Law in a lawless community not ten years old; a community made up for the most part, of people whose very presence there meant impatience of the old order, defiance of the conventions.”21 After one of his five-year absences, he tackles the plight of the Indians in Oklahoma with an editorial that Sabra knows will prevent him from elected office.

19 Ibid., 161.
20 Ibid., 216.
21 Ibid., 265.
Herded like sheep in a corral—no, like wild animals in a cage—they are left to rot on their reservations by a government that has taken first their land, then their self-respect, then their liberty from them. The land of the free! When the very people who first dwelt on it are prisoners! Slaves, but slaves deprived of the solace of work. What hoe have they, what ambition, what object in living! Their spirit is broken. Their pride is gone. Slothful, yes. Why not? Each month he receives his dole, his pittance. Look at the Osage Nation, now dwindled to a wretched two thousand souls. The men are still handsome, strong, vital; the women beautiful, dignified, often intelligent. Yet there they huddle in their miserable shanties like beaten animals, eating the food that is thrown them by a great—munificent—government. The government of these United States! Let them be free. Let the Red Man live a free man as the White Man lives. . . .

Yancey’s editorial is powerful and speaks to Ferber’s concern about the government’s treatment of the Native Americans. The power of this piece could make it a rallying cry for all of those excluded from the American Dream, including women.

One of the disappointments Sabra experiences in Osage is that her values clash with those of her children, the next generation. The freedom they have grown up with allows her son, Cim, to intermarry with a young Indian woman. Although at first shocked, Sabra adapts and ends up showcasing her Indian family around Washington where she lives since being elected to Congress. More difficult than Cim is her daughter, Donna. Donna sets her sights on a wealthy married man and maneuvers enough so that he leaves his wife and marries her. Their relationship is all about wealth and money and the consumption of material things, but there is no struggle for the material gain. Donna takes the model of

22 Ibid., 281.
her hard working, self-sacrificing mother and totally rejects it. She returns home from school a determined woman of eighteen. “Her mother she regarded with a kind of affectionate amusement. ‘What a rotten deal you’ve had, Sabra dear,’ she would drawl. . . . ‘Oh—you know. This being a pioneer woman and a professional Marcy and head-held-high in spite of a bum of a husband.’” 23 She tells Sabra she does not want to be a newspaper reporter. “ ‘I want to marry the richest man in Oklahoma and build a palace that I’ll hardly ever live in, and travel like royalty, and clank with emeralds.’ ” 24 Sabra believes Donna’s drive for money is misguided. Donna loathes everything about the pioneer town and spirit. Donna begs her mother to look at her actions without sentiment.

Unlike the real model, Elva Ferguson, whose husband gets appointed as governor of the Oklahoma Territory, Sabra herself, with the backing of the paper she has built over a lifetime and the connections made through women’s groups across the state, gets elected to Congress. Ferber states:

The sight of a woman on the floor of the Congressional House was still something of a novelty. Sentimental America had shrunk from the thought of women in active politics. Woman’s place was in the Home, and American Womanhood was too exquisite a flower to be subjected to the harsh atmosphere of the Assembly floor and the committee room. 25

23 Ibid., 326.
24 Ibid., 327-328.
25 Ibid., 368.
However, after a lifetime of fending for herself, Sabra does not shrink, and her oratory skills now match those of her errant husband. Her purpose is to break the glass ceiling for women and allow them their dream. As Sabra states:

If American politics are too dirty for women to take part in, there is something wrong with American politics. . . We weren’t too delicate and flowerlike to cross the plains and prairies and deserts in a covered wagon and to stand the hardships and heartbreaks of frontier life. . . but here in this land the women have been the hewers of wood and drawers of water. . . thousands of unnamed heroines with weather-beaten faces and mud-caked boots . . . alkali water . . . sun . . . dust . . . wind. . . I am not belittling the brave pioneer men but the sunbonnet as well as the sombrero has helped to settle this glorious land of ours. . . .

Yancey’s speech is now hers. Although she tried to help him get elected, starting off as the traditional devoted helpmate who goes along to support her husband in realizing his dreams, in the end, she becomes the reluctant embodiment of her own American Dream. Sabra is the Prairie Madonna who, through her hard work and discipline, rises as a woman to one of the most prominent positions in America, showcasing not only the promise of the American Dream but its realization.

26 Ibid. 369.
CHAPTER NINE

THE GIRLS AND SHOWBOAT, THE GENERATIONAL NOVELS

The Girls, 1921, is the first of Edna Ferber’s generational novels. It deals with three generations of Thrift women who live on the south side of Chicago in the years leading up to the First World War. Chronicling three generations is a device Ferber uses to explore the new freedoms, new attitudes, and new values of different generations. The Girls begins with the patriarch, Isaac Thrift, who had come to Chicago in 1836, opened a general store and then moved on to real estate and other investments. His daughter, Carrie, marries his assistant, Samuel Payson, and has two daughters. Payson absconds with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in bonds, notes, and deeds. Isaac Thrift spends his remaining days trying to make good on the debts incurred because of the embezzlement. It leads to both his and his wife’s premature deaths. His daughter, Carrie Payson, takes over the business. “Her [Carrie’s] mind marched with her father’s. The two would discuss real estate and holdings like two men. Hers was the mathematical and legal-thinking type of brain rarely found in a woman.”¹ Her two daughters, Belle and Lottie, are cared for by her spinster sister, Charlotte, who is more maternal. This allows Carrie the freedom to work and earn a living to support everyone. “She [Carrie] worked like a man, ruled the roost, was as ruthless as a

man. She was neither a good housekeeper or marketer.”

One daughter, Belle, rushes off to marry at twenty and leave home. She does not go far, she still calls her mother daily and she is required to show up for dinners on Friday nights. Lottie, years younger than Belle, does not marry and begins to assume the responsibility of running the large home as both her aunt and mother are aging and less capable. She sees this as her obligation but is conflicted with the desire to have more for herself.

Lottie’s is the generation that feels the shift in what a woman’s role can be. With one foot in the past, she is trying desperately to extricate herself from obligations to home and family, and with one foot in the future she is trying to gain some measure of self-expression and independence. At first Lottie questions her desires for freedom and a different life than that of her mother’s generation. She feels obligations to family, but her aunt admonishes her, “Lottie, you’re going to be eaten alive by two old cannibal women... You’ve got your whole life before you, live it the way you want to. Then you’ll have only yourself to blame. Don’t you let somebody else live it for you. Don’t you.”

Lottie begins to search for new avenues of self-fulfillment and self-definition. Lottie’s friendship with the female Judge Barton leads her to some quasi-social work, as she has a gift for reaching the young women who come

\[\text{2 Ibid., 64.}\]

\[\text{3 Ibid., 84.}\]
through the court system. Belle’s housekeeper’s sister is just such a young woman.
Lottie brings her home to live under the same roof as her mother and aunt. It is a brave step. “In spite of objections, Lottie made sporadic attempts to mingle in the stream of life that was flowing so swiftly past her—this new life of service and self expression into which women were entering.”

At this point, Lottie’s friends, who are all members of the Reading Club, a group they formed to improve their minds, begin to drift apart. Some leave the group for jobs in settlement work or advertising, while Lottie spends the bulk of her time chauffeuring her aunt to doctor’s appointments and her mother to rent collections for her business and marketing. When a member of the club marries at thirty-six, they reunite and one of them does a thorough evaluation of the group and their plight. Those who are not married and not working are desperately rushing to find a place where they can fit in. Beck Schaefer attacks Lottie:

A little truth wouldn’t hurt you, Lottie Payson. I suppose it wouldn’t help any, either to acknowledge that you’re a kind of unpaid nurse companion to two old women who are eating you alive!—when your friend Judge Barton herself says that you’ve got a knack with delinquent girls that would make you invaluable to her staff. . . . Well, I wouldn’t have spilled all this if Cele had been willing to tell the truth. I said we were failures and we are because we’ve allowed someone or something to get the best of us—to pile up obstacles that we weren’t big enough to tear down. We’ve all gone in for suffrage, and bleeding Belgium, and no petticoats and uplift work, and we think we’re modern. Well we’re not. We’re a past generation. We’re the unselfish softies. Watch the eighteen year olds, they’ve got the method, they’re not afraid.

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4 Ibid., 86.
Lottie is aware of the next generation’s feelings about obligation and independence through her dealings with her eighteen-year-old niece, Charley, and the young Jeannette, who she has brought home from court. Lottie feels success with Jeannie, who has thrived under her guidance and the warmth of a good home. Charley is more difficult to grasp. She has taken a business course at college and is working her way up in a department store, and she has found love with a young man who is a poet and about to go to war. Though her grandmother Carrie disapproves of both her work and her boyfriend, she is not concerned. Charley tells Lottie that if her life is limited, it is her own fault. Lottie says, “I am just the kind of person that things don’t happen to.” 6 Charley tells her that her methods for bottling up her anger are ineffectual and that she is being treated like a teenager. Here, Charley truly reveals the sense of freedom she feels, as compared to the freedom Lottie can only dream of. Charley states:

All these centuries we’ve been told to profit by the advice of our elders. What’s living for if not to experience? How can anyone know whether you’re right or wrong? Oh, I don’t mean about the small things. Any stranger can decide for you that blue is more becoming than black. But the big things—those things I want to decide for myself. I’m entitled to my own mistakes. I’ve a right to be wrong. . . the thing is to be able to say, ‘I planned this myself and my plans didn’t work. Now I’ll take my medicine. You can’t live somebody else’s life without your own getting all distorted in the effort.’ 7

5 Ibid., 111.
6 Ibid., 222.
7 Ibid., 223.
All the women in the book gear up to serve the cause of World War I, by selling bonds or wrapping bandages or heading over to France to help in anyway that they can. Although Lottie is driven by guilt, believing her mother will have a stroke in her absence, she gathers all the strength and resolve she has and heads to France to help in the war. Charley, with the confidence of her generation, chides her aunt for not setting her own course. Charley states:

You’ve let grandma dominate your life. That’s all right her wanting to, I mean, that’s human nature the older generation trying to curb the younger. But your letting her do it, that’s another thing. That’s a crime against your own generation and indicates a weakness in you not in her. The younger generation has got to rule. Those of us who recognize that and act on it, win. Those who don’t go under.  

Charley has announced that she will marry this young man from the other side of the tracks, a poet without much potential for income. When her grandmother, Carrie, tells her daughter, Belle, that she will need to put a stop to the marriage, the daughter explains she does not have the power. Charley, the third generation, takes on her grandmother without guilt and thus reveals the huge shift in the generations and their views with regard to responsibility, independence, and respect. Charley states:

You never did respect your own people—your own family. You’ve never shown respect to Lottie or to mother, or to father or to Aunt Charlotte, for that matter. So why should I expect you to respect me. I’m marrying Jesse Dick because he’s the man I want to marry. I may be making a mistake but if I am I’m willing to pay for it. At least I’ll have only myself to reproach. 

8 Ibid., 225.

9 Ibid., 265.
Everyone in this book is both felled in some way or another by a man and forced into independence because of it. Aunt Charlotte, who kissed a young soldier she cared for on the way to the Civil War, is exposed and damaged by the experience and spends the rest of her days working in her sister’s home. Carrie, betrayed by a husband who embezzled everything from her family, needs to spend the rest of her life refilling the emptied coffers and taking care of her extended family. Belle’s husband, Henry Kemp, seems the only steady man in the group until his business almost goes under because of the War. Lottie brings home her baby from France, which she raises out of wedlock because her lover was killed in the War. Charley’s poet boyfriend is also killed in the war.

This book could be considered anti-war, anti-business and anti-tradition, revealing what happens when women are left behind to clean up the mess that men make in both business and war. The slow release of restrictions for women through these three generations allows Charley to set out on her own journey. When she is not happy in the business world, she feels socially independent enough to explore dancing and joins a ballet company. Lottie, who does not take the easy way out with marriage but does take a lover, is freed up enough to bring home the baby she has had out of wedlock. The freedom of the second and third generation to strike out on their own, without sacrificing because of society’s conventional rules, allows them to discover their own happiness as part of the
American Dream. The success here is freedom, in the pursuit of happiness, in whatever form that takes.

*Showboat*, 1926, is another generational novel where all of the women, ultimately, are left to care for themselves. Showboats traveled to small Mississippi River towns where culture-starved communities had not yet caught up with the trends and shows of the big cities. Edna Ferber discovered the showboat when the producer, Winthrop Ames, was struggling in tryouts with the first Ferber/Kaufman play, *Old Man Minick*. “When theaters continued to be half empty during tryouts, Ames suggested lightly that the company hire a showboat next time and float around in search of audiences, never bothering to get off the boat.”¹⁰ Ferber traveled down South to do her research and, like much of her work, the story is based on a real showboat family, (the James Adams Floating Palace Theatre in North Carolina) and its star, a mulatta who is forced to leave the boat because of miscegenation laws.

The story of the showboat, a traveling theatre company with second-rate actors playing leading men and ladies and ingénues, is set against a backdrop of the real life melodrama of the Hawks family. The women of the family have had the benefit of Andy Hawks, the captain of the Cotton Blossom, husband to Parthenia and father to Magnolia. The women’s somewhat settled life is disrupted

when Andy Hawks accidentally drowns in the Mississippi river. His wife, Parthenia Ann Hawks (Parthy), takes over as captain, manages the boat with added responsibilities and is very successful. His daughter, Magnolia, runs away with her inheritance, her handsome gambler husband, Gaylord Ravenal, and her daughter Kim to live a tumultuous life in Chicago.

The Ravenals’ live on Gaylord’s winnings but more often than not Magnolia is alone, waiting for him, and in debt. Because of his mother-in-law’s impending visit, Ravenal leaves Magnolia for good. Out of necessity, Magnolia goes to work doing the only thing she knows how to do, sing old Negro songs that she learned as a child on board the Cotton Blossom. Raised on a boat with plenty of black help, these songs are a genuine part of her childhood even though she is white. Nobody seems to question her, and out of the need to earn a living she becomes a star in her own right. Magnolia knew that, “I must take things in hand now. I have been like a foolish young girl when I’m really quite an old married woman. . . . I must take Kim in hand now.” 11

Parthenia Ann Hawks accepted the life of the showboat when she joined her husband Captain Andy Hawks on the Cotton Blossom. Andy adored his little daughter, Magnolia, and wanted her with him for the long months that the showboat spent on the Mississippi. Parthy is a stern New England schoolteacher

who never saw herself as either a wife or a mother. Against her better judgment she ends up raising Magnolia onboard the showboat surrounded by kitchen help and actors, a detached lot of souls, many of whom were escaping the traditional life and sometimes the law for the months the boat is afloat. Magnolia resents her mother’s harsh rule and marries the first suitor who arrived, the handsome Gaylord Ravenal.

From the stern matriarchal model of Parthy, Magnolia’s escape is a small attempt at individuating, one her mother predicts will fail because Gay is a poor choice for a husband. It does fail and, again, Ferber leaves an abandoned woman to take stock and assert herself, to become independent and successful. Magnolia’s evolution as a singer of Negro songs could qualify as a woman accessing her talent and using what she has in the service of herself. Magnolia needs to care for her child as well, first in a convent school and then by paying for her training in dramatic arts.

Kim’s ability to reach the stage without personal struggle but with determination, direction and education reveals how far these three generations of women have come. She expects to have a career, she chooses one that she is passionate about, she works because she wants to, and she marries someone who supports her dream. For Kim, the American Dream is available and she has an expectation of happiness in her chosen field. Kim is married to a Broadway producer with whom she collaborates and shares a life, a dedication to her art,
and a family. It is a marriage of equals. Kim’s larger dream comes true at the hands of her dead grandmother, who ran the boat so well after her husband’s death that Kim inherits a half million dollars which she uses to start her own theater company. Kim calls it The American Theater.

The evolution of the Hawks women on board the showboat highlights the generational gains for American women. Whereas Magnolia manages to leave her dominant mother, although only with the first man who arrives, her daughter Kim, secure in her upbringing at a convent school, finds her way to Broadway musicals without much struggle. The difference in careers between Kim, the granddaughter, and Magnolia, the daughter, who literally fights her way to freedom, is generational, and the gain in independence between generations is what Ferber was trying to highlight.

In each generation, the women are successful. Although Parthy and Magnolia are forced to work with the hands they are dealt, Kim, the third generation, does not need to rebel and in her the expectation of success is a birthright. She is neither limited by society, as she has benefitted from the gain in independence, nor is she limited by the family obligation, because her family suggests a new paradigm. Although Ferber muses about the loss of the natural actress, one that is plucked from oblivion and rises to the top of the stage by the sheer power of her own ability, she does make clear that the achievement of the dream is the result of hard work. But with Kim she has removed the struggle
toward creative accomplishment, and for Ferber, as with many other writers of upward mobility stories, the struggle is where the excitement is.

Kim had none of those preliminary hardships and terrors and temptations, then, that are supposed to beset the path of the attractive young woman who would travel the road to theatrical achievement. Her success had been instantaneous and sustained.

She was intelligent, successful, workmanlike, intuitive, vigorous, adaptable. She was almost the first of this new crop of intelligent, successful, deft, workmanlike, intuitive, vigorous, adaptable young women of the theatre. There was about her—or them—nothing of genius, of greatness, of the divine fire. But the dramatic critics of the younger school who were too late to have seen past genius in its heyday and for whom the theatrical genius of their day was yet to come, viewed her performance and waxed hysterical, mistaking talent and intelligence and hard work and ambition for something more rare. 13

Edna Ferber, who had many Broadway successes, including Stage Door, which tells the story of young actresses trying to make it in New York, goes on to say that the performances of these young stars are “Right. As right as an engineering blueprint.” 14 Magnolia is a success—she has managed to educate her daughter, and she is not brought down by her marriage. Parthenia is a success—she has managed the Cotton Blossom as an effective businesswoman after the death of her husband and left a large inheritance for her granddaughter. Kim, the beneficiary of everyone’s hard work, has risen to accomplish her dream on the shoulders of two generations of strong, independent women.

13 Ibid., 173.

14 Ibid., 173.
CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

Edna Ferber’s journey as a writer and her professional and monetary success during her lifetime serve as a model of what the American Dream could look like for a woman in the early decades of the twentieth century. Ferber incorporated the attributes of the New Woman into her novels *Dawn O’Hara* and *Fanny Herself* and into the *Emma McChesney* series of short stories, *Emma McChesney & Co., Roast Beef Medium and Personality Plus*. She revisited history in *So Big* and *Cimarron* by reimagining historical narratives that gave women recognition for their important contributions to American history and the settlement of the West. Her novels *The Girls* and *Show Boat* told the stories of three generations of women, beginning in the late eighteen hundreds through World War I, and highlighted the expanded opportunities and the dramatic change for women that occurred between the generations in this progressive era. Her women characters triumph in their struggle to gain access to the promise of the American Dream for themselves and their families.

In 1925, when addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, DC, President Calvin Coolidge said, “The Business of America is Business, . . . We make no concealment of the fact that we want wealth, but there are many other things that we want very much more. . . . The chief ideal of the American people is idealism. I cannot repeat too often that America is a nation of
idealists.” Although Coolidge was philosophically and literally addressing men only, to Edna Ferber, the “Business of America” was also women’s business. She chronicled original businesswomen, and she was an archetypical businesswoman herself. She was a writer who mastered short stories, novels, and plays, and she was a successful businesswoman in selling her literary output to the vehicles of mass culture—magazines, monthly book clubs, and Hollywood. She is considered one of the most successful writers in Hollywood in terms of the number of her works that have been translated to film.

In much of what Edna Ferber wrote she celebrated the triumph of the spirit over materialism. After the climb to succeed in whatever business her female character has chosen, the success is not the triumph of greed, but one that is tempered so that the character can be released to embrace more spiritually uplifting and self-fulfilling goals. Their idealism allows these women to use their financial gains in the service of themselves, their families and their community. The fight to succeed is still present, but it is softened by feminine intuition and maternal instinct resulting in a more feminized dream with a solid understanding of life’s disappointments and challenges. Ferber wanted to modulate the mad grab for success and materialism that was sweeping the country during the early years of her writing, 1911 to 1930. She helped the reader remember the bedrock

values that made America great and how those values could be incorporated to advance a greater good.

Edna Ferber nourishes and supports her women in two significant ways. First, they are successful even if that success at times is only the freedom to pursue their own happiness. This creates a strong model of self-actualization to which her large audience could aspire. Secondly, she chronicles unexplored areas for women’s work and fulfillment. Again, this expands the range of opportunities and creates models for her women readers. Her work is emphatically didactic because her voice remains inside the novels, and it is plainly evident what Ferber wants the reader to think and feel. Her characters have little internal voice: everything about them is learned from the author. These are engaging, purposeful stories that are well written. The regional images are painted in great detail, which makes them hard to extricate from their time and place. The huge sweep of melodrama and landscape in the pioneer stories of So Big and Cimarron and subsequent regional novels prompted critics to say that Ferber was writing screenplays for Hollywood. The limited interior voices of the characters helped in the translation to film.

In her stories and novels, Ferber demonstrates that a woman can be comfortable and successful in every profession, breaking the corporate glass ceiling as well as running the family farm. Each of her characters, after exploring and resolving the conflict between obligation to family and community and self-
actualization, are allowed to pursue an independent dream. Emma McChesney loves her work, and the challenge to keep the business going is vital for herself and her psyche. Magnolia Hawks in Show Boat returns to the Cotton Blossom, after her mother’s death, and takes over as captain. She has a love of the river that she could not find elsewhere, and it gives her solace and protection in her remaining years. Carrie Payson in The Girls runs the family business out of necessity but Lottie Payson, her daughter, is freed up enough from society’s strict conventions to bring home and raise her child born out of wedlock. Dawn O’Hara grows from a newspaperwoman to an author and feels fulfilled and independent. Fanny Brandeis in Fanny Herself after a stunning success in mail order marketing, decides to follow her passion of sketching those oppressed by society. Sabra Cravat in Cimarron takes all that she has learned during the struggle to settle the Oklahoma territory and brings it to the Congress of the United States as the first woman’s voice, clearing the way for other women to follow.

Edna Ferber herself embodied the American Dream; all of her characters are semi-autobiographical. She became a successful writer with a large Park Avenue apartment, invitations to exclusive dinner parties, opening nights and weekends in the country with front-page celebrities. Her friends included Noel Coward, George and Dorothy Kaufman, Richard and Dorothy Rogers, Alfred and Lynn Lunt, and many other cultural celebrities. Ferber mingled with the most exciting and talented group of people in New York: theater critics, newspapermen,
and authors of Broadway plays, popular songs, and Hollywood movies. She was financially able to take care of herself, her mother, and her extended family. Like all self-made people, she believed that America was the greatest country on earth, and her trajectory from a lower middle class girl without a college education to a best-selling author was living proof of it.

This thesis explored how Edna Ferber's Midwestern roots nurtured her positive view of women and how she employed these small town settings to explore the conflicts holding women back from the realization of their dreams. Additionally, it has clarified how Ferber was able to articulate what the New Woman aspired to and to model what she looked like at home, in the workforce and in the community. Finally, it has explained how the new media of her time expanded the audiences for Ferber's work and the significant cultural authority of her female characters.

All that Ferber lived through as a child and all that she aspired to as an adult were embodied in the women characters she created between 1911 and 1930. Edna Ferber wanted nothing less for the women she wrote about and wrote for than what she achieved for herself, namely the opportunity through hard work and ingenuity to achieve the American Dream in a way appropriate to a woman.
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