

Bess Streeter Aldrich: the Dreams Are All Real

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higher education would also increase the book's value for general readers and educational historians.

Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real, by Carol Miles Petersen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. xix, 237 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY CHERYL ROSE JACOBSEN, WARTBURG COLLEGE

Drawing on Bess Streeter Aldrich's extensive professional writings, private correspondence, public interviews, day journals, and ledgers, as well as on interviews with Aldrich's children and friends, biographer Carol Petersen produces an affectionate portrait of the popular, early twentieth-century midwestern writer. The Bess Streeter Aldrich who emerges was Victorian in her sensibilities, shrewd in business, reflective about her craft, and ambitious. Petersen also argues that the writer's life can be seen in the written legacy—both of which can be understood as "exemplars of the Romantic Realist" (xvii).

Born in Cedar Falls, Iowa, in 1881, Aldrich drew extensively on the pioneer heritage of Iowa and Nebraska and of her own family for novels and short stories about the settling of the Midwest. Petersen identifies Aldrich's paternal grandfather as the "archetypal pioneer" of her novel *Song of Years*. Similarly, Aldrich's maternal ancestors reappear in *A Lantern in Her Hand*. In both instances, the "family histories-cum-legend blend the reality and romance that Aldrich confronts in her stories" (5). The "reality" part of this equation was the result of Aldrich's extensive research in primary accounts and historical documents prior to writing a novel. For *Song of Years*, Aldrich used documents collected by a Cedar Falls local historian of early settlement days, her grandfather's letters from his years as a state legislator, and oral histories of family members. Aldrich undertook similar historical research for *A Lantern in Her Hand*, although she solicited the information through the medium of radio following a talk about "The Pioneer in Fiction."

By the 1920s and 1930s, Aldrich's popularity grew among a partisan readership who preferred her emphasis on "such basic values as home, love, and family" over fiction usually characterized as naturalistic or, at least, focused on the darker aspects of life. Most of Aldrich's writing appeared in magazines such as the *American Magazine*, *Ladies Home Journal*, or *McCalls*. She noted that her success depended directly on her study of the market and what would sell, especially to women readers (41). In the decades of world war, urbanization, and depression, fiction that affirmed "decency" and the "safety

and solidity" of past values and rural life provided escape from the pressure of modern life for many readers (90, 37). Petersen graphically contextualizes Aldrich's success and business acumen: in 1919, her income from writing was \$1,575 at a time when bread cost ten cents a loaf (33); in 1935, at a peak of popularity, the \$2,000 per week Aldrich commanded for screenplay writing contrasted with the \$27 per month a farm laborer earned (129).

Beginning in 1917, Aldrich actively marketed her fiction to the film industry, which she believed would ensure her financial security. Aldrich was not successful, however, until 1941, with the production of *Cheers for Miss Bishop*, based on the 1933 novel about a midwestern woman who devotes herself to teaching for fifty years. As with other of her short stories and novels that provided an alternative view of life from the actual contemporary situation of war or upheaval, the film won acclaim as a "tender and touching piece of Americana" (181).

Unfortunately, Petersen does not offer rigorous literary criticism of Aldrich's writings, discussion of how the body of her work fits with popular romance or magazine writing, or much historical context apart from brief economic examples. In making the case for Aldrich's historically based fiction, Petersen cites only two historians of women's experience, but not Glenda Riley, whose *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* treats experiences similar to those in Aldrich's fiction. In her initial discussion of Aldrich's literary identity, Petersen indicates that she will explore the romance and realism of her writing. She does so only through plot summaries or observations about the origin of a character. However, one could reasonably expect from reading the biography that Aldrich may have both followed conventional formulas for magazine writing and broken with them in her rigorous historical research for her novels and in her resistance to stereotypical depictions of rural or small-town life and people. At its best, Petersen's biography portrays a woman in touch with her family roots and traditional midwestern values, reflective of both the craft of writing and the business of publication, and ambitious for an audience that shared her sense of pioneer and basic human values.

In Search of Susanna, by Suzanne L. Bunkers. Singular Lives: The Iowa Series in Autobiography. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. xiv, 251 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$19.95 paper.

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The tracing of family roots is always, to some degree, the attempt at a fuller understanding of the self. Suzanne Bunkers engages in a much

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