

Few have ever heard of her. Names such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck are often remembered as writers of American literature, but Edna Ferber is little known for her writings. A Pulitzer Prize winner and author of several plays and novels later adapted for movies and television, Ferber's writings have been recognized, but the author was left with little renown.

Ferber was primarily a newspaper journalist in her early years. Her high school senior essay had impressed the editor of the *Appleton Daily Crescent*, the local newspaper, and was offered a job as a reporter. At nineteen, she interviewed Harry Houdini. Later on, she worked for the *Milwaukee Journal*, where she had been overworked to exhaustion. During her recovery from anemia, she had written her first short story and novel. She soon began to write prolifically, gaining national attention for a series of stories based on a character named Emma McChesney.

One of Ferber's lesser-known novels included *Come and Get It*, a story of a Wisconsin family making its way up to fame and fortune. Beginning with the experiences of two young lumberjacks and ending with their great-grandchildren, the story was a chronology of four generations.

The first half of the novel centered on Barney Glasgow and his friend, Swan Bostrom, as boys working at the Iron Ridge lumber camps. Barney worked his way up from being a lumberjack to owning the lumber yards and earning an enormous fortune. However, Barney, fifty-three years old, fell in love with Swan's nineteen-year-old granddaughter, Lotta. He found that his own son, Bernie, was to marry Lotta, and a brutal fight between father and son soon followed. Bitter and heartbroken, the father very soon died in an boat explosion, and his son inherited his vast sums of wealth.

The second half of the book was about Bernie's new life with Lotta and their experiences during the World War I and post-war era. The couple lived in high society at New York and London until the Wall Street crash brought the family back to Wisconsin.

*Giant*, one of Edna Ferber's best-selling books, was made into a movie in 1956, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean. The story was about a Virginian bride married to a wealthy and powerful Texan cattle rancher, Jordan Benedict. Leslie Benedict, the main character, had visited Texas for the first time, and would live there for the rest of her life.

Her new home, Reata Ranch, was a completely different world for her, and she was surprised to find herself under restrictions created by Texan society and her husband's sister, Luz. However, Luz is killed in a horse riding accident. Leslie almost immediately realized that she was finally free from Luz's binding and made changes in her lifestyle. She and Jordan had two children. The first, a boy, was named Jordan Benedict Fourth. The second was a girl, and although Leslie chose the name of Claire, everybody came to call her Luz.

The son, nicknamed Jordy, was not a cattleman like his father; he instead wanted to study to become a doctor. Luz, however, was rugged and much like her father, but was often neglected as a girl. She began making improvements on the ranch with her knowledge of newer, more advanced techniques. Wishing Jordy to be the heir to the ranch, their father Jordan would later realize that he could not force his dreams upon his children.

Edna Ferber won the Pulitzer Prize with her novel, *So Big*. The story is about a young woman, Selina Peake who had moved to a Dutch farming village in Illinois after her father's death. She had become a schoolteacher for the farmers' children, the closest of which was named Roelf Pool.

Selina later agreed to tutor a man, Pervus DeJong, with whom she subsequently married. However, he was a farmer, and marrying a farmer meant marrying the soil they lived on. The couple struggled to survive with their poor crops and soon bore a son named Dirk, whom Selina nicknamed Sobig. Pervus soon died of sickness, and mother and son were forced to survive on their own.

Selina, going out to the Haymarket to sell her vegetables, made little money, and she turned to peddling door-to-door. While stopping at the last house, a policeman caught her peddling without a license. However, the resident of the house, Julie Palmer, recognized Selina as her old friend. Julie loaned Selina money to rebuild her farm, and in ten years Selina finally paid off the loan.

Dirk was sent to college, where he had discovered his interest in architecture. He became an architect, but quit the occupation, believing it would not have a wealthy future. He became a wealthy seller of war bonds. Discontent with his success and looking for a woman to marry, he fell in love with an artist, Dallas O'Mara. She, however, did not wish to marry Dirk because she valued a man who suffered and fought through his battles in life.

Roelf Pool, now a famous sculptor, returned to Chicago and professed his gratitude toward Selina, whom he had learned the meaning beauty from. Roelf, Selina, and Dallas had found happiness in their lives, while Dirk, believing that money equaled happiness, was left an unhappy and discontent man.

The novels, *Come and Get It*, *Giant*, and *So Big* shared several common themes. One major theme illustrated by all three of the novels was the contrast between upper and lower class societies. Each of the novels took place in a different setting in the United States, each with its rich and poor. The poor were often depicted as earnest, innocent victims. In *Come and Get It*,

Swan Bostrom remained a lumberjack of little wealth or fortune, soon to be taken over by machinery. The younger generations, however, used their inherited wealth to buy luxuries. "...he allowed his pale glance to travel the rich room in which they sat, and that glance encompassed unseen yacht, horses, houses, jewels..."(p.465)

The theme of the large gap between social classes was very evident in *Giant*. Mexicans and Native Americans were seen as inferiors, and were often segregated and forced to put up with severe conditions. "The floor of the little wood and adobe hut was broken so that you actually could see the earth over which it stood. Rats must come through those gaps, Leslie thought, looking at the squirming infant. Rats and mice and every sort of awful creeping thing."(p.159) The rich Benedict family, however, lived in a huge house and were treated practically like gods. Private jets transported wealthy Texans from region to region, across millions of acres of barren desert land.

The differences between the life of a poor farmer and a successful businessman were vividly described throughout *So Big*. Farmers, who labor day and night, put their blood and sweat into every crop grown, for only a small wage. Although they were often portrayed as idiotic, farmers were also caring and helpful to each other. The upper class, however, were often described as "rubber stamps", each one alike. One needed to flatter others in order to get ahead.

Pretense and superficiality was also a major theme in Ferber's stories. A rich family was expected to act in a certain way; their every move watched closely. The family of Bernie, Lotta, and their children in *Come and Get It* acted very superficially, caring much about their social status and wealth. For example, Lotta had decided to take French lessons in order to impress people who did not know French. At the same time, she started planning a larger dinner party.

However, Bernie was opposed to the idea. “ ‘...Lot of people squawking around, and gobbling food. What for?...’ ‘That’s society,’ said Lotta, very concisely.”(p.363)

The superficiality of Texas was a constant theme throughout *Giant*, with the entire state obsessed with being big. Everything was huge in order to cover up their true littleness. The masking of their ill treatment toward workers was evident with Jordan’s objections to his wife leaving the house to visit the local Mexicans. Texans such as Luz were shocked even at the thought of Leslie walking. “‘People don’t walk in Texas. Only Mexicans.’”(p.153)

The characters, Dirk and Paula, were embodiments of superficiality in *So Big*. The two had given up their lives for wealth and eventually paid the price. Dirk, who worked to be an architect, decided the job did not make enough money and instead became a war bonds salesman. Paula, however, was more miserable than he. Although she loved Dirk and would have married him, she chose instead to marry a rich man whom she did not love. However, keeping close to Dirk and secretly maneuvering his success, she continued to love him while Dirk turned away and sought other women. Because of their superficiality and addiction to money, the two individuals could find no happiness.

Edna Ferber’s characters often had the similar characteristics. The main characters in both *Giant* and *So Big* included strong female main characters who had married into realms different from their own. The women learn to love their new surroundings, and soon stop at nothing to improve their lives. Leslie of *Giant* was overwhelmed by the extreme, and perhaps savage, culture of Texas. After Luz’s death, she decided that she would take charge of the household. Leslie was clearly the hero in the novel; the Virginian who saw through the fake toughness of the giant Texan men, women, and culture.

*So Big*'s Selina, lover of beauty, was also the obvious hero for the first half of the novel. Selina had taught her students valuable lessons of beauty during her time as a teacher. As wife of Pervus DeJong, she was a much more intelligent farmer than her husband. With the Pervus's death, Selina proved her boundless strength when she ventured into the Haymarket and attempted to keep herself and her son alive. She took charge of the farm, using the latest techniques to maximize production and quality. The use of those techniques eventually made her a successful farmer.

The characters of *Come and Get It* were rather dry and commonplace. Neither the males nor the females would be able to accomplish the feats done by the men and women of Ferber's other novels. In fact, the main characters, Bernie and Lotta, seemed to handle their money quite badly compared to the mastery of Bernie's late father Barney.

Each of the novels shared characters who had gotten in the way of some kind of progress, and somehow gotten killed. Although it may seem sick to think that a person's death could cause another person's happiness, all three of the novels presented the exact point. The death of Barney Glasgow in *Come and Get It* allowed his son to marry Lotta and to live a comfortable life. Luz's death in *Giant* was immediately recognized as an opportunity for Leslie to take charge of both the Benedict house and her own marriage to Jordan. Leslie used her new status and position to change the face of Texas and to add aspects of beauty to the ranch. Pervus's death in *So Big* changed the future of the entire family. His death led to events such as Selina going to the Haymarket and meeting her old friend, Julie. "Then, involuntarily, she wondered if this day would ever have occurred, had Pervus lived."(p.254)

The settings of Edna Ferber's stories ranged across the map. Her novels each written based on a particular region of America, she describes each of the aspects of society in full

detail. The lumber yards of Iron Ridge in *Come and Get It* were described expertly, almost as though Ferber herself had lived there as a child. The Texan atmosphere, especially with its heat and prevailing winds, was painted with words as masterfully as a painter would on a canvas. In *So Big*, the small farm town is, like the other stories, not only about described. It is also the town's everyday lives and flaws in the American system that Ferber takes close attention to. The world of Texas continued to show great segregation, bigotry, and an enormous capitalist economy in *Giant*, where the rich land owners used dishonest tactics to hustle more land from its owners.

The United States, however, continued to represent a land of opportunity, where anybody could make his way up. Barney Glasgow in *Come and Get It*, for example, moved up from doing simple chores for the lumber camps of Iron Ridge to eventually running Iron Ridge and earning huge sums of money. The man who had once worked for Jordan at Reata Ranch in *Giant*, Jett Rink, left and began his own rival business. He made his way up to eventually taking control of part of Reata Ranch land. The story of *So Big* focused much on a woman's climb from a poor, struggling farmer to a successful farmer whose crops were sold a month in advance. Her son's journey toward wealth and high society, with the help of Paula, showed that connections and schemes could get a person to any rank in American society.

Edna Ferber's three novels, *Come and Get It*, *Giant*, and *So Big*, were similar in numerous ways, possibly due to the common styles they were written with. Each of the novels began with an extremely illustrative, descriptive, and confusing chapter which flashed back to the actual beginning of the story. Each book is written much like a chronology of the events in a person's life. The most important events were described in great detail. When there was little or no action, the lapsed time was quickly mentioned. The sense of time therefore seemed very

distorted, stretched out during certain parts while other parts received little acknowledgment and were nodded off often nonchalantly.

Each of novels presented very musical and melodious writing, sometimes reminiscent of Edgar Allen Poe. Much of this type of writing was used in *Giant*. “Luz and Jordan. Luz talking, talking, Jordan placating. Buzzbuzzbuzz. Mumblemumblemumble. On and on. Defiantly she put on robe and slippers and slip-slapped down to the source of the sound.”(p.190)

Edna Ferber had written a collection of books portraying the hearts and lives of America. Her books, although having negative meaning towards the faults of the American culture, at the same time embrace the nation for its diversity. Her messages were often simple: that beauty made living worthwhile. Ferber’s writing was indeed beautiful, and although she is not well-remembered, she had at least found her life worthwhile.