

# Maurine Whipple's Story of The Giant Joshua

*as told to Maryruth Bracy and Linda Lambert*

*When Ernest Hemingway's FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS was on the national best-seller lists in 1941, so was Maurine Whipple's THE GIANT JOSHUA, a 637-page novel about the settling of the Utah Dixie Mission in the 1860s. The novel, which won the Houghton-Mifflin prize in creative writing, received mixed reviews, but essentially was well received, except in Utah. In a cover story in the SATURDAY REVIEW for January 4, 1941, Ray B. West, Jr. said, "The book as a whole . . . makes excellent readings, and it catches one side of the Mormon story neglected in Vardis Fisher's 'Children of God' . . . , and that is the tenderness and sympathy which existed among a people dogged by persecution and hardships, forced to battle an inclement nature for every morsel of food they ate, and to struggle for every moment of genuine happiness. In this interview-story, Ms. Whipple recounts some of her experiences before, during and after the writing of THE GIANT JOSHUA.*

I had a girlfriend and ever since I knew her when she was in the eighth grade, she always said, "I'm going to be a writer. I'm going to be a steady contributor to *Cosmopolitan* when I'm thirty years old." I never said that because I didn't think I was good enough. I wasn't one of those people who say, "I'm going to be a writer."

I was interested in writing, but I never dreamed that anyone from St. George, Utah could ever write anything that anyone would want to read. I just didn't think that anyone in the whole world would want to publish anything written in St. George, so I thought maybe I could do something with teaching or playwriting or drama. I said to myself, well, good heavens, only smart people wrote books. I never could pronounce words. I was always saying things like *pitchurescu* [picturesque] and things like that.

The last year I taught school was up in Idaho in a primitive community. I got appendicitis and to recuperate I went into the county seat and got a room in a hotel and stayed there a couple of weeks. I amused myself, as I always have done, by writing something. When I started writing, I never knew what it was going to turn out to be. I still don't. It's not a very disciplined way of doing it. You know, there are two kinds of writing. There's the art and there's the craft. The people are lucky who learn the craft but I never had a chance to do that. All I know I was born knowing and it's more or less an art that you're born with. Anyway, this turned out to be a short novel of about 30,000 words called "Beaver Dam Wash."

At a writers conference in Boulder, Colorado, the critic John Peale Bishop singled me out from other writers of first novels. Bishop and I — and I'll never

forget it — we sat on the back steps of the fraternity house where he was staying that summer until four o'clock in the morning talking. He told me that out of all the first novels he'd ever read, mine was the only one that was funny. And it was unforced humor. I hadn't tried to be funny. He also said there was no breast-beating in it. Most autobiographical novels, first novels, are just full of how tough the world's been and you beat your breast and cry aloud to the stars and all that. Most beginning writers are pretty melodramatic. Well, this wasn't about *me* at all. It had nothing of me in it except the country, and he couldn't get over that. He told me that I had this innate gift and that it was the only humor he had ever seen that was absolutely unforced. I didn't even know it was funny. He also told me that I could be one of the greatest women writers of my time, *if* I had a little help. He told me that I would have to have something like a decent environment and some encouragement. I had to have people. In other words, I couldn't be beaten down all the time. He said that if I could have peace of mind, food, and a place to live . . . , but of course, I've never had any of that. That's been the trouble.

Ford Maddox Ford was at the conference and was impressed to ask "first refusal rights" on "Beaver Dam Wash" and took the manuscript to Houghton-Mifflin in Boston. Ferris Greenslet, the man that *Giant Joshua* was dedicated to, became my editor there. He was the vice-president of Houghton-Mifflin. I was told he was the best editor in the United States at that time. And I guess he'd be one of the best in the world.

An editor can mean a lot to you. You see, you can't see the forest for the trees. Even when you put your stuff in the ice box and let it cool and go back a month or two later, you still can't see everything you should see, the way an outsider can. That's why an editor is worth his weight in gold. It isn't everybody who can read the first two or three chapters of a work or even the first draft and see the potential; in other words, see what can be created as a whole from a very small part. It takes a very special kind of imaginative empathy to do it. Greenslet was an old man then; his younger days had been spent with writers like Gertrude Atherton and Willa Cather. Well, you see, those were the days when women writers were rare in this country and when writing as an art had a place and a woman writer was looked up to.

Greenslet thought I was so young that it wouldn't matter if I made a lot of money or not. I never, never, never could make him understand that the West was not still full of wild Indians. He wouldn't come as far as Chicago; he always said there was nothing to see. But Greenslet wrote to me and said he'd give me a contract on this beginning book, this little book. "But it's got to be made a little bit longer," he said. I'd have to write another chapter. I'd have to drum it up, pad it, and I didn't want to do that. He said, "It's better to launch a young writer on a longer book — it's better for your career." So I wrote back and told him I'd had this idea for *The Giant Joshua* as long as I could remember. He asked me if I could write a synopsis of it, so I did. I've still got it. It's the synopsis of the three generations. What I was interested in was the evolution of the Mormon idea, and I'd had that in mind, including the plot, ever since I was in grade school. So I sent it to him. He said, "Will you write us a chapter?"

Some of the old people were alive then — Uncle Charlie Seegmiller was 95, Aunt Jane Blake was 90 something — and I just went and talked to them.



I got so immersed in that era — reading everything and wandering the hills and sitting upon the red hills and visualizing everything — that it was almost as if I had lived through it myself.

Anyway, I wrote the first chapter almost the way it exists today. In fact, I remember I started the first sentence by saying something about Clory moving on the black lava rock and finding it still warm although it was the first of December. I sent this back to him and he wired back. He said, “There’s such a tremendous difference between what you’ve done in ‘Beaver Dam Wash’ and what you’ve done in this that we’d rather start with *The Giant Joshua*.” He said “Beaver Dam Wash” was infantile compared to this other.

I never knew that Houghton-Mifflin had a literary fellowship. They offer a sum of money — it’s \$2,500 now, it was \$1,500 then — to an unknown writer on an unknown book. They gamble it, and they give you a percentage of the royalties. I sent in character studies plus a complete synopsis.

I went up to the butcher at Mathis Market and I begged butcher paper. I cut it in sheets. Finally, I used to go up to the newsstand and get mill ends. In front of my desk, I had each character. Like Abijah. I’d have what he looked like when the book started, everything about him. If he had ingrown toenails, I put it down. I put down what he must have been thinking about, what he was like in his youth, where he came from, did he have any brothers and sisters, what made him tick. And then, as the story went on, I would put how he changed, why he turned into what he was.

So I sent in the part of my book and he wrote back and said that he was positive I was fellowship material and wanted me to quit my job. Everybody who’d ever known me had a fit. My father just told me I was wasting my

time writing when I could make good money. He was a carpenter, he had a family, and he didn't have much to live on — nobody did in St. George. It was always a poor town. And everybody thought I was crazy because I'd had to work so hard to get through school and at last I had a chance to have a little money, to live a little, and I was throwing it all away for a pipe dream. They could not understand that writing was something that I loved doing.

My folks never have accepted the fact that my writing amounted to anything. My father died a year ago and he'd been mad all his life. He said, "You could teach school." When I came home from New York, by father said, "Well, it's a vulgar book." You remember those books in the old days, when the saints were always saints and the villains were always villains. Writing today isn't in the romantic vein at all. It's realistic writing; it's a lot better. In those days they made everything up.

I went through an awful lot just for a chance to apply for the fellowship. I used to teach tap-dancing after school was out and I'd do my research in the morning and then I'd work at night and lots of times I'd work all night long. I discovered that the best stuff came to me when I was so exhausted I could no longer think logically and I'd go to bed. And right when I was dozing off, then the words would start coming. I never analyzed it, but I know now that it's the subconscious that writes for you. I didn't know what it was; I just knew that the real creative stuff that I didn't have to dig for, that I knew was right, came to me when I was half-asleep, when my conscious mind no longer functioned.

Anyway, by spring I think I weighed less than a hundred pounds. I didn't have enough to eat. I worked in a cold room all night long, wrapped up in blankets with a hot pad draped on me. My hands would get stiff with cold and I couldn't push the pencil. I wrote longhand because it's easier for me to think like that. To save me time they arranged for me to send each chapter back to Greenslet. Every time I'd write a chapter I'd get an immediate response from Greenslet. He'd say, "Here's the way I test writing ability and sentence structure. I stick a pen in the middle of a page and if a sentence bleeds, then it isn't good rhetoric. But if it holds together, if it doesn't bleed where I stick my pen, then it's all right no matter how long it is." And he had another way of saying don't be too flowery: "The more the marble wastes, the more the statue grows." I learned a great deal from him. Well, after each chapter, he'd say, "This is better than the one before." Finally in February they began to grade. He said, "Give up your job, I'm sure you're going to win this."

Well, everybody told me I was crazy. I was just inundated with letters and personal visits and phone calls from people who told me I was absolutely out of my mind. I mean, for giving up a sure thing because a thing like this just wasn't heard of. If you wanted to be a writer, you spent ten years struggling.

At that time we didn't have a Western Union in St. George, and nobody did any long-distance calling. I think it was June 14, 1938 and the phone rang. It was Western Union calling from Cedar City and the man read me this long telegram over the phone and it said, "Congratulations, you are the winner of this year's Houghton-Mifflin Fellowship." I don't know how many entries there were, but an awful lot, and they were from all over the world. It was quite a thing to win it, but nobody in my family was excited about it or thought anything about it. Nobody in town. I wasn't even mentioned in the local paper. You see, it was something that was unheard of. If you'd have gotten a story in the

*Relief Society Magazine*, that would have been a great thing, or even a paragraph in the *Deseret News*, but nobody knew it existed, nobody knew what it was.

Anyway, they insisted that I come east. So I went east and it was something I'll never, never forget. I wanted to have some fun. But to Greenslet and the others, they could only speak of their stable of writers. I'd worked terribly hard all my life and I hadn't had a chance to play. They couldn't see that. All they could see was that I was a potential — well in the first place, a curiosity. Also I was a potential money-maker. Also, I had a talent. To people like that, if you have a talent, that's all that counts. But it wasn't all that counted to me. I wanted to finish the book but what I wanted more was to get married and have a big family. Or at least a family. And have a little fun in my life. That didn't mean a thing to Greenslet. That would have been wasted energy. It was just two opposite poles of thought.

While I was writing my book I lived on \$50 a month. What Greenslet did was to tell me that they would pay \$50 for each chapter I wrote. Well, gosh, one of my chapters, by the time I got through with it, took at least a month, and that meant sometimes writing around the clock. It was a thing he never understood. Because he didn't realize that I looked up every single word, every historical reference. Even the botany and the biology and all that. It seemed to me that if I created an era, I had to be true to it. So I had to look up costumes and clothes, even the dialect they used. Well, it took a long time.

On the day I wrote the last word, I rushed into the street; I'd finished the book and I expected stars to crash and comets to blaze and nothing happened. The "spit and whittle" gang looked up and said, "Well, there's that fool woman with another mental aberration."

I had a tough time, a really tough time, before it was published because they had to have a photograph of me that looked like a writer, and I couldn't get one taken. But finally, after struggling over it for three weeks, the photographer and I did get something out that looked, well, human. I sent it to Boston with the explanation that having my photograph taken was like wrestling with Satan on the mountaintop. The publishers wired back that it looked to them as if Satan had won!

When the day came for publication, I had to go east for the big autograph party. I claim I'm the only person who went from St. George to Boston by bus and back again and lived to tell about it! I had to go at my own expense, too. I tried to get out of it but they wouldn't let me. I couldn't make them understand that I needed every cent of that money. Well, I went east expecting to make \$3,000. To get through the three years it had taken me to finish *The Giant Joshua*, I had had to borrow \$2,000. I told Greenslet before I made the trip that I owed \$2,000 and it had to be paid out of the first money I got. When I got to New York, here came a letter that had been forwarded to St. George and forwarded again to New York, telling me I had only made \$2,000. Also, on the day the book was published, my dad hornswaggled the postmaster in St. George to give him the first copy, and I never knew what had happened to it until a long time afterward. When I got to Houghton-Mifflin they gave me a check for \$2,000 and I turned around and wrote every bit of it out in checks. Within an hour I had a book published and I was completely broke. They had to give me the money to go to New York. The whole world fell in on my head.

In New York, I changed hotels twice because I was in the papers too much. There'd be just mobs. All the maids and the bell hops and everybody else would want autographed copies. Complete strangers would stop me on Fifth Avenue; they'd see my picture in the paper and wanted an autographed copy. Well, you see, everybody thought I was rich. And I had to give this lecture in the literature-of-the-day class at Columbia in order to get enough money to come home on. Then, of course, there was some money after that. But then when the money did start to come in, the next year, my sister's husband was in an accident and crushed his spine. So I took them over with what money I made for the next ten years.

One of the fan letters I got was from the great-great-grandson of Brigham Young. He worked at a bank in Berkeley. He said, "I've been awaiting the Great American Novel and you've given it to us. But the only thing I can't understand is how so old a woman could have written so big a book." Well, he thought I'd been raised with the pioneers. He thought I must be quite over a hundred.

A critic in Chicago (I got some awfully funny reactions) — Fanny Butcher, the famous critic — she was quite an old gal when she wrote this. She said she couldn't understand how anybody could talk like that about polygamy without a personal experience. She said that the only conclusion she could reach was that I must have been born experienced because I had given a keyhole view of polygamy.

Sterling North — he's a writer, he does children's books — wrote a review. You know, my book gets to some men; it makes some men mad, just furious; they relate to Abijah so much. Anyway, Sterling North wrote a review and it sold books. He'd tell the story and every once in a while, about every other paragraph, he'd stop and come out of the story and say, "Lady, lady, I'm not like that." All the way through it. And at the end he said, "The only consolation I can see for the old bulls that took the westward trek is that few, if any, ever had to take to their bosoms a female novelist." I've had some funny reactions to that thing.

Well, the joke about *Giant Joshua* is that the publishers had been absolutely convinced — we'd had a long argument — that this was going to be put on the required reading list by the Church because they thought it was so flattering to the Mormons. I'd never been able to convince them that the Mormon Church wouldn't think like that. And they said, "Well, heavens, this is a great book; look what it does for the Mormons." And I would say over and over, "Well, that depends on whether or not the Mormons read it." None of the Church leaders ever read it, but they condemned it. They condemned it! For instance, one member was quite disgusted and he said, "I don't know why you couldn't have written about the *real* Mormons up here in Salt Lake City."

*The Giant Joshua* has been translated into German, French, Italian, all the main languages except Chinese and Russian. During World War II, the biggest bookstore in London bought two American books to tide people over during the blitz: one was the Audubon with all the bird pictures and the other was mine.

One interest my novel had for many people was the polygamy part. You see, the thing about polygamy is that the spirit that prompted it didn't die out. Men went on thinking that they should do this. It sort of bred a feeling that

they — at least among the Mormons here in Utah — that women were lower than men; they were chattel. Well, I had been brought up on these early stories, and especially from talking to the old people, I knew that their dreams, their realities, their goals, were a lot different than the things that had come about. See, in that second generation, my father's generation, this resentment was very widespread, because those children were the sons and daughters of polygamy. If you want to read something, read Sam Taylor's *Family Kingdom*. He and his brother Ray had to wait until all their immediate family was dead before they were allowed to write this. It'll give you an idea of what some of those kids went through.

I'll tell you what the Mormon Church has got to do. It's got to get rid of its authoritarian attitude. It had its place in the early days, but it doesn't now. You can't say to people, "Do this because I tell you to do it." You can't do that anymore. This generation just isn't going to accept it.

You see, the one thing the Mormon society is backward in is culture. They're fine in music; I mean, after all, it's hard to be anti-Mormon in music. But in writing — anytime you put words down — you have to say something. You look at any primitive society's writing and it is the last form of culture that comes into being, the very last.

People have asked why I came back to St. George to live. Well, I couldn't live in California when *Collier's* went out of business. The climate was too hard on me down there. I knew I'd have troubles, but I didn't think it'd be so bad. I kept kidding myself that if I just found a place and lived in my little corner and didn't bother anybody, they wouldn't bother me. I've got friends, but it isn't so much that people are worried about the anti-Mormon thing. It's just that a local girl did this, and the publicity continues and people resent it. I didn't know this until it happened.

When I was working on *The Giant Joshua* that first winter, one of the teachers at Dixie College saw me on the street and he threw a quarter at me and he said, "You might as well pick it up; this is all you'll ever be worth." See, everybody made fun of me for thinking I could write a book. My editor said to me, "I just can't believe that anybody from St. George, Utah can read and write." He said, "I can't believe that this book could have been written by a young girl." Others say, "Oh well, it's your book and you think you're so important. *We* don't care about it."

Perhaps I never should have come back here. One friend said, "Maurine, you have to realize that St. George isn't the United States." It isn't. St. George doesn't go by the same laws. You can violate anything here. The only thing you can't violate here and get away with is getting caught! That's the only sin there is. All these small Mormon towns are just about as bad. I'm on what's known as public welfare, which, in Utah, is \$90 a month. Imagine trying to run a house on \$90 a month. It's a good thing I've got friends. I can't get anything in St. George because they all say, "Oh, you're rich. You wrote that book." Even banks say that. I can't even borrow any money. They say, "Look at the thousands of people that come to you. You're rich."

It doesn't matter to me what people say anymore. I know things that they don't. You see, what interested me from the time I was old enough to know anything was the evolution of the Mormon idea. I used to spend every second I could; I used to talk to the old people when I was growing up, because it

seemed to me that they had sacrificed so much and gone through so much to establish this thing, and whether what they established was worth it or not — this was the point — whether it in any way exemplified or fulfilled their dream.

*The Giant Joshua* was the first of a trilogy. There are two books to come. It was the publisher who made me see that I would have three books. But that's another story.

