The Spring 1999 issue of the Nebraska State History seemedly simple questions were all thatSir from a variety of fields, Great Plains literature, we reach a less-than-agreed geographically than the imagine is readily apparent. the rugged Pine Ridge on the state or meanders through sand hills lining Highway between Alliance and Me. can perceive geographic characters in the works of Sandoz. The semi-arid Mid quite the same opportunity for the Pioneers! Even if readers may still see Nebraska as of terra firma and may as trains Morris (to add another dimension) to the possibilities of Nebraska wrong. One Nebraska writer Mamie, offers a fictiona...
The Spring 1999 issue of *Nebraska History*, the quarterly journal of the Nebraska State Historical Society, is dedicated to answering a seemingly simple question: “Where is Nebraska, anyway?” If the question were all that simple to answer, however, scholars and writers from a variety of fields, including geography, history, journalism, and Great Plains literature, would not have needed nearly thirty-five pages to reach a less-than-agreed-upon answer. That Nebraska is more diverse geographically than the outsider barreling across Interstate 80 may imagine is readily apparent if one drops from the “table” down through the rugged Pine Ridge on the way to Chadron in the northwest corner of the state or meanders through the undulating and, occasionally, towering sand hills lining Highway 2, for the more than one hundred miles between Alliance and Mullen. Likewise, readers of Nebraska literature can perceive geographically influenced differences in the experiences of characters in the works of Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, and Mari Sandoz. The semi-arid Mirage Flats in Sandoz’s *Old Jules* do not present quite the same opportunities and challenges as the Divide in Cather’s *O Pioneers*! Even if readers recognize these differences, however, they may still see Nebraska as a largely homogeneous, undifferentiated mass of terra firma and may assume that Aldrich, Cather, Sandoz, and Wright Morris (to add another dimension to the discussion) exhausted the literary possibilities of Nebraska’s topography. That assumption would be wrong.

One Nebraska writer, Marion Marsh Brown, in her best book, *Marnie*, offers a fictional portrayal in which the images of landscape...
differ markedly from those in works by other, more noted, Nebraska writers. And in this difference lies one of the reasons that *Marnie* deserves to endure (or to be resurrected, as it were) because its writing develops a natural interplay between character, conflict, place, and situation. It does not, however, develop the Great Plains imagery common to the works of other Nebraska writers; rather, it develops the kinds of woodland imagery one might associate with states farther east. Moreover, that imagery (and the locale from which it emanates) and, even more so, the ever-presence of nature are central to developing the character of Mamie Marston, the protagonist in *Marnie*. And that symbiotic relationship contributes greatly to making this book a deserving addition to the canon of Nebraska literature.

**BROWN’S NEBRASKA ROOTS**

Marion Marsh Brown was born July 22, 1908, in southeast Nebraska, near the village of Brownville, and spent all of her approximately seventy-year professional life writing and teaching in the state. Like Mamie Marston, Brown grew up near the loess hills lining the Missouri River. More specifically, the place where she was reared sits right on the dividing line between these hills to the east and the more gently rolling prairie to the west.

The loess hills (pronounced “luss”) were formed after the last ice-age from wind-deposited soil and are characterized by “sharp edged ridge crests [which at times fall off at near ninety-degree angles on either side] and slopes ranging from gentle to very steep.” Because of these natural features, the area near Brown’s birthplace is topographically unlike most other parts of Nebraska. But while it does not look like most of the state, it can still provide those who grow up there a Nebraska identity. Bradley Baltensperger, a native Nebraskan and a professor of geography at Michigan Technological University, explains the contradictions in that statement in an article titled “Labels, Regions, and Reality”:

> Through our public and semi-public institutions, through our popular media and our educational system, we develop an identification with a particular region. This identification has a physical landscape base. It is a place-based identification with such places as Lincoln County, Nebraska [the county where Brown was born] and with places and not one with particular regions. It is not identification with specific regions, such as Benkelman [a county in southwest Nebraska, near Brown's birthplace].

Brown, to my knowledge, never expressed any such sentiment, but the fact that she was raised in Benkelman County, Nebraska, is significant. Even though she was raised in Benkelman County, where Brown was born, she was to Lincoln or Omaha, her father’s hometown, as to Benkelman. Where she grew up was not the most important thing; what she learned about herself and her father was. Baltensperger’s perspective explains the paradoxical identity that Brown expresses in her writing regarding her father, the only one of the primal characters (her mother, her youngest brother, her father’s father, her father’s father’s brother, and her father’s mother) whose deaths she knew. When she was only fourteen years old, she was to Lincoln or Orrville, southwest Nebraska, to live with her father and his new family, and to go to school there. In fact, Brown graduated from high school at fifteen and a second semester later, when she was thirteen and preparing to live again in Benkelman County, where Brown was born, to my knowledge, never expressed any such sentiment, but the fact that she was raised in Benkelman County, Nebraska, is significant. Even though she was raised in Benkelman County, where Brown was born, she was to Lincoln or Omaha, her father’s hometown, as to Benkelman. Where she grew up was not the most important thing; what she learned about herself and her father was. Baltensperger’s perspective explains the paradoxical identity that Brown expresses in her writing regarding her father, the only one of the primal characters (her mother, her youngest brother, her father’s father, her father’s father’s brother, and her father’s mother) whose deaths she knew. 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ROOTS

908, in southeast Nebraska, of her approximately teaching in the state. Like hilly Missouri, the hills lining the Missouri river was reared sits right on the and the more gently rolling formed after the last ice-age zed by “sharp edged ridge degree angles on either side”.

Because of these natural topographically unlike most it look like most of the state, Nebraska identity. Bradley professor of geography at the contradictions in that and Reality”:

Institutions, through our system, we develop an identification with a politically bounded entity, and that entity takes on a meaning of its own. And while northwestern Missouri has a physical landscape that greatly resembles that of Otoe County, Nebraska [the county immediately north of Nemaha County, where Brown was raised], I developed a much closer identification with such far-flung places as Cedar County and Benkelman [a county and a small town, in northeast and southwest Nebraska, respectively].

Brown, to my knowledge, never expressed exactly the same sentiment, but the fact that she wrote nine books about Nebraska people and places and not one with a similar grounding in Missouri or Iowa, even though she was raised closer to these states’ boundaries than she was to Lincoln or Omaha, strongly suggests that she shared Baltensperger’s perspective.

The landscape of Brown’s formative years appears in her novels Marnie and Frontier Beacon. Like Marnie Marston, Brown grew up on a rather hard-scrabble farm in the early 1900s. She also attended a one-room country school, which provides part of the setting for this and others of her books and stories, and later attended high school in town. In fact, Brown graduated from high school in Auburn, Nebraska, when she was only fourteen years old and began college at nearby Peru State as a fifteen-year-old freshman. Maybe more important, Brown, like Marnie, lost her father to illness when she was a teenager. Brown was fifteen and a second-semester college freshman, while Marnie was only thirteen and preparing to enter high school. For both herself and her fictional character, the loss was tremendous. In fact, throughout her adult life, when Brown talked about her writing career, she repeatedly credited her father, who was a newspaperman and who often read to her and her brother (her father had a complete bound set of Charles Dickens’s works), as one of the primary reasons she had decided to write. Marnie’s father holds a similar significance. As he nears death, Marnie thinks to herself: “Much as she loved her mother and Twist [her brother] and Little Grandma, there had always been a very special place in her heart for her father. He was the most important person in her life. He was the rudder
of their ship, holding it steady. But more than that, she knew, was the fact of his understanding."

Undoubtedly, Brown felt an emotional kinship with Marnie Marston, whose name seems a transformation of "Marion Marsh," Brown's maiden name. Brown said about Marnie, "I knew how she felt." This depth of understanding is apparent throughout the book, as Marnie lives on the pages, a thirteen-year-old who alternately squabbles and confederates with her younger brother, puzzles over conflicting feelings when a boy steals a kiss, resents the snobbishness of her city cousins, and dreams of someday becoming a writer. Marnie's thoughts in a telling passage well into the book could well have been Brown's at a similar age, for her life included all of the following events and people: "There had been other girls with little brothers, other girls who had gone to country school then to town to high school. There had been other girls who had dreamed of going to college and of becoming writers. But never another Marnie Marston." 

Although we don't know what happens to Marnie after her father's death, we do know that Brown graduated from Peru State and pursued dual careers in teaching and writing. Teaching took her to small towns in southern Nebraska and to one, Curtis, in southwestern Nebraska, a locale that most likely provided the landscape for her book *Prairie Teacher*. She also returned to two of her alma maters, Auburn High School and Peru State, to teach English and then finished her teaching career at the University of Omaha. All these experiences reinforced her Nebraska identity.

**OTHER INFLUENCES ON BROWN'S WRITING**

Brown's teaching career and personal life, however, also influenced her in a way that took her far afield from writing solely about Nebraska. When she temporarily quit teaching and left Peru State as a newlywed in 1937 to join her husband in Omaha, she continued writing, turning out scores of articles and stories for children's magazines and Sunday School papers. In fact, during these years she noted that she wrote things that her young son, Paul, born in 1940, "might like to read," a point clearly indicated by the dedication to Nathan, which reads: "To Nathan, who comes to Nebraska 1850, this is the largest body of work, which ranged from fiction to non-fiction.

Moreover, her early teaching career is the first time she published a book about Nebraska locales. This largest body of work, which ranged from fiction to non-fiction.

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than that, she knew, was the relationship with Marnie Marston, "Marsh," Brown's maiden name. This depth of feeling, as Marnie lives on the quabbles and confederates dictating feelings when a boy city cousins, and dreams ofights in a telling passage well at a similar age, for her life example: "There had been other gone to country school then her girls who had dreamed of. But never another Marnie to Marnie after her father's from Peru State and pursued ing took her to small towns southwestern Nebraska, a escape for her book Prairie alma maters, Auburn High then finished her teaching experiences reinforced her

WN'S WRITING

However, also influenced writing solely about Nebraska. Peru State as a newlywed in continued writing, turning out magazines and Sunday School that she wrote things that her to read,” a point clearly indicated by the dedication in her first fictionalized biography, Young Nathan, which reads: “TO MY SON for whom it was written.”

Moreover, Brown lived her whole life in widely separated Nebraska locales. This long residence led to a varied collection of images, some of them typical of Nebraska writing, some not. Brown’s novels Marnie and Frontier Beacon, drawn from the landscape of her youth, best illustrate the imagery not found in the works of other Nebraskans. Frontier Beacon, for example, tells the story of Jud Stuart, who comes to Nebraska Territory from Missouri with his parents and siblings in the mid-1850s. The Stuarts leave primarily because Missouri permitted slavery. The area in which they settle is described here:

Jud’s ax rang clear and loud through the forest as he felled trees for the new cabin. Though he still regretted this move to the wilderness, he had begun to feel the challenge of the frontier. His father had made a good choice in this spot. There was a natural stone landing, where their boat, on which they were now living, was tied up. Extending back from the river a half mile or so was
a level bench of land which was ideal for farming. Beyond it, tree-shrouded hills fanned out as far as the eye could see. The hills would be full of game. 

This passage clearly reflects the Missouri River hills of Brown’s youth. A reader who has only this context might imagine that this story takes place in Kentucky, Missouri, or Tennessee.

The landscape of *Marnie* has the same kind of “feel.” It has no traces of what Shaunanne Tangney, in an article in *Great Plains Quarterly*, calls the “horizontal spectacular.” The book’s imagery does not picture distant horizons, the great dome of the sky, or wide open spaces. It never mentions the “sea-of-grass” that Great Plains scholar Diane Quantic says permeates so much of Great Plains fiction. Instead, Brown’s images are much more nearly reflected in the following: “[Marnie] was remembering the black walnut trees that had been cut from their grove for lumber. The stumps that were left and the gaping holes in the forest had made her feel sick when she first saw them.” Or by this passage: “In one way [Marnie] hated to think of going to high school, because she would have to stay in town during the week, unable to watch the sunrise peeping over McClusky’s hill or to run headlong down the steep timber paths...” Or this one: “Marnie shuddered at the thought of her father’s slipping backward down the [Big Hill]. There were deep ravines on either side, at the bottom.”

While these images do not express what Tangney would call the “vertical spectacular,” the rugged mountains of the West, which people typically equate with beauty, they are not Great Plains’ images, either. Moreover, the “Big Hill” of that last passage is one of the most prominent symbols in *Marnie*. It is the obstacle Marnie must literally tackle alone when her mother asks her, a frightened thirteen-year-old, to drive the family’s Overland automobile to town to fetch the doctor for her gravely ill father. And as she white-knuckles her way down this snow-covered monster, many of life’s “mental hills” play in her memory. The passage reads:

All kinds of things went through her mind: the time she and Twist had taken the old hen to hallie [her best friend] Hallie [her best friend] Hallie [her best friend] John, and how angry her baby—the baby was angry John, and how angry her baby—the baby was living with her folks and

 Appropriately, each of these images traversed in her path to great hill in an ultimately futile imagery, in league with *Marnie* a memorable novel.

&Mashne’s Plas th

In most cases, however, similar appeal, because he storyteller and writer. In more intent on supporting an engaging story. That she such as, “In my historical the meaning of the freedc struggle for these things, result, too frequently, is one-dimensional, where t unique individual with ar able, however, to bring to literature, and she does melds character, conflict, George notes in the follows, because readers recogni environment and its inhab Alexandra Bergson, and T Brown best develops th...
or farming. Beyond it, the eye could see. The

Lari River hills of Brown’s might imagine that this story

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scholar Diane Quantic says instead, Brown’s images are [Marnie] was remembering

that the forest had made her feel this passage: “In one way

of her father’s slipping

of her father’s slipping

tight of the West, which people

of the West, which people

she would have

on either side,

the steep timber paths . . .”14

apparently make me aware that Tangney would call the

of the West, which people

of the West, which people

the sunrise peeping over

the sunrise peeping over

ought of her father’s slipping

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lown the steep timber paths . . .”14

ought of her father’s slipping

ought of her father’s slipping

had taken the old hen through the draw to the gypsies, her shame,

had taken the old hen through the draw to the gypsies, her shame,

and the way her father had comforted her; the time she had taken

and the way her father had comforted her; the time she had taken

Hallie [her best friend] a piece home and stopped to talk to Long

Hallie [her best friend] a piece home and stopped to talk to Long

John, and how angry her father had been; Hallie and Tom and the

John, and how angry her father had been; Hallie and Tom and the

baby—the baby was a girl—and how Hallie and the baby were

baby—the baby was a girl—and how Hallie and the baby were

living with her folks and Tom with his. . .16

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Appropriately, each of these thoughts is a “hill” that Marnie has

Appropriately, each of these thoughts is a “hill” that Marnie has

traversed in her path to greater maturity, and now she must tackle a literal

traversed in her path to greater maturity, and now she must tackle a literal

hill in an ultimately futile attempt to save her father. And that kind of

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imagery, in league with the ever-presence of nature, is what makes

Marnie a memorable novel.

Marnie’s Place in Nebraska Literature

In most cases, however, Brown’s other books fail to fully develop a

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similar appeal, because her aims as a teacher overtook her talents as a

similar appeal, because her aims as a teacher overtook her talents as a

storyteller and writer. In the books where this happens, Brown seems

storyteller and writer. In the books where this happens, Brown seems

more intent on supporting some preconceived moral than on fashioning

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an engaging story. That she intended to teach is illustrated by a statement

an engaging story. That she intended to teach is illustrated by a statement

such as, “In my historical books, I . . . tried to get young people to realize

such as, “In my historical books, I . . . tried to get young people to realize

the meaning of the freedom we . . . take for granted. Someone had to

the meaning of the freedom we . . . take for granted. Someone had to

struggle for these things, and I try to explain this in my books.”17 The

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result, too frequently, is writing in which the characters are noticeably

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one-dimensional, where the reader doesn’t get the sense of meeting a

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unique individual with an interesting story to reveal. When Brown is

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able, however, to bring to the forefront the story and the characters, rather

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than the moral, as she does most notably in Marnie, she creates engaging

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literature, and she does what the best Nebraska writers often do. She

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melds character, conflict, place, and situation. She does what Susanne

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George notes in the following passage: “Cather’s literature endures today

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because readers recognize the symbiotic relationship between the

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environment and its inhabitants in characters such as Antonia Shimerda,

environment and its inhabitants in characters such as Antonia Shimerda,

Alexandra Bergson, and Thea Kronberg.”18

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Brown best develops this kind of relationship when she uses Marnie’s
connections to the nuances in her natural environment to reveal Marnie’s personal landscape. Marnie, for example, understands and appreciates nature’s bountiful panorama. Brown writes:

Everything seemed beautiful to Marnie as she trotted down the dusty road: the hop vines on the fences, dangling their pale-green puffballs like clusters of green grapes; the dried cornstalks in the fields beyond, golden in the sunlight, their heavy ears hanging head down; the black plowed and harrowed plots in the distance, ready for the planting of winter wheat.

But by afternoon the picture had changed. The sun had clouded over, and the sky looked threatening.19

Significantly, this change in weather foreshadows Marnie’s discovery that her best friend, Hallie, a year older than she, has gotten pregnant out of wedlock by a boy whose lack of character can only bring her pain.

Brown similarly signals significant events in Marnie’s own life. Much of the book, for example, is skillfully infused with a motif of new and renewed life, reflecting Marnie’s adolescent optimism and wonder. However, other parts, particularly latter ones, feature the indifference and inevitability of natural processes and signal Marnie’s growing understanding of the passing away and difficulties of life. Marnie’s world is full of the joys of being outside, including carefree sled riding, barefoot walks in a cool forest creek, and gooseberry and black walnut gathering with her brother and grandmother. However, her world also has reminders of nature’s sometimes less-than-forgiving and less-than-benevolent character. The Marstons don’t lead a hand-to-mouth existence, but their days are work-filled, and they must struggle to afford almost anything beyond their basic necessities. Moreover, their world is a place where fighting a house fire and repairing its damage in the frigid, wet, late-January cold lead Marnie’s father to contract pneumonia.

 Appropriately, the novel’s beginning and ending encapsulate Marnie’s many-faceted interconnection to the natural world around her. The novel starts with the dawning of spring and the birth of a new colt on the farm; it ends in the bleakness of the waning winter of the following year, when pneumonia took cognizance of the natural believable disposition for the first chapter, Brown recalls: “Quick tears came to her she would have done. Marnie began to nurse, and from the up in her that she could not trembling.”20 These stirring conflicting feelings about the and, finally, her understanding parallel phenomena she presents.

In the book’s final page, Brown protests against the reality so. “And life must go on were over. With this night she finds no satisfaction in words from Shelley’s Ode to her: “If Winter comes, assurances in another facet father had planted to be her are, “[The apple tree . . . They should put you 21 Brown recognized, the as well, that such an early college at the age of nineteen, to get on with life, even the young in college and celebrate today.”22 Nevertheless, the life on a not particularly maturity a necessity. But her ability to transform her

So, as Alexandra Brown and Abbie Deal become prod...
environment to reveal Marnie’s understands and appreciates
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dangling their pale-
light, their heavy ears
and harrowed plots in the
wheat. The sun had
changed. The sun had
changed. Mamie’s
discovery
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can only bring her pain.
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the birth of a new colt on
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year, when pneumonia takes Marnie’s father. All along, we see Marnie’s
cognizance of the natural, cyclical changes around and within her, a
believable disposition for a girl who grows up so close to nature. In the
first chapter, Brown records Marnie’s reactions as she sees the colt:
“Quick tears came to her eyes as she saw that the mare was doing what
she would have done. Mabel’s soft nose nuzzled the colt. . . . The colt
began to nurse, and from the depths of Marnie’s being something welled
up in her that she could not understand, a joy and excitement that left her
trembling.” These stirrings of maternal instinct and, likewise, Marnie’s
conflicting feelings about attraction to and repulsion from boys her age
and, finally, her understanding of the significance of her father’s death all
parallel phenomena she perceives in her natural environment.

In the book’s final page, Brown writes that although Marnie’s mind
protests against the reality of her father’s death, “she knew that it was”
so. “And life must go on. Suddenly she knew that her little-girl years
were over. With this night she had become a woman.” And although
she finds no satisfaction in this discovery, she does find reassurance in
words from Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind that her father had often read
to her: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” She also finds
assurance in another facet of nature’s providence: the apple orchard her
father had planted to be her “college insurance.” Nearly his last words
to her are, “[The apple trees will] start to bear the year you’re eighteen.
. . . They should put you through college.”

Brown recognized, though, and we suspect that Marnie would have,
as well, that such an early loss of a father would have an additional price.
In an interview in 1984, she noted how she had not wanted to finish
college at the age of nineteen. However, her family had encouraged her
to get on with life, even though “she felt it was a social handicap to be so
young in college and certainly wouldn’t recommend it for any child
today.” Nevertheless, the family’s economic challenges, stemming from
life on a not particularly prosperous hill farm, made Brown’s early
maturity a necessity. But they did not end her desire to be a writer nor
her ability to transform her early experiences into memorable fiction.

So, as Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Shimerda, Jules Sandoz, and
Abbie Deal become products, to an extent, of the places they inhabit, so
does Marnie Marston. And the fact that these aforementioned characters amply occupy our mental landscapes, because they are memorable literary creations, does not have to preclude the opportunity for a spot on the map for Marnie Marston. For through her, Marion Marsh Brown has given us the opportunity to experience a place and a life not found elsewhere in Nebraska literature.

NOTES

14. Ibid., 147.
15. Ibid., 102-03.
16. Ibid., 183.
20. Ibid., 11.
21. Ibid., 187.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 186.
aforementioned characters because they are memorable
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22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 186.
24. Marion Marsh Brown quoted in Jan McMullen, “An Interview with Marion Marsh

lage Reader Is Her Market,” 72.
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