Marion Marsh Brown and her son, Paul, as she worked on the manuscript for her book *The Swamp Fox* (circa 1950)
photo courtesy Paul Brown

MARION MARSH BROWN COUNTRY: A WORTHWHILE STOP IN NEBRASKA'S LITERARY GEOGRAPHY

by
Dan Holtz

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

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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 Marnie 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 Marnie 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."[1] 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 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].[2]

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.[3] 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."[4]

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."[5] 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."[6]

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 in her first fictionalized biography, *Young Nathan*, which reads: "TO MY SON for whom it was written."[7]

Moreover, her early teaching career influenced her similarly, for she said that as she began teaching, she noticed that the classics of literature that were often taught in schools were fine for adults and older high school students but that not nearly enough good books existed for younger teenagers.[8] Inspired by these twin motivations, she embarked on a career in which she produced fifteen books targeting an adolescent audience. From the time *Young Nathan*, a story of Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale, was published in 1949 until the early 1990s, she published a book about every two years. Her book-length works numbered twenty when she died in February of 2001. Nine of these, which ranged from fiction to history to fictionalized biography (her largest body of work), won national awards,[9] and, in the late 1950s, the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English named her one of Nebraska's ten most important writers.

NON-TYPICAL NEBRASKA IMAGERY IN BROWN'S WRITING

As noted before, 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 . . .[10]

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."[11] 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.[12] 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."[13] 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 . . ."[14] 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."[15]

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 through the draw to the gypsies, her shame, 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 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 living with her folks and Tom with his. . . [16]

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 hill in an ultimately futile attempt to save her father. And that kind of 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 similar appeal, because her aims as a teacher overtook her talents as a storyteller and writer. In the books where this happens, Brown seems more intent on supporting some preconceived moral than on fashioning 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 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 result, too frequently, is writing in which the characters are noticeably one-dimensional, where the reader doesn't get the sense of meeting a unique individual with an interesting story to reveal. When Brown is able, however, to bring to the forefront the story and the characters, rather than the moral, as she does most notably in *Marnie*, she creates engaging literature, and she does what the best Nebraska writers often do. She melds character, conflict, place, and situation. She does what Susanne George notes in the following passage: "Cather's literature endures today because readers recognize the symbiotic relationship between the environment and its inhabitants in characters such as Antonia Shimerda, Alexandra Bergson, and Thea Kronberg."[18]

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.
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> 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 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."[20] 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."[21] 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?"[22] 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."[23]

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."[24] 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

1. "Loess Hills Alliance." loesshillsalliance.tripod.com/ 19 December 2006.
2. Bradley H. Baltensperger, "Labels, Regions, and Reality," *Nebraska History* 80, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 26.
3. Margaret Marsh, telephone interview by author, 11 October 2000.
4. Marion Marsh Brown, *Marnie*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 184.
5. *Reflections in Time: Marion Brown*, KYNE-TV, 1987, videocassette.
6. Brown, *Marnie*, 148.
7. Marion Marsh Brown, *Young Nathan*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949).
8. Marion Marsh Brown quoted in Jane Ely, "Young Teenage Reader Is Her Market: Marion (Mrs. Gilbert) Brown Writes Stories with a Meaning," *Benson Sun*, 12 April 1962, 72.
9. Rhonda Stansberry, "Sower Awards Will Recognize Author, Clubs," *Omaha World-Herald*, 20 September 1994, 29. Brown, for example, won Junior Literary Guild Awards for *Young Nathan* and *The Silent Storm*, a Boys' Club of America "Book of the Year" for *The Swamp Fox*, and a Catholic Children's Book Club Selection for *Broad Stripes and Bright Stars*.
10. Marion Marsh Brown, *Frontier Beacon*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 13-14.
11. Shaunanne Tangney, "But What Is There To See?: An Exploration of a Great Plains Aesthetic," *Great Plains Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 39.
12. Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 157.
13. Brown, *Marnie*, 35.
14. Ibid., 147.
15. Ibid., 102-03.
16. Ibid., 183.
17. Marion Marsh Brown quoted in Ely, "Young Teenage Reader Is Her Market," 72.
18. Susanne K. George, "The Prairie State: Root-bound to Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 80, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 18.
19. Brown, *Marnie*, 127-28.
20. Ibid., 11.
21. Ibid., 187.

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 186.
24. Marion Marsh Brown quoted in Jan McMullen, "An Interview with Marion Marsh Brown," (unpublished paper), fall 1984, 2.