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Edna Ferber: The Triumph of Archetype Over Stereotype

Audio Link to :Edna Ferber: The Triumph of Archetype Over Stereotype"

Over the past year, I've put together a lecture series entitled *Short Story Writers and Their Art*. I'm happy to report that so far, the lectures have elicited some pretty positive comments and reviews. In the world of fiction, writing a successful short story is far, far more difficult than a novel. And for good reason. In a novel, the writer has all the time in the world to create a plot, describe character and place, go on a gazillion side roads and eventually reach a conclusion. Not so with a short story. Here, the writer must rely far more on the readers' intelligence and inner ear to take what is hopefully a well-drafted sketch and add, by and for themselves, the essential color, voice and emotion.

Among the writers I've read, researched and have been speaking on are Anton Chekov, Guy de Maupassant, Isaac Leib Peretz, Somerset Maugham, Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Cheever, Dashiell Hammett, O. Henry, Damon Runyon, Dorothy Parker, and Edna Ferber. Each lecture consists of two parts: an introduction to the life, literary strengths and style of the writer, and then a dramatic reading of -- what at least to me -- is one of their best stories. To date, the one writer who has consistently earned the greatest raves is . . . drum roll please . . . Edna Ferber.

Why Ferber? Despite the fact that her name is not nearly as familiar today as, say, Poe, Twain or Fitzgerald, her work is, nonetheless, the most omnipresent. Hardly a week goes by without at least one of her adapted short stories, novels or plays showing up on Turner Classic Movies. Consider that whether one knows it or not, Ferber is the pen behind such novels, and Broadway hits-cum-classic-films as *Cimarron* (Best Picture, 1931 &1960), *So Big* (1924, 1932 & 1957), *Show Boat* (1929, 1936 &1951), *The Royal Family* (1930, 1939), *Come and Get It* (1936), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *Stage Door* (1937), *Saratoga Trunk* (1945), *Giant* (1956) and *Ice Palace* (1960). In 2015 -- 104 years after her first novel (*Dawn O'Hara*) was published and 47 years since her death -- most of her novels and short stories are still in print; indeed, she still has sales in excess of 100,000 copies a year. Her first success came in the days of Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser and Jack London; her final works -- more than a half century later -- were on the same bookstore shelves as Mary McCarthy, Kurt Vonnegut and Joyce Carol Oates.

Ferber chose as her literary canvas the length, breadth and history of America; her interests ranged from the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 (*Cimarron*) and segregation in the post-Reconstruction South (*Show Boat*) to the Oil Fields of Texas (*Giant*), the swells of Park Avenue (*Dinner at Eight*) loggers in 19th century Wisconsin (*Come and Get It*) and the settling of Alaska (*Ice Palace*).

Ferber's initial success came with a series of 21 stories featuring a young woman named Emma McChesney. Until Ferber came along, there was nothing like Emma in all of America literature; she was "a smart, savvy, stylish, divorced mother, and Midwest traveling sales representative for T. A. Buck's Featherloom skirts and petticoats." Throughout the various Emma tales we find our protagonist, one hand on her sample case, the other fending off advances from salesmen, hotel clerks, and other predators, doing everything in her power to hold on tightly to her reputation. And, she's a single mother. Far from being a *stereotype* -- a preconceived and oversimplified character who fulfills and lives up to our instinctive prejudices -- Emma is an *archetype* -- a positive, original model from which copies may eventually be made. (In 1915, Ferber turned the stories into a play entitled *Our Mrs. McChesney*. It had a successful run on Broadway, starring Ethel Barrymore (picture at right), who also essayed the role in a long-lost 1918 silent film.)

It should be noted that as a short story writer, Edna Ferber was just about the best there ever was at permitting readers to add color to the author's pen-and-ink character sketches. Where a Dickens, Dostoevsky or Galsworthy might take 500 to a 1,000 words or more to describe the look, physical characteristics or deportment of an individual, Ferber could accomplish the task in a single sentence. Here's her description of Birdie Callahan, a waitress at the "Haley House" in an early short story entitled *The Man Who Came Back*: "*Birdie had a face that looked like a huge mistake, but she walked like a panther . . .*" Upon reading these fifteen words, I know exactly what Birdie looks like and how she moves. And so does everyone else who reads the story -- even if no two people have the same image.

This is genius . . .

Ferber's writing style could be described as "muscular." Her characters were strong, self-motivated, balanced and memorable. None suffered from either being too good to be true or too evil to be stomached; just real archetypal human beings possessing measures of strength and weakness, energy and exhaustion, success and failure. Over the course of more than a half century of daily writing, Ferber created a robust roster of male and female archetypes starting with Emma McChesney in 1912, extending to Barney Glasgow, the rapacious logging baron in her 1935 novel *Come and Get It,* and on to Christine Storm, the Alaska pioneer in Ferber's final (1963) novel, *Ice Palace.* Her sense of time and place were extraordinary; her love for America -- its history, the sweep of its vistas, the heterogeneity of its people -- never failed to enthrall. Hers was and is the triumph of archetype over stereotype.

Today, in so many areas of life, we are guided, informed, entertained -- and all too frequently misled -- by stereotypes . . . surface sketches and cardboard cutouts lacking human pulse or personality. Stereotypes are to archetypes what bad television is to good literature: a predigested bricolage of sights and sounds requiring little of either the imagination or the intellect. As an example, an awful lot of Republicans seem to have a stereotypic understanding of Democrats as being a bunch of singularly un-American, ungodly anti-capitalists. Then too, an awful lot of Democrats seem to have a stereotypic understanding of Republicans as a bunch of heartless, narrow-minded misogynists. And while there may easily be a whiff of reality about one group's view of the other, they reek of superficiality; they are mindless stereotypes.

To a Southerner or Midwesterner, the word "California" frequently brings to mind sex, sandals and scandals, where out West, the word "Florida" brings to mind sun, sand and senescence. Again, these are stereotypes.

Seen in this light, is it any wonder that people no longer speak to -- but rather at -- one another? Or that in the minds of many, the only thing that stands in the way of resolving social -- or political or economic -- inequities is the "other side." In a world where stereotypes are treated as reality, reality becomes far from . . . well, real. In a world of archetypes -- of positive flesh-and-blood originals worthy of emulation -- progress and respect for the opinions, motives and humanity of others is possible.

Perhaps this is why Edna Ferber is still drawing rave reviews after so many, many years . . .