

LOULA GRACE ERDMAN

(1898–1976)

Although she wrote seventeen novels, three collections of short stories and essays, a literary biography, and dozens of other short stories, essays, and articles, Loula Grace Erdman saw herself first as a teacher and then as a writer. Even though she frequently acknowledged that she could have been a better writer if she had devoted all of her time to the craft, she nevertheless taught during her entire professional career. Her first teaching job was in the Amarillo public schools in the 1930s and from there she moved to Canyon, where she taught until she retired at what was then West Texas State Teachers' College (now West Texas A&M University). After retirement she continued to teach creative writing workshops throughout the Texas Panhandle.

According to biographer Ernestine Sewell, Erdman began her writing career when from sheer boredom she wrote a short story while stranded in a train station during a blizzard. When the story was rejected by *Saturday Evening Post*, she reworked it and carefully investigated the market for magazine fiction. That story, "Good Match," finally sold to *Home Friend* magazine in 1933 for ten dollars. Erdman then began writing seriously by carefully budgeting her time when she was not busy grading student essays and preparing for her classes. In her classes and creative-writing workshops, she frequently pointed out that one had to actively *make* time to write, not passively *find* time to write. With practice, her writing improved and the stories she submitted to various magazines began to sell regularly for higher and higher amounts. In these early stories she followed the ageless rule of good writing: write from the heart about what you know best.

The tone and quality of her writing took an unexpected turn when, after taking a romantic confession magazine away from a student, she tried her hand at literary confessing. She received \$500 for her first story, the highest

fee she had ever received. But she lacked the knack of maintaining the freshness that such stories require and returned to writing about the topics she knew best—small town and rural characters engaged in everyday lives. But she readily admitted throughout her career that writing confessions was excellent training in the discipline that good writing requires.

“The Voyager,” first published in *Christian Herald* in 1950 and later included in *The Man Who Told the Truth* (1962), is a gentle tale of a mousy spinster schoolteacher whose influence on her students’ lives is reminiscent of the inimitable protagonist in *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1954). “The Voyager” is typical of the low-key style at which Erdman excelled. As Sewell explains about Erdman’s writing in general:

As for plot, Miss Erdman determined early in her career that the plotted story, with its beginning, middle, and end, was more life-like than the so-called “slice of life” story. Plot is cause and effect . . . and that is the basis for life itself. Since she chooses her people from the “middle” class and treats them without the scorn so fashionable among her contemporaries, her stories move with an even tenor, realistic in their portrayal of this class. Consequently, little happens in her novels. But, as Miss Erdman says, these little people, loathed by both high and low, have a right for someone to speak for them.

In “The Voyager,” Erdman departs somewhat from her conventional plotting, preferring instead an O. Henry–like conclusion as the reader realizes at last that this shy, nondescript, unmarried sixth-grade geography teacher never really left home—all her travelling was done through reading and her imagination. The students she inspired were the ones who eventually would undertake real journeys to exotic places.

Erdman turned to novels after she had perfected her craft by writing short stories. She began with a couple of juvenile novels about teaching as profession, *Separate Star* (1944) and *Fair Is the Morning* (1945). She finished this trilogy about teaching in 1953 with *My Sky Is Blue*.

In 1947, with the publication of *Years of the Locust*, Erdman finally achieved the success and recognition she was seeking when the book received the \$10,000 Dodd, Mead–Redbook Prize for best novel. In discussing this novel in her autobiography, *A Time to Write* (1969), Erdman explained, “I had taken the backward look my father had recommended and had written about the way of life I had known. If nothing else ever came of this book I would still have my lasting memory.” The contours of the plot had come to her during her father’s funeral, when she realized that funerals presented the opportu-

nity to look both backward and forward at one's life story. The novel *Years of the Locust* is structured around flashbacks of five different women attending the funeral of a powerful old man who had dominated the community in which he lived.

Erdman departed from the Midwest setting for her fiction in 1950 when, at the suggestion of her editor, she wrote her first and most successful Texas novel, *The Edge of Time*. Exercising her distinctly woman's point of view, Erdman chose to focus on homesteaders and the role of women in settling Texas instead of the more exotic ranchers and cowboys romanticized by the Texas mystique. In this novel, Erdman exemplified one of the strengths of Texas women writers' contribution to Texas literature. She focused on personal relationships and strong women characters caught up in real-life situations and dilemmas instead of the excitement and adventure of trail-driving and Indian battles. In the dedication of this novel Erdman wrote,

Two groups of people have helped to build the Texas Panhandle. The rancher came with his horse and his rope and his gun and built the cattle empire. The nester came, too, with his wagon and his woman and a plow and built another kind of empire. Much has been written about the romance of the range. It is of the homesteader that I choose to write, believing that the story of his stubborn courage has been overlooked in the greater glamor that is the ranch legend. It is to the homesteader, then, that this book is dedicated.

Erdman undertook extensive research into Panhandle history before she wrote this book; she had to rewrite the manuscript before it could be published because she had focused at first so much on the history that she obscured the story she was telling. Her sister allegedly told her that all it needed to be a Master's thesis was the footnotes. In her research, Erdman mined the archives of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum on the West Texas State Teachers' College campus in Canyon, which led her to conduct interviews with pioneers then still living in the region. She met the legendary Texas cowman Charles Goodnight. She watched a prairie fire and drove out onto the plains to get a sense of the isolation and loneliness that the early settlers, especially the women, must have felt. The writing assignments that students in her college classes turned in increased her knowledge of local life and family histories. The cowboys in this novel, rather than indulging in shootouts and other masculine high jinks, come to the young homesteading couple's dugout to enjoy buttermilk and fresh bread served at the kitchen table.

Following the success of *The Edge of Time*, for several years Erdman set

most of her fiction in the Texas Panhandle, which she had come to regard as home. She went on to write a series of juvenile novels based on her historical research. The first of these, *The Wind Blows Free* (1952), won the *American Girl*–Dodd, Mead Prize competition. *The Wide Horizon* (1956), *The Good Land* (1959), and *Room to Grow* (1962) were the other titles in this series of juvenile novels. Two others of her novels are set in Texas. *The Far Journey* (1955) chronicles the solo journey of a new bride who must drive their covered wagon alone from her home in Missouri to the homestead her husband has claimed near Mobeetie. *Three at the Wedding* (1953), set in a Texas oil town, depends on the technique of creating multiple flashbacks, which Erdman had used so effectively in *Years of the Locust*. As Sewell points out, “The story is simple and satisfying as each soul-searching woman, recalling the past, comes to a present understanding of herself.”

Erdman’s journey from her midwestern roots in rural Missouri to success as writer and college teacher in the Texas Panhandle could itself be the plot of one of her novels. She grew up surrounded by relatives, living on land that her great-grandfather had homesteaded. She started her college education at Central Missouri State College and then transferred to the University of Wisconsin, where she roomed with a girl from Amarillo, Victoria Warner. This friendship ultimately led to the offer of a job teaching in the public schools in Amarillo, which Erdman eagerly accepted, providing that her younger sister could have a teaching job as well. The sisters moved to Amarillo and Erdman spent the rest of her life in the Panhandle, dividing her time between teaching and writing. She also attended Teacher’s College at Columbia University. She never married and came to regard her students and colleagues as her family.

Although her works were generally overlooked by male readers because of her consistent woman’s point of view, her women contemporaries regarded her as a successful writer. Women, often housewives, throughout the Panhandle came to her various creative-writing workshops because of her reputation as an outstanding creative-writing teacher. For them she was a role model because she had achieved the glamor and prestige of making her living, at least in part, from writing, and they dreamed of doing the same. She received many awards in her career, starting with the Dodd, Mead–*Redbook* Prize for *Years of the Locust*. She also was awarded the Texas Institute of Letters Juvenile Award for *Room to Grow* and both the Texas Institute of Letters Award and the Steck-Vaughn Award for *A Bluebird Will Do* (1973). She was an influential member of the Panhandle Pen Women. As a testament to her commitment to teaching, she belonged to Delta Kappa Gamma, Kappa Delta Pi, Phi Kappa Phi, the National Education Association, and the Texas State Teachers Association.

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The Voyager



BY LOULA GRACE ERDMAN

For thirty years Miss Goldie Parks taught sixth-grade geography in Tyson, Texas. Nine months of each year she looked out of the same classroom windows, and what she saw was sameness. For the town was set in a great monotony of spaces, a vastness of sky and flat land and meager vegetation, broken occasionally by arroyos down which flash floods sometimes poured—roaring, tawny menaces on their way to join the Rio Grande.

When vacation came, Miss Goldie was as anxious to get away as were any of her pupils. Then, it was, she took her trips.

“Where are you going this summer, Miss Goldie?” we would ask.

“First I must go see my mother, who isn’t well.” She always went first to see her mother who “wasn’t well.” “And after that—well, I don’t know. But I’ll bring you back pictures and things.”

She did. She brought so many pictures and maps and travel folders and other items that she had to hire a drayman to haul them to school for her. It was these things she brought for us to see that made the places she visited come alive for us, too, so that we began to talk about them as if we had been there ourselves. Miss Goldie never spoke of “studying about” a country. She always said we “went there.” We picked up the phrase from her.

Miss Goldie was really small, although she gave the impression of being tall. Perhaps that was because she carried herself with an eager vitality, as if always there were a great many things she must do quickly because she was in a hurry to be off somewhere else. Her clothes were utterly without distinction. No matter how hard I try, I cannot remember a single thing she wore.

“She ought to buy herself some decent clothes,” Mother said once, “instead of spending all her money on trips.”

Of all the names she might have borne, Goldie was the one which fitted her least. Mousie would have been far better, for she was all of a color—eyes,

hair, skin blended into a single pattern. I suppose her clothes blended into the pattern also. Certainly the effect was not golden. Taupe would have been the nearer color—that curious in-between shade that retreats apologetically into the back of one’s wardrobe.

About Miss Goldie herself, however, there was nothing apologetic. Both in and out of her classroom she moved with an unself-conscious assurance, bearing at the same time a look both remote and alert. Former students remembered her and talked about her long after they forgot other more dynamic, attractive teachers. In fact, I find it hard now to separate the things I actually saw her do from those I merely heard about.

Year after year they came back to see her, these former students, and never once was she known to fumble a name. She remembered them all.

“Hello, Miss Goldie.”

“Hello, Tom.”

“Say, I saw Yellowstone this summer. It was just like you said it would be.”

“Good.”

“Where is the class going this semester?”

“Just now we are in China.”

“Fine. I think I liked China the best of all the places we went.” The old phrase fell easily off his lips.

He left, and Miss Goldie turned back to her class.

“Now the Great Wall of China was built for protection,” she said.

The class would have almost sworn that she had helped with the construction, so positive was her statement. For they were not merely studying about a wall. They had “gone” there, and in so doing, had made the place their own forever more.

Once this kinship with another land did not come so easily. That was when Jack Benetti entered school.

Jack’s mother had been Sylvia Thatcher, a Tyson girl who had gone East to school and there had met and married an Italian named Benetti. Her family gave out that he was a count, but Miss Carrie Fulton said he was more than likely a fruit peddler. (A great many people in Tyson thought Sylvia gave herself airs, a thing unforgivable in that region.) The young couple settled down in New York, and Sylvia never came home for a visit. She had a son, whom she named Jack for her father. The boy was twelve years old when she came back to Tyson to live, bringing him with her. Her husband did not come with her, a matter which she did not feel she needed to explain. Tyson took that rather hard.

Jack entered the sixth grade. He was a small, nervous, over-polite boy with dark coloring and melting brown eyes. From the first, he was a marked character.

“Hey, got any bananas to sell?” the other boys would call.

And then they would chant, “Wop—Wop—Wop—”

And then came the day when Jack found himself on the playground facing a line of boys who were armed with sticks and clods. But these were feeble things beside the more cruel weapon they held—a feeling of solidarity among themselves, a fabric held together by the cement of intolerance.

“Go back to Italy—” they yelled.

But their hearts were not quite in the game. This Italian boy was showing courage, and that was a thing to be respected wherever it was found.

“I am an American,” Jack said. He was very white, and looked as if he might be sick at any moment. “I was born in New York, and that is America. My father was a naturalized American. Besides, my mother was born here in this town.”

He wanted to cry, and did not. That made his tormentors uneasy, and strangely enough, all the more determined to continue their persecution.

Just then Miss Goldie came by, making her rounds of the playground. She gave no indication that she realized she had come upon a scene in which anything was amiss.

“Of course you are an American,” she said, as if he were taking part in some game, like spelling the names of capitals. “An American of Italian descent. Nearly all Americans are descended from some other nationality.”

The bell rang, and everyone went back to the classrooms.

Scarcely had the children got seated when Miss Goldie, as if she were handing them the earth and most of the planets, said, “Today we are going to Rome.” She said it although at that moment there were any number of folders and books on her desk bearing the label “Alaska.” “Open your books to page 212,” she said, clearing her desk of the piles of material there. “By the time you have finished reading, I’ll have some material about Rome on the table. Remember—extra points for all outside material you bring in.”

The next day the table well-nigh collapsed with its load of things Roman. The room began to be filled with shaky handiwork—replicas of the Colosseum, and other Roman buildings. There were dolls in togas, sitting in the Senate. Through all this construction and study, Jack Benetti, even more than Miss Goldie, was technical adviser and director. He gave his information with simple dignity and great assurance.

“That’s the way it really is,” he would say. And then he would turn to Miss Goldie to ask politely, “Isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” she would assure him.

The day after Jack had been chosen first in baseball (where it was discovered he could run faster than any of the other boys) Miss Goldie rolled down the big wall map.

"Today we are going to Italy," she said. And then she added casually, "Rome is in Italy, you know."

So they "went to" Italy. And finally they concluded, quietly egged on by Miss Goldie, that it was rather a proud thing to be Italian.

The case of Jack Benetti might have been an accident. Only it happened much the same way with a tough little red-head the boys began to call "Shanty Irish" before he had more than set foot on the playground, and with the only Jewish lad in town. I think she could have done the same thing for a Hottentot, or a South African, or a Burmese. For she knew the world, had her fingers on its pulsing currents, slipped easily into talk of its people. And we of Tyson, scarcely conscious of what we did, followed her through ever widening horizons.

Perhaps there was not anyone who followed her so completely as did the members of the Travel Club. Somewhere early in the organization's history, Miss Goldie had been asked to plan the year's program. After that, the Club program *was* Miss Goldie. She was very firm with the members; after all, most of them had been her pupils and, in her presence, became once more little girls anxious to get extra grade points for outside work. She conducted the Club study as she conducted her classes—with an inspired thoroughness that made each member feel she "had gone" to the places studied.

And so it was, when the world went mad, that strange names like Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal and Saipan did not send the women of Tyson scuttling to the atlas. This knowledge was not always a good thing. It gave mothers a white-lipped certainty about the character of the country in which their boys fought. Perhaps it also explained why Tyson always oversubscribed its Red Cross and War Bond quotas.

On the days Miss Goldie conducted the Club program there was a sort of glow about her, a thing that transcended clothes. It was then that her name was not too incongruous.

The war brought a new type of returned student to Miss Goldie's door. He wore a uniform, and he did not talk of going to Yellowstone.

"Hello, Miss Goldie. Say, I've been to Japan."

"Hello, Bill. Yes, I knew you went. I read your letters in the paper. Even used them on the bulletin board."

"I hoped you would. That was partly why I wrote them." He blushed a little as he told her.

"I'm glad you kept your eyes open and learned things."

"Yes, ma'am." He was six feet tall, and had three stripes on his sleeve. But before her was a little boy, seeking to prove his worthiness. "Yes, ma'am. I watched the country, and the people. Maybe this will sound funny to you, but we're going to have to learn to get along with those Japs, after this is over."

“We are going to have to learn to get along with people everywhere.”

“Say, Miss Goldie,” he grinned at her, “do I get extra points for doing those letters?”

“You always do, don’t you?” Miss Goldie said dryly. But you could tell she appreciated his joke.

“Funny thing,” he said, all seriousness now, “first time I saw Japan I felt like I’d been there before.”

The boys of Tyson were to say that same thing in the far reaches of the Pacific, in Africa, in Europe, in Asia—“I’ll be dogged if this place don’t look familiar. Guess we’ve ‘been here’ before with Miss Goldie.”

“Not much like Tyson, was it?” Miss Goldie would ask them later.

“Not much. And yet it is, too. Guess it’s like you used to tell us—all people and places are sort of alike, underneath.”

The first few months after the war ended, Miss Goldie’s door was full of boys most of the time.

“Say, Miss Goldie—I got to Switzerland. You ought to go back there.”

“I’ll go sometime.”

“Why don’t you go this summer?”

“I’ll think about it—”

The years went by, and more and more young people came to stand at Miss Goldie’s door. They came from Germany and Japan and Korea and other far-flung places where American troops were stationed; they had furloughs from oil companies with headquarters in Saudi Arabia; and, in the case of the girls, they returned from summer sessions at the University of Hawaii and from student tours to out-of-the-way spots in the world. Always Miss Goldie listened to them with interest, nodding her head in agreement, giving the impression that she knew, from firsthand experience, that their accounts were correct.

Then came the spring when she won first place in an essay contest, sponsored by the West Texas Chamber of Commerce, on “The Resources of Texas.” The prize was an all-expense trip to Austin and the Alamo.

“Just to think,” Miss Goldie said, “I’ve never seen the Alamo or the capitol.”

“Why, Miss Goldie,” we protested in shocked disbelief. She who knew every syllable of their history, she who had been everywhere else, had never seen the two most historic places in her own state.

Wasn’t it fortunate, she said, that the trip was scheduled for mid-June. Because of that, she could go by and spend a few days with her mother. “She lives with my married sister, you know.”

We didn’t. Nobody seemed to know anything at all about her personal life. Even Carrie Fulton, with whom she boarded, knew nothing much.

Her friends gave her a farewell dinner. Miss Goldie thought it was very nice of them. Everyone was being nice, she said. Her brother-in-law couldn’t meet

her bus, but he was leaving the pick-up at the station so she could drive out to the farm the minute she got in.

Her bus was late leaving. There had been big rains to the north, snarling traffic. But finally she got started, sitting stiffly in the window seat, wearing her no-colored dress with a no-colored coat over it. She waved debonairly at those down to see her off.

“I declare,” Carrie Fulton said, “she looked for the world and all like someone sailing away on a big liner.”

And that was the last anyone in Tyson saw of her.

Carrie Fulton, one of the last to see her, was the first one to have the news. The brother-in-law called her, and the news he had to relate sent her, tears streaming down her face, to our house.

“The most horrible thing has happened,” she said. “Miss Goldie Parks has been drowned—”

Mother said, “Oh no—” and the way she said it, I knew she felt as I did. Not Miss Goldie. She was eternal, everlasting—like the mountains she taught us about.

“It was a flash flood,” Carrie went on. “She got caught in the arroyo that runs between her sister’s house and town. They found the truck, but they haven’t found her. They’ve given up hope by now. More than likely her body is down to the Rio Grande—maybe even on its way to the sea—”

“Poor Miss Goldie,” Mother said. “She didn’t get her trip. But then,” she added quickly, “she’s had so many trips—”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Carrie said. “I found out from her brother-in-law. She’d never had a trip. Never, in all her life.”

The town had her story now, a story as fantastic as the news of her death. Miss Goldie had never been anywhere, save to her sister’s to nurse the mother who “was not well.” Every summer she spent there.

It was during these summer months she “took” her trips. She had her mail sent there—travel folders, books, advertisements, magazines. She read these, and for that time, she literally lived in the country about which she studied. Here she traced the routes of her “travel” which she brought back to us. They were the fabric from which romance was made, and when she shared them with us, they were real for us, too. Who were we to say she had deceived us?

We talked it over uncertainly.

“She never *really* said she went to those places—I mean, really *went* there, did she?”

“Well no. Remember—she called it ‘going to’ a place when we studied it.”

Yes, we remembered.

We remembered, and we could not feel sad. It was as if one of Miss Goldie’s wall maps had unrolled, letting us see the true picture of the thing that had

happened to her; as if all the wisdom she had given us about far places was crystallizing into a single moment of perception. She had given us a kinship with space, a feeling of being at one with the universe. And we followed her now in the path she had prepared for us.

We knew, at last, Miss Goldie had embarked upon a Journey Magnificent. And, as always, the old magic held.