6-2015

Josephine Lawrence: A Writer of Her Time

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Although Josephine Lawrence’s name is almost unrecognized today, during her lifetime Lawrence’s work intersected with New Jersey audiences on almost every level: children heard her stories on the radio, read them in the newspaper, and encountered more of her narratives in scores of popular series books published under her own name and several pseudonyms; adults consulted the women’s page she edited in the Newark Sunday Call, discussed her best-selling

Josephine Lawrence
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by Deidre A. Johnson
www.readseries.com
books, and, later, enjoyed her book reviews in the *Newark Sunday News*; movie audiences viewed *Make Way for Tomorrow* based on one of her most successful novels. For over fifty years, new works from Lawrence reached receptive (albeit shrinking) audiences, who viewed her stories as reflecting contemporary situations or problems affecting the average family.

Ironically, while Josephine Lawrence’s name was readily recognizable to the reading public, little was—and is—known about her private life. So fiercely did Lawrence guard her privacy that until recently few biographers were able to identify accurately the year of her birth. Genealogical records indicate that Josephine Lawrence and her twin brother Harlo (or Harlow) were born on March 12, 1889. In a biographical sketch requested by her publisher, Lawrence wrote that she was “Born in Newark, educated, also inadequately, in the public schools, no college,” though she supplemented her education with courses in New York City. Her father, Elijah Lawrence, was a physician; census records suggest that sometime between 1900 and 1910, he gave up his practice and moved the family to a farm in Hopewell, New Jersey.

Lawrence displayed writing talent even in high school, and, by 1915, was editor of the children’s page of the *Newark Sunday Call*. Her own fiction, unsigned, often appeared on the page, relating the adventures of characters such as the Gingerbread Man, Princess Charlotte Russe, and the George Washington Doll. In 1921, when the newly-established WJZ began broadcasting from Newark, Lawrence’s sketches became part of the broadcast line-up as *The Man in the Moon Stories*.

By the time Lawrence’s fiction aired on the radio, she had already started her publishing career. About 1918, she approached Edward Stratemeyer, then one of the country’s
most successful children's authors, to ask for advice about a manuscript. Instead, Stratemeyer recruited her to work for his writing syndicate as a ghostwriter for children's series books. From 1919 until 1934, Lawrence drafted approximately forty-seven titles for syndicate series. Most were aimed at younger children, the same audience Lawrence reached with her stories for the children's page, and told of happy boys and girls leading comfortable lives filled with small adventures. Characters such as Sunny Boy and Honey Bunch visited relatives in the country or at the seashore or engaged in creative activities with friends at home. The titles of these stories highlight the cozy, everyday nature of the narratives: *Honey Bunch: Her First Little Garden*, *Honey Bunch: Her First Visit to the City*, *Sunny Boy and His Playmates*, *Sunny Boy in School and Out*, *The Riddle Club in Camp*, *The Riddle Club Through the Holidays*.

Lawrence's work for the Syndicate encouraged her to try creating and marketing her own series. Her first attempt, *Brother & Sister* (6 vols. 1921–27), was similar to her Syndicate fare. Advertisements described the series as relating the doings of “the youngest of a large family of children . . . [who] are so eager to do as the others do [that they] sometimes tumble into a peck of mischief.” Even many of the titles were similar to her Syndicate series: *Brother and Sister's Schooldays*, *Brother and Sister’s Holidays*, *Brother and Sister’s Vacation*. As Lawrence continued to create series, she introduced a few more memorable protagonists with a greater sensitivity to social issues. The central characters in the *Elizabeth Ann* (8 vols, 1923–29) and *Linda Lane* (6 vols., 1925–29) series are away from or without biological parents for the duration of their series. As they stay in different households, they become more aware of others’ financial needs and domestic situations; both encounter wealth and poverty, notice contrasts between households managed with efficiency and those showing
carelessness or waste, and occasionally reflect on different lifestyles and behaviors.

In addition to series with continuing characters, Lawrence also wrote a number of very short stand-alone stories, which her publisher issued as brightly illustrated slender volumes in generically titled series (Kiddie Wonder, 6 vols, c.1926; Toyland, 9 vols., 1928). In the ten years between 1921 and 1931, Lawrence created approximately fifty books that were published under her own name—all the while continuing her duties as a Syndicate ghostwriter and her work at the Sunday Call.

By the 1920s, Lawrence's responsibilities at the Call had also been expanded to include editorship of the Household Page. A biographical profile from the late 1930s by a former colleague explained that her editorial duties meant she "produced eighteen columns of copy for those two pages" weekly and occasionally "filled in on special stories for the city editor or one of the feature editors." Just as her work on the children's page had proved useful to the transition into juvenile fiction, so, too, would Lawrence's time writing and editing the Household Page yield benefits beyond employment with the paper.
Although Josephine Lawrence was clearly established as a juvenile author, she wanted to write for a different market and thus began to devote more time to drafting a novel. Concerned that her name was linked to stories for children, she submitted the manuscript under the pseudonym Lynette Elaine West. When Aventine Press accepted *Head of the Family*, Lawrence identified herself, and the book was published under her name in 1932. Although she would ghostwrite one or two more series books for the Stratemeyer Syndicate, never again would Lawrence's name appear on a new children's book. That phase of her career had ended.

Described in the publisher's ads as “A novel, startlingly realistic, tuned to our times, that carries a ringing challenge to women to reassert their rights—to men to reassume their responsibilities,” *Head of the Family* nonetheless attracted little notice. Not so Lawrence's next book, published two years later. Heralded as by the *New York Times* as one of the year's best books, *Years Are So Long* launched her career as a novelist. A timely, painful study of the problem of aging parents and adult children's response to their plight, the much-discussed *Years Are So Long* was not only selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection but also adapted and filmed as *Make Way for Tomorrow*. A press release for the novel included the information that Lawrence worked on a newspaper and “likes newspaper work because she believes it keeps one in close touch with the mass of humanity,” also a selling point for much of Lawrence's subsequent fiction.

*If I Have Four Apples*, Lawrence's third book, was, if anything, even more successful than its predecessor.
Simply put, the story tells of a family unable to live within their means or to grasp the concept of a sensible budget, despite the best efforts of the helpful household editor of a local paper. Published during the Depression, the story addressed multiple financial issues all too familiar to readers: buying on installment plans, the expense for newlyweds of setting up households, the debate about the value of owning one’s home instead of renting. Within a week after its release, *If I Have Four Apples* made the *New York Times*’s list of best-selling fiction in the city; three weeks after its release, it occupied the top slot. Over the next few months, the *Times* tracked its position on lists of best-sellers across the country, book groups featured it in discussions, the Book-of-the-Month Club selected it as another of their offerings, and Josephine Lawrence’s name became known to readers nationwide.

Lawrence’s fourth book, *The Sound of Running Feet*, was a near-contender for the 1938 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. (The committee listed it and *Northwest Passage* as second choices if John Marquand’s *The Late George Apley* should prove unsuitable, calling it “a realistic and compassionate but in no way doctrinaire study of the lives of a typical group of lower middle-class men and women living in contemporary America.”) The remainder of Lawrence’s writing career, however, never earned the level of acclaim of those early works. She may have exhausted her most powerful ideas or settled into more of a formula (a charge found in several reviews), or merely been content to write what some might have classified as saleable fiction rather than lasting works of literature. She once told an interviewer, “I’m no Shakespeare; I can’t write brilliant, beautiful phrases, open up a world with a sentence, and I know I can’t and never try.”

Instead, Lawrence wrote steadily, often turning out a book a year. Generally, she selected a contemporary
problem, devoted several months to collecting material, developing characters to illustrate several aspects of the problem, and outlining the story. She then typed a draft and revised it: her novels, she noted, usually required two drafts. Almost every article about Lawrence included mention of her strict regimen of putting in three hours of work a night. ("I came direct from the office to my work, didn’t even bother about dinner," she told an interviewer.) Lawrence continued to live alone in Newark in what she described as “a small apartment” within walking distance of the newspaper until 1940. That year, she married Artur Platz, and the two took up residence in Manhattan. Platz worked as a musician and a model; he appeared as Santa in advertisements for Lucky Strike cigarettes and some brands of liquor, and by the early 1950s was also doing an occasional television commercial.

Other than acquiring a husband, Lawrence seems to have done little to alter her routines, spending days at the Newark Sunday Call and writing three hours each weekday evening. Indeed, a biographical sketch of Artur Platz in a Canaan, New York, newspaper suggests that he and his dog spent most summers in that town while Lawrence remained in the city. When the Sunday Call folded in late 1946, Lawrence moved to the Newark News and at some point began editing book reviews and writing a column titled “Book Marks.”

During the 1940s, in addition to writing novels, Lawrence occasionally contributed short pieces to magazines. "Lend Them Your Ears," in the May 1942 issue of The Writer, advised aspiring authors not to isolate themselves but to mingle with people and “Listen, just listen . . . never be too busy, or too tired, or too preoccupied to listen to people” because doing so helps a writer understand character. In the mid-1940s, Lawrence also penned several pieces for Sunday supplements and at least one item for the Women’s
Unlike her novels, these were light fare—a combination of unlikely situations and predictable romance. In “The Lost Santa Claus” from December 1944, for example, two sisters spending the holidays in a country cottage after a heavy snowstorm are startled by the arrival of a young man dressed as Santa carrying a sack of toys, who explains that he lost his way en route to a family gathering. When a disaster at a neighbor’s home leaves several children devastated at the thought that Santa won’t find them, the costume and gifts come to the rescue—and the shared efforts to save the children’s Christmas also lead to a hint of potential romance.

Like her magazine stories, many of Lawrence’s books from the 1940s focused on women, but in less rosy situations. Kirkus Review summarized There Is Today (1942) as a story “dealing with women in wartime—to marry or not to marry, to have children or to wait.” Double Wedding Ring (1946) centered on a mother’s concern for her adult children (including a son sent off to fight during the war) and the marital strains caused by her husband’s midlife crisis; The Pleasant Morning Light (1948) featured three cousins, all single, worried that the aftermath of World War II meant they would not find spouses and pressured to marry by family and societal expectations.

During the 1950s, Lawrence continued to turn out a book a year, sometimes returning to familiar subjects such as motherhood and marriage with war on the horizon (Song in the Night, 1952), other times addressing family tensions from other causes, such as adult children making demands on parents (The Empty Nest, 1956); several books considered contemporary issues like forced retirement at age sixty-five (The Web of Time, 1953).

Lawrence was widowed in April 1963 and sometime thereafter donated some of her letters and manuscripts to Boston University, though she also continued to work and
write. Several of her later books drew tangentially on elements from her own life or experience: *In All Walks of Life* (1968) is set in a newspaper office and consists largely of scenes depicting the sometimes hectic nature of the work, its internecine squabbles, and occasional miscommunications with a public ("Constant Reader") that seems more interested in horoscopes and syndicated features than the news itself. A reporter for the *Newark News* recalled that after its publication "for a while it was fair game in the City Room trying to match the characters in the book to the author’s co-workers." *Remember When We Had a Doorman* (1971) is about life in an apartment building in New York City apparently not unlike the one in which Lawrence lived.

Lawrence’s last book, *Under One Roof*, was published in 1975. Ironically, it drew on a concept she had used almost 50 years earlier in her juvenile series about the orphaned Linda Lane, the idea of constituting a household of unrelated people to share a home and form a makeshift family. In *Roof*, a young woman buys a large Victorian home and finds eleven people—an elderly man and woman, a married couple with teenagers, an unmarried female novelist, and assorted others, including three orphans—to live in it. Sadly, the novel received tepid reviews, which may have dissuaded her from further publications.

Josephine Lawrence died at her home in New York City on February 22, 1978. Her *New York Times* obituary described her as a “Novelist of Middle-Class America” remarking that “most of her work dissected, in an intimate way, her contemporaries” and quoted Sinclair Lewis’s praise for her “unusual power of seeing and remembering all the details of everyday living, each petty, yet all of them together making up the picture of an immortal human being.”

In the past decade, Lawrence’s work has been receiving
more attention, in part because of its depiction of the 1930s and of women’s lives. In *The Middle Class in the Great Depression: Popular Women's Novels of the 1930s*, Jennifer Haytock devotes a chapter to *If I Have Four Apples* and a contemporaneous novel. Carmela McIntire, an English professor at Florida University, has also published a study of *Apples*, “The Arithmetic of Aspiration.” Additionally, McIntire prepared and edited a critical edition of *If I Have Four Apples* in 2011, following that with a critical edition of *Years Are So Long* in 2012. Thus, two of Lawrence’s best-known works are back into print and available for rediscovery by a new generation of readers.

For even more about Josephine Lawrence, cited sources and transcripts of her work and interviews, see the author’s website: http://readseries.com/joslaw/index.htm