

## THE PALOUSE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH MARION

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

Readers will be hard-pressed to find many farm novels being written today. In the 1930s, however, when one out of every four Americans lived on a farm, novels depicting farm life were as common as wheat stubble and harvest mites. Yet, more often than not, though, the authors of these novels were dismissed as local colorists and dispatched to the dust bins of literary history. If the author was a woman, the odds of such a fate doubled. And if the author wrote about one of the most distant regions of America's farmland—the vast wheat fields of the Palouse—her obscurity was virtually guaranteed.

Such was the misfortune of Elizabeth Marion (1916-1989), who was reared on a farm near the town of Spangle, in Spokane County. She published three impressive novels set in the Palouse: *The Day Will Come* (1939), *Ellen Spring* (1941), and *The Keys to the House* (1944), all of which perceptively depict the rigors and rewards of mid-century farm life in eastern Washington.

Marion's approach to her subject recalls Midwest novelist Hamlin Garland's notion of "veritism," which combines a sharp eye for realistic detail with the author's personal vision. Marion, in these terms, draws an exacting picture of daily farm life while also scrutinizing the turbulent emotional lives of her characters. Indeed, while the virtues of community almost always prevail in Marion's

novels, her characters often lead lives of quiet desperation.

In *The Day Will Come*, the adult children of a domineering mother seek a place on the homestead farm bequeathed to them by their hardworking father. Among the children is the nephew Steve, raised on the farm but now a stockbroker in Spokane. In longing to restore integrity to his life, Steve dreams of returning to the farm of his childhood and marrying his niece Penny, who in her acute appreciation of the region represents everything that's good about it. Meanwhile, Henry, the youngest, sets off to buy the rundown Bjernsen place and marry a scandalous older woman named Ragni to achieve his dream of operating his own

farm free from maternal meddling. Behind such familial discord lies the enduring Palouse landscape, where "the wheat grew in sunlight and silence, careless of all save growth."

*The Day Will Come* is a commendable first novel—"sensitively told and deeply felt," according to *The New Yorker*—yet Marion's literary talents are developed even more fully in *Ellen Spring*, in which the title character flees her op-

pressive marriage to find refuge in an abandoned Palouse farmhouse. Over the course of the changing seasons, Ellen and her 10-year-old son find the support, friendship, and sense of belonging among their rural neighbors that enable them to thrive in the unfamiliar surroundings. While the neighbors are not always the most affable

sort (and can be downright crabby), they know they can rely on one another, and when Ellen's estranged husband intrudes upon her new life, they rally to her side.

Among Ellen's neighbors—and one of Marion's most memorable characters—is Noah Dunne, a retired farmer-turned-handyman. As Noah restores the farmhouse where Ellen and her son live, he imparts to them a calm understanding of the country and its inhabitants. He even waxes philosophical now and then, remarking at one point on how he would rather die in spring than winter, because winter "is kinda hard on the folks who have to bury me," and "You can see a long ways in the wintertime when there ain't no prettiness to get in your eyes and confuse you." Whereas in spring, "the world's so good to look at there ain't anything else to do but die." One might expect this kind of fatalistic insight from the stern New England farmers found in a Robert Frost poem, yet coming from Noah, it's accompanied by a bemused wink-and-a-nod that's unmistakably western.

In *The Keys to the House*, Marion takes a darker turn, recounting a young farmer's discovery of his mother's affair with the farmhand who murdered his father. Max Kenny works the family farm, and is content doing so. He values work without questioning the necessity of it. He feels most at home in his barn and sees the barnyard as "a world in itself." So when he uncovers his father's unmarked grave in the orchard, life as he knows it comes undone. And to restore equilibrium to his world, he must leave his farm community, drive across the state, and confront his father's murderer in a seedy beer parlor along Seattle's First Avenue.

Here, as in each of Marion's novels, the city—whether nearby Spokane or distant




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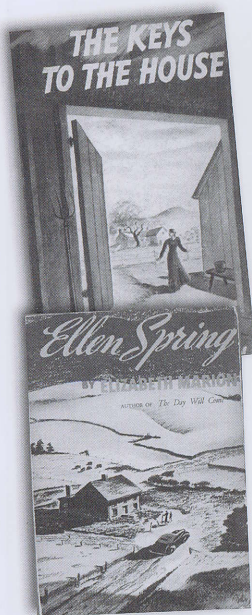


Seattle—represents the antithesis of life in the Palouse, where the fields, hills, creeks, wind, and sun instill a vitality and virtue in the inhabitants that the city only saps. Marion's passion for the Palouse becomes most evident in her lyrical yet subdued descriptions of the landscape, and in her respect for a people who manage their difficulties by "laughing with a whole heart at the calm little business of daily life."

It's no wonder then that Elizabeth Marion remained in the Palouse region throughout her life. After graduating from high school, she worked for the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, where she befriended fellow writer Ruby El Hult, with whom she maintained a lifelong correspondence that the two eventually compiled into *The Cockalorum Chronicles: New Words Between Old Friends* (1980). In the 1950s, she worked for the *Standard Register* in Rockford, a small town about 25 miles southeast of Spokane, where she met and married Eugene D. Saunders.

Marion, however, never published another novel. Although she wrote two more, she failed to find a publisher for either, despite favorable reviews of her first three; and according to the Washington State University Libraries, where her papers are held, both manuscripts are now lost. Nevertheless, the achievement of Elizabeth Marion's three published novels remains significant. Though long overlooked, their contribution to Washington letters and American farm literature deserves renewed attention. 

*Peter Donahue is author of the novel Madison House (2005) and coeditor of Reading Portland: The City in Prose (2006) and Reading Seattle: The City in Prose (2004).*



## Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

### Ellen Powell Dabney

*Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, ed. by Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

*Seattle Women Teachers of the Interwar Years: Shapers of a Livable City*, by Doris Hinson Pieroth. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004.

*Good Schools: The Seattle Public School System, 1901-1930*, by Bryce E. Nelson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.

### Tall Timber

*Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants in North America*, by Kazuo Ito. Kazuo Ito, 1973.

*A History of Pe Ell, Washington, and the Upper Chehalis River Valley*, by Ray Graves. Pe Ell: Ray Graves, 2006.

*Rails to Paradise: History of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad, 1890-1918*, by Russell Holter and Jesse Clark McAbee. Olympia: Russell Holter, 2005.

### Peter Stanup

*Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound* by Alexandra Harmon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

*Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Nisqually Indians. A Report prepared for the American Friends Service Committee*, by Mary B. Isley. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970.

*Indian Lives: Essays on 19th- and 20th-Century Native American Leaders*, by L. G. Moses and Raymond Wilson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

### Audubon's Western Woodpeckers

*John James Audubon: Writing and Drawings*, ed. by Christoph Irmscher. New York: The Library of America, 1999.

*Thomas Nuttall, Naturalist: Explorations in America, 1808-1841*, by Jeannette E. Graustein. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

*Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains and to the Columbia River*, by John Kirk Townsend, with introduction and annotation by George A. Jobanek. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999.

### Menace in the Sky

*Japan's World War II Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America*, by Robert C. Mikes. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973.

*Silent Siege: Japanese Attacks against North America in World War II*, by Bert Webber. Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1984.

### Snohomish County

*Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest*, by Warren Cook. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

*New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Age of Discovery*, by William Goetzman. New York: Viking, 1986.

*The Hidden Coasts: A Biography of Admiral Charles Wilkes*, by Daniel Henderson. New York: Sloane Associates, 1953.