JESSAMYN WEST
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Whittier College

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Jessamyn West is a birthright Quaker who is still best known for her first published book *The Friendly Persuasion*, the characters of which are also Quaker. These facts often frame people’s expectations of her subsequent works and of West herself. Surely all West stories will be variations on a gentle Quaker theme. Surely West herself will be a manifestation of the plain-dressing, theeing and thying Quaker stereotype of the 1800s. But such is not the case.

Although she doesn’t fit a past-century stereotype, the influence of Quaker beliefs is clear in her life and in her work. Quakers believe that God is love and that He dwells in every human. The logical results of these beliefs emphasize individual worth and responsibility, equality of men and women, optimism concerning the human condition, and work against social injustice.

West’s introduction to her anthology *The Quaker Reader* gives an accounting of Quaker history and of the leading Quaker men and women. But throughout this discussion, as throughout her fiction, the emphasis is on the humanness, the individuality, of both the historic figures and the characters. The Quaker view of life is essentially optimistic, but it is also realistic. It has enabled West to see and imagine beyond the social labels, but to see whole—the feet of clay as well as the crown.

The women characters are as complex as the men and are independent of them; they do not serve as shadows or reflections. Although the prototypes of her characters were raised at a time and
in a place where women were expected to become wives and mothers or perhaps teachers or missionaries (Double Discovery, p. 5), these roles did not involve subservience. As West remarks in her review of Colette Dowling’s The Cinderella Complex, “… if the reader [in this case West] be a Quaker, ungroomed for dependency…, the caste of success-fearing girls appears unreal—unreal to those brought up in a society that believes a God who chose a woman to bring His son to mankind will not object to having her speak a few words to the congregation” (“The Book Review,” Los Angeles Times, May 24, 1981, p. 1).

West also feels that it is the three-hundred-year-old Quaker belief that it is wrong to harm another human being which precluded her writing the kind of action and violence-packed Western she read in childhood (personal letter, February 24, 1981).

Born on July 18, 1902 (listed incorrectly as 1907 in some biographies), West was the first child of Eldo Roy and Grace Anna Milhous West. Her father’s people—Vawters and Wests—were English, of the Church of England, and first settled in this country in Virginia in 1685. The family believes that one of her father’s grandmothers was an American Indian (personal letter, September 7, 1980), and it is this woman West credits with her father’s dark good looks and her own tall, large-boned frame and square-jawed face. Her mother’s people—Milhouses and Griffiths—were Irish and Welsh for the most part and were Quaker converts of William Penn’s. They came to America in the 1700s, some of them with Penn himself.

Although there are no known published writers among her forebears, West came to a love of words, of reading and writing, naturally and early. Her father delighted in learning and using uncommon words he’d find in their unabridged dictionary and in making poems, some of which were printed in the Banner Plain-Dealer
(Hide and Seek, pp. 82-83). Her mother had won prizes for her elocution as a young girl and made up words, collected unusual names, and played anagrams with her husband and children. Their first married luxury was a bookcase. The name Jessamyn is the result of both her mother’s love of exotic names and her penchant for making up words. The Jess is for her maternal grandfather, but the addition is because her mother felt Jess or Jessie too common, too plain.

West began talking at the age of six months under the tutelage of her maternal grandmother, and she remembers at age three or four: “I knew that I was born to read and write, and sat in a corner crying because I could not make out the words in the book I was holding” (The Woman Said Yes, p. 73).

When she was six, the family, which now included four-year-old Myron and two-year-old Carmen (the fourth child, Merle, would be born in California), moved to Whittier in Southern California where a number of her mother’s relatives had already settled. Because land rates proved too high there, Eldo West eventually bought land, built a house, and moved his family to nearby Yorba Linda. Her love of the Southwestern landscape which permeates so many of her works was born here on these dry, sparsely treed hills amid the Santa Ana winds under the strong California sun. “Why is the desert more beautiful to me than the mountains or forests? Because I like spareness more than fullness, earth colors more than growth colors, far horizons rather than nearer ones? Sun rather than shadow, wind rather than rain, big stars rather than small ones, silence rather than sound?” (To See the Dream, p. 160). By the time she was twelve she had begun to keep scrapbooks of story ideas, the beginnings of the journals she has continued throughout her life, and she was able to indulge in her passion for reading with the opening of the Yorba Linda Public Library in the converted janitor’s closet of the grammar school (Alfred S. Shivers, Jessamyn West, p. 22).
West graduated from Fullerton High School when she was sixteen, and she entered Whittier College as a freshman in the fall of 1919. It was here during this year that the single most devastating blow to any dreams of writing occurred. In high school she had edited the school paper, had been on the debating team, and had been sent by her teachers to read her compositions to other classes as well as her own. In college she expected exacting criticism, but she was confident of the challenge. Instead she found a woman teacher who chose one of West's themes called "Live Life Deeply" to copy on the board and ridicule sentence by sentence to the entire class. The effect was so brutal that West quite seriously planned to take her own life. She has kept the essay to this day, but she still cannot find in it what caused her teacher's reaction, her fear for West's moral state, her plea that she henceforth curb her imagination (Dream, pp. 254-58).

West's grades dropped during this year, probably helped by her dating and becoming engaged to fellow student Harry Maxwell McPherson, and she transferred to Fullerton Junior College. A year later she came back to Whittier to major in English under Herbert Harris's tutelage and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in the spring of 1923.

West and McPherson were married on August 16, 1923, and in the following few years West was first a school secretary and then for four years the sole teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Hemet. She resigned her teaching post in 1929 to do graduate study at Oxford University for a summer, and then she began a doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley in American Studies under the direction of T. K. Whipple. It was West's first exposure to American writers, to a major library, to a single department of scholars larger than the entire Whittier College faculty at that time. From Whipple she received the first and only suggestion she says she has ever had that she write, and she thought she had chosen a satisfactory means,
but says now: “A doctorate in English literature was only a diffident would-be writer’s way of staying close to words without taking the writer’s risk of exposing his own perhaps pretentious ineptitude in the use of words” (Woman, p. 73). She was given a clue to just how unfulfilling this means might be when she found herself in the middle of her studies unexpectedly sobbing “When are you going to write your stories? When are you going to write your stories?” (Dream, p. 252).

Plagued by unexplained illness through her final graduate year and with her orals days away, West suffered a lung hemorrhage. This time the diagnosis was clear—far advanced bilateral tuberculosis—and within three days she was in a sanatorium in the Sierra Madre foothills. Two years later her mother was told: “Take her home and let her die amongst her loved ones” (Woman, p. 41). West did not die, but she was one of only five percent with that particular diagnosis who didn’t. Because West found it too painful to listen to the radio, “to be tormented with reports of people who had lives to live” (Woman, p. 46), or to relive her past for the same reason, her mother reminisced about her own youth as a Quaker girl on a farm in southern Indiana. It was for West “the only landscape I could live in comfortably. There was no pain there for me. It was nothing I once possessed and had lost; it was not a future forbidden to me” (Woman, p. 49).

When she could at last join her husband in Yuba City, she began to weave her mother’s shared memories into structured stories with beginnings and endings and to build on the recollections with her own imagination. And she went on to write stories concerning tuberculosis and the sanatoriums. Her husband finally convinced her to submit some of them for publication, and she did so with his promise that if none of them were accepted, he’d stop pestering her. The first to be published was a short story entitled “99.6” concerning life in a tuberculosis sanatorium. West was nearly thirty-seven. Her first full-
length book — *The Friendly Persuasion* — was published when she was forty-three. Tuberculosis had enabled her to write by leaving her unable to do anything else, but the price had been nearly ten years of her life.

West now lives in the Napa Valley in California with her husband who has retired as Napa’s superintendent of schools and from the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley. But she has in no sense retired, even though she has written prolifically in her fortysome years as a published author and has received a good deal of recognition including selection of some of her works by book clubs, entries on the best-seller lists, a film on her writing philosophy, a full-length biography and critique, the Indiana Author’s Day Award, the Thormod Monsen Award, and honorary doctorates from Whittier, Mills, Swarthmore, Indiana University, Indiana State College, Western College for Women, Juniata, Wheaton, and Wilmington College in Ohio. She is at work on a new novel, and her writing is usually only interrupted by the speeches and seminars she is requested to give across the country and by her active participation as a Whittier College trustee.

As she states in the film *My Hand—My Pen* (Writers on Writing Series, Davidson Films), she sets no given number of words as a day’s goal. What is hard for her is getting started in the morning without letting household tasks interfere. But once she has begun, she has no difficulty with the words themselves. She begins with firm ideas about where her characters are going, but she doesn’t force her characters if they develop in ways she hasn’t anticipated. She used to consider herself a short-story writer, but later she discovered the novel’s greater time and space, the possibility of more people. Her goal is to make her imaginary world so real that the reader believes it to be real. She wants the reader to “write” with the writer, to see the several possible endings there could be at any turn just as there are
several possible outcomes at any stage in a life. She amends the writing-only-what-you-know advice to include the imagination as the world best known. Just as Emily Bronte knew no Heathcliff, West did not know the Birdwells of *The Friendly Persuasion* or the Chases of *The Life I Really Lived*—except in her mind. West keeps notebooks of story ideas, but she also keeps journals, believing that her own life is not completely experienced until she has been able to commit at least part of it to the written word. She knows of no greater excitement than having a work underway and going well. This same feeling is also expressed in *To See the Dream*: “Writing is so difficult that I often feel that writers, having had their hell on earth, will escape all further punishment hereafter. At other times, tonight for instance, I fear there’ll be no heaven for us. What joys can equal the writing of seven pages—which I did today—on ‘Terra Buena’ or this room and the pen and ink with which to relive the day?” (p. 3).

West has edited a Quaker anthology and written in a variety of genres—poetry, operetta, autobiography, film script, essay, science fiction, short story, and novel. The works which mark West particularly as a Western writer are the autobiographies, the operetta, and the novels, including those that are short-story collections with related characters, because they contain such vivid descriptions of Midwestern lands in the 1800s and Southern California in the 1900s, and because she herself, her family, and her characters embody the indomitable and independent spirit so closely associated with the American West. All of her works have larger themes such as the coming of age and the Quaker religion, but in addition most capture the West in scene and temperament.

West’s anthology, *The Quaker Reader*, primarily contains selections from earlier times and other places, beginning with the Society of Friends’ founder George Fox in England. The filmscripts have been based on others’ works—such as *The Big Country* based on a
novel by Donald Hamilton—or on her own, as for The Friendly Persuasion. The science fiction novellas The Prismire Plan and The Chilekings, although set in California, are chiefly comments on American twentieth-century society as a whole (and have never appeared in hardcover editions—West, pp. 86-88). The essay Love Is Not What You Think, published in hardcover in 1959, transcends time and region to deal with a universal, as her many magazine articles transcend region to deal with such topics as writing, education, friendship, solitude, violence, Marina Oswald Porter, Ruth Carter Stapleton, and Richard Nixon (see bibliography for specific listings). The poems, many of which are collected in The Secret Look, and the short stories, most of which appear in Love, Death, and the Ladies’ Drill Team and Crimson Ramblers of the World, Farewell—which includes her first published work, “99.6”—are examples of Jessamyn West as a Western writer. But because of their length, it is the autobiographies, the operetta, and the novels where Western American qualities are most completely manifest.

Lucy Lockwood Hazard (The Frontier in American Literature, p. xviii) credits Frederick Jackson Turner with a useful definition of the Western frontier and thus of the characteristics of Western writing. He says that America has had a succession of frontiers beginning in the seventeenth century on the Atlantic shore and ending in the nineteenth on the Pacific. But even more important than the time or place of this moving frontier is evidence of the pioneering spirit—"A spirit of determination, of endurance, of independence, of ingenuity, of flexibility, of individualism, of optimism."

But there are two traditions within the literature of the Midwest and the Far West: an earlier and a later one (Charles Crow in Janet Lewis, Western Writers Series, page 13, names the second a counter-tradition because the two have co-existed much of the time). The earlier tradition is dominated by both male authors and male
characters and is probably best exemplified by Zane Grey's works which West began reading in her teens when he was at the height of his popularity. It also includes J. Frank Dobie, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., and Owen Wister, whose books she went on to read, and it can be thought of as beginning with James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving—whose frontier works have been eclipsed by the fame of Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. The focus of this literature is on the external world with man against nature and man against man. As such, the stories in this earlier tradition contain more action and more violence; they focus on early explorations, westward wagon treks, and very early settlements. West is unaware of any influence on her own work by these writers (personal letter, February 24, 1981), and indeed there is very little apparent in her settings, themes, and plots. She does share with them a talent for geographical description and the close interweaving of setting and character.

The later Western American literary tradition makes important shifts: the internal world is an important theme again, women authors become more prevalent, and they seem largely responsible for a tradition "which saw the key to American history as the creation of its social fabric and which stressed the experience of the family on the frontier, rather than the clash of natural and human forces" (Crow, Janet Lewis, p. 13). Although West does not see herself as having been influenced by the writers in this tradition any more than by those in the other, she is more clearly a part of it, as can be seen by examining a few of these women novelists. It is important to remember, however, that these women and their works are more different than alike, just as the men of the earlier tradition are. West thinks of herself as a writer without further qualification—not as a woman writer, not as a Western writer (personal letter, February 24, 1981), an attitude which probably holds true for most of these
authors whose work often involves a number of genres, settings, and themes, including ones outside the Western classification.

Mary Hallock Foote shares a Quaker background with West, but many of Foote’s Quaker relatives were well-to-do Easterners. Much of Foote’s adult life, beginning with her marriage in 1876 and lasting into her middle years, was spent in primitive mining camps in the Far West, but her associates here were the university-educated, upper-class mining engineers and their families, not the rural Westerners that Jessamyn West knew. Foote’s stories often portray conflicts between Easterners and Westerners or the difficulties of adjustment to the West by an Easterner. They show a nostalgia, a longing, particularly in the earlier stories, for the East, which they considered home, the antithesis of West’s characters and of West herself, who embraced the West as home. Quaker concerns or characters who are Quakers also figure less largely in Foote’s work than in West’s.

The Western American writer whose membership in a religious sect is most evident in her work is Virginia Sorensen, born a Mormon in Utah. The Mormons’ westward movement is a particularly important part of the American westward movement, and Sorensen has used her work to give readers not only a sense of Utah as a place but also a sense of Mormon concerns. Even her stories whose subjects are not Mormon—such as those about the Yaqui Indians or the Amish—still treat the general theme of the group versus the individual who is a religious or cultural outsider. Quaker characters do often figure in West’s stories, but uniquely Quaker concerns do not, except in The Friendly Persuasion and Except for Me and Thee. In any case, it is the character, not the concern, which is paramount.

Willa Cather is like Jessamyn West in having published her first novel comparatively late in life—although she was an active journalist and editor since her college days—and in having moved at an early age from a lush, settled area to a relatively barren, unsettled
one. More importantly, there is in the work of both writers a close interaction of their characters with the land. But Cather’s themes of loneliness, of gifted and sensitive characters’ alienation from an insensitive, unfulfilling Western environment, and of the “terrible spiritual toll taken by frontier life, especially upon women” (Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather, p. 11) are unlike West’s, where characters often relish solitude, where the western lands are positive forces, and where the women’s as well as the men’s lives are generally strengthened by frontier life.

Ruth Suckow, who wrote of Iowa as Cather did of Nebraska, is similar to Cather in emphasizing human isolation and feminine frustration. She goes even further, however, and “invariably sees women as victims” (Abigail Ann Hamblen, Ruth Suckow, p. 20). In contrast, West’s characters are rarely victims and then only of their own weaknesses.

Born just three years before Jessamyn West, Janet Lewis is similar to West in a number of ways. Both have spent most of their lives in California, and Lewis also suffered for years with tuberculosis, although unlike West she had published a book of poetry and had completed a children’s book before the illness overtook her. Perhaps because of early influence, both writers treat Indian characters as individuals: Lewis heard the tales of a local part-Ojibway woman whom she thought of as her Indian grandmother, and West saw the physical and emotional heritage in her family of her Indian great-grandmother. Both used short, sketchy accounts of court cases found in anthologies as inspiration, although Lewis’s three such novels are set in Europe while West’s are set in the Midwest—a chapter in The Friendly Persuasion and the entire The Massacre at Fall Creek. Most importantly, although their styles and their subjects are very different, the dignity and strength they give their characters, especially the women, are the same.
The Autobiographies

West has written four autobiographies. The first of these, *To See the Dream* (1957), focuses on the year she served as technical director and scriptwriter for the movie based on *The Friendly Persuasion*, with excursions into her own Quaker background and her philosophy of writing. In the form of a journal, it allows the reader to “remember” and to make discoveries as West does, but with the advantage of knowing how it all came out.

She became involved in the filmmaking very reluctantly because she was hard at work on *South of the Angels*—here called “Terra Buena”—and because the many previous Hollywood offers had come to nothing. But the caliber of the assistant director Stuart Millar and the director William Wyler convinced and intrigued her, and the metamorphosis of *The Friendly Persuasion* in the hands of Hollywood from merely a picture to make money to a picture that tells the stories of the characters as clearly and truly as it can becomes the grist for the journal entries. It is West’s first inside look into Hollywood and film production, and she takes the reader with her through this alternately astonishing, frustrating, ordinary, and extraordinary time. To tell the story of the Birdwells of southern Indiana effectively on the screen, West had to limit the action to one year out of the forty the book covered, to delete characters and scenes, and, by adding new characters and events, to weave the discrete chapters into one tale with a beginning and an end. She had to translate words on the page into camera images and character dialogue and action.

She was considered the authority on the Quaker practices of her characters because it was assumed that as a birthright Quaker her experiences would be similar. In fact they were not: she attended silent meetings with the leading actors Gary Cooper and Dorothy McGuire as much a learner as they. The Quaker practices she described in
The Friendly Persuasion were like those of her great-grandparents as told to her by her mother. As she says, "This is about the right remove for fiction" (Dream, p. 133). The church meetings she attended as a child in Southern California bore a much closer resemblance to the noisier Protestant sects: "We sang the ragtime hymns, listened to sermons long on rhetoric and short on reason, and had revivals that tore all but the most stolidly built emotionally among us right apart at our spiritual seams" (Dream, p. 131). Her own Quaker minister uncle used to keep time to the hymn singing by alternately slapping his Bible against his hand and throwing it against the ceiling. When the costume and set designers produced items plain and drab to the extreme, West countered with old pictures and clothes belonging to her Midwestern silent-meeting family to show that although church clothes were usually somber, everyday clothes were no different from any other Midwestern farm family's and that their homes did indeed have pictures and rugs and curtains and upholstered furniture. In short, "they furnished their homes with just as much Victorian luxury and bad taste as Methodists or United Brethren" (Dream, p. 206).

In struggling with the scriptwriting and the different ways the same story must be told when different media are involved, West often set down her ideas about journal keeping, writing, and reality. Her feeling that "no other kind of writing [than journals] gives the reader so much the feel of what another person has experienced" (Dream, p. 3) explains her choice of form for this autobiography. Her desire "to make an object—a story, a novel, a poem, which says 'life'" (Dream, p. 233)—explains her purpose for all her fiction as well as this translation into film. She eventually convinced even Hollywood that Jess and Eliza Birdwell were characters who happened to be Quaker rather than Quaker tracts in character form. She takes up the question, too, of reality: how the storytelling, the acting, may
sometimes be more real than “real life,” how difficult it often is to separate them, how important both are to living.

Although Hollywood threatened for some time to call the film “Mr. Birdwell Goes to Battle,” *The Friendly Persuasion* was the ultimate and wiser choice. *To See the Dream* ends before this choice was made and before the film was released to become a popular success and a candidate for an Oscar in the United States and the winner of the Gold Palm at the Cannes Film Festival.

*Hide and Seek* (1975) is the second autobiography. Like *To See the Dream*, it is written in the form of a journal but without the datelines, but it is more revealing because it covers more of her life, enlarging on events only briefly mentioned in *To See the Dream*, and because more kinds of ideas are contemplated and examined.

The present setting, the framework for the weaving of these past and present observations, is her three-month solitary stay in a travel trailer near Mesquite on the California side of the Colorado River.

All her life, West has craved solitude and a small place to look inward as well as outward. The trailer which she names “Walden on Wheels”—and which was the working title of *Hide and Seek*—is the present small place. It is a much more comfortable and sophisticated small place than the washtub in Indiana or the piano box in Yorba Linda, but its purpose is the same. “Solitude, like a drug, can be addictive. The more you have it, the more you want it. Solitude is an unending colloquy between you and yourself and such persons as inhabit your memory or are called forth by your imagination. It is painful to have this colloquy interrupted by the voices of real people. ‘Be still, be still,’ you want to say to them. ‘I can’t hear what’s being said’” (*Hide and Seek*, p. 92).

The river landscape recalls other Southern California landscapes, which she admires because of her love of light, of space, of contrast, and particularly of movement. “There are many beautiful
movements in the world: a wave cresting; a pacer responding to the call of 'Rack On'; a buzzard riding the air currents. But there are two available to any dweller in the West—perhaps I should say the Old West—that cannot be bettered: curtains lifting in the cooling air off the ocean after a sultry day, and outside the window a stand of volunteer oats now green, now silver, as the ocean wind bends and releases them” (Hide and Seek, p. 159). And the landscape recalls her childhood, particularly the years in Yorba Linda: the fear and excitement when the Santa Anas blew, the trips her family took, the solitude she enjoyed when she managed to convince them to leave her home, perceptive recollections of her parents and grandparents and their qualities that she has often given characters in her books. Through all the recollections are references to Henry David Thoreau. West had “discovered” Thoreau in her student days at Berkeley, and his thoughts figure prominently in all of her autobiographies and his influence in her fiction. The similarities in journal keeping, love of writing, desire for solitude, and even tubercular illness are strong. He is a singularly kindred spirit.

The third autobiography, The Woman Said Yes (1976), is subtitled Encounters with Life and Death: Memoirs. It is West’s favorite of her own books because it is a tribute to both her mother and her sister (personal conversation, May 5, 1980).

West credits Grace, her mother, with giving her life three times: in giving her birth, in restoring her to life when the sanatorium doctors had given up, and in giving her a life to “live in” while she was convalescing, a life which became the source of The Friendly Persuasion. West chronicles not only the events in her mother’s life, but more importantly her dreams and her qualities. Her dreams of a more refined life than an Indiana farm offered resulted in the children’s exotic names. Her love for her husband resulted in the children’s necessary self-reliance, for “the children of lovers and orphans” as
Robert Louis Stevenson said (Woman, p. 17). They never doubted that their mother would be there in an emergency, they never lacked food on the table, but they were allowed to go their own ways, to dress as they pleased, to read what they liked, to hike among the cactus and rattlesnakes at will. Grace’s unorthodox ways often appalled West as a child, but she came to treasure them as she grew older. West details her mother’s particular unorthodoxy in connection with West’s own “emergency”—tuberculosis: Grace’s eighty-mile round trips to the sanatorium weighted down with library books, papier-mâché cows, frosted root beers; her thermometer tampering; her secret eggs in the orange juice; and most importantly, those recollections of the past.

The second half of the book focuses on her sister Carmen’s final months with terminal cancer and the recalling of their shared past and relationship. Carmen wrote to West to “come home and help me die” (Woman, p. 113), and the sisters conspired to do just that, to allow Carmen—after life held nothing for her but increasing and unbearable pain—to choose the time of her death. West was severely criticized by her readers for helping her sister: “As you may imagine there were plenty of letters from people who went so far as to hope ‘I would rot in hell’. I may, but not for those last days with Carmen” (personal letter, November 15, 1976).

Only two of the seventeen reviews that I have read of these three works were unfavorable. Pamela Marsh in the Christian Science Monitor (February 7, 1957, p. 6) commented of To See the Dream that West’s “introspective outpourings can be tedious,” and A. M. Donohue in Critic (Winter 1976, p. 80) calls The Woman Said Yes “a truly immoral book . . . that never should have been written,” thus agreeing with the letters noted above. But reviews in such publications as the New York Times called To See the Dream “refreshingly and almost frighteningly perceptive” (February 10, 1957, p. 6) and

The fourth autobiography, *Double Discovery* (1980), also well received, takes West on a reexamination via her letters and journals of her journey alone at twenty-seven in 1929 to Europe. The journey is as much a record of her physical travels—the places she sees, the people she meets or observes—as it is a look into her mind and heart. The discovery is double because she finds out who she was before she dared admit even to herself that she wanted to be a writer and who she has become some fifty years later.

She goes primarily to see England in order to “visit the home of poets and penmen,” to “walk where heather and bracken grew and nightingales and cuckoos could be heard” (*Discovery*, p. 7). She also visits Paris at a new friend’s urging and Ireland, because her mother’s ancestors came from there. But it is the unsatisfying Ireland trip that yields two significant later visits: one to Timahoe with her second cousin Richard Nixon that gives the reader a glimpse of the man behind the political offices, and one to Limerick that changed her life when she found by chance Ann and Jean McCarthy, the sisters she and Max would raise as their own.

As Carolyn See says, “Jessamyn West quite gently reminds us that everything is an adventure—hiking through the French countryside with French spinsters, passing up wine in favor of lemon squash; traveling, going away—in order to return, turn back, and find yourself” (“Jessamyn West 50 Years Later,” *Los Angeles Times*, Part V, December 12, 1980, p. 30).

**The Midwestern Fiction**

West’s first published full-length work and the first with a
Midwestern setting, *The Friendly Persuasion* (1945), established a prominent and permanent place for her in American letters, remaining her best known work to date. Actually, *The Friendly Persuasion* is a collection of previously published short stories that are unified by a single cast of characters—members of the Birdwell family, Indiana Quakers of the 1800s. John Woodburn of Harcourt Brace suggested the idea of a collection to her (*West*, p. 48), but the seeds for the stories themselves were sown by West’s mother’s reminiscences of her grandparents and her own girlhood and told to West during the long months of her battle with tuberculosis (*Dream*, pp. 132-133, and *Woman*, pp. 74-75).

As far as the plots go, the seeds were small indeed. Grace West’s recollections of a man who talked to an imaginary spouse, her own ride through the woods to take cookies to a neighbor, and an orphan boy’s unexpected death formed the cores of “Shivaree before Breakfast,” “Lead Her Like a Pigeon,” and “Homer and the Lilies” respectively (*West*, p. 56). West says that the horse stories “A Likely Exchange” and “First Day Finish” grew from her mother’s remark that West’s great-grandfather liked a horse that picked up its heels (personal letter, October 23, 1977). That same gentleman also bought an organ to which his Quaker minister wife and the congregation objected (*West*, p. 55), but the particulars of the purchase and the objections are entirely West’s own in “Music on the Muscatatuck.” West gives her characters family names and traits more often than she uses the happenings of her family’s past. Jess Birdwell, the central character and patriarch, is patterned after West’s great-grandfather nurseryman Joshua Vickers Milhous (*West*, p. 55) and is named after her grandfather Jesse Griffith Milhous; Birdwell’s daughter Mattie longs to be named Gladys as did West’s mother. Mattie is also West’s imagining what her mother was like as a young girl, and Shivers sees some traits of West’s father
in Mattie's beau Gard Bent (West, pp. 48-49) as well as seeing grandmother Mary Frances McManaman in Eliza Birdwell (West, p. 56).

At least one of the stories owes its beginnings to sources other than Grace West. The kernel of "The Pacing Goose" comes from a collection of true court cases called Early Indiana Trials where a woman successfully identifies her stolen goose because it was "a pacer." West says that since Eliza Birdwell was "already mixed up with ducks and geese" she "attributed this . . . remark to her" (personal letter, February 23, 1977).

The stories take place over a forty-year span, the final one set in Jess's eightieth year. Most are warm tales with pain or illness or the darker human follies only rarely touched on. The opening story, "Music on the Muscatatuck," concerns Jess's yearning for music, his yielding to the temptation by buying an organ, and the resulting problem with his disapproving Quaker minister wife Eliza and a suspicious congregation. Thirteen-year-old Joshua and ten-year-old Laben, Jess and Eliza's sons, are featured in "Shivaree Before Breakfast"; in a confrontation with a lonely old neighbor, they gain a new insight into what it means to grow up. Eliza takes the neighbors to court over the ownership of Samantha in "The Pacing Goose," Mattie's first encounter with Gard Bent is the focus of "Lead Her Like a Pigeon," and her learning of the bravery of an earlier Mattie reconciles her to her name in "The Buried Leaf." "A Likely Exchange" and "First Day Finish" involve Jess's love of fast horseflesh and his successful "race" with the local Methodist preacher, and "Yes, We'll Gather at the River" is a contest of wits between Jess and a neighbor with a long-standing aversion to bathing.

The one earlier story that has a more serious theme is "The Battle of Finney's Ford." This is the longest and most fully developed of all the stories and is a moving and clear account of Quaker pacifism here set against the Civil War. Joshua goes to fight Morgan's Raiders
in spite of his Quaker upbringing. He goes because he hates fighting and because he feels he cannot set himself above his neighbors. His parents accept his willingness to die, but they cannot accept the possibility that he might have to kill. As with so much of any war, Joshua experiences only long hours of waiting and of preparing for battles that don't materialize. When he is wounded at last, it happens during a false alarm. Nevertheless, his scant twenty-four hours as a soldier provide him with a new maturity, a finding out what really matters and what does not. Furthermore, Joshua's enlistment confronts each Birdwell with the testing and meaning of pacifism. West's portrayal of those confrontations is true both to Quaker belief and individual character.

The later chapters also treat more serious themes: Jess's thoughts of death and the tastes of eternity he feels he's received on earth in "The Illumination," his fear of his own sickness and death in "The Meeting House," the differences between Jess and Eliza in coping with their daughter's death in "The Vase," the death of an orphan boy in "Homer and the Lilies," and particularly "Pictures from a Clapboard House" where adult griefs and infidelities are seen as incomplete puzzles, sometimes somber, sometimes illuminated, through granddaughter Elspeth's eyes. However, none of the stories is tragic nor even pessimistic.

The major reviews were strongly favorable, with only a mildly negative statement in the Saturday Review of Literature on the form being episodic rather than cumulative (November 17, 1945, p. 14). But, as Shivers states, not all of the Quaker press "was so . . . friendly" (West, p. 44). The criticism that caused West the most pain and is still so vividly remembered was in a Milhous cousin's letters to her Whittier College English professor Herbert Harris and to her mother—rather than to West herself—saying that The Friendly Persuasion demeaned Quakers, belittled the Milhous family, and under-
mined good English because it had a Quaker praying loud and long only to hide the sound of the forbidden organ, had Milhous using "ain't," and used the obscene four-letter word duck dung (personal letter, October 23, 1977). Shivers says that once it was obvious how popular the book was, this same cousin "donned Quaker costume and gave readings from the book" (West, p. 43).

Twenty-four years later, Harcourt Brace published West's second collection of stories concerning the Birdwells, Except for Me and Thee. Although the majority of these stories were written for the book rather than as separate magazine entries and were written long after The Friendly Persuasion, the characterizations are constant and the tales as fresh and lively as the first set. In fact, the two volumes make up a unified whole which Shivers feels should be published as one volume (West, p. 65). The stories remain discrete units as in the The Friendly Persuasion, but they flow more like chapters: there are fewer character points of view, more attention to chronology, and more allusion to events in other chapters.

The first three chapters, "The Wooing," "Heading West," and "The New Home," give the details of Jess and Eliza's courtship and early married life and let us know how the Birdwells came to settle in the area of southern Indiana that provides the locale for all of The Friendly Persuasion stories. "First Loss" describes daughter Sarah and her death, which is the source of the events in "The Vase" in The Friendly Persuasion, although that story takes place years later. Sarah is given some of West's own childhood traits—a love of words, early reading, a lively imagination.

Like "The Battle of Finney's Ford" in The Friendly Persuasion, "Neighbors" is the longest, most complex story in this volume and covers the same period in history—the Civil War. Instead of concentrating on the individual Birdwell's Quaker pacifism, this story focuses on the harboring and conducting of runaway slaves. The con-
trast between earlier Quakers who refused to uphold immoral laws and the mid-nineteenth-century American Quakers who were stalwart lawabiders is vividly drawn in Eliza’s wrestle with her conscience and her ultimate decision to go against the law when the question is no longer hypothetical. The events of this chapter have no roots in West’s past. As far as she knows, “the Milhous family was never mixed up in the Underground Railroad. Shame on them!” (personal letter, October 23, 1977).

“After the Battle,” which also takes place during the Civil War, does owe one line to West’s grandfather. The central theme is the humanness and ordinariness of the soldier, regardless of the color of his uniform. All of the Birdwells come to realize this during the few days they care for a very young, fatally wounded Rebel, but it is Little Jess—about the same age as West’s grandfather when he spotted a lost Rebel in the woods—who expresses the grandfather’s surprise that the Reb had no “brimstone smell or even horns” (Except for Me and Thee, p. 257, and personal letter, October 23, 1977).

The other chapters treat sibling rivalry, another tale of Jess’s love of fast horses, Laben’s maturation, family arguments, and finally the increasing worldliness of Jess and Eliza’s family and neighbors. As Eliza says, and Jess echoes, “People are getting more worldly every day. Except for me and thee” (Thee, p. 309).

Again, the reviews were generally favorable, with only The New York Times feeling that Except for Me and Thee is not quite up to par with The Friendly Persuasion, though it is worthwhile nevertheless (May 11, 1969, p. 35).

A Mirror for the Sky (1948) is perhaps West’s least known book. Although the subtitle refers to it as an opera and a musical drama, Shivers feels it has more elements of an operetta—spoken dialogue, loose plot, arias, choruses, dances, and a happy ending (West, p. 74).
It covers the life of John James Audubon—who learned English from Quakers—from 1818 to 1841, emphasizing the years he lived in the American wilderness, unknown, painting his beloved birds, subjecting his family to frontier poverty and years without him when he pushed even farther west. The idea was suggested to West by New York City theatrical producer Raoul Pène du Bois after he'd read *The Friendly Persuasion*, and the first edition contains nine costume sketches by du Bois himself. The book received mixed reviews (*West*, p. 75), and the only known performance of it, in 1958 by the University of Oregon, was not well received.

It makes delightful reading, however, since West, as in so many other books, has caught the flavor of the frontier: the Conestoga wagons rolling westward, the crowded riverboat landing, the picturesque speech, and the exuberance and passion of the characters themselves. But the fifteen scenes involve complex sets, often take place years apart, and, without script in hand, the supporting cast in particular is hard to keep straight. West learned later in writing *The Friendly Persuasion* script how effective it can be to telescope events to a single time period. Perhaps this would have helped here, although the director, Horace W. Robinson, felt the libretto and the music by Gail Kubik were not well suited to each other, and others felt that the elaborate staging at McArthur Court emphasized the spectacular instead of the story (*West*, p. 76).

West's first novel, *The Witch Diggers* (1951), like *The Friendly Persuasion*, owes its beginnings to West's mother's memories. "What a story teller needs I believe is not someone else's story, but someone else's fact firmly rooted to a known area and a known people. . . . I think that if my mother had told 'tales' that would have been the end of their utility for me. She did for me something far more provocative. A hint—a line, a memory half recalled. She gave me the seed of a story. In addition was her gift of a time long past in a land
no longer recognizable—something to dream about” (personal letter, October 23, 1977).

The known area is Indiana, especially the County Farm that Grace West visited in her teens where her grandfather was superintendent. She never forgot the assemblage of poor, insane, and simple-minded she met there (West, pp. 18-19). The promiscuous hired woman and an unusually large, feeble-minded Black inmate serve as models for two of West’s Poor Farm inmates. Her mother’s memories of other southern Indiana inhabitants—witch diggers, though she had no idea what they were digging for; a town drunk; and a man castrated for incestuous relations with his daughter—also served as ideas for characters and events (West, pp. 71-72). Link Conboy, who is West’s superintendent and lives at the Poor Farm with his family and some twenty indigents, shares some of West’s father’s traits, particularly his coming from a family scorned as drifters and renters. Cate and Em Conboy, Link’s daughters, share some of West’s own traits such as Cate’s longing for a conventional, plump, caressing mother and Em’s list and journal keeping. The character who apparently shares the most family traits is the mother, Lib Conboy. Like West’s mother, she is unconventional, given to bizarre dress around the house but exquisitely stylish in the presence of outsiders, fond of made-up words, and too spontaneous for the formal celebration of holidays and anniversaries.

The story begins on Christmas Eve 1899, with a flashback to the previous summer, and ends during the summer harvest of 1900. The characters live their lives at one with the seasons and the holidays: buoyed by crisp falls and false springs, dulled with gray, unchanging cold, mellowed by August’s yellow light, exhilarated by wind and rain and storm. “Who wants tame weather?” Cate asks. “Blazing summers, freezing winters, great storms, that was how it should be. Full of contradictions” (The Witch Diggers, p. 422). West is a master
at description and the scenes are alive with these Indiana climate contradictions just as the story crackles with the contradictions of the characters, especially Cate's, whose story it really is. These contradictions are as natural to the human condition as weather is to the earth: Cate's see-sawing between child and woman, between innocence and sexuality; Link's reticence and his desire for companionship; and the witch diggers themselves searching for happiness but providing the darkest counterpoints to the brighter events.

The contradictions abound and foreshadow, as in the opening chapters with Christian Fraser's trip to the Poor Farm on Christmas Eve to court Cate Conboy. Although he is as happily anticipating his visit as his visit is anticipated, although the train's passengers are filled with the special glow of holiday hope, Christie must get from the station to the farm by riding with the town undertaker, and he's left on the doorstep with a baby's casket to deliver. Christmas Day itself is also the day for the funeral of the baby of one of the inmates, the reason for the delivery of the casket.

The central story concerns the growth and eventual shattering of Christie's and Cate's love by events which lead Cate to suppress her sexual self as evil. She witnesses the severe and unjust punishment of her twelve-year-old sister's innocent endeavor to help satisfy the appetites of the resident peeping tom. She sees her brother's castration of his wife's uncle for his incestuous relations with the wife. She learns of her father's adultery, and, inexplicable to her, her mother's acceptance and forgiveness of the very thing she has been most outspokenly against. How trust a man's physical caresses, even her father's? More importantly, how trust her own desires for Christie? How truly be "good" as her mother so frequently admonishes her? Cate answers the questions by breaking her engagement to Christie and marrying a local mother's boy who arouses no more in her than a vague motherliness. Her repression turned to revulsion triggers the final
tragic events.

Although the reviews gave heady praise for the most part, the public did not take to *The Witch Diggers*. Shivers feels it likely that it was their unwillingness to accept a tragedy from someone they’d enshrined as a teller of gentler and happier Quaker tales (*West*, p. 73).

In 1967, after a number of books with a California background, West returned to an early nineteenth-century Ohio-Indiana setting with *Leafy Rivers*.

Leafy’s coming to emotional and sexual maturity forms the core of the book, and her character is the catalyst for the others. Told as a series of flashbacks while she awaits the birth of her first child, the narrative is about her childhood, her courtship and marriage, and their year of raising pigs in Indiana, events which are interwoven with the lives of the other characters.

Because Leafy’s husband’s talents are more suited to schoolteaching than to raising pigs, Leafy assumes many of the physical tasks of homesteading. These and her romantic relationship with the owner of their land change her from the child who’d “just as lief” do one thing as another—the source of her nickname—to a person of firm independence, and they prepare her for sexual awakening by the area’s master drover during the annual pig drive to Cincinnati, which she begins alone. Unlike Cate of *The Witch Diggers*, Leafy melds the child and the woman before it is too late, not only saving but enriching her marriage.

West’s mother is not the source of *Leafy Rivers*—Shivers cites a single-line notebook entry as the germinal idea (*West*, p. 77)—but her traits and the circumstances of West’s own birth add dimension to the characters and the plot. Reminiscent of Grace West’s penchant for unusual names are the character’s names in *Leafy Rivers*: Reno, Aprilla, Venese, Ozias, Cuma, Chancellor. The Lucey children arrive at school in outlandish dress as the unsupervised West children
sometimes did; Leafy is a lover of books, a fast reader to her hus­
band’s plodding, as were Grace and Eldo; and Aprilla suffers
migraines with Leafy’s concern for her mother matching Jessamyn’s
own. Leafy also bears a physical resemblance to Grace—like her she
is not beautiful but she was bewitching on her wedding day: “green-
eyed, red-lipped, transparent-skinned, like something grown in the
shade but touched at the minute with a blaze of light” (Leafy Rivers,
p. 67). The difficulty of Leafy’s labor, the doctor’s decision to take
the baby in order to save the mother, and Leafy’s determined, over-
riding objection parallel West’s own birth. Even the birthdate, July
18, corresponds to West’s, albeit some eighty-four years earlier.

Shivers finds Leafy Rivers replete with symbolism: the sexual
significances of lameness with the Roman god Vulcan, of snakes with
the Garden of Eden, and of pigs with the Odyssey’s Circe, and the
significance of the characters’ names, Shivers especially noting that
all those characters whose names change are those who undergo or
seek change (West, pp. 77-78, 81).

The sales of Leafy Rivers were not particularly good nor were the
critics particularly kind, several feeling as did J. J. Hall that “she
strains to tie up the loose threads in a tidy ending” and “the
backwoodsiness is occasionally forced” (Saturday Review, October 7,
1967, p. 45). It is a story well told, but it lacks the fire and freshness
of most of West’s work. Shivers speculates that it “must have given
her more than the usual amount of labor” (West, p. 77), and he cites
a letter from her which shows that she put it aside, unfinished, while
she completed another manuscript (West, note 45, p. 144).

West’s most recent novel with a completely Midwestern setting is
The Massacre at Fall Creek (1975). Its source was the same book in
which she’d found The Friendly Persuasion’s pacing goose, Early

In Indiana in 1824 five white men had killed nine Seneca Indians,
seven of them women and children, all of them peaceful, long-time dwellers of the region. Four of the white men were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to hang; the fifth had escaped and was never brought to trial. Three of them did hang while the fourth, an adolescent, was given a last-minute reprieve. This was the first time white men had been tried, convicted, and hanged for murdering Indians.

The memory of the meager reference to this event haunted West until she made a novel from it. A historical recreation was impossible, for too few records or eyewitness accounts have survived, but what intrigued her more in any case were the “more abiding truths” of this human predicament and the impossibility of a satisfactory solution to so complex a situation, illuminating as it did the entire Indian-white conflict of nearly two centuries’ duration (The Massacre at Fall Creek, p. 314).

The story covers the few short months from the winter killings to the early spring hangings, centering on the lives she has created for the Indians, the local settlers, the lawyers, and especially the condemned men and their families. She does include the influence on the often fierce Senecas of the real Seneca, Handsome Lake, who taught total nonviolence and the natural communion among all living things that made his followers the antithesis of both the whites and the Indians involved in the massacre (Massacre, p. 313). The writing is stark, carefully honed, to provide immediacy. From the thwack of the Indian boy’s head splintering against the tree trunk to the crack of the hanged men’s vertebrae, the reader is present—watching, experiencing. There are no real heroes or heroines in this tale: courage and cowardice, love and hate, guilt and innocence are too closely entwined in each of the characters, just as they are in life.

The subject and the technique produced one of her most successful
books, and very few reviewers agreed with *The New Yorker* that *The Massacre at Fall Creek* was "heavy-handed fiction" where fact would better have served (May 5, 1975, p. 143). It was chosen as a Literary Guild main selection and a Reader's Digest Book Club selection and remained on the best-seller lists for several weeks.

**The California Fiction**

West's fourth full-length work, *Cress Delahanty* (1953), is the first set in Southern California. Like *The Friendly Persuasion*, several of the chapters first appeared as short stories in such magazines as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*, and the main characters are the same throughout. Unlike *The Friendly Persuasion*, all of the stories are from the point of view of just one character (young Cress), they involve only a five-year span, and the incidents are imagined from West's own remembrances and observations rather than from her mother's.

Although the 1940s time period is later than West's own adolescence, Cress bears a good deal of resemblance to West not only in thought and action but also in her circumstances. Cress lives in Tenant, Yorba Linda’s fictional counterpart, her father is also a rancher and a school board member, and in the final chapter she attends Woolman College, like Whittier College in location and description. She writes on a cherished bamboo desk, home for her dreams, as West did (*Hide and Seek*, p. 85), and remembers the favorite haven of her childhood, a piano box, as West does (*Hide and Seek*, p. 85).

The appeal of Cress is the universal coming of age. Through Cress, the chasm between parent and child, the poignancy of early loves, the difficulty and joy of self-discovery, and the stunning insights into adult duplicity and complexity are felt again. Cress sometimes feels "tragic," but the events are seldom so and humor touches the out-
come of most of the episodes.

The book opens with Cress at twelve glorying in a day alone in the house during the fall, dreaming of receiving the “magic sentence” that will awaken the boys to her, and writing in her notebooks, where she copies phrases she likes from Shelley and adds to her list of strange and beautiful words gleaned from the dictionary. During the winter Cress does become interested in a boy, a bookish dreamer unpopular because his physical ineptness handicaps team play. She accidentally injures Edwin during a game but allows his parents to think she did it on purpose so that he will not know that she feels sorry for him.

At thirteen, Cress takes both poignant and painful steps to growth. She grapples with her grandfather’s way of mourning her grandmother’s death; buys an immense and ornately decorated red straw hat to impress Edwin with, only to lose it to the waters of an uncovered fish tank; and becomes so successful in her bid for recognition by being the school clown that she loses an election because no one will take her seriously. In an especially funny chapter, she undergoes agonies over the proper behavior of her parents in the presence of her much admired older friend Bernadine until she overhears the agonies her parents are anticipating watching her dance in a school festival. Her idealization of her piano teacher becomes joy when Mrs. Charlesbois begins asking her to stay for dinner on the nights when her husband is out of town, and then becomes dismay when she learns she is being used as a cover for the teacher’s affair with an older pupil. In her anguish Cress confronts Mr. Charlesbois, who remains steadfast in his love despite his having known of the affair all along, and she gets her first insight into the intricacies of adult lives and loves. Another chapter has the still-bookish Edwin, this time practicing “Scenes from The Aeneid” with Cress, stand up to the local bully on Cress’s behalf.
The last chapter in which Cress is thirteen is the most haunting of all the selections and certainly the darkest in tone. On an overnight visit to the home of a school acquaintance in the nearby oil district, Cress is taken alone for an after-dinner walk with her friend’s father, a man whose excessive neatness, rough fondling, and choice of an embarrassing Bible chapter for Cress to read aloud before the meal have already made her uneasy. On the walk he begins to talk about snakes, eventually catching a harmless gopher snake and tossing it in a sump hole.

“Sink—swim,” said Mr. Wallenius. “Up—down; in—out.”

Behind the blunt, striving, blinded head making its horrible effort to rise, yet falling back again, the snake’s body moved with such energy that against anything with less resistance than oil it would have broken free. But the oil held like fingers. Along the whole of her body, Cress felt the terror and effort of that struggle—the oil in her own eyes, the taste of oil in her own mouth.

“Save him!” she implored. “Save him! It’s wicked to do that. It hurts him so!”

“Sink—swim,” said Mr. Wallenius. “Sink—swim.”

A bird darted near the surface of the sump hole, then flashed away; the evening insects sang on; there was a little flurry of wind among the elder leaves.

“Sink—swim,” said Mr. Wallenius. “Under—out.”

The snake’s head lifted and fell; it kept time, it seemed, not only with the words Mr. Wallenius spoke but with the thud and suck of the pumps and with the rhythmical pressure of Mr. Wallenius’ fingers on Cress’s hand, which she now realized he was holding. (Cress Delahanty, p. 182)

At fourteen she undergoes alternating bouts of shyness and
boldness over Calvin Dean, the football captain and debating club president, who hardly knows she exists. She is reunited with her friend Honor but discovers that the years apart and the five-year age difference now make light years' difference in their interests—while Cress is still a tomboy happiest swimming in the irrigation ditch, Honor is engrossed in recipes and household equipment preparatory to her marriage. Cress attends a beach house party and, excluded and uncomfortable with the older, boy-crazy girls, finds unexpected companionship with the lame, spinster chaperone. Then her disastrous entry in a talent contest brings calm self-awareness instead of the tears her parents expect.

At fifteen her affections fasten on Mr. Cornelius, a thirty-eight-year-old neighbor dying of tuberculosis. She offers God her life in exchange for his—as West did for a cousin (West, p. 108), and when she is brave enough to declare her love to Mr. Cornelius, it is welcomed like a tonic by Mrs. Cornelius, and she asks Cress to help care for him.

In the last chapter, when she is sixteen, Cress is called away from college to be with her dying grandfather. She leaves school very reluctantly and only at Edwin's urging. She feels no bond with an old man and death, but by his bedside she finds that his pleasures are the same as hers, that bodies, not hearts, age.

*Cress Delahanty* was chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection and was reprinted ten times, becoming nearly as popular as *The Friendly Persuasion*.

*South of the Angels* (1960) is West's longest and most complex book to date. It was the manuscript, under its working title "Terra Buena," she interrupted so reluctantly to work on the movie of *The Friendly Persuasion* in the 1950s.

The setting is Southern California's Yorba Linda, although she follows the practice established in *Cress Delahanty* of giving Yorba
Linda a fictional name amidst the actual names of the surrounding cities and towns. Here Yorba Linda is Terra Buena, more often simply called the Tract, and Anaheim, Fullerton, Orange, Whittier, Santa Ana, Pomona, Monrovia, Riverside, Norwalk, Gardena, Corona, and Azusa are among its neighbors.

West draws upon her own observations of this region she loves best and of its people, but there are now only echoes of particular family traits or events—no one character harbors so much of her mother as does Lib Conboy in *The Witch Diggers*, for example. Here Mrs. Raunce has poems published in the *Banner Plain-Dealer* as Eldo West did, Mrs. Cope’s attitudes on a camping excursion are Grace West’s, and Old Silver survives coyotes and chloroform as did the West’s own Old Silver. The Quaker practices of West’s upbringing are also here, the quite silent meetings that cause Reverend Raunce to say: “We’ve got the gift of tongues as strong as any Baptist or United Brethren” (*South of the Angels*, p. 29).

West’s feeling for the Southern California landscape is fully expressed in *South of the Angels*. Shelby Lewis mirrors her thoughts on the merits of Southwestern landscapes above others: “‘always been . . . moving west since I was born, toward my rightful home.’ . . . He felt strangled, remembering all that greener em back East, like a man held down by weeds underwater who suddenly breaks free and rises to the surface” (*Angels*, pp. 65-66). She pictures, too, the land’s change from virgin hills to cultivated groves: “The land that had been free to voyage silently under the stars . . . was going to be made to earn its keep like any yoked oxen” (*Angels*, p. 134).

The characters, nearly thirty of whom are fully developed, come from northern California, Colorado, the South, and the Midwest to become the Tract’s first settlers, to turn the grazing land into citrus groves. The book covers the first nine months of the settlement, from fall 1916 to spring 1917. Technically too late to be “pioneers,” they
must nevertheless forge new relationships and often new livelihoods in a new climate on new land with only the tools of their separate pasts. Several of the characters might seem stereotypical at first glance—the spinster school teacher, the handsome philanderer, the brutally prejudiced Southern “gentleman”—but West believes in the development of her characters consistent with both their flaws and strengths, so they are not one-dimensional. Thus, the effects on each character of severe weather or traumatic experience, rather than the events themselves, receive the emphasis. The effects are complex and interrelated—as Shelby Lewis remarks: “How tangled together we are in our suffering and pleasure” (Angels, p. 442).

The cast of characters is too large to permit any detailed description of either their actions or their feelings, but some idea may be given by touching on the story framework and a few of the characters. The nine-month time period is significant. Two women, Joicey Lewis and Rosa Ramos, conceive as the story opens and give birth just days before the story ends. Mary Jessup’s slow, agonizing death by cancer and Pete Ramos’s sudden death by bullets also occur at the end, but the nine-month gestation period is necessary for all the events—the births, the deaths, and the entwined relationships.

Tom Mount—aptly named—is one of the major causes of the entanglements: the Tract carpenter and apparent bachelor, he beds a large number of the adult females, changing the lives of married and unmarried alike, while a patient wife of twenty years’ standing waits in Los Angeles for the interludes between jobs and other women.

Four adolescent girls reach maturity during the nine months, but by different paths. Especially memorable are Pressley Cope’s eventual laying aside of responsibility and guilt over her mother for adult love and marriage, and Medora Cudlip’s liaison with Julian Ortiz, which lights the fuse to her father’s deep-seated prejudice and indirectly causes the murder.
The marriage of Pressley’s parents is examined, a union of individuals hopelessly different: Luther Cope, a “pattern of a man,” and Indy Cope, “a live creature threshing about [who] will tear a pattern to shreds” (Angels, p. 223).

West creates a California Thoreau in Asa Brice, except that his Walden Pond is a dry arroyo. He is solitary, a close observer of nature, a keeper of records of the weather and the native plants and animals. But he comes to choose human companionship over impersonal nature in the end.

Most of the reviews of South of the Angels were mixed, hailing the characterization and description, but faulting the large cast, looseness of focus, and the length.

A Matter of Time (1966) is the first novel West wrote that is set in the present and told in first person. It is also the most autobiographical, for its center is the alliance of two middle-aged sisters in ending the cancer-filled life of one of them. That the details of this act of courage are virtually unchanged from West’s sister Carmen’s death can be seen by any reader of both A Matter of Time and The Woman Said Yes. But A Matter of Time preceded The Woman Said Yes by ten years and West was not yet ready to reveal A Matter of Time’s source, as this statement by Shivers shows: “The memory of various relatives in her family who were killed by cancer, including her sister Carmen, plus the thought that she herself might be afflicted someday, inspired Miss West to explore in fiction what she thought she might do in a similar situation where the agony was increasing and nearly unrelievable” (West p. 123).

The time span is the last few months of the character Blix’s life, but most of the story is flashbacks of the sister’s remembrances of their pasts and particularly of their own tangled relationship: the younger sister’s reprimands for supposed and actual sexual misconduct that led her to choose a marriage of the head rather than the
heart, the failed first and successful second marriages of the older sister that taught her to trust the heart over the head, and the conscious and unconscious influences of each sister on the other’s decisions. These events are not autobiographical, although there are similar details. Like the Wests, the Murphys are Irish, English, and a touch of Indian. Their father is from a family of drifters and renters, their mother from long-time property-owners. The children—five in this case—bear even more unusual names than the Wests—Tasmania, Blix (for the Frank Norris heroine), Marmion, Le Cid, and Basil. They live in Southern California in towns that resemble Yorba Linda, Whittier, Hemet, and Palm Springs. Some of them, Tasmania in particular, attended Pilgrim College, which is similar to Whittier College. Tasmania, like Jessamyn, is the eldest and sees herself as tomboyish and unsophisticated while Blix, like Carmen, has beauty, grace, and an infallible style.

The nonautobiographical events do, however, illuminate the West sisters’ actual relationship described so vividly in *The Woman Said Yes*: the long resentment of the younger toward the older; the idealization by the older of the younger; the contrast in sophistication and lifestyle; and the similarity in need and loving. The illustration of this relationship by fiction gives *A Matter of Time* its freshness and vitality, its truth. In spite of the circumstance, there is far more wit and laughter here than sorrow, for it is an affirmation of life and family rather than a justification for death.

Unfortunately, in spite of the almost entirely favorable reviews, the shock of the candid treatment of euthanasia—never intended to be more than an accounting of an individual choice (*West*, note 31, p. 146)—obscured the literary merits of *A Matter of Time* in many readers’ eyes.

*The Life I Really Lived* (1979) is West’s most recent fictional work. Like *A Matter of Time*, it is written in first person and it is contem-
porary, although most of the story takes place from the turn of the century to the early days of World War II.

So convincing is the telling combined with the title, the use of first person, and for the first time the exclusive use of actual place names, that many readers, including some critics, are sure that it is autobiographical. West cites one reviewer who supported this thesis by saying that both West and her heroine Orpha Chase had disastrous first marriages, causing West to remark that her one marriage—at that time in its fifty-sixth year—is “a pretty long drawn out disaster” (personal letter, May 1, 1980). If the events of Orpha’s life did parallel her own, West says she would have used third person to disguise any relationship with her to Orpha’s “hopping from one bed to another” (personal conversation, May 5, 1980).

The overt similarities between West and her family and Orpha and hers are fewer and fainter here than the author-character parallels in almost any other West novel except The Massacre at Fall Creek. West attributes her own mother’s comment about West as a child to Orpha’s brother Joe: “Never still for a moment, body or tongue” (The Life I Really Lived, p. 4). As was Grace’s, Orpha’s grandfather is superintendent of a poor farm where Darkey Bob much resembles Nigger Bob in The Witch Diggers, who in turn was based on an actual poor farm inhabitant. Orpha’s father is a nurseryman as was West’s great-grandfather. Some of the cats carry names that West gave her own cats. As does West herself, Orpha loves to see the soaring of turkey buzzards and feel the raging of a Santa Ana; she is also lefthanded and suffers from migraines—West, as well as her mother, was plagued with migraines. But these are meager references in a 404-page story and are incidental to the plot. Orpha does become a writer, but her works are all novels and have plots different from those of West’s novels. Even so, readers of The Life I Really Lived believe enough to ask for West books with
Orpha's titles, *Talbot Ware* and *The Pepper Tree House*. Orpha and West are similar in their philosophies of writing and life. Words hold the same magic. They each lead "a double life: one life on paper, another spoken; a life of words, a life of acts" (*Life*, p. 147). Together they believe that circumstance makes a life; as Orpha says, "Who was I? I was all that was behind me. I had built myself. I was part of all I had loved. And hated?" (*Life*, p. 373). It is the permeation of these similar philosophies in *The Life I Really Lived* that readers sense as truth, and therefore, they cannot separate Orpha Chase from Jessamyn West.

Orpha begins life in northern Kentucky shortly after the turn of the century. By the age of twenty she's known cruelty and sadism and has become the widow of a murderer and a suicide. She vows then to marry the next time with her head instead of her heart. And exactly five years after the day of her first marriage, she becomes the second wife of prudish Jacob Hesse, only to discover that she is merely a substitute, even in looks, for his first wife and that both are substitutes for Jacob's mother, repeating the incest in Jacob's eyes that had gone before. It is during this marriage that she begins to keep notebooks of Unspoken Thoughts, the beginnings of her writing, and the only place she has to be herself. When Jacob discovers the notebooks, but not her love affair with one of his salesmen, and she refuses to destroy them, he leaves her. Shortly thereafter, in 1932, she and her adopted daughter travel to California, where Orpha eventually does become a writer, but first she becomes housekeeper for her brother Joe—cured of tuberculosis by a religious experience, converted to the Society of Friends, and serving as a faith healer whose fame ultimately rivals Aimee Semple McPherson's. The time in California encompasses a series of related events: Joe's trial for murder, at which he is accused of keeping a cancer victim from the medical help she needed; Orpha's affair with a much
younger man, a Hollywood star whose fame is rising because of his role in the movie based on Joe's life and on one of Orpha's books; daughter Wanda's marriage to that star; and Orpha's fulfilling and final marriage to Joe's defense attorney.

The themes, the circumstances, are complex, but among them are West's most detailed account of a tubercular sufferer, her first major character to have the disease outside of her short stories, and her most thorough accounting of the kind of Quakerism common to Southern California and practiced there by the West family, in several ways the antithesis of the Midwestern Quaker practices of her grandparents' day, as discussed earlier. Also, as Robert Kirsch says, she has caught "the essences of Los Angeles" (Los Angeles Times Book Review, November 18, 1979), not only the weather and the land, but the people:

It didn't occur to me then—as it does now—that the five of us seated at that out-of-season Thanksgiving table constituted what was typical of Southern California. Not a native child of the Golden West among us.

A woman, twice married, husbands departed, and hopeful now of finding herself—not a husband.

A Midwestern couple, Roosevelt-hating, God-fearing, churchgoing, Republican-voting: the real backbone of Southern California.

Girl born out of wedlock (bastard in the sociology textbooks); pure product of California sunshine (beach or desert), California poppies and Hollywood, beholding eyes would affirm.

Joe, most typical Californian of all, a man come to the state (the one-lung state) in his youth for his health. Product of the great California school system, and possessing that talent more admired in California than anywhere else: a
talent for public performance. Joe's talent was for preaching the gospel, a gospel somewhat esoteric. Why would Californians who divorce, make sexy movies, build tract houses, kill each other by speeding on their freeways, produce and drink wine, take to a man preaching conversion, faith healing, and the Second Coming? Perhaps they feel the need of God more than most. Uprooted, far from home, divorced, lonesome, doing what they have been taught as young people was wrong, they long to be loved and forgiven. (Life, pp. 285-86)

West says that "the persuasion in [The Life I Really Lived] has become less friendly" (personal letter, July 14, 1979), and this contrast with her best known work is another reason she is asked if The Life I Really Lived is her life. As she answered Nick Williams (Los Angeles Times West View, January 13, 1980), "Of course it is. Not that any of it happened to me, but I lived it while I wrote it. All writers do that—they become, as they write, their characters re-embodied. They have to feel all of it, suffer all of it, enjoy all of it, or reality won't come out of what they write." The difference between The Life I Really Lived and The Friendly Persuasion firmly refutes any lingering belief that she can write only of gentle people in a gentle past. She began her writing life by making the Birdwells and a small section of nineteenth-century southern Indiana real. But as she continues to observe, to live, to write, the realities occupy a larger canvas. She is spending well her Thoreauan legacies—commitment to nature, to observation, and to introspection—and her legacy from both the Quakers and Thoreau—commitment to the human spirit.

Most critics have commended her for the reality in The Life I Really Lived, and Kirsch considers it "a masterpiece [in which she has] turned tables on the conventional views [and] made universal the materials, the vocabulary of the Southern California experience.
... It is time, I think, to recognize Jessamyn West as one of the treasures of this state's literature, and, in fact, of the nation's" (Los Angeles Times Book Review, November 18, 1979). I wholeheartedly agree.
Selected Bibliography

This listing does not include unpublished materials, condensed versions, or anthology reprints, nor does it itemize the materials housed in the Jessamyn West section of Special Collections in the Whittier College library. This section includes longhand manuscripts, revisions, typescripts, and galleys of her works (not all four forms for all works), the Spanish version of The Friendly Persuasion, and the French versions of Cress Delahanty, A Matter of Time, South of the Angels, and The Witch Diggers, as well as various editions of her works.

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