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Preface

I first came across Mildred Walker's work in the fall of 1995. At the time, I was snowbound in Great Falls, Montana, having traveled down from Canada to pick up a load of ponies. An early winter storm had blown in that day, and I found myself wandering around a bookstore trying to find a distraction from thoughts of the trip I had just made, of slipping and sliding in the ruts of semis with a rented horse trailer blowing back and forth. Since I'd been traveling through winter wheat country all afternoon—as best as I could tell in the drifting snow—the title of Mildred Walker's recently republished book, *Winter Wheat*, caught my eye.

The next morning, with the snow replaced by ferocious winds, I found my way to Curtis Lee's little farm on the banks of the Missouri River to pick up his band of Shetlands. The vivid landscape of Walker's book shadowed my thoughts as I helped load the little animals. Curtis was selling his farm and taking the proceeds to move into a nursing home. It was all a little sad—him showing me photos and trophies from Great Falls' fairs in the 1940s and '50s. On that day I had no idea that almost fifteen years later I'd find myself less than a mile from his place, again standing on the banks of the Missouri, again in Great Falls, again picking up something and hauling it home, and I had no idea that the book I'd bought the night before just to lull myself to sleep would have something to do with it all.

PREFACE

Like Mary Clearman Blew, the little girl who realized for the first time that lives like hers were worth writing about when she found a copy of *The Curlew's Cry* in a local Montana library, I too was happy to realize that the seemingly mundane and backwater existence I lived was somehow validated in words—beautiful words. Subsequently, I arranged to have each new reissue of Walker's novels by the University of Nebraska Press sent to our farm in Alberta. Certainly, my initial enthusiasm for Walker's fiction was by no means scholarly. It was entirely personal, and probably still is. Her settings were realistic, as were her characters. Her books didn't have happy endings. They just stopped because there wasn't anything else to say. Her characters and writing had an integrity that I valued. So with just that, I sent copies of her books to my family and friends and carried on in my little backwater, secretly wishing I could meet the author. But, like many things, I waited too long—or so I thought.

As with many mothers and wives, my life changed when my husband came home one day, and although I did not know it at the time, the news that Andrew announced would bring me a whole lot closer to meeting Mildred Walker than I could have ever imagined. He explained that he had been offered a job in Houston and thought it would be nice to have a break from Alberta's winter and snow, just for a season or two, and he asked what we thought. Initially, we were horrified. We had horses, sheep, chickens—not exactly a mobile group—and I sure wasn't a "trailing spouse." But we struck a compromise. My husband was itching for a little change, we'd find someone to stay at the farm, and hadn't I always vowed that when I was old, I'd finish my PhD? Maybe this was the opportunity, I reasoned.

I discovered that not many universities are interested in a middle-aged mamma who wants to pursue a PhD in English, having no formal education in the subject. However, luck was on my side. With characteristic Southern hospitality, the University of Houston didn't slam their door but instead said they'd

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The purpose of this study is to offer the first comprehensive critical reading of the major fictional works of Mildred Walker. Its goals are to suggest a variety of interpretations that will encourage readers already familiar with Walker's novels to re-evaluate her works and their implications and also to encourage new readers and students of literature to undertake further critical studies of the author's fiction. The study's methodology will be to evaluate the author's novels in light of critical concerns that have previously been, and are currently, discussed in the context of modernism. In doing so, a further goal of this study is to reiterate and reinforce the value of what Hugh Wite-meyer, in *The Future of Modernism*, refers to as a postmodern version of modernist criticism and to contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of modernism as a critical idiom.

Walker's life spanned the twentieth century, from 1905 to 1998, and her literary production lasted almost three-quarters of a century. Eleven of her novels were first published with Harcourt Brace between 1934 and 1970. Her last published novel was *A Piece of the World*, a work of young adult fiction published by Atheneum Press in 1971. All these novels were out of print in 1992, when the University of Nebraska Press reissued *Winter Wheat*. Subsequent to that publication, all her previously published novels have been reissued to the public under the press's Bison imprint. Moreover, in 2006 the University of Nebraska

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Press posthumously released her last novel, *The Orange Tree*.

With a new reading public and an extensive body of readily available literature to draw upon, Walker's place in and contribution to American letters deserve greater critical understanding and appreciation. The biggest challenge to presenting the initial critical study of Walker's collected works is in choosing a critical idiom that not only does justice to the author's diverse works and interests but also encourages future studies that may lead students and readers to a variety of interpretations, something that her works are certainly conducive to. With the diversity of fresh approaches evident in the new critical introductions included in the reissues, certainly what can be agreed upon is that Walker's engagement and concern with the issues of her time are still relevant today.

Modernism is an appropriate critical idiom for an examination of Walker's work because it encourages readings that take into account the times in which she lived, her many areas of interest, and the stylistic adaptations that she exhibited over her long career as a writer. Furthermore, in light of critics' and scholars' reevaluations and discussions of modernism in recent years and the ongoing interest in modernism, this study addresses these developments in order to reevaluate modernism in a postmodern light.

Modernism is no longer defined solely by avant-garde aesthetic reactions to modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, when Walker produced much of her work, but is increasingly thought of as a multicultural, philosophical, and social reaction that emerged in many forms in response to the vast changes sweeping through the modern world that altered the public's perception of what was once considered stable and predictable. Although this study will consider the various definitions of modernism and the different forms it took in Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world, the text's focus will be on the author's reactions to the era in which she lived and her contributions to modernist American literature.

In particular, this study will address the cultural issues raised in the novels: human relationships, family dynamics, the changing roles for women and children in our society and in fiction, the movement of the population from the East to the West, the effect of an evolving U.S. economy on its communities, the many cultural faces of the U.S. population, the integrity and importance of the natural world, and literature's place in that world. I also focus on the importance of "readerly" interpretations of modernist texts through the use of unreliable narrators, changing points of view, and poetic techniques such as the extended metaphor and literary compression.

Not only was modernism a movement in which literature opened to readers in a new way, allowing and encouraging readerly participation in the creative process, it was also a period of time when technology, capitalism, and the American artist seemed to come together for a brief and gilded hour. During the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, before the well-paid and recognized in America consisted mainly of football players and rock stars, writers and other artists were among America's first celebrities. Writers such as John Steinbeck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway were well-compensated for their work and were recognized by wide audiences, as were many other authors who are not as well-known to today's readers. With a public that read and a publishing industry that had finally come into its own, before the advent of TV and computers and the many competing public media we have today, the *Book of the Month Club* selections and magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, *Redbook*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* were integral to the entertainment and educational process in many homes.

In the Mildred Walker Archives at the University of Wyoming, the carefully folded *Book of the Month Club* selections and issues of *New York Times Book Review* featuring her novels are evidence of those special days as are comments in her journals describing her excitement over a release of a new novel and how "royally" her publishers treated her. This period of celebrity for

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modernist writers is also one of the factors that distinguishes modernism from postmodernism.

American modernist publications were not limited to the U.S. audience in their readership or their subject matter. American fiction had truly become international; particularly with the rise of expatriate writers, U.S. fiction moved, both physically and spiritually, beyond the borders of North America. After two world wars, with rapidly changing technology contributing to less expensive modes of transportation, the earth became smaller and globalization shifted into overdrive. The world's nations became more interested in one another. Even an author from Great Falls, Montana, had her novels translated into nine other languages and toured Europe to visit foreign publishers. Evidence of this internationalization of American literature can also be found in samples of letters from her foreign readers, from soldiers stationed abroad, and even from a young teacher in Japan. Accordingly, this work addresses international issues that indicate the increasingly globalized perspective in American literature.

With the exception of Ripley Hugo's biography of her mother, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*, no text has been fully dedicated to a study of Walker or her novels. Hugo's biography presents invaluable critical information concerning her mother's fiction and brings attention both to the events in Walker's life that influenced the settings, characters, and themes in her novels and to the concerns and beliefs that contributed to her development as a novelist. Hugo's integration of setting, personal details of her mother's life, and an analysis of the texts' creation influences the approach of this study. This work aims not to study literature in isolation from its source of creation and reception but rather to present an integrated discussion focusing on the cultural and social histories and background of the texts, their authors' personal experiences and inspirations for their creation, and readers' reactions to the texts. In this light, *Modernism and Mildred Walker* responds to Ripley Hugo's biography and should be viewed as a continuation of *Writing for Her Life*.

Of all her literary works, *Winter Wheat* has received the most critical attention. However, to date, much of this attention has focused on the novel's setting in Montana, its realistic depictions of western life, and its contribution to the region's literary heritage. With the exception of Elaine Jahner, in her *Spaces of the Mind: Narrative and Community in the American West*, critics have not focused on the novel's complexity and success as a literary work. Jahner dedicates several chapters to a detailed discussion of *Winter Wheat* through discourse theory. Her study encourages critical approaches to the fiction of Walker that blend a use of regionalism with a fresh approach to formalism. In other recent works that discuss her novels, writers most often highlight the need for more critical work on her fiction. These include William Bevis's *Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West*; Mary Clearman Blew's *Bone Deep in Landscape: Writing, Reading, and Place*; Krista Comer's *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing*; Ken Egan Jr.'s *Hope and Dread in Montana Literature*, William Kittredge and Annick Smith's *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, and Ann Ronald's *Reader of the Purple Sage*.

Because the term "modernism" and the approaches to this critical idiom are so contentious, a separate chapter is dedicated to modernism's historical context, its various uses as a term, and a suggested definition in light of recent critical discussions. The definition formulated in this chapter attempts to bridge the aesthetic interests of formalists and New Critics, characterized by their interest in high modernism's poetry, with postmodernists' inclination for approaching literary criticism with intertextual, multidisciplinary, and multicultural studies. The conclusion of the discussion is that both approaches can and ought to be wed.

Modernist texts, as Matthew Bruccoli describes them in *Ernest Hemingway and the Expatriate Modernist Movement*, are both "diachronic" and "synchronic." Because of this it is important to approach a modernist discussion from both perspectives.

1. The Life and Work of Mildred Walker

Mildred Walker's prodigious literary career as an author included thirteen published novels and officially began when she was twenty-one, with the publication of an essay entitled "Gargoyles," which she wrote during her senior year at Wells College in New York State. She had enthusiastically entered this private women's college in 1922 under a tuition waiver granted for ministers' daughters, having had ambitions to become a writer since she was nine years old. From Wells College, and after marrying, she continued her education and literary career at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, receiving her master's degree in English in 1933, along with the Avery Hopwood Award for her novel *Fireweed*. The success of this novel and its publication that year by Harcourt Brace initiated a partnership that Walker maintained for nearly a half century and eleven more novels, ending with the 1970 publication of *If a Lion Could Talk*. During all these years, Walker maintained her maiden name only for use as a pen name for her fiction. For all other purposes, she referred to herself as Mildred Walker Schemm.

The success of Walker's *Fireweed* helped finance her young family's move from the Midwest to Montana, and the subsequent success of *Winter Wheat* enabled the family to move from their bungalow in Great Falls to their acreage on the banks of the Missouri River. Published in 1944, *Winter Wheat* was her most popular and lucrative novel, but it was by no means her

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only literary success. In 1939 the Literary Guild of America chose *Dr. Norton's Wife* as their literary selection for January. Her short novel *The Southwest Corner* was transformed in 1954 into a Broadway play and adapted into a Kraft television feature. *The Body of a Young Man* was nominated for the National Book Award in 1960. During these productive years, Walker also regularly wrote book reviews and short stories and clipped reviews of her novels from the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and the *Book of the Month Club* selections. Although *If a Lion Could Talk* was the last novel by Walker that Harcourt Brace would publish and marked a downturn in her publishing career, the author continued writing for as long as her health permitted. In 1972 Atheneum Press published *A Piece of the World*. Subsequent to this publication, she wrote a novel and a number of short stories and pieces that remained unpublished at her death. By 1992 all of Walker's thirteen novels were out of print, but she lived long enough to see the commencement of their reissue by the University of Nebraska Press, beginning with *Winter Wheat*. This rerelease marked the beginning of a new wave of critical and popular success that the author was able to witness in her final years.

Although Walker was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she always considered her family's summer residence in Grafton, Vermont, as her childhood home. Both her mother and father had come from this area of Vermont and found themselves in Pennsylvania primarily because of Mildred's father's work as a Baptist minister. However, every summer the family returned to Vermont. In 1916 Mildred's father bought the Grafton house that the family had rented since 1906, which became her home during her retirement and remains in the Schemm family to this day. New England's rich history, landscape, and community influenced six of her published novels: *The Quarry*, *The Southwest Corner*, *The Body of a Young Man*, *If a Lion Could Talk*, *A Piece of the World*, and her last novel, *The Orange Tree*, which features a Vermont setting.

After she had accepted Ferdinand Schemm's marriage proposal in 1927, doing so only after insisting that she could continue her writing career and "not have to do the laundry," she did agree to accompany her husband, a young doctor, to Big Bay on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Despite finding herself pregnant and isolated culturally in this remote outpost, Walker was later able, perhaps through the keen senses she had developed as a girl in Vermont and the discipline she had honed in college, to adapt her observations of the natural world and social structure of this small community into her first successful novel, *Fireweed*. Later, when, with some misgivings, she accompanied her young family to Great Falls, Montana, she was again able to harness these same sensibilities to create the rich characterizations, depictions of landscape, and observations of middle-class life featured in *Winter Wheat*, *The Curlew's Cry*, *Unless the Wind Turns*, and *If a Lion Could Talk*. No doubt her keen sense of the natural world, her appreciation of history, and her extraordinary ability to observe and fictionalize the quiet lives and triumphs of ordinary people around her were qualities she had developed in Vermont.

Her careful observations and character studies would find their way into detailed journals she kept for all her writing, often resulting in praise for her novels' detailed depictions of American life. Even today, the 1992 edition of *Winter Wheat* receives accolades for its realistic depictions of Montana and the "real West." Likewise, when *The Brewers' Big Horses* was published in 1940, the beer industry was so impressed by how vividly she had depicted their industry that the *Brewers' Journal* recommended that "every brewery executive, every brewery master and member of the allied trades [read the novel]" (qtd. in Hugo: 89). And when *Dr. Norton's Wife* was published in 1938, it became required reading for nurses because it described so accurately the debilitating effects of multiple sclerosis.

Many of her books have also been touted as good examples of regional writing. However, it is difficult to place her in any one

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region of the country and label her as a regionalist writer, per se, because for every novel she set in the West there is another set in New England or the Midwest. But if the novels set in a single region are examined apart from her entire literary output, they do fulfill many of the criteria scholars often imply when using the label “regionalist.” For instance, in *American Women Regionalists*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse distinguish regionalist writers in their specific presentation of the regional experience from within “so as to engage readers’ sympathy and identification” (xii), in their characters’ development from within their own communities of origin, and in the centrality of landscape to their characters’ self-discoveries (xvi). Perhaps because of Walker’s ability to invest all her narratives with enough genuine sense of self, and because she writes about landscapes that she personally inhabited and studied, her readers seldom sense that her stories are from an outsider’s perspective and so easily label her work as regionalist.

Despite the variety of geographic settings and broad subject matter in her novels, this label of “regional writer” persists. Especially today, Walker is most often referred to as a Montana writer. There are a number of explanations for this label. First, although only four of her novels are set in Montana, she wrote nine of her novels while residing in the state between 1933 and 1955. Second, she is best known, particularly today, for a novel set in Montana, *Winter Wheat*. This novel is considered by some to be the first quintessentially female *bildungsroman* about the modern western woman. Ann Ronald, in her essay “Montana Maturity,” discusses *Winter Wheat* as such, claiming that it “finally relies on the earth itself to explain fully the germination and maturation of its female hero” (105). Third, her family’s presence in the state and dedication to the Montana literary scene has had much to do with the resurgence of popularity and critical acclaim her novels began to receive in the 1990s. Walker is one of four family members with pieces in *The Last Best Place*, a popular anthology of Montana writers. The book

features excerpts from Walker's fiction and samples of poems from her son-in-law, Richard Hugo, her daughter, Ripley Hugo, and her grandson, Matthew Hansen. Certainly, no other single family has a stronger presence in this collection of writings about Montana. Furthermore, longtime Montana resident Ripley Hugo has continuously promoted her mother's works by attending readings and conferences and by recently producing her mother's biography, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*. Notably, *Winter Wheat* was the "One Book Montana" selection for 2003 in conjunction with Montana's fourth annual state book festival. However, "regional writer" is not a label Walker would have chosen for herself. After reading a 1950 *Kirkus Review* that praised her as a "regional novelist," she lamented that such terms would automatically limit her readership (Hugo 194).

Walker had reacted similarly when Joe Howard, family friend and author of *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*, tried to dismiss her works, claiming he did not read women's romances. Ripley Hugo also chronicles the fact that her mother became sullen whenever book reviews characterized her fiction as being "warm," "homey," or "sentimental" (Hugo 135). But there are valid reasons why readers might have sought these labels as well. Relationships between men and women play a role in the plots of all her novels. For a public that focuses primarily on these relationships when reading her novels, such labels might seem apt. Likewise, most of her novels, though not all, feature strong-willed and ambitious female protagonists. Often, their struggle for independence is central to the novels. For this reason, a number of modern scholars have suggested offering feminist readings of her works. For instance, in Mary Swander's introduction to the 1995 edition of *Light from Arcturus*, she indicated that the novel represented the concerns of "current feminism" in that it portrayed "a perspective of 'trailing spouses' [. . .] socialized to give up self in the service of community and family" (x). However, when Mildred Walker read the introduc-

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tion, she disagreed completely with Swander's assessment, once again resisting any attempts to label her works.

A possible explanation for her resistance to any labels, particularly feminism, may be found in the words of a friend of the Schemm's, Sharon Bryan. In her introduction to *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, Bryan offers the following: "Some feminist rhetoric seems to reduce complex issues to a matter of choosing sides, and [. . .] I think many women poets [and writers] have been reluctant to voice their concerns because they were afraid of being misunderstood, labeled, pigeonholed, dismissed" (Introduction vii–xiii).

Given that some critical labels and approaches limit interpretations of the author's works and that she herself was resistant to labels, reading Walker's novels as modernist texts seems an agreeable and apt approach. With a career that spanned the best part of the twentieth century, a marked interest and concern for a rapidly changing society, and a propensity for experimentation in both style and subject matter, Walker employs themes and styles that are captured in modernism. During her long career, she was able to take part in the exciting development of the novel predicted by writers she admired greatly—Henry James, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf, who themselves fostered stylistic adaptations by altering points of view and time sequences and by using unreliable narrators. Psychological realism and the implementation of metaphors and other devices of literary compression all had the consequence of forcing readers to become more participatory in the interpretation and subsequent appreciation of modernist fiction. Not only was Walker aware of these changes, she took advantage of the broadening of possibilities for her novels' characters and subject matter, offering fiction that featured narratives told through the viewpoint of disabled, psychologically troubled, and aged protagonists.

Although readers might find little evidence in the author's earlier novels of the stylistic modernism that characterized some aspects of her later works, her social and thematic con-

cerns were modernist from her first publications. For instance, though *Fireweed* follows a traditional chronological sequence and is told from one narrative perspective, it is rife with the observations and concerns of many modernist writers. If readers study the opening pages of *Fireweed* they will discover a vivid description and commentary on the over-harvested and denuded forests of Northern Michigan. Even in her first published novel, Walker was concerned by the effects of commercialization, not only on the landscape, but on the attitudes and ambitions of people in the most remote spots of North America.

With a cinematographer's eye, the novelist introduces young Celie Henderson in *Fireweed* with the image of her high-heeled opera pumps, carefully navigating the mud and cracks on the broken boardwalks of Flat Point, in marked contrast to the other heavy feet tramping along in gold-seal boots. Although this seventeen-year-old girl has never seen life beyond the Upper Peninsula, her head is full of dreams. Cinema has come to Flat Point. She twists her hair like Greta Garbo. She saves her money from working at the company store to buy pretty dresses from mail-order catalogs. She is, in fact, discontent, sensing that the world is on the move and that she is missing out. This discontent creates the initial tension in the novel. However, Walker inserts greater concerns than the dreams of this small town girl in the conflicts between the wealthy mill owners and the laborers as well as those caused by the pecking order in the community's complex ethnic mix. Then, the Great Depression hits and closes mines and mills. Like other towns struck by economic hardship, Flat Point is abandoned. The novel's characters make their exodus to the urban centers, but Celie's young family does not. Initially, she is disappointed not to leave, but eventually she comes to accept that personal independence is worth more than material possessions. Despite this ending, the narrator reminds her readers that the world is on the move and that Celie accepts her life in Flat Point only with the knowledge that her children will not.

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Many of the issues in Walker's first novel reemerge in subsequent works. In *Winter Wheat*, for example, Ellen cannot return to college because the family's wheat crop is unprofitable due to a poor growing season and prewar commodity prices. In *The Curlew's Cry*, Pamela Lacey tries to reinvent the family's western enterprise by transforming a bankrupt cattle ranch into a dude operation. This novel also fictionalizes the union action of the region's mine workers in response to the indifference of their corporate owners and the tensions caused by the tightening grip eastern owners exert on western lands. The plots in *The Quarry*, *Light from Arcturus*, and *The Brewers' Big Horses* are also driven by the author's understanding of the rapid changes in the U.S. economy that threaten to destroy many families' businesses and ways of life. Even *The Southwest Corner* can be read as a reaction to the social effects of the economic upheavals in American society. When the novel's elderly protagonist, Marcia Elder, finds that she can no longer live alone, she studies her New England home and remembers that there was a time when extended families lived together and the southwest corner of the house was a separately deeded parcel, allowing the elderly members of the family to live their last days in dignity and privacy that this era has passed over. Now, the rural population of New England has moved off to more prosperous areas. Despite the fact that families and communities have been scattered in search of economic opportunity, however, Marcia Elder remains in Vermont and eventually finds a way to create her own social security and maintain the custodianship over the land that has sustained her family for generations.

Not only was Walker aware of changes in the economic system, she was also cognizant of alterations in men's and women's roles and of the family structure in general as the twentieth century progressed. A number of her protagonists are working women, battling and sometimes overcoming stereotypes and other obstacles in a man's world. Some are also women who deeply question their traditional roles as mothers, wives, and