



Jessamyn West

Vernon, Jennings County

July 18, 1902 – February 23, 1984

Mary Jessamyn West is a prolific American author whose works include fiction, nonfiction, poetry, screenplays, and even an opera libretto. She is remembered for her numerous short stories of rural American life. She was born in Vernon, Indiana, to a farming family of modest means. She later left Indiana at the age of six when her family moved to California to the same rural region as Richard Nixon, who was her second cousin through her mother's family. She and Nixon became lifelong friends; she sometimes traveled with him while he was President.

West graduated from Whittier College in 1923 with a degree in English. That year, she married Harry Maxwell McPherson, whom she had met while attending college. They moved to a small community in California where they operated an apricot orchard. She worked as a school secretary and then taught in a country school where she handled all eight grades. While attending graduate school at the University of California-Berkeley, she was diagnosed with an advanced form of tuberculosis.

West was sent to a sanatorium, where she resumed writing to pass the time. Her first short story, *99.6* was about her experiences in the sanatorium. She later was sent home because she was not expected to live. Her mother recounted stories about her Quaker ancestors to Jessamyn, who began to create sketches about an Indiana Quaker farming family during the Civil War era. Much of her fiction reflects that Quaker upbringing. Published as a collection of short stories in *The Friendly Persuasion* in 1945, her popular stories recreate the lives of Jess and Eliza Birdwell in a nineteenth-century Quaker farming community in rural Indiana. The book was critically acclaimed for its warmth and simplicity.

Jessamyn West died in 1984, the same year her final novel, *The State of Stony Lonesome*, was published.

For information about Jessamyn West, go to:

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jessamyn-West>.

For information about *Writing Her Story*, go to: <http://www.in.gov/icw/2440.htm>.

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<http://www.wnyc.org/story/206711-jessamyn-west/>



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