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The Making of Books

Jeanne Williams

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Carl
Hertzog
Lecture Series



The Making of Books
by
Jeanne Williams



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Lecture Series



The University of Texas at El Paso

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The Hertzog Lectures, inaugurated on February 5, 1989, and presented annually in the month of his birth, honor the memory and life work of the "Printer at the Pass," J. Carl Hertzog (1902-1984).

A premiere typographer and book designer long before his association with the University of Texas at El Paso, Mr. Hertzog brought his international renown to the then Texas Western College in 1948 and launched Texas Western Press in 1952, serving as its director until his retirement in 1972.

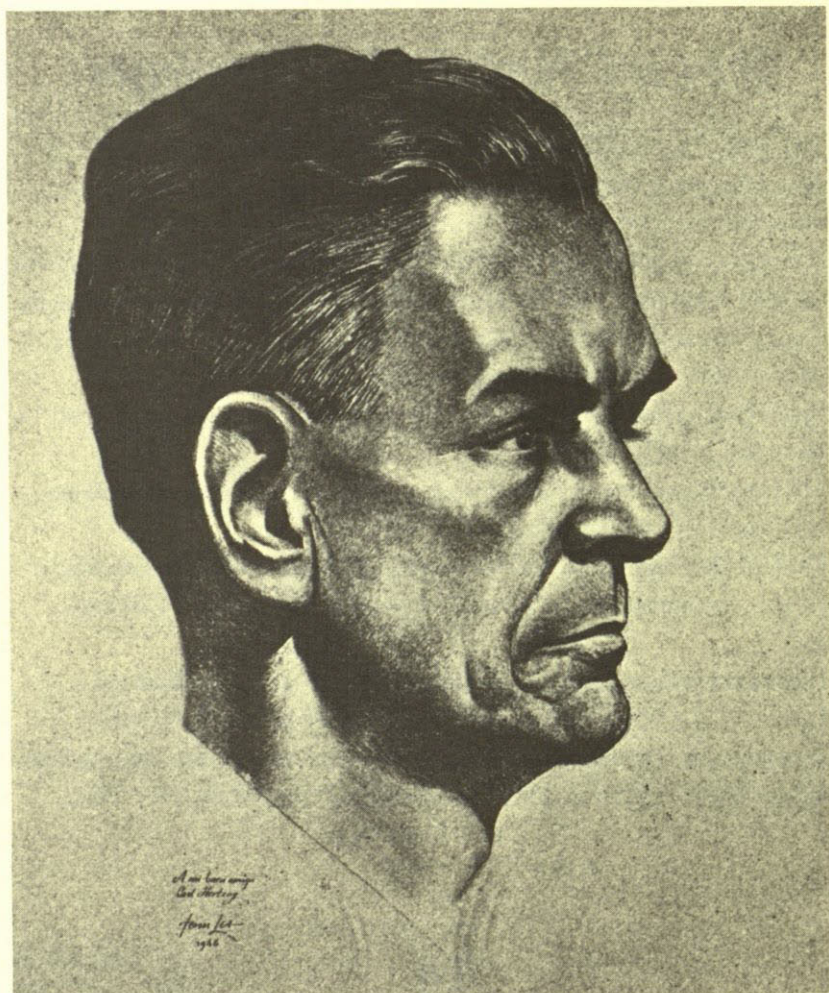
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(Drawing by Tom Lea, 1946)

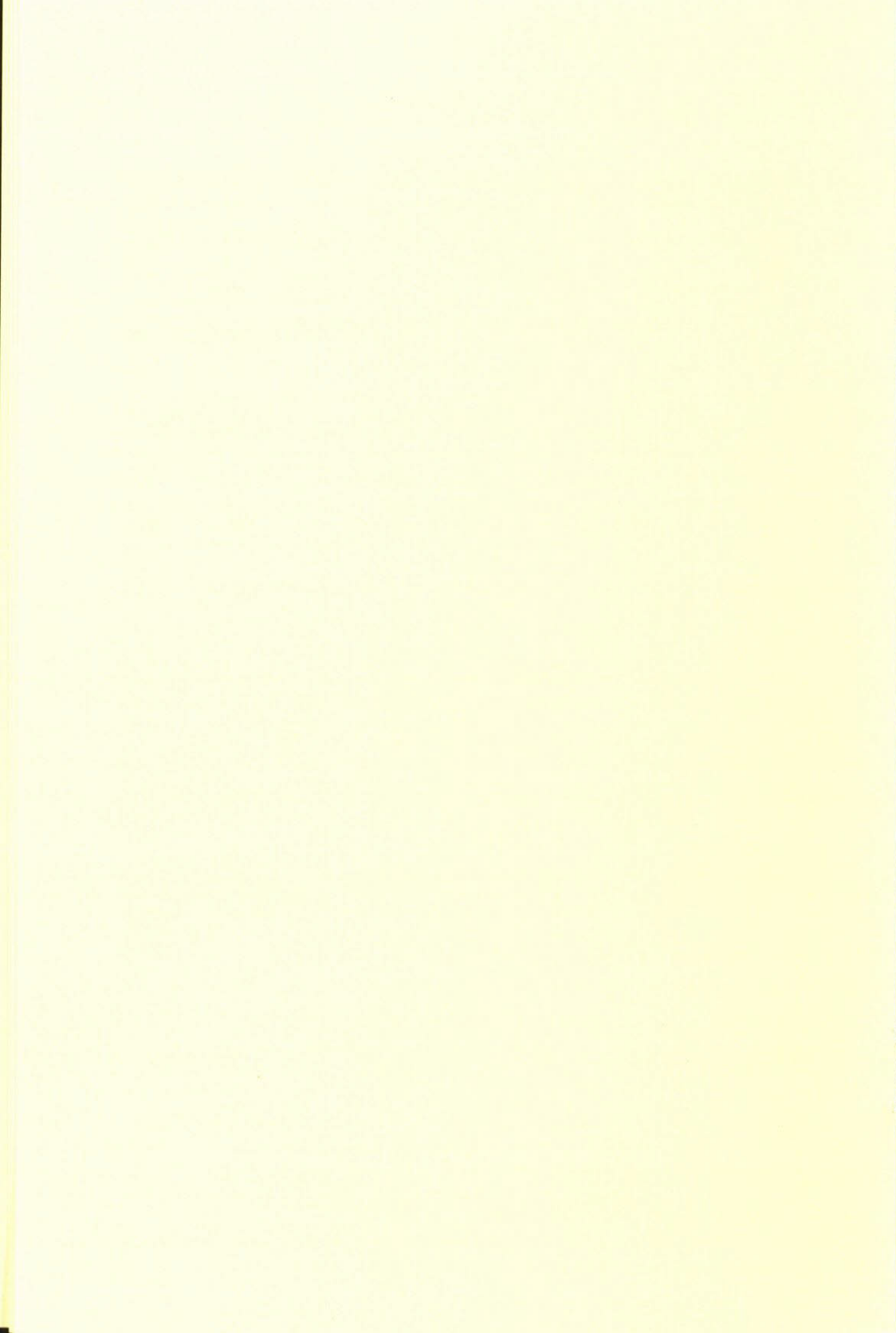
J. Carl Hertzog
1902 — 1984

The Making of Books

by Jeanne Williams

February 7, 1993

Carl Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 5



Probably every person here has an inordinate love of reading. That addiction has led some of us to justify our habit by making our living from it. We make books. Some write them. Others, like Carl Hertzog, design or publish. A few extraordinary people like Dale Walker manage to both write and publish books of lasting value.

Unless a writer works completely from firsthand experience, it usually takes many books to make a book. This gives writers an excuse to accumulate them. I don't collect books for their rarity. One publishing trend I greatly appreciate is the issuing of new editions of out-of-print books, often in affordable trade paperbacks, university presses deserve thanks for leading the way in this. Texas Western Press makes a valuable contribution to history in publishing the attractively designed Southwestern Studies monographs. For the price of a paperback, they hold information that might not warrant a book but cannot be covered in an article.

Even if I have a hardcover edition of a book I'm going to use heavily, I like to get the paperback for my working copy because my working copies really get worked. I underline, make notes, use marker tabs, and generally love such books to death. Carl Hertzog's books are too handsome for such treatment. His designing genius and Tom Lea's and José Cisneros's art combine with the author's words to make these among the most treasured books in my library. I've never, ever marked in a Hertzog book. Hertzog left a tradition of beautiful books at Texas Western Press, one Dale Walker continued.

Some of the books I use for research, especially autobiographies and firsthand experiences, are so interesting that I wonder why readers who enjoy my novels don't just go directly to the non-fiction. There is no novel of the frontier army as engaging and flavorful as John Bourke's *On The Border With Crook*. I don't know of any fiction about the frontier Oklahoma Panhandle that reads as intriguingly as Jim Herron's *Fifty Years On The Owl Hoot Trail*. Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory* paints unforgettable scenes of the Depression and Dust Bowl. *Indeh*, Eve Ball's painstakingly garnered recollections of Ace Daklugie and other Chiricahua Apaches, evokes for me at least, more of Apache life and their long struggle than any work of fiction, good as some of them have been.

Why then write novels, especially historical ones which are often scorned as hybrids, neither fact nor fiction? John Hersey thought that journalism allows readers to witness history while fiction allows them to live it. It's been said that anyone who reads the *Iliad* as history will find it full of fiction and anyone who reads it as fiction will find it full of fact. Arnold Toynbee must have been thinking like this when he said "Fiction is the only technique that can be employed or is worth employing where the data are innumerable." He went on to say that *War and Peace* gives a better understanding of Napoleon's invasion of Russia than could all the histories written about it.

This is what novelists do. We select significant facts to make our truths; we distill a mass of details into a feeling of time and place.

Perhaps the most prevalent, pernicious advice to beginning writers is "Write what you know." Pinfeathers! Writers should write about what excites and interests them, what makes their blood boil or effervesce, and what they are willing to learn about.

Sometimes a writer is called to a book. It's like falling in love or catching cold—just as unavoidable, unexplainable, unexpected, and uncomfortable. The call may be a sudden flash, it may be an image that burns in the mind, it may be a dream, it may be the spark that makes a bonfire of an inert mass of information.

Often this call will shake the writer up and make him or her see familiar things in a new way, just as the scales fell from Saul's eyes on the road to Damascus. I might never have written about the Dust Bowl and Depression if I hadn't been listening to Woody Guthrie's tapes made for the Library of Congress in 1941. He sang "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," and told Alan Lomax when and why he wrote it. He'd been in Pampa, Texas on Black Sunday, April 14, 1935 and the storm was so fearful that people gathered in houses or churches and waited in the darkness for the end of the world, Lomax asked if they didn't cry and scream and Woody said they didn't. They just talked in an ordinary way—hoped they'd been decent enough to make it to heaven, and they said, "So long, it's been good to know you."

That hit me like a lightning bolt. The first things I remember are tumbleweeds, dust silted up against fences and dreams about the end of the world. I had heard that song many times though I didn't know it was Woody's, but until I heard him talking, I hadn't realized it was an end of the world song. Right then I thought, "I'm going to write about that!" I could no more have avoided it than I could voluntarily hold my breath. And this month, after the long process of writing

and production, the story that called me three years ago has become a book that others can hold and read.

I was called to write *The Island Harp* when I went to the Western Isles of Scotland looking for traces of Brigid, the ancient fire goddess who survives as St. Brigid. I did find signs of her—smooth white oval stones and her handsome bird, the oyster-catcher with its bright orange bill and pink legs. It is called in Gaelic *ghillie Brighde*, follower of Brigid. She was the nurse of Jesus and the oyster catcher, her servant, hid the baby beneath some seaweed when Herod's soldiers came to kill him.

I didn't write about Bridgid, though, as had been my intention. I saw many deserted stone houses crumbling to ruins and I asked where the people had gone. This was the first time I'd heard of the Highland Clearances, or had any notion that many thousands of Highlanders and islanders had been forced off their tiny farms in the nineteenth century to make room for sheep or for deer parks. Prince Albert made deer-stalking fashionable and it became the great status symbol to own or lease deer forests—usually without any trees—in the highlands of islands. Some islands were completely cleared of families who had lived there for centuries. That was a story I had to tell.

My editor didn't like the book and turned it down when I was almost 400 pages into it. My agent didn't like it, either. Both women said it was too sad, too dark and depressing, and anyway, who wanted to read about people who lived in a peat-smoked hut with cattle shut up all winter in one end of it? Now if I wanted to bring my heroine to America....

I have done that. The reasons why people left their homelands to come to America and how so many ethnic strains have blended into Heinz variety Americans are endlessly fascinating stories. In my own person, Celtic strains, Irish, Welsh and Scots, mix with German, Bohemian, Dutch and French—and that's only what I know about. I've written of Mennonite emigrants who left the steppes of Russia for the plains of Kansas and of Mormon converts from Wales who pushed handcarts from Iowa to Utah. In *Lady of No Man's Land*, I told about a young woman from Sweden who arrived destitute in Dodge City with a dying younger sister and made her living as a traveling seamstress along the wagon road loop from Dodge to Tascosa to Mobeetie and back through Camp Supply.

This island book was different, though. I wasn't called to write the story of those who left, but of those who stayed, who ate shellfish and seaweed and somehow managed to live on between the rocks and the sea. I guess I'm like

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Eugene Manlove Rhodes in feeling that I write what people *ought* to like.

I was shattered—well, badly fractured—by my agent's reaction. I long ago grew callouses where editors are concerned. A good editor's value is beyond rubies and I have had two very good ones, but unfortunately they move around a lot in New York so it won't work to become too dependent on the best of them. I've done my share in helping to educate several generations of young folk. One difficulty is their trying to impose current attitudes and values on people of a century ago. One young lady told me I was racist because an escaped slave didn't speak perfect English. Neither, I pointed out to her, did my old mountain man in the same book, in fact his English was worse.

After numerous encounters of this kind, an editor's opinion can't distress me too deeply so long as I have my agent's support. We've been friends as well as business associates for over twenty years and experience has taught me that she's usually right about a book's marketing chances.

Since she didn't want to show the book around, I had to put it aside while I wrote something that would sell, but even then I felt that I was far richer for what I had learned and I did not regret the year and considerable expense I had put into the story. I knew the oyster catcher was Brigid's servant, and I knew the song of a mother whose child, her *cúbhrachán* or little fragrant one, was stolen away by the fairies. The haunting words may be Englished rather like this:

"I found the track of the otter brown.
I could not find my *cúbhrachán*.

I found the track of the spotted red fawn.
I could not find my *cúbhrachán*.

I found the track of the swimming swan.
I could not find my *cúbhrachán*."

This book wouldn't let me forget it, though. After finishing two books about the frontier, I got it out and finished it. I felt I had to give it a chance to breathe. By this time I had a new editor. She liked it, my agent liked it, and it was selected by several book clubs and Readers Digest Condensed Books. The paperback will

be out in April. But that book would still be on the shelf if I hadn't been so strongly called to write it.

It may seem a long jump from the rain and peat bogs of the Hebrides to the Dust Bowl, but the basic stories are quite similar. In both books, the people face loss of their land, their home and roots. Tenant farmers in the Dust Bowl were often replaced by tractors which yielded more profit to their landlords, just as sheep and hunting leases paid the Highland lairds much better than crofter-fishermen could.

In order to make real the worlds of the Dust Bowl and the Island of Lewis, I had to do a lot of reading. My research always includes books on birds, animals, plants and the natural world. I get in as much of this information as I can because one of my not-so-hidden agendas is to show people as part of the world, not the center of it. For most books, I make not only a chronology of historical events, but a calendar for natural rhythms—when plants bloom, bear fruit and wither, when birds migrate and return, which stay all year, what animals, wild and domestic are doing, when crops are planted, cultivated and harvested, and in *The Island Harp*, I had when the dolphins and basking sharks went south, when the herring and other fish moved into the offshore waters, and when the various kinds of seaweed are exposed—all that kind of lore I could find. Then, as I wrote the book, I'd get to, say, April, and wrote that the sea pinks started to bloom, that whooper swans and greylag geese migrated north, and that terns, guillemots, kittiwakes and puffins returned to join the sea birds that spent the winter. The women moved kale from plantcrues into the kaleyard, and it was time to sow barley and do the great annual spring washing.

I did sensory research as well, learning about a place by seeing it, by fighting to keep my feet against a Lewis wind while hearing and watching cormorants and shags nesting along the sea cliffs, by touching and smelling heather or by finding the blessed shade of cottonwoods along the Cimarron River a few miles from my birthplace.

Sensory research is the fun part, an excuse for far roaming and spending hours in hiking boots instead of at the keyboard. Elmer Kelton quotes Louis L'Amour as saying if there was a stream in one of his books, it was really there and he had tasted the waters and they were sweet. Elmer added, "When there's a stream in my book, it's there, and I've tasted it, but the water's generally alkali." When there's a stream in one of my books, it's probably there, but I haven't tasted it. I'm scared of giardia.

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Of course what one sees now is not necessarily the way it was a hundred years ago. When I went to Lawrence, Kansas, to both use their microfilms of pre-Civil War newspapers and see the physical lay of the land, I was impressed by the many trees—and I would have blithely put them in my book if I hadn't read that the trees on that side of the Kaw River had been taken out by a prairie fire some years before the period of my story.

Over-grazing and introduced plants and animals have also brought great changes in a short time. Speaking just of my region of southeastern Arizona, mesquite and juniper have taken over immense areas that used to be grasslands. The area is infested with horehound, allegedly brought from Texas in the fleece of sheep. There were no coatimundis in the 1880s though tribes of them range the mountains now. But much has vanished. The last wolves in southeastern Arizona were killed in the 1930s. The thick-billed parrot was exterminated in the same decade. A jaguar that wandered up from Mexico a few years ago was shot by a rancher. Beaver are gone.

Still, though we need to check contemporary sources about what a place was like in a certain era, what we experience through the senses is more powerful than words and lends our words reality because it roots them in commonly shared feelings and experiences.

The most moving autobiographies do this. They do it because we share the author's feelings, love and fear and hate and hope. A properly objective historian—"Just the facts, ma'am"—can't footnote or document what's going on inside someone. But as Leland Sonnichsen said, "Truth is the sum of many facts. Truth is the forest, and facts are the trees which keep us from seeing it." He also said the best of history begins where facts leave off—where we consider meanings.

Novels are about the feelings and meaning behind the facts. This is the reason, I believe, that many devourers of historical novels resolutely shun formal history, though if they'd try some of the books mentioned before and any of Leland Sonnichsen's, Dale Walker's or Leon Metz's works, I'm sure they'd be hooked.

Ironically, in order to make fiction believable, novelists must provide details that no one expects a historian to produce. What did people eat? Where and how did they get or raise this food? What is their fuel and how do they light it? How are they dressed? Where did the fabric come from? How was it dyed and sewn? What's the furniture like? The dwellings? How did people travel? A diligent historian may tell what can be learned about these subjects and dismiss the rest by saying no more is known.

A novelist can't do this. At some point, the novelist must stop substituting study for courage, shake off "analysis paralysis," the accumulation of facts that have not been percolated through a viewpoint, and get down to making a dream castle into an edifice that others can see and enter.

Many of the stones, the facts and details, will usually come from other books, nearly always non-fiction. Leland called research picking other people's brains. He said it could just as well be called shoplifting or cannibalism but the polite name for it was "documentation."

"Think big," he advised. "If you get all your information from one book, you are a plagiarist and can be sued. If you use material from fifty books, you are a scholar. If you use material from a hundred, you are an authority. A parallel situation exists in the world of finance. If you embezzle a hundred million dollars, you are a financier."

Georg Lichtenberg had a kinder view. He said, "To read means to borrow; to create out of one's reading is paying off one's debts." And to prove that writing hasn't deteriorated as much as we sometimes believe, Sebastian Chamfort said in 1805, "Most of today's books have the air of having been written in one day from books read the night before."

Publishers don't like to use footnotes in novels but I do try to pay my debts by mentioning in an author's note the books and other sources that supplied by building stones. I try to tell enough about the book to interest a potential reader. In some cases it works. I've heard from readers who hunted up some of my sources and thoroughly enjoyed them. The author's note is where I also try to indicate where facts leave off and fiction begins.

Some writers of historical fiction think it's fine to fictionalize a real person, that is, precede beyond what is known. I recall one novel in which the author made an actual man homosexual and put Big Bill Haywood and Mother Jones where they never were. This might not have been so bad except that their presence, in the novel, triggered the Bisbee deportation, an actual and infamous event.

Several of us, on a panel, took the author to task for this. He responded with a story about Faulkner. A young woman told the author that she had been recording her grandmother's experiences and they would make an absolutely enthralling book—but such a book would break her grandmother's heart. Faulkner said, "My dear young lady, a good story is worth any number of grandmothers."

I said that *my* grandmother was worth any number of stories. We went round and around for awhile and finally the author ended the discussion and confounded

us all by saying that if God had written the book, that's how he would have done it.

It's strange though how often our castles in the air turn out to be the real thing. I wrote a book that took the Basques from the caves to modern day Idaho, using only books and research at the excellent Basque Collection at the University of Nevada. When I went to the Basque region before revising the book, the only thing I had to change was the distance from the airport to Biblao. I wanted the book to be as accurate historically as possible so, out of my own pocket, I engaged Dr. Richard Etulain, a Basque scholar, to check the manuscript. He found one misspelling, a few minor trifles. Of course he suggested that I ask Dr. William Douglass to read it, too, but I thought that if the book got by Dr. Etulain, it was certainly going to satisfy anyone but an authority and I didn't expect any authorities to be reading the book.

When it comes to anything mechanical I need all the help I can get. A friend who's a former driller checks anything I write about the oil fields and he's also my expert on Model Ts and such. When I write about Arizona, my husband, Bob, checks my birds and natural history. A retired cattleman friend's knowledge has, I hope, saved me from the unmitigated scorn of our ranching neighbors when I wrote about a young woman who established a dairy ranch in the Chiricahuas during the wild days of Apache raids and Tombstone outlaws. I made it a dairy because there was no way I could have my Katie selling animals for beef. She wouldn't sell her bull calves, either, to anyone who wouldn't promise to keep them or sell them back to her if they wanted to be rid of them. Funnily enough, quite a few cowboys and ranchers have told me how they like that book. I guess the rule is if you're doing something incredible, you'd better make everything else as credible as you can. My son is my weapons and guns expert. I turn to Don Worcester for anything I need to know about horses.

You can see those castles in the air are constructed from many facts, from many books, from as much first-hand experience as possible, and often with the help of friends. The design and the mortar are the author's. Given the same facts and the same experiences, I doubt if any of us would construct the same story. Perhaps that and the call to a book are the real magic and mystery.

Writing novels can be wish fulfillment, too. I love music and have always yearned to play some instrument. I've tried the dulcimer and recorder, the tin whistle, harmonica and guitar. In desperation I sent off for a children's lute that's supposed to sound sweet no matter what strings are touched. It's all in vain. But in two of my last three books, the heroine has played the harp beautifully, and in

The Longest Road, a wandering musician gives my little girl a harmonica and teaches her to play. Of course, she has natural talent and picks it just like that, so well that she's soon supporting her little brother and herself. As Foster-Harris, my dear friend and teacher, used to say, "In our dreams, at least, we are fabulous and free."

In the hereafter you won't find me plunking away at the word processor. I'll be playing a guitar or harp or harmonica in the midst of a heavenly hootenanny, laughing and singing and having a wonderful time. But for pleasure and delight, I'll still be reading Carl Hertzog books.



Jeanne Williams

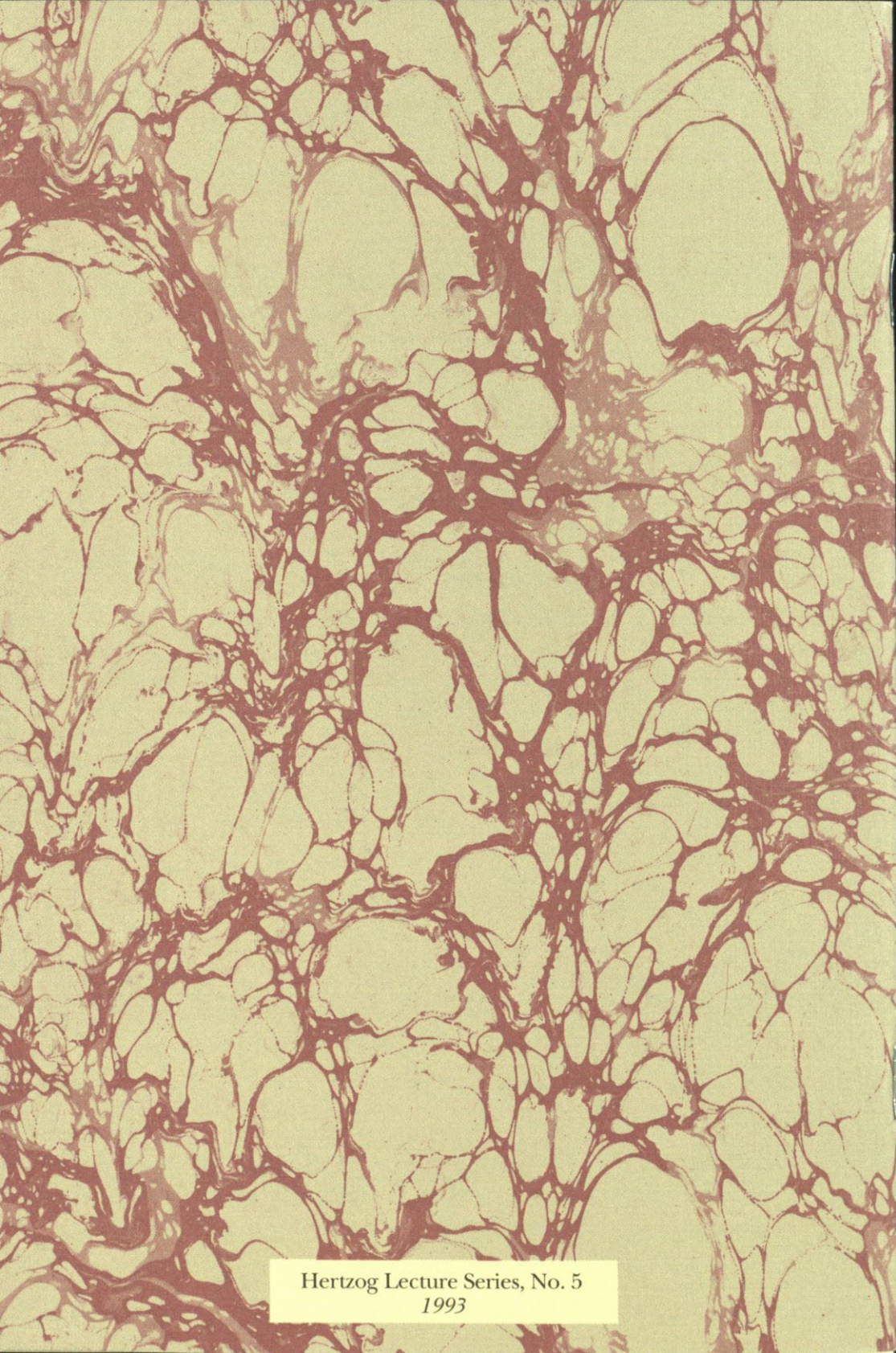
Jeanne Williams was born in 1930 beside the tracks of the Santa Fe trail on the Kansas-Oklahoma border. She has lived most of her life in the Southwest though she has traveled widely and lived in Germany and England. She came to Arizona in 1970 and now lives in the Chiricahua Mountains.

Over twelve million of Jeannne Williams books are in print. Her books are widely translated, and she has won four Spur Awards from Western Writers of America, two for Best Western Juvenile and two for Best Novel of the West. She also holds the Levi Strauss Saddleman Award for lifetime achievement in Western Literature.

Williams is past-president of the Western Writers of America and the Cochise County Historical Society and has served on the national board of Defenders of Wildlife. Presently, she is a volunteer Emergency Medical Technician and Wildlands Fire Fighter in her home town of Portal, located sixty miles from the nearest doctor or hospital. Her husband, Robert Morse, is an ardent birder and president of Portal Rescue.

Her fifty-fourth book, *The Longest Road*, about the Dust Bowl, the 30s, and life in Texas boom towns, has recently been published. It will be a selection of Readers Digest Condensed Books, as have her last four books.





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