

Topic Page: [Ferber, Edna](#)

Definition: **Ferber, Edna** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1887–1968, American author, b. Kalamazoo, Mich. Her novels portray the lives of a wide variety of Americans in a vigorous, colorful, and panoramic fashion. Among her best-known novels are *So Big* (1924; Pulitzer Prize), *Show Boat* (1926, musical version 1927), *Cimarron* (1929), *Saratoga Trunk* (1941), *Giant* (1952), and *Ice Palace* (1958). Ferber also collaborated with George S. Kaufman on such plays as *The Royal Family* (1927), *Dinner at Eight* (1932), and *Stage Door* (1936).



Summary Article: **Ferber, Edna**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Image from: [Cimarron River in Field Guide to Rivers of North America](#)

One of the most popular writers of the first half of the twentieth century, Edna Ferber succeeded in multiple genres, including the short story, the novel, and drama. Her fictions, which typically feature strong, hardworking female characters and are often set within vibrant American regional landscapes, were also frequently adapted to stage and screen, giving her a cultural presence like

few writers of her era.

Edna Jessica Ferber was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1885, daughter of a Jewish Hungarian immigrant father and an American-born mother. After several short-term moves, the family lived in Ottumwa, Iowa for seven years, until the town's relentless anti-Semitism drove them to resettle in Appleton, Wisconsin when Ferber was 12. After high school Ferber worked as a journalist before her health gave out, but during her convalescence she began writing fiction, leading eventually to her first published story in 1910. Over the next 53 years Ferber would publish a dozen novels, another dozen collections of short stories, 10 plays, and two memoirs, making her not only one of the most popular American writers but also one of the most prolific.

After publishing her first novel, *Dawn O'Hara: The Girl Who Laughed* (1911), and first short story collection, *Buttered Side Down* (1912), Ferber found her first major success with a series of stories about an enterprising businesswoman named Emma McChesney, one of the first of her type in American fiction. Republished in book form in three volumes (*Roast Beef Medium* in 1913, *Personality Plus* in 1914, and *Emma McChesney & Co.* in 1915), the McChesney stories could have become Ferber's lifelong bread and butter; but Ferber decided to retire McChesney rather than become straitjacketed by the demands of a serial character. Over the next decade her fictions explored new territory while revisiting certain familiar themes. In 1917, for example, Ferber published *Fanny Herself*, a semiautobiographical novel about a Jewish businesswoman who struggles to reconcile her financial ambition with her religious soul. With *The Girls* (1921) Ferber tried the type of multigenerational novel that she would later find conducive to the often sprawling historical sagas she took great pleasure in researching and writing, such as *Cimarron* (1930), a tale of the Oklahoma Territory; *Great Son* (1945) on the Seattle frontier; *Giant* (1952), set in larger-than-life Texas; and *Ice Palace* (1958), about Alaska.

Ferber crossed from popular success to critically acclaimed author with the publication of *So Big* (1924), a story of the clash between artistic and commercial values set in and around turn-of-the-twentieth-century Chicago, which won Ferber the 1925 Pulitzer Prize. She followed this achievement with a novel

about the Mississippi River that would become perhaps her best-known story – *Show Boat* (1926) – albeit primarily through its adaptation as a Broadway musical the following year. Ferber would actually have two stories on the stage in 1927, as her own co-written drama, *The Royal Family*, her second collaboration with playwright George S. Kaufman (with whom she would eventually write half a dozen plays, including *Dinner at Eight* in 1932 and *Stage Door* in 1936), also debuted on Broadway. Along with Kaufman and other writers such as Dorothy Parker, Ferber also became a member of the famously acerbic 1920s New York literary circle, the Algonquin Round Table. Ferber's cultural reputation (and celebrity) was only heightened by the frequent translation of her writings to the silver screen. By the 1930s it must have seemed as though there were a new film – or two – based on Ferber's work released every year. Between 1928 and 1939, 14 motion picture adaptations of Ferber's writing were produced, including two versions of *Show Boat*.

In 1939 Ferber published the first of two memoirs, *A Peculiar Treasure*, which she would reissue in a revised edition in 1960, just three years before releasing a second autobiography, *A Kind of Magic* (1963). Although her critical reputation declined late in her career, as critics faulted her work for being too melodramatic, she remains for many readers an inspiring and enduring chronicler of the lives of strong women and a champion of the underdog. She died of stomach cancer in New York City in 1968 at age 83.

SEE ALSO: Modern Fiction in Hollywood (AF); Modernist Fiction (AF); Parker, Dorothy (AF); Social-Realist Fiction (AF)

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