



Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times

Linda Ben-Zvi

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"Venturesome feminist," historian Nancy Cott's term, perfectly describes Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), America's first important modern female playwright, winner of the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for drama, and one of the most respected novelists and short story writers of her time. In her life she explored uncharted regions and in her writing she created intrepid female characters who did the same. Born in Davenport, Iowa, just as America entered its second century, Glaspell took her cue from her pioneering grandparents as she sought to rekindle their spirit of adventure and purpose. A journalist by age eighteen, she worked her way through university as a reporter. In 1913 she and her husband, fellow Davenport iconoclast George Cram "Jig" Cook, joined the migration of writers from the Midwest to Greenwich Village, and were at the center of the first American avant-garde. Glaspell was a charter member of its important institutions--the Provincetown Players, the Liberal Club, Heterodoxy--and a close friend of John Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse, Max Eastman, Sinclair Lewis, and Eugene O'Neill. Her plays launched an indigenous American drama and addressed pressing topics such as women's suffrage, birth control, female sexuality, marriage equality, socialism, and pacifism.

Although frail and ethereal, Glaspell was a determined rebel throughout her life, willing to speak out for those causes in which she believed and willing to risk societal approbation when she found love. At the age of thirty-five, she scandalized staid Davenport when she began an affair with then-married Jig Cook. After his death in Delphi, where they lived for two years, she began an eight-year relationship with a man seventeen years her junior. Youthful in appearance, she remained youthful and undaunted in spirit. "Out there--lies all that's not been touched--lies life that waits," Claire Archer says in *The Verge*, Glaspell's most experimental play. The biography of Susan Glaspell is the exciting story of her personal exploration of the same terrain.

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