



• Author

Corra Mae White Harris

1869–1935

Inducted 1996

Corra Mae White Harris wrote *A Circuit Rider's Wife* from first hand experience and as a means of escaping the desperate privation that accompanied it. Widely read and admired in her own time, she was so much of that time that her popularity plummeted when times, as they invariably do, changed. Yet her talent and perseverance brought her both a livelihood and literary prominence.

Born on a farm near Elberton in 1869, she lived most of her life in the Georgia mountains. From this secluded retreat she wrote ten novels that were serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* before being published in book form, and numerous essays for the *Post* and other national magazines.

Her writing has an engaging quality. Here is her description of her marriage at seventeen to twenty-eight year old Rev. Lundy Harris in the living room of her family's farm:

"I can still hear the roar and crackle of blazing logs on the wide white hearth. I can see Bishop Atticus Haygood standing a little way off with the open Book in his hand; but for the life of me I cannot fix my attention upon him, nor upon Lundy by my side. ... For in the deepening shadows behind him I can see my mother somehow standing alone and apart from everybody else. ... Mother regarding me with a strange foretelling look. I did not hear Lundy being married to me; I heard only the busy crackling of the fire and saw mother's long, long look through me and past me beyond all the years to come, until the Bishop called me by name. Then her face seemed to fade. She was no longer between me and this vow."

The ominous tone was warranted. The marriage was not a happy one. Lundy Harris was a Methodist circuit-rider in the mountains, pulling a creaking buggy over impossible roads, serving malnourished, isolated people in tiny churches, for a salary of \$245 per year. He also pastored in Decatur and taught at Emory at Oxford, but he was a sick man, obsessed with hell fire and damnation, unable to preach the love of God. According to Corra, his sermons left his parishioners "hair-hung

and breeze-shaken over the hot pit of perdition." In 1888 he suddenly left his family and disappeared, later to be found in Texas, suffering aphasia and living in fantasy. Corra nursed him through repeated nervous breakdowns. In 1910, he took his own life.

Corra turned to writing as a way to secure their living years before. She wrote her first novel, *The Circuit-Rider's Wife*, between five and six in the morning. It was promptly accepted, with some revisions, by the *Saturday Evening Post*.

From then on, the *Saturday Evening Post* became her life-support, publishing her novels and essays and sending her abroad on reporting missions. It enabled her

"My latch-string is always out to humanity."

– Corra Mae White Harris

to educate her daughter, Faith (two sons died in infancy), and to purchase a home

in Bartow County where she lived for the rest of her life.

Corra Harris's abiding theme was the role of women and the ways a woman could find self-fulfillment. Her answer was as traditional as it was unequivocal: marriage and family. She did not believe women were unequal to men or incapable of thinking for themselves, but that their highest calling was to lift their husbands and children to a high moral plane through love and service.

While one might expect her work to be sentimental, it is not. She was a realist, with no illusions about married life. She accepted as a given that most husbands commit infidelities and drink too much. As one of her heroines remarks, "The Lord might as well throw up His hands as far as the salvation of men is concerned!" It was woman's work, quietly within the home, to mold her man into a decent life. Man looks to woman as a model for virtue. Listen as the mother of one of Harris's heroines consoles a daughter whose husband has a mistress:

"In the beginning God created Eve to satisfy Adam. He never has made a man that could satisfy a woman. But this is the truth: a good man does not often make a good husband. He is apt to be more in love with his piety or his church ... than he is with his wife. Adam adores you because he thinks you are good and he knows he is not. This is not a bad arrangement. There never was a wife happy forever. Make up your mind to that and do the best you can."

As for romantic love, it must not get out of hand.

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Another heroine remarks, "A woman can always manage the man she marries, if she's not in love with him."

Such attitudes could not survive the changes in popular taste of the 1920's, and even the Post began rejecting her stories after 1930. But her vivid story-telling and clearly drawn characters make her work stand as a testament to her times:

"My father had a nose that proclaimed his lineage. It was immense like a noble monument to many noble ancestors. The rest of his face seemed to draw back from it, as if unworthy of too intimate an association. I do not know whether my mother respected him or whether she merely accepted him as women do curious dispensations of Providence. ... Mother never knew that she was not happily married. ... People did not think about their marital relations; they accepted them. So there were no divorces."

Corra Harris died peacefully in 1935 at her mountain home. She was a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

Additional Resources

Corra Harris Collection

Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library
University of Georgia
(706) 542-3251