

Mildred Walker

1905 – 1998

Novelist

“You are either a Mildred Walker enthusiast or you are missing one of the best writers of the American scene.” – Philadelphia Inquirer



Mildred Walker, ca. 1941-1950, John J. Yaw, photographer
Montana Historical Society Legacy Photograph Collection, 945-967

Born in Pennsylvania in 1905 to a school teacher mother and preacher father, Mildred Walker was raised with tremendous respect for the power of words, and as a child she desired to be a writer. She cultivated her writing skills during her undergraduate education at Wells College in New York and earned a Master's degree in English at the University of Michigan in 1933. As a result of her skill and ambition, her award-winning first novel, *Fireweed*, was published in 1934.

Walker's commitment to writing was such that she agreed to marry cardiologist Ferdinand Schemm in 1927 on the conditions that she could continue her writing career and not have to do the laundry. Throughout their marriage, she successfully navigated the intersection of her personal, professional, and social life. The success of *Fireweed* financially supported the young family's move

to Great Falls in 1933. In the ensuing years, she squeezed her writing into the spare moments she found amid the needs of her husband and three children.

Maintaining her maiden name for use as a pen name, Walker carved out an exceptional writing career during her twenty-two years in Montana. From 1933 to 1955, she wrote nine of her thirteen novels. Three were set in Montana: *Unless the Wind Turns* (1941), *Winter Wheat* (1944), and *The Curlew's Cry* (1955). A fourth Montana novel, *If a Lion Could Talk* (1970), was published after she left Montana.

Critics praised Walker for her exceptional ability to capture both ordinary human experiences and the authentic environments in which her characters lived. She wrote from firsthand experience, showcasing a modern, unromanticized version of Montana. *“Writing, to me, is one way of living and savoring life more deeply ... a cup in which you can lift life to the lips and taste it – even if the cup is sometimes a battered tin one.”*

These writing hallmarks are present in *Winter Wheat*, her most popular and lucrative novel. Receiving accolades for its authentic depictions of Montana and life in the West, the story realistically captures the emotions of people struggling to live with the land. Praise came from many directions, but perhaps the greatest tributes were from native Montanans serving overseas in the military. Expressing gratitude for the vivid reminders of home, one wrote, *“The detail brought out so clear the feeling one gets when standing on a high hill and can feel the earth and sky. It fills you with an awe that is rather hard to express. You achieved that in your book.”*

Following the death of her husband, Walker left Montana. Shortly before her death in 1998, her out-of-print novels were reissued, bringing a new wave of critical and popular success and introducing a new generation of Montanans, and Americans, to one of the state's great writers.