

Sheba Mae Childs Hargreaves (1882–1960)

By Richard Etulain

Sheba Hargreaves reached the apex of her career with a trio of historical novels—*The Cabin at Trail's End* (1928), *Ward of the Redskins* (1929), and *Heroine of the Prairies* (1930). She was an anomaly in the field, as popular Westerns were generally the bailiwick of men.

Sheba Mae Childs was born in The Dalles on November 5, 1882. After graduating from Oregon State Normal School (now Western Oregon University), she worked as an elementary schoolteacher in Oregon and California. She married Fred Hargreaves in 1906 and had two children. When her sons began school, Hargreaves turned to writing.

In her early efforts as an author, Hargreaves contributed essays and pamphlets in several fields, including pioneer types, parenting, cremation care, and occultism. She wrote for the *Oregon Journal*, the *Oregonian*, and national popular magazines and was a ghost writer for doctors. She also began an advertising agency in Portland.

At first, Hargreaves was reluctant to write historical fiction about the American West. She was correct in her hesitation, because the most popular fictional Westerns in the 1920s were adventure novels by Zane Grey, Max Brand, and others who relied on action and were light on historical facts. Sheba Hargreaves wanted her work to be authentic, to be factually accurate but in a limited manner. In her novels, the daily lives of Indians and early white settlers would be accurate, but she would create the characters. The marriage of the two resulted in novels of imagined figures set against historical backgrounds.

The Cabin at the Trail's End: A Story of Oregon (1928) was the first of Hargreaves's triumvirate of Western historical novels. The story focuses on the Oregon Trail but also on life at the Trail's end, where the midwestern Banbridge family tries to revive and redefine itself in the Oregon City area. The setting and content of the novel are reminiscent of Ernest Haycox's *Earthbreakers* (1952). In the novel, Hargreaves breaks new ground in providing details of Native and pioneer contexts, with Indians treated sympathetically. Details of diet, cropping, landscapes, and positive descriptions of Native social life thicken the description in this well-told Oregon historical novel.

The second novel in the trilogy, *Ward of the Redskins* (1929), is similarly constructed. The hero sets out from the Oregon Coast for Crater Lake to search for a white girl among protecting Indians. The journey, search, and resolution are surrounded by descriptions of flora and fauna, Native beliefs and actions, and historical backgrounds from familiar first-hand sources, such as Hudson's Bay Company records and exploration narratives. *Heroine of the Prairies: A Romance of the Oregon Trail* (1930), the third book in the trilogy, centers on the Barlow Trail and its importance to Oregon emigrants. The story revolves around Salita Prentiss (Sour Gal) and includes large doses of early Oregon history.

With these books, Hargreaves made a name for herself among Oregon writers, and publication with New York publisher Harper and Bros. helped her gain a national reputation. She continued to write after 1930, but no new novels appeared under her name. The popularity of Western fiction stumbled during the Depression and World War II, and Hargreaves may have suffered from that downswing. She remained active, however, giving talks in Portland about her writing, being involved in women's groups, and engaging in her favorite pastime, gardening. She also kept in touch with her mother's U'Ren family, including her uncle William S. U'Ren, a leading Oregon political activist. Sheba Hargreaves died in Portland on June 20, 1960.

Sources

"Sheba Hargreaves: Novelist." *Portland Oregonian*, July 25, 1948, 7.

Sheba Hargreaves Papers. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.

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<https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/hargreaves-sheba-mae/>