
Of the group of well-known women writers who have been associated with Pittsburgh either on a short or long-term basis, it is surprising how many have been connected with the North Side, the erstwhile (before 1907) city of Allegheny. Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and Margaret Deland (1857-1945) were born there, although their literary lives were conducted in Paris and Boston. Willa Cather (1873-1947) taught at Allegheny High School before she left for New York in 1906.

Perhaps most famous of all native Pittsburgh writers, the most prolific and popular, not to say one of the longest-lived, was Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958), whose very name, to any Pittsburgher of the early part of this century, was once an incantation which summoned up one of the great American literary success stories of the twentieth century. She was not only a writer with a genius for putting her hand on the pulse of the common reader, but was an uncommonly good storyteller whose swiftly perfected craft made her the idol of millions. She was not a great literary artist, but a new Rinehart novel, usually serialized in one of the great popular magazines, was always an event. She was also a celebrity whose opinion on momentous issues was important to her public.

The story of her life also makes a good story, and the present biography comes just long enough after her death, not only to refresh her fading laurels, but to attempt an assessment of her place in the culture of her day. The author, Jan Cohn, is now head of the English department at George Mason University near Washington, D.C., but she formerly taught English at Pittsburgh's Carnegie-Mellon University. Her approach to her subject is thus academic, but not oppressively so, and she does know the Pittsburgh background. She is abundantly aware of the "story line." The title of the book is a quotation from Shakespeare's Twelfth Night — "If this were played upon a stage now I could condemn it as an improbable fiction." There is always something literally fabulous about a great success story.

Born Mary Ella Roberts in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in America's centennial year, our heroine graduated from Allegheny High School in 1893 and from the Nursing School of Homeopathic Hos-
pital in 1896. In the latter year she also married a young doctor, Stanley M. Rinehart, and they took a house on Western Avenue where the doctor also had his office. Between 1897 and 1902, three sons were born to this union. In these early years of her married life was thus forged one of the great components of her legend — that of Mary Roberts Rinehart as wife and mother.

The other component — even more necessary to the success story — was her literary ability. She had begun to write in the early 1890s, and her first two stories were published in the *Pittsburgh Press*. By 1904, she was writing and publishing prolifically. In 1906, her first mystery novel, *The Man in Lower Ten*, appeared, and with *The Circular Staircase* (1908), perhaps her most famous mystery, her success was assured. At this time also, she began to earn a great deal of money. Rinehart also began to write for the stage. Her greatest stage success was a mystery play, *The Bat* (1920), which was seen by more than ten million people and grossed more than nine million dollars.

Meanwhile, Rinehart moved to a large house in Allegheny in 1907, then to Sewickley in 1911. From Sewickley she went to Washington in 1923. After Dr. Rinehart's death in 1932, she took an apartment on Park Avenue in New York. She also had, in her later years, a large summer house in Bar Harbor, Maine. She continued to write and publish to the very end of her long life — including a number of her best mystery novels. She died in 1958, full of riches and honors.

Perhaps her best book is her autobiography, *My Story* (1931-revised, 1948). The Mary Roberts Rinehart who grew up with the twentieth century was a remarkable woman. Even in her eighties she radiated energy, vitality, and power. In her own way she was a tycoon; a charming woman but a tough one. As her biographer says, "Mary Roberts Rinehart constructed her own life drama. What still seems an improbable fiction became a great adventure."

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