

Dorothy Marie Johnson (1905-1984): “Montana’s First Lady of Letters”

“She was a witty, gritty little bobcat of a woman.”

Biographer Steve Smith, 1984

an outstanding writer and a classic storyteller, Dorothy Johnson wrote 17 books, more than one hundred short stories, and countless articles, many of them addressing Montana and the American West. She is best known for three pieces that Hollywood converted into films: “**The Hanging Tree**” (1959); “**The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance**” (1962); “**A Man Called Horse**” (1970).

Dorothy was born in McGregor, Iowa, in 1905. Her family moved to Great Falls and then, in 1913, to Whitefish. She graduated from Whitefish High School in 1922. At the University of Montana-Missoula she studied creative writing under H. G. Merriam and graduated with a degree in English in 1928. She married in 1927 and divorced in 1930.

After secretarial/stenographic jobs in Washington and Wisconsin, the petite Dorothy removed (1935) to New York City and embarked on a career in advertising and journalism. For six of the next fifteen years, she edited *The Woman* magazine.

In 1950 Dorothy returned to Whitefish, where she became the news editor of the weekly *Whitefish Pilot*. Three years later, she moved to Missoula. Here she served as the secretary-manager of the Montana Press Association and taught in the Journalism School at the University of Montana for 14 years. In her popular course on magazine-article writing, she resolutely emphasized persistence, detail, and precision.



Dorothy M. Johnson, [no date,] Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives Research Center

The foundation of Dorothy Johnson’s writing career was a series of action-packed Western stories for such periodicals as *Argosy*, *Collier’s*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. From the 1950s through the 1970s, she published solid, imaginative Western tales, including: **Indian Country** (1953); **The Hanging Tree** (1957); **Sitting Bull: Warrior for a Lost Nation** (1969);

The Bloody Bozeman (1971); **Buffalo Woman** (1977); **All the Buffalo Returning** (1979).

Dorothy Johnson’s storylines include inventive twists; her tales are grounded in accurate historical context; her language is sparse, tight, vigorous, and clean; she can really spin a yarn. Johnson’s characters are tough Western men, but she also wrote sensitively of frontier women and Indians—at a time when that focus was unusual.

Above all, this accomplished Montana writer was an iconoclast. Her buoyant sense of humor matched her outrage at governmental ineptitude.

Her frequent, famous “*letters to the editor*” of the *Missoulian* were both pungent and penetrating. One observer called them “*a smile from a stranger on a gray day.*”

What a remarkable chronicler of the American West—what a remarkable woman—Montana produced in Dorothy M. Johnson.