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# When Edna Ferber Was Accused of Communist Propaganda

Ann Shapira

When Edna Ferber's image appeared a few years ago on an eighty-three cent stamp, it was testimony by the United States government that Ferber had achieved acceptance as a quintessential American writer. Certainly her carefully researched novels, taken together, reveal a panorama of America, including Texas, Oklahoma, Alaska, Mississippi, Chicago, Saratoga, and beyond. Blockbuster films of *Giant*, *Saratoga Trunk*, and *Show Boat* brought Ferber's America to millions. It was, therefore, not entirely surprising to read one morning on the front page of the *New York Times* that Laura Bush had invited scholars to the White House to discuss Edna Ferber because she was an important American woman writer. Pleased by Mrs. Bush's interest, I sent her my recently published article about Edna Ferber as a Jewish American feminist. To my horror, I did not receive a response to my thoughts on Ferber, but rather a large cardboard-backed, personally signed letter, suitable for framing, from Laura thanking me for my "kind words of support and encouragement [which] sustain President Bush and me" (Letter to the author). The letter, which ignored both Ferber and the content of my article, was a reminder of both the enthusiasm and controversy that Ferber's work had once generated, not only from the public and the press, but from a former President, who read her work, and members of the United States Senate, who did not. Initially, Ferber's feminism and social criticism were well received by an American president. Teddy Roosevelt was a fan, who wrote to Ferber intermittently between 1915 and 1918, praising the Emma McChesney stories and *Fanny Herself*. In one letter he even mentions the "hours of conversation" he and his wife enjoyed with her (Roosevelt). But the benign politics of an earlier era gave way to the politics of hatred by 1957, when Ferber was vilified in the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, chaired by McCarthy. The individual being questioned by the Committee was Mr. M. G. Horneffer of the French Unit of Voice of America, who was asked to comment on a review of *Giant* by a French journalist in his department, Marcelle Henry. In the course of the testimony, Horneffer revealed that he himself never read the book. Notwithstanding, he is quick to admit that it

is Communist propaganda, and at the end is commended by McCarthy. Here is the testimony, which is verbatim but condensed:

Mr. Colm: I would now like to call your attention to a broadcast of December 2, 1952.

Are you familiar with that broadcast?

Mr. Horneffer: Yes; I am.

Mr. Cohn: Who wrote that broadcast?

Mr. Horneffer: Marcelle Henry.

Mr. Cohn: And did that broadcast concern Edna Ferber's book, *The Giant* [sic]?

Mr. Horneffer: It did.

Mr. Cohn: And in that book, did Miss Henry in the script echo some views concerning the people of Texas and those who lived there?

Mr. Horneffer: She did.

Mr. Cohn: Did she first state: Miss Ferber knows the Texans well, whatever the Texans may say to the contrary?

Mr. Horneffer: She did.

Mr. Cohn: And then did she go on to say that as far as the whole Texas group are concerned, the men drink bourbon by the gallon, the women are nitwits who talk but say practically nothing, and there are also a lot of Mexican peons who work on the ranches and in the homes as servants, and who live harsh and difficult lives?

Mr. Horneffer: That is correct.

Chainnan: Would you consider that good anti-Communist propaganda?

Mr. Homeffer: I would say it is the best anti-American propaganda.

Mr. Cohn: And you objected, of course to this, and many other scripts which you submitted to us, and which we will file.

Senator Mundt: It is also a slur, Mr. Chainman, on the great Republican State of Texas. ...

Mr. Horneffer: [Marcelle Henry] referred to--and I quote "those dirty Americans"....

The Chairman: I understand this language used in the script is a summarization of things said by Ferber after first copying what Ferber said.

Mr. Horneffer. Yes sir. I have not read the book; so I cannot tell you how accurate it is....

The Chairman: If I were a member of the Communist Party, and I wanted to discredit America and further the Communist cause, could you think of any better job I could do helping out the Communist cause than by beaming to Europe the type of material which you have just described?

Horneffer: No sir, not possibly.

The Chairman: In other words, you feel we are doing a great service to the Communist cause in beaming this material out in the so-called fight against Communism?

Horneffer: Yes, sir.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Horneffer. You are an example of the good people we have over at the voice.

State Department Information Program of the U.S. Congress Senate Committee Hearings, 83rd Congress, 1953 (179-185).

This odd bit of testimony would have remained unknown to me had I not found it embedded in an anonymous manuscript in the Edna Ferber archive at the University of Wisconsin. That manuscript, poorly typed on a manual typewriter, adds further insult to the Senate testimony by identifying Ferber as "an evil old Jewess" who has "vented her spleen and hate upon the established traditions of our country." The anonymous writer then lists some blacks and a number of Jews, including Albert Einstein and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who, along with Ferber, belonged to allegedly Communist organizations.

No matter how distasteful, the Senate testimony remains important simply because it is verifiable American history, containing the words of duly elected American senators and appointed officials and advisors. But one is tempted to dismiss the rest of the anonymous manuscript as mindless trash except that Ferber saved it. It is likely that she herself might not have known about the Senate testimony had someone not delivered the manuscript to her. For my purposes here, the statement by the Senate, further embellished by the anonymous writer, raises several questions:

(1) Why would Ferber, who was inordinately sensitive to adverse criticism, save this manuscript?

- (2) Why would anyone, and especially United States senators, consider *Giant* Communist propaganda?
- (3) Given the anti-Semitism of both the unidentified writer and McCarthy's subcommittee, are the allegations about Communist propaganda really thinly veiled anti-Semitism?

My own guess is that Ferber saved the piece because she saw in it a kernel of truth that was missed by fans, who perceived her love for America. But Ferber was also sharply critical of American abuses of power. The anonymous remarks quoted above recall similar anti-Semitic comments about *Cimarron* in 1930, when one Oklahoma critic wrote, "This Ferber woman is the most unpleasant personality that has ever come into Oklahoma...Why doesn't she stay in the ghetto where she came from?" (PT 340). Curiously, Ferber commented that angry Oklahoma natives probably understood *Cimarron* better than the New York critics who saw it as a "colorful, romantic Western American novel" (PT 339). While *Giant* is obviously not Communist propaganda, in some ways it is, like virtually everything she wrote, a Jewish book, even though there is not a single Jewish character. With the exception of her early autobiographical novel, *Fanny Herself*, Ferber did not write about Jews per se, but she always wrote about what she called "the little people," and the regional novels, for which she became famous, are more social criticism than patriotic Americana. The book jacket of the most recent imprint of *Giant* proclaims that it is "A sensational story of power, love, cattle barons, and oil tycoons" (HarperCollins 2000). But Ferber's anti-Semitic critics saw something else, which is probably closer to the truth.

*Giant* exploded on the American scene twice, first as a novel in 1952, which was a popular success despite mixed reviews, and then again in 1956, in the even more popular film version starring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean. The Senate testimony in 1953 was obviously a response to the novel, albeit unread by the chief witness. The anonymous manuscript, written in 1957, was undoubtedly a response to the film so that the unidentified writer, like his predecessor, probably never read the book. Both non-readers, like thousands of other non-readers throughout history, who dutifully removed library books from shelves, or worse, burned them, were clearly impressed and intimidated by the power Ferber's book could exert on others, or else they would not have bothered to attack her so viciously.

*Giant* is a muckraking novel. Although Ferber went to Texas many times to research the book, it is informed not only by the facts she accumulated but by her own experiences growing up in Ottumwa, Iowa, where she was frequently greeted with shouts, "Oy-yoy, sheeny! Run! Go on, run!" (PT 10). Wherever she traveled (and she traveled widely), she always identified with those who were oppressed. In *Giant*, it was the exploited Mexican laborers.

Ferber first went to Texas in 1939 after reading what she termed "fantastic stories" about "million-dollar ranches" and "oil wells spurting millions of gallons worth millions of dollars where only barren desert had been" (*Magic* 246). While

she acknowledged that there was plenty of material for a “terrific novel,” she abandoned the idea for several reasons including her belief that “Texans are too touchy” (*Magic* 245). In explaining why she returned to Texas ten years later to research the novel, she wrote, “*Giant* in the guise of Texas, haunted me for a decade or more. I shrank from it, I shuddered to contemplate the grim task of wrestling with this vast subject. Finally I wrote it to be rid of it” (qtd. in Gilbert 173). She later mused, “I think I went back to Texas because I thought this strange commonwealth exemplified the qualities which must not be permitted to infect the other forty-seven states if the whole of the United States as a great nation was to remain a whole country and a great nation” (*Magic* 247). What she doesn’t mention is that between 1939 and 1949 World War II intervened, a powerful reminder of the precarious position of the Jewish people.

Ferber’s first autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure* (1938), reveals that she was deeply affected by the rise of Hitler. In fact, the unpublished dedication to the book read, “To Adolf Hitler, who had made me a better Jew and a more understanding human being, as he has of millions of other Jews, this book is dedicated in loathing and contempt” (qtd. in Gilbert, 291). Still alluding to the Nazi threat, she eventually dedicated the book to her nieces “with the hope that my reason for having written this book may soon become an anachronism.” In writing her autobiography, she wanted to show that despite anti-Semitism, Jews succeed. The title, *A Peculiar Treasure*, comes from *Exodus*: “Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people...” (19.5). When the war was over, Ferber seems to have become obsessed once more with the plight of people who, like Jews, were persecuted because of their ethnicity. The result was *Giant*.

One Texas reviewer who hated the book aptly compared it to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As Stowe felt compelled to write about the horrors of slavery, Ferber knew she had to expose the plight of the exploited Mexican laborers, whose land was stolen and who were reduced to near slave labor by wealthy Texas cattlemen and planters. *Giant*’s heroine, Leslie, like Ferber herself, is an outsider. Although Leslie is played in the film by a nubile Elizabeth Taylor, in the novel she is described as not “really beautiful,” and she is an avid reader and a would-be social reformer, who clearly has a good deal in common with her creator (52-53). When Jordan Benedict, a Texas cattleman and owner of two million and a half acres of land, shows up at her father’s house in Virginia to buy a horse, Leslie and Jordan inexplicably fall in love and within three weeks are married and off to Texas. Leslie is alternately awed by the huge ranches, houses, and the larger than life men, who dominate everything, and disgusted by the rape of the land, the superficiality of the women, the misogyny of the men, and, above all, the mistreatment of Mexicans.

When Jordan insists, “You’re a Texan now,” Leslie responds, “But I’m not anyone I wasn’t. I’m myself.” Described as a woman who “felt like someone in a Victorian novel,” Leslie, like Dorothea Brook, begins life in her new home by visiting the poor, who work on her husband’s property. As she walks beyond the fifty

room mansion, where she lives with her husband and his sister, she sees the homes of the Mexican laborers, “rows of shanties, small and tumble-down. Flimsier even, than the Negro cabins she had seen so familiarly in Virginia.” Hearing the cry of an infant Leslie enters one of the hovels where “there was no water tap, no pump, no sink,” and after attempting to communicate with the feverish mother, diapers the crying baby (138-139).

When Leslie asks her husband how he got millions of acres, he simply says, “Never mind how we got it” (175). Leslie has to rely on books, which tell of Spanish land grants and purchases by settlers, only to be corrected by her husband’s irreverent hand, Jett Rink, “Bought it-hell! Took it off a ignorant bunch of Mexicans didn’t have the brains or guts to hang on it. Lawyers come in and finagled around and lawsuits lasted a hundred years and by the time they got through Americans had the land and the greasers was out on their ears.” Leslie persists that the settlers paid, but Jett retorts, “Yeah. Five cents a acre” (192). Leslie prevails on Jett to show her the neighboring Mexican town of No pal, where she meets Fidel Gomez, the richest man in town, who “sneaks [men] across the border from Mexico to work as pickers and rounds up the Mexican voters,” who she later learns are locked up and forced to vote for the candidates supported by the ranchers and growers. Leslie, asserting her rights as Mrs. Jordan Benedict, insists that Gomez show her the camps where Mexican laborers live in tents and use open latrines (250). She thinks about the ancestors who came to Texas to conquer the land and its people, and decided “let them work for us, let them work for a quarter a day till the work is done, then kick them back across the border where they belong” (200). When she asks Jordan about the “thousands of Mexicans piled into trucks like cattle,” he tells her not to mix into “this migratory mess” (243-44).

Later, when Leslie criticizes the cattleman, she is advised by one of the women to “stop that kind of talk” or “they’ll be saying you’re one of those Socialists” (268). Some of what Leslie learns sounds disturbingly contemporary. Jordan’s Uncle Bawley reveals, “About fifty thousand of these wetbacks slip out of Mexico every year, swim or wade the Rio Grande where it’s shallow, travel by night and hole up by day. The Border Patrol and the Immigration boys and Rangers and all, they can’t keep them out. Sometimes they make it, a lot of ‘em get caught and thrown back. Sometimes they’re shot by mistake, sometimes they wander around and starve” (288). Referring to a skinny seventeen-year-old who Leslie encounters, Uncle Bawley explains, “the whole of Texas was built on the backs of boys like that on the bent backs of Mexicans” (290). Meanwhile, Leslie discovers that the oilmen managed to get Washington to vote the twenty-seven percent tax allowance on oil (317).

Despite her concerns with the unmitigated oppression of Mexicans, Ferber ends the novel on a note of hope. The next generation, the children of Jordan and Leslie, reject their father’s ranch and the culture it has created. Jordy marries a Mexican woman and becomes a doctor, and Luz falls in love with a young agronomist, recently graduated from Cornell, who is committed to saving the land. Leslie herself is traveling with her Mexican daughter-in-law and grandchild when she is

mistaken for a Mexican and thereby literally identifies with the oppressed people, just as Ferber herself did. This misidentification recalls another incident in Ferber's own life when she visited Egypt and wrote:

The fields of that flat land were, in my imagination, fertilized with the dried blood of centuries; the smell of decay seemed all pervasive. My departure seemed more in the nature of escape. Perhaps, two thousand years ago, I was a little Jewish slave girl on the Nile (*Magic* 175).

Ferber similarly identified with the Mexican mother who is too ill to feed her wailing baby, the starving young illegal wetback, or the family of six who collectively eke out five or six dollars a week from cattlemen, who own millions of acres and bedeck their wives with jewels.

Far from being Communist propaganda, *Giant* was intended to remind Americans of the values of justice and equality articulated by the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln and embedded in Jewish ideals of *tikkun olam*. None of Ferber's harsh critics, including the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, offered any evidence that her facts were incorrect. Rather, the argument was that it was unpatriotic to reveal the truth, and implicit in the Senate investigation is that Jews who exercise the right of free speech *in America* may be especially vulnerable.

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