



June Johnson Caldwell Martin

OCT 6, 1921 - MAY 10, 2020



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My mother passed away peacefully Mother’s Day evening. Maybe out of spite for my forgetting that holiday when I was a kid. She was 98 and fighting tooth and nail for 99. Actually 100. Her own mother died just three months shy of 100, as did her aunt. But 98 seems sufficient because much of these last couple of years was spent merely dozing and sleeping, and that just wasn’t like her. She wasn’t sick, mind you: there just wasn’t much oomph left. During her final day one granddaughter (Twila) and two greatgrandchildren (Makena and Ty) had visited and her other granddaughter (Maile) and her son (K-J) had called. In a strange quirk of geography, she passed away in her Foothills home, just a half mile away from her first Tucson home.

Because her passing took place over an ever-expanding span of months, then years, I had the luxury of taking a leisurely stock of her life. Not that I could chat with her about it much. She just wasn’t there for that. She passed quietly, surrounded by the thousands of books she had read, admired, promoted, judged, and collected throughout her lifetime in literature and journalism. She assigned me to be her bibliographic executor. Those books provided me fascinating access into what was most important to her: her literary life.

In *In Search of Lost Time: Time Regained* Marcel Proust wrote: “A name: that very often is all that remains for us of a human being, not only when he is dead, but sometimes even in his lifetime.” I think my mother was intent on leaving more than her name, and certainly not “June (Mrs. Erskine) Caldwell,” as the *Citizen* referred to her in 1949. And she succeeded.

She was a lifelong promoter of reading, writing, books, literature, and literacy. Born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1921, she migrated with her parents through Memphis, Silver City NM, and finally to Phoenix. Her father, whom I (as did she) idolized, was an electrical engineer and then once in Arizona a citrus farmer. In the late 30s she found her way to Tucson when her mother came to town to be treated for tuberculosis at a local sanitarium near the University; she stayed on to study English and Spanish literature (what else!) and creative writing at the U of A.

In October 1942 Harry Behn—native Arizonan, Harvard grad, poet, children’s book author, and former Hollywood screenwriter—was teaching creative writing at the U and casting about for a



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celebrity guest. Knowing that my father, Erskine Caldwell, his old Hollywood chum from the 30s, was back in town after his own most recent Hollywood screenwriting gig had ended, Behn asked him to speak to his class. In 1978 Behn recalled to Caldwell biographer Harvey Klevar that June Johnson was “the prettiest and the brightest of them all” and in return, she told Klevar, she thought Caldwell was “her ideal.” Later that year, on December 21st, they married.

Through the 40s, Behn was my mother’s muse and promoter. In the Winter 1945 issue of the *Arizona Quarterly*, a literary journal which Behn had established at the University, he published a short story of hers, “Frances.” Frances is a quiet and dowdy escrow clerk, but on her bus ride home one evening she has a chance encounter with a soldier who mysteriously seems to know her name. The sexual frisson between the two dissipates quickly, without consummation, and Frances’s humdrum existence simply tails off into unrequited anomie, quite at odds with the sort of outcome in many of my father’s short stories. In the Contributors section of that AQ issue Behn establishes her bona fides as an Arizona alumna who had recent published a story in the August 1944 issue of *Town & Country* magazine: “Old Pio is Ration Bored.” She takes issue with the condescension and rudeness with which an elderly Hispanic man is treated.

Four years later, no doubt again with Behn’s support, she was commissioned to contribute a chapter to *Rocky Mountain Cities*, an irreverent compendium of descriptions and opinion on ten western cities: in her case, naturally enough, one on Tucson. Mustering history, geography, economic data, statistics, and the wealth of her own observations, she minces no words, taking the local tourist industry to task for promoting a pseudo-cowboy authenticity, but one catering only to the wealthy and Anglo.

She is both acutely aware and offended at the local attitude toward Hispanics, the ethnic group supplying most of the tourism labor force. “While not actually barred from restaurants and dance halls, Mexican-Americans are often made to understand that they are not altogether welcome. The most constant discrimination, which has been practiced so long that Mexican-Americans have almost ceased to rebel against it, consists in the community’s belief that Mexican-Americans are not ‘white persons’” (222-23).

But she saves her full wrath for the separate-but-equal doctrine. After ticking off a list of places Blacks can go, she seethes, “But he cannot, for instance, after buying a roller shade at a drugstore, step up to the fountain and have a soda,” then adds, “He is rarely employed in capacities higher than janitor in any of the local stores” (224).

I have no idea how her husband reacted to this now published public screed, but the business community was understandably upset and she soon had to appear on a radio talk show to explain her actions and whether she’d been put up to this hatchet job by the book’s editors. No, she said, she was writing from her own observations, research, and beliefs. And her heart.

Their marriage lasted through the 40s, spiced with lots international travel, but in the 50s she



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found herself a single mom with me to raise. She toiled around town in a white 1954 Corvette, then later in a pick-up. Although she initially returned to the University, contemplating an advanced degree, instead she signed on with the Arizona Daily Star in 1954 and was soon writing an award-winning (Arizona Press Club & National Headliner Club) weekly general interest column she called “Surprise Package,” a title for which she always gave me credit. Subjects ran the gamut from political movers and shakers to high school cheerleaders, from industry moguls to tamale makers, from fashion shows to soup kitchens.

After five years of this, her first stint at professional journalism, she became the editor of the University of Arizona’s *Alumnus* magazine shifting its focus toward serious, and away from its formerly fluffy contents. Just as her prior joust with the patriarchy had gotten her into editorial trouble, so too she fell afoul of the University powers after publishing hard-hitting pieces attacking the campus Greek system and deploring campus racism toward Blacks. In June 1970 her contract was “not renewed,” the Alumni Association insisting to the end that she hadn’t been fired. And she returned to the Star, almost immediately.

In any case it was a sanguine career move. For the ensuing quarter century she honed her editorial skills, organizational enthusiasm, personal magnetism, and newspaper and writerly connections to fashion an award-winning career in matters literary. But rather than advancing her own reputation as an author she dedicated herself to burnishing the careers of other writers, whether just budding or well-established. In December 2007 the Pima County Public Library honored this work with the Lawrence Clark Powell Lifetime Achievement Award (“Powie”) for “distinguished contributions to southwestern letters”. Meanwhile, for each stage along the way she filled her home bookshelves with evidence of her progress, leaving behind an archaeological trove of a literary life. A checklist of her literary activities is breathtaking in its breadth and longevity:

- At her second and final stint at *The Star* (1970 → 1994), she was first a general assignment reporter, then the Fashion Editor, then after a while she added to her portfolio the role of Books Editor, and finally the audiobook reviewer (she was simultaneously a judge for the Audio Publishers Association). Although she retired as a full-time employee in 1994, her work seemed only to expand.
- Southwest Books of the Year (Christmas 1977 → 2005, finally passing on the baton to the county library) began as a *Star* Christmas gift supplement. My mother recruited two UofA librarians, W. David Laird and Don Powell, plus western historian and biographer C.L. Sonnichsen, to come up with a list of highly recommended books with either a Southwestern theme or location. This project continues, now under the auspices of the Pima County Library (<https://www.library.pima.gov/southwestbooks/>) with the help of a half-dozen experts nominating a couple hundred titles a year, including children’s books.
- *The Clarion*, a feminist newspaper (1977 → 1991, though it continued to publish occasional



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issues into 1996), of which she was a driving force and frequent contributor. As early as the 1940s, she had been a feminist with special interest in reproductive health, suffrage, and workplace equality.

- Southern Arizona Authors column (10.1980 → 1.2015, which still runs to this day in the Star) that began following a chance encounter with a self-published local author simply looking for a little publicity. The rules were that the author must live part of the year south of Casa Grande and the book in question had to be available for purchase.

- Book & Author Event began in late 1980 when she recruited Sandy Hall, the Star's Director of Special Services and Ann Underhill, the owner of the Book Mark bookstore. Together they convinced Irving Stone to come to town for a kind of grandiose public bookclub and the project was off and running annually for the next sixteen years. Sadly it ran afoul of the scourge of poor ticket sales, so it is only indirectly the forerunner of the annual Festival of Books.

Although most of the books that came to her Foothills home office over the last nearly fifty years ended up at local libraries, including ones in Benson and at the West Campus of Pima Community College, over the years she donated many back to the community through the county library's Book Fair. When she passed, she donated thousands of volumes to a variety of charities including literacy programs and prison reading projects.

Finally, to add a more personal codicil to all this, there are a few other things only I remember:

- For years she maintained that the green ink on my letters from the Tooth Fairy— who would substitute a quarter for a recently-shed tooth I'd placed under my pillow—was made from grass . . . until one morning I found a pen with green ink on her desk and she had to fess up. And the quarters stopped.

- I thought she made the best chicken or beef pot pies in the world because we agreed there would never be peas, corn, celery, or pimientos in them and that the crust would be piled up so extra-thick that it would curl and flake over the edges of the dish.

- We'd play catch in the vacant lot just west of our house on 7th Street near the Rincon Market (where I once got caught shoplifting a Tootsie Roll, an act about which she was quite displeased), a lot that strangely remains vacant even today, sixty-five years later.

- For a time when we'd take our Sunday dinners at the counter of the Broadway Village Drug Store (Broadway & Country Club) where I could have a hamburger topped with mayonnaise, and then on way home we'd stop by Hidden House (NE corner of Broadway & Tucson Blvd.) and pick up a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream, hand-packed in front of us.

- Once, when I must have gotten so upset about what I considered to be unfair punishments or constraints on my time, we sat down and drew up a Constitution for our 2-person family with rules, rewards, but also punishments.

- There was also a time in the mid-1950s when we'd visit her friend and fellow Star



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newspaperwoman Barbara Campbell on Sunday evenings because she had a color TV and we'd watch Walt Disney Presents on ABC.

- Later, we'd spend Sunday evenings having a pizza delivered and listening to oldtimey radio programs like the Green Hornet and The Shadow.
- Then there was a time when we'd spend Friday or Saturday nights out at the old Tucson Speedway watching Roger McCluskey, Bill Cheesbourg, and Carl Trimmer race "jalopies" and "stock" cars around that short dirt track.
- When she was at the Arizona Alumnus, up on the second floor of the old Student Union, I recall walking over from Tucson High to wait for her in Louis' Lower Level, eating a Louisburger, always garnished with mustard and onions.
- In her later years she'd take great joy in regaling my friends with her stories of dining with Picasso and Françoise Gilot in Antibes, with Faulkner and the Gallimards in Paris, stories she'd never told me, making me think I'd never thought to ask the right questions. Whatever she thought of my father, years later (she always referred to him, generally with a twinkle, as "that rat") she clearly pleased in the memory of Picasso's cigars, so it couldn't have been all bad.
- She argued vehemently into her dying days that the Designated Hitter was a godsend to baseball because no one wants to see a pitcher hit. She would never listen to my reasoned pleas in favor of real, honest National League ball, that the DH is an abomination. But she was a solid proponent for real, honest wood bats, not the collegiate metal ones.
- Beyond baseball, she was an avid tennis fan, glued even to the opening rounds of the Grand Slam tournaments and she was such a horseracing fan that she and her dear friend Judge Lillian Fisher had a front window table for many Rillito seasons. She is surely the only person you'll ever know who subscribed to The Blood-Horse.

Back in the day, it always seemed that she knew everyone in Tucson. I had a standing \$1 bet with my stepfather, Keith Martin, the founder and proprietor of Concrete Designs, her husband of 42 years (1966-2008), that every time we'd go just about anywhere, she'd strike up a conversation with someone she knew, or who knew her. I remember once at the original groundlevel Sky Harbor Airport, she walked right up to Barry Goldwater as he was either boarding or disembarking from a plane, I forget which, and just started chatting with him. And, out of the blue, he called her "June." That was impressive.

Toward the end she'd stopped reading or even listening to audiobooks. She just couldn't see or hear well enough to get much pleasure from books. But to the end she was at peace. You know that feeling when you've just woken up, you check your clock to discover you've still got another hour to sleep? A wonderful, snuggly feeling. That's how she passed away.



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To ensure the health and safety of our community, we are following all guidelines set by local, state and CDC officials. If you are planning on attending a service, please contact the funeral home in advance, so that we can plan accordingly.



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring June by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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