

Jean Webster

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Alice Jane Chandler Webster



Pseudonym: Jean Webster

Born: 1876-07-24
Fredonia, New York

Died: 1916-06-11
New York, New York

Occupation: novelist and playwright

Nationality: American

Writing period: 1899-1916

Genres: Fiction

Jean Webster (pseudonym for Alice Jane Chandler Webster) was born July 24, 1876 and died June 11, 1916. She was an American writer and author of many books including *Daddy-Long-Legs* and *Dear Enemy*.

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Childhood

Alice Jane Chandler Webster was born in Fredonia, New York. She was the eldest child of

Annie Moffet Webster and Charles Luther Webster. She lived her early childhood in a strongly matriarchal and activist setting, with her great-grandmother, grandmother and mother all living under the same roof. Her great-grandmother worked on temperance issues and her grandmother on racial equality and women's suffrage.^[1]

Alice's mother was niece to Mark Twain, and her father was Twain's business manager and subsequently publisher of many of his books by Charles L. Webster Publishing, founded in 1884. Initially the business was successful, and when Alice was five the family moved to a large brownstone in New York, with a summer house in Long Island. However, the publishing company ran into difficulties, and increasingly the relationship with Mark Twain broke down. In 1888, her father had a breakdown and took a leave of absence, and the family moved back to Fredonia. He subsequently committed suicide in 1891 from a drug overdose.^[1]

Alice attended the Fredonia Normal School and graduated in 1894 in china painting. From 1894 to 1896, she attended the Lady Jane Grey School in Binghamton as a boarder. During her time there, the school taught academics, music, art, letter-

writing, diction and manners to about 20 girls. The Lady Jane Grey School inspired many of the details of the school in Webster's novel *Just Patty*, including the layout of the school, the names of rooms (Sky Parlour, Paradise Alley), uniforms, and the girls' daily schedule and teachers. It was at the school that Alice became known as Jean. Since her roommate was also called Alice, the school asked if she could use another name. She chose "Jean", a variation on her middle name. Jean graduated from the school in June 1896 and returned to the Fredonia Normal School for a year in the college division.^[1]

College years

In 1897, Webster entered Vassar College as a member of the class of 1901. Majoring in English and economics, she took a course in welfare and penal reform and became interested in social issues.^[1] As part of her course she visited institutions for "delinquent and destitute children".^[2] She became involved in the College Settlement House that served poorer communities in New York, an interest she would maintain throughout her life. Her experiences at Vassar provided material for her books *When Patty Went to College*

and *Daddy-Long-Legs*. Webster began a close friendship with the future poet Adelaide Crapsey who remained as her friend until Crapsey's death in 1914.^[1]



She participated with Crapsey in many extracurricular activities, including writing, drama, and politics. Webster and Crapsey supported the socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs during the 1900 presidential election, although as women they were not allowed to vote. She was a contributor of stories to the *Vassar Miscellany*^[2] and as part of

her sophomore year English class, began writing a weekly column of Vassar news and stories for the *Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier*.^[1] Webster reported that she was "a shark in English" but her spelling was reportedly quite eccentric, and when a horrified teacher asked her authority for a spelling error, she replied "Webster", a play on name of the dictionary of the same name.^{[1][2]}

Webster spent a semester in her junior year in Europe, visiting France and the United Kingdom, but with Italy as her main destination, including visits to Rome, Naples, Venice and Florence. She traveled with two fellow Vassar students, and in Paris met Ethelyn McKinney and Lena Weinstein, also Americans, who were to become lifelong friends. While in Italy, Webster researched her senior economics thesis "Pauperism in Italy". She also wrote columns about her travels for the *Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier*, and gathered material for a short story, "Villa Gianini", which was published in the *Vassar Miscellany* in 1901. She later expanded it into a novel, *The Wheat Princess*. Returning to Vassar for her senior year, she was literary editor for her class yearbook, and graduated in June 1901.^[1]

Adult years

Back in Fredonia, Webster began writing *When Patty Went to College*, in which she described contemporary women's college life. After some struggles finding a publisher, it was issued in March 1903 to good reviews. Webster started writing the short stories that would make up *Much Ado about Peter*, and with her mother visited Italy for the winter of 1903-4 including a 6-week stay in a convent in Palestrina, while she wrote the *Wheat Princess*. It was subsequently published in 1905.^[1]

The following years brought a further trip to Italy and an eight month world tour to Egypt, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Hong Kong, China and Japan with Ethelyn McKinney, Lena Weinstein and two others, as well as the publication of *Jerry Junior* in 1907 and *The Four Pools Mystery* in 1908.^[1]

An increasing intimacy and a secret engagement developed between Webster and Ethelyn McKinney's brother, Glenn Ford McKinney. A lawyer, he had struggled to live up to the expectations of his wealthy and successful father.

Mirroring a subplot of *Dear Enemy*, he had an unhappy marriage to an unstable woman, Annette Reynaud, who was frequently hospitalized for manic-depressive episodes. The McKinneys had a child, John, who also showed signs of mental instability. McKinney responded to these stresses with frequent escapes on hunting and yachting trips as well as alcohol abuse. He entered sanatoriums on several occasions as a result. The McKinneys separated in 1909, but in an era when divorce was uncommon and difficult to obtain, were not divorced until 1915. After his separation, McKinney continued to have struggles with alcohol abuse, but had his addiction under control in the summer of 1912, when he traveled with Webster, Ethelyn McKinney and Lena Weinstein to Ireland.^[1]

During this period, Webster continued to write short stories and began adapting some of her books for the stage. In 1911, *Just Patty* was published, and Webster began writing the novel *Daddy-Long-Legs* while staying at an old farmhouse in Tyngham, Massachusetts. Webster's most famous work was originally published as a serial in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and tells the story of a girl named Jerusha Abbott, an orphan whose attendance at a women's college is sponsored by an

anonymous benefactor. Apart from an introductory chapter, the novel takes the form of letters written by the newly-styled Judy to her benefactor. It was published in October 1912 to popular and critical acclaim.^[1]

Webster dramatized *Daddy-Long-Legs* during 1913, and in 1914 spent four months on tour with the play, which starred a young Ruth Chatterton as Judy. After tryouts in Atlantic City, Washington, Syracuse, Rochester, Indianapolis and Chicago, the play opened at the Gaiety Theatre, Broadway in September 1914 and ran until May 1915. It subsequently toured widely throughout the US. The book and play became a focus for efforts for charitable work and reform. "Daddy-Long-Legs" dolls were sold to raise money to fund the adoption of orphans into families. Webster's triumph and success was overshadowed by the illness of her college friend Adelaide Crapsey with tuberculosis and her subsequent death in October 1914. In June 1915 Glenn Ford McKinney was granted a divorce, and he and Webster married in a quiet ceremony in September in Washington, Connecticut. They honeymooned at McKinney's camp near Quebec City, Canada, and were visited by former president Theodore Roosevelt,^[3] who invited himself, saying "I've always wanted to meet Jean Webster.

We can put up a partition in the cabin."^[1]

Returning to the US, the newlyweds shared Webster's apartment overlooking Central Park and McKinney's Tymor farm, in Dutchess County, New York. In November 1915, *Dear Enemy*, a sequel to *Daddy-Long-Legs*, was published, and also proved to be bestseller.^[4] Also epistolary in form, it chronicles the adventures of a college friend of Judy's who becomes the superintendent of the orphanage in which Judy was raised.^[1] Webster became and according to family tradition, was warned that her pregnancy might be dangerous. She suffered from severe morning sickness, but by February 1916 she was feeling better and able to return to social and other activities, including prison visits, and meetings about orphanage reform and women's suffrage. She also began a book and play set in Sri Lanka. Her friends reported that they had never seen her happier.^[1]

Death

Jean Webster entered the Sloan Hospital for Women, New York on the afternoon of June 10, 1916. Glenn McKinney, recalled from Princeton

University from his twenty-fifth reunion, arrived ninety minutes before she gave birth at 10:30 p.m to a six-and-a-quarter-pound daughter. All was well initially, but Jean Webster died of childbirth fever at 7:30 am on June 11th 1916. Her daughter was named Jean (Little Jean) in her honor.^[1]

Themes

Jean Webster was active political and socially, and often included issues of interest in her books. ^[5]

Women's issues

Jean Webster supported women's suffrage and education for women. She participated in marches in support of votes for women, and having benefited from her education at Vassar, she remained actively involved with the college. Her novels also promoted the idea of education for women, and her major characters explicitly supported women's suffrage.^[5]

Eugenics and heredity

The eugenics movement was a hot-topic when Jean

Webster was writing her novels. In particular, Richard L. Dugdale's 1877 book about the Juke family as well as Henry Goddard's 1912 study of the Kallikak family were widely read at the time. Webster's *Dear Enemy* mentions and summarizes the books approvingly, and her characters in the book support the sterilization and segregation of the mentally and physically disabled

Institutional reform

From her college years, Webster was involved in reform movements, and was a member of the State Charities Aid association, including visiting orphanages, fundraising for dependent children and arranging for adoptions. In *Dear Enemy* she names as a model the *Pleasantville Cottage School*, a cottage-based orphanage that Webster had visited.

Bibliography

Compiled from the Library of Congress's catalog:

- *When Patty Went to College* (1903)
- *Wheat Princess* (1905)
- *Jerry Junior* (1907)
- *Four-Pools Mystery* (1908)

- *Much Ado About Peter* (1909)
- *Just Patty* (1911)
- *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912)
- *Dear Enemy* (1915)

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1. ^ *a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p* Simpson, Alan; Mary Simpson with Ralph Connor (1984). *Jean Webster: Storyteller*. Poughkeepsie: Tymor Associate. B0006EFCTE Library of Congress Catalog Number 84-50869.
2. ^ *a b c* Jean, Webster (1940). *Daddy-Long-Legs*. New York, NY: Grosset and Dunlap, "Introduction: Jean Webster" pages 11-19. ASIN: B000GQOF3G.
3. ^ Roosevelt, Theodore (1916). *A Book-Lover's Holidays in the Open*. New York: Charles Scribner's sons.
4. ^ Keely, Karen (Sept. 2004), "Teaching

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External links

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