

This Day in History... August 15, 1885

Birth of Edna Ferber

Noted author Edna Ferber was born on August 15, 1885, in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The daughter of a storekeeper, Ferber's family moved to Chicago, Illinois, and Ottumwa, Iowa, before settling in Appleton, Wisconsin, when she was 12. She would go on to graduate from high school there and briefly attend Lawrence University.

In school, Ferber had acted in several plays and had dreams of becoming a professional actor. However, when her father fell ill, Ferber had to set those dreams aside and find a job to help support the family. At age 17, she got a job working as a reporter for the *Appleton Daily Crescent*. She worked there for a year, during which time she interviewed Harry Houdini for an article. Ferber then got a job with the larger *Milwaukee Journal*. She would work there for four years, but overworked herself and had to leave the job due to exhaustion.



Issued to pay the 2002 first-class rate for letters weighing under 3 ounces.



The Ferber stamp was reissued in 2003.

During her recovery time, Ferber wrote the short story, "The Homely Heroine," which was published in *Everybody's Magazine*. The success of that story led Ferber to write her first novel, *Dawn O'Hara*. During this time, she also wrote the first installment in a series of stories about traveling saleswoman Emma McChesney, which was published in *The American Magazine*. Ferber's stories proved quite popular and earned her national attention. Spurred on by her success, Ferber moved to New York in 1912 to become a full-time writer.

In the coming years, Ferber proved herself to be one of the most influential female writers of her time. She published several novels and short stories and was a member of the literary group Algonquin Round Table. Much of Ferber's writing was based on her family history and Midwestern roots. Her stories revolve around average Americans, particularly strong women. They showed her pride in America and contempt for the bigotry she and her family had endured when she was younger (her parents were both Jewish).

Ferber published one of her most successful works in 1924 – the novel *So Big*. It sold more than 300,000 copies and won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. It was adapted into a silent film the same year it was released, as well as a talkie starring Barbara Stanwyck, George Brent, and Bette Davis in 1932.

In 1926, Ferber published her most famous work, *Show Boat*. That novel was adapted into a musical in 1927. The play broke from musical theatre tradition because it was based on a serious literary work. It was one of the first musicals to consider the difficult themes of racism and poverty.

Several other Ferber works were also adapted for stage and screen, including *Cimarron* (which won the Academy Award for Best Picture), *Giant*, *Saratoga Trunk*, and *Ice Palace*. Ferber also began writing plays with George S. Kaufman, including *Dinner at Eight* and *Stage Door*.

Ferber was once called "the greatest American woman novelist of her day." She died on April 16, 1968, in New York City. In 2013, she was inducted into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. An elementary school in her hometown was also named in her honor.



Show Boat stamp from the 1993 Broadway Musicals issue

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