

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

The Novels of Alan Hart

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No writer's career stands out more in Northwest literary history for its uncommon path than Alan Hart's. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hart became an accomplished novelist. In the late 1940s and 1950s, he made his mark as a medical researcher. Today, he is remembered primarily for his transsexual identity.

Alan Hart grew up Alberta Lucille Hart in Oregon. After attending Albany College (now Lewis & Clark) and Stanford University, Hart earned her medical degree from the University of Oregon in Portland. In her mid 20s, following therapy and a hysterectomy, Hart transitioned to being a man, assuming the name Alan L. Hart. He married and became a physician in remote Gardiner, Oregon, where his identity was soon questioned. Within six months, he relocated to rural Montana. As Hart authority Brian Booth points out, "The challenges of Hart's passing as a man in the medical profession and literary circles for four decades involved a complicated life of deception and discrimination, and led to numerous moves, job changes, and financial challenges."

Hart went on to live in various cities, including Spokane, before obtaining a master's degree in radiology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1930, and, eventually, a master's degree in public health from Yale. In 1925, Hart's first wife divorced him, and he married Edna Ruddick, with whom he remained until his death. In 1930 he moved back to the Northwest where he held hospital positions in Tacoma and Seattle.

As Hart established his medical career he began writing to supplement his income. Over seven years he published four novels depicting idealist doctors who fight illness and disease while also confronting professional arrogance and local ignorance. Hart's fiction rests squarely in the mode of realist writers such as Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser. Three elements, however, separate his work from other large social novels of the period: Hart's expert knowledge of the medical profession, his detailed depictions of the Northwest, and his subtle insights into sexual desire and identity.

In *Doctor Mallory* (1935) a young doctor battles the 1918 flu epidemic in a -poverty-stricken fishing village on Oregon's Siltcoos River, sacrificing career, marriage, and ultimately his life for the dream of rural health care. The novel meticulously depicts rural medical practices while vividly evoking coastal Oregon in all its social bleakness, circa 1918.

In *The Undaunted* (1936) Dr. Richard Cameron makes his way to Seaforth (read Seattle) to take a position at Safe Harbor Hospital. On the train he meets a young woman from Spokane, and when he makes certain assumptions about her she asks, "Do you expect a woman to be what she seems?" to which he replies, "Not at all. I am not that simple-minded." Later, when they

drive through the Cascade foothills, he balks at making love to her and warns her, "Don't trust the men, my dear girl, and don't trust yourself. We're, all of us, slaves to biology." Only today, with the knowledge of the author's transsexual history, does the full suggestiveness of such passages become apparent.

Pursuing a treatment for "pernicious anemia," Dr. Cameron ventures to the state university to solicit the help of a fellow researcher, who tells him that "Seaforth...is a raw city in a raw young state" and then warns him that coming to Seaforth "is like dropping into a scientific vacuum." (For a contemporary view of Seattle's medical profession, see Michael Byers' 2004 novel *Long for This World*.) Thus rebuked, the good doctor establishes a backwoods facility and, against the will of his superiors, proceeds with his research. He is aided by Sandy Farquhar, a talented "x-ray man," whom critics view as a stand-in for Hart himself. Despite his medical skills, Farquhar is hounded by his peers for not fitting in and must "develop an inordinate courage in order to live at all."

Dr. Cameron becomes enamored of Puget Sound after taking a ferry to Battenridge Island. Despite complaints of becoming "mildewed" by the rain, he admires how the city across the bay "leaped gulches and lakes and sprawled carelessly over bluffs." Yet, to continue his research, he must return East.

Hart's third novel, *In the Lives of Men* (1937), is that rare literary artifact, the Tacoma novel. The title comes from the Hippocratic oath, which pledges physicians to keep the secrets "in the lives of men which ought not to be spoken abroad..."—an allusion, critics agree, to Hart's gender identity. It also refers to the private, often lurid, details of the community that Dr. Jim Winforth must keep to himself as he joins his father's practice.

Lying in the shadow of Mount Sehome on a bluff above Terminal Bay, Fairharbor (read Tacoma) is known as the City of Destiny by its "dog salmon aristocracy." It has been a boomtown since the Northwestern Pacific Railroad chose it, over Seaforth, for its Northwest terminus. Mills and smelters crowd the tide flats, filling the air with a "familiar acrid odor." The city's high society builds its mansions on the hill above the downtown and attends dances at the ornate Fairharbor Hotel. Its prominent families include real estate barons and timber beasts. Fairharbor also has a skid road, called Lava Flats, where gambling and prostitution prevail. Set between 1890 and 1909, *In the Lives of Men* offers a sweeping account of one of the most historically important yet unfairly ridiculed of Northwest cities.

Seven years later Hart returned to Seaforth with *Dr. Finlay Sees It Through* (1942). About a doctor who returns to restore the hospital he founded, the novel depicts the strained politics of hospital administration in the Pacific Northwest at the height of the Depression.

Though Alan Hart lived in Connecticut at the time of his death in 1962, his ashes were scattered, according to his will, in Port Angeles. Though largely forgotten today, Hart's four richly detailed novels give an unparalleled portrait (step aside, *Grey's Anatomy*) of the medical profession in Oregon and Washington.

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