

DEAR READERS AND RIDERS

The Beloved Books, Faithful Fans,
and Hidden Private Life of Marguerite Henry



A BIOGRAPHY BY

LETTIE TEAGUE

"AN EXTRAORDINARILY DETAILED AND SENSITIVE ILLUMINATION OF MARGUERITE HENRY
AND HER WRITING LIFE—A BEAUTIFUL AND UNUSUAL STUDY."

LEE SMITH, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Last Girls*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Silver Alert*

– **BIOGRAPHER’S NOTE:** –
A Remarkable Woman Who Wrote Remarkable Books

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letters





MARGUERITE HENRY

A dull bronze day
in November

Dearest Gee Gee,

How I love your "Lonely Sorrel"! It
begins sad and mournful, becomes joyful and happy,
and has a nice denouement, explaining God's way in
the world. You have presented your thoughts with
skill.

How can I can criticize? The poem is so quiet
and smooth, it conveys its thoughts so clearly. ^{Only} ^{one}
word I think you could change, and that is "whine."

I'm so eager to see you!

'Til then

best love,

Marquette (Mom I)



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BRIGHTY OF THE GRAND CANYON

CHAPTER SEVEN

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*“Was there a wildness in Brighty that could never be tamed?
A need for freedom stronger than the need for companionship?”*

—

FROM *BRIGHTY OF THE GRAND CANYON*
(FIRST PUBLISHED 1953)

When Marguerite had the stable built behind her house with “Misty money,” she directed it to be built for three horses—although at the time she had only two. She must have been prescient, as just a few years after Friday arrived, Marguerite added a burro (aka donkey—the term “burro” is commonly used for the smaller or wild version of the species). This burro soon became a favorite among the local children, especially Sidney “Tex” Drexler, who had already established himself as one of Marguerite’s favorites. Indeed, in his 2016 obituary, Drexler was noted as having “worked for famed author Marguerite Henry” when he was eight years old.

Marguerite's burro came with the name Jiggs. As Misty had been a "pony muse" for Marguerite when she was writing *Misty of Chincoteague*, so Jiggs became the stand-in for Brighty, the hero of Marguerite's next, beloved tale about a real-life burro who wandered around the Grand Canyon at the turn of the twentieth century, and who may or may not have helped solve a murder.

Inspired by a Free Spirit

The idea for *Brighty* was first floated to Marguerite by Mildred Lathrop, a librarian in Elgin, Illinois, who had helped Marguerite with the research for several of her books, including *Album of Horses*, a reference about breeds of horses and their origins published in 1950, the same year as *Born to Trot*. Marguerite had developed a curiosity about burros during the course of her research for the *Album*—she learned how different they were from horses, and how in many ways they were even harder to know. For example, Marguerite learned that a burro was far more intelligent than a horse, more reliable, and less skittish. While a horse's first reaction in many frightening instances is most often to flee, a burro might stand still and think. It is this thinking that has often been misconstrued as stubbornness.

Marguerite and Dennis shared a love of burros. In an interview in the *Chicago Tribune*, Marguerite enumerated the three qualities they liked best about small-but-mighty donkeys: "a rollicking sense of humor, a willingness to work, but a passionate distaste for overwork." That seemed like a smart summing-up of burro character—and particularly Brighty, the hero of her newest book.

Lathrop had read about the burro named Bright Angel who lived in the Grand Canyon for a couple of decades in a story published in *Sunset* magazine in 1922, and she passed the magazine along to

Marguerite. Written by Thomas McKee, whose father-in-law ran the Wylie Way Camp near Bright Angel Point of the Grand Canyon when Brighty was still alive, the article told of Brighty's discovery and life. According to McKee, cowboys had been commissioned to look for a man from Chicago who had vanished somewhere in the Grand Canyon. They didn't find the man, but they found Brighty at a campsite, just "hanging around." And that was where the story of the free-spirited burro began.

By McKee's telling, Brighty roamed the canyon freely, occasionally being put to work (if, in fact, he deigned to oblige) by cowboys in the canyon. Brighty, he wrote, occasionally befriended people, some of whom were famous, including (possibly) President Theodore Roosevelt. According to McKee, his own son Bob was one of the people Brighty allowed to press him into service occasionally—mostly carrying saddle bags filled with water up and down the canyon paths.

A Real-Life Adventure

Although Brighty was no longer alive when Marguerite read the article, she thought it had the earmarks of a story that might be turned into a book. This meant doing the necessary research—aka traveling to the Grand Canyon to follow the paths that Brighty trod—to get an understanding of the place and what had been his life.

Marguerite chose to undertake the outing in the middle of winter, and later admitted she would not have gone on the trip at all if she'd had to travel to Arizona alone—she wouldn't have been brave enough. There was the challenge of the weather, and the challenge of the trail itself. But Sid was game to accompany her, and his was a particularly stalwart offer since Marguerite didn't know until the end of their adventure that Sid suffered from acrophobia (fear of heights). A trip

up and down the canyon on thirty-two-inch-wide canyon trails on the back of a mule, following Brighty's path, terrified Sid—although he didn't admit that to Marguerite until after they had safely made the trip down the canyon and back up again. (Mules are the resulting offspring of a male donkey and female horse and have long been the choice of canyon guides owing to their surefootedness and size—they are usually much larger than burros. They are also quite brave. Stories abound of mules attacking and killing mountain lions—some true, some fiction.)

It was an adventure with a real element of peril; just prior to their journey, Sid visited a supply store near the Grand Canyon to buy some warm clothing for their trail ride, including long underwear. While there he overheard the store's proprietor discussing two local guides who'd recently fallen off the trail to their deaths. Sid didn't mention this fact to Marguerite until much later—long after their trip was concluded.

It was Valentine's Day week, with February temperatures of a frosty six degrees, and the trails were covered with snow. Marguerite was nervous, but she later wrote that when their guide gave her the mailbag to carry behind her saddle, she felt relieved, reasoning that if the mail could make it down the canyon wall—as it had time and time again—then surely she (and Sid) would survive the experience as well.

Their destination was Phantom Ranch, the only overnight accommodations offered below the rim of the Canyon, and then, as now, the lodge could only be reached by foot or muleback or raft. Marguerite took notes, interviewing guides and "mule skimmers" (people who specialize in handling mules) while they made their way down. Sid rode behind Marguerite, and unbeknownst to her, was hanging on for dear life. Marguerite only realized the depth of Sid's terror when they ascended to the canyon rim the following day and Sid threw his arms

around his mule (called Boob) and gave him a kiss for delivering Sid from what had seemed (to him) certain death.

Marguerite made return trips to the Grand Canyon and even spent the night in a cave as she understood the real Brighty had—although she was apprised of the possibility of certain visitors. In a letter to a young reader named Brian Mitchener who wrote Marguerite, wondering how the story of Brighty came about and if everything she described had actually happened, she replied in great detail, including this note: “*The park rangers warned me to listen to a soft, whimpering cry like a baby’s. ‘That will be a mountain lion,’ they said. ‘But if you lie motionless he will not harm you.’*” Sure enough, the mountain lion came by, breathing just as park rangers predicted, and although Marguerite wanted to look, she was too scared, and burrowed even deeper into her sleeping bag. (She did not mention Sid in records of this account, but it’s hard to believe he wasn’t right beside Marguerite, scrunched down inside his own sleeping bag.)

Enter: Jiggs

Marguerite set out to find a Brighty stand-in to serve as her model and inspiration. “*I can’t write about an animal character unless he’s part of our establishment,*” Marguerite explained in an essay in *The Chicago Tribune* (November 15, 1953). It wasn’t just the look of the creature that she needed but the smell and feel as well. To write about Brighty, Marguerite wanted to be able to run her hand through the burro’s coat and “*look deep into his almond eyes,*” she said.

It seemed like a simple enough quest. Marguerite sent word out to various local farmers and even contacted the director of Chicago’s Brookfield Zoo about her burro search, and each one, in turn, helpfully supplied her with the names of farmers with donkeys. Marguerite

“interviewed” several of them (the burros, not the farmers) but none seemed quite right. Marguerite had a very particular muse in mind; she described the burro she wanted like another woman might the man of her dreams. Her burro had to have “*busy ears and great brown eyes and a watershed of hair over the eyes to give him a sweet, unkempt look.*” It seemed like a dauntingly specific list, but eventually Marguerite found just the right candidate: a burro named Jiggs from a village with the perfectly magical name of Sugar Grove (not far from Naperville, Marguerite’s former home).

Much like Misty and the friendly agreement Marguerite had with Grandpa Beebe, Jiggs was initially “on loan”; Marguerite paid his owner twenty-five dollars a month, with the agreement that she might keep the donkey up to a year. (She later purchased him.) Jiggs quickly fell in love with Misty, but reportedly, the feeling was not returned. Misty was far more interested in human attention and snacks than a burro’s affections, said Marguerite, although Jiggs never stopped trying to convince Misty otherwise. “*If Misty goes to a school for the day he brays and sobs,*” Marguerite told a reporter from *The Chicago Tribune*.

Neighbor boy Sid “Tex” Drexler, on the other hand, was crazy about Jiggs, and the two soon formed a fast partnership, riding along with Marguerite on Friday and Ed Richardson on Misty some three days a week. On the days that the trio didn’t ride together, Marguerite sometimes rode Friday with a group of neighborhood women along the trails. They filled their saddlebags with wildflower seeds, scattering them as they went so that flowers might one day bloom in their wake.

Jiggs proved not only an exceptional book model but also a capable actor (he later starred in the *Brightly of the Grand Canyon* film that was produced in 1966, starring famed American actor Joseph Cotten). He was such a perfect model that Wesley Dennis traveled to Wayne

to sketch Jiggs for the book—never mind that there were burros in Virginia too. Marguerite made note of his degree of artistic devotion: “*Wesley spent an entire day in our pasture making sketches of Jiggs, our winsome little burro who struck a gay variety of poses,*” she said.

As Marguerite noted in the *Something About the Author* book series (*Volume 7*), Dennis and she often visited one another while working on a book together. They exchanged phone calls and letters too, but their in-person encounters seemed essential, far beyond a sort of practical meeting between writer and artist. “*With Wesley Dennis either he would come to my home in the plains of Illinois, or I would go to his in the mountains of Virginia and then we would read aloud the first rough draft. I loved this day above others for I had always wanted to be an actress and I could dramatize the story with all the ham actor in my soul,*” Marguerite said. Wesley would interject, saying a certain scene that Marguerite had written seemed like a good moment for an illustration, and then they each would return home to finish their respective work.

Although in Marguerite’s telling of his life, the fictional Brighty faced danger and hardship, some aspects of the real Brighty’s life were cleaned up and others omitted, including the sad and sordid facts of his death. The ending of Marguerite’s *Brighty* is joyous: “*It seemed all at once that he was free—no one was gripping his tail or prodding him with a rifle and no walls were hemming him in. The wide, free world and the sky above were his.*” The epilogue is yet more poetic: “*Everyone knows that Brighty has long since left this earth. But some animals, like some men, leave a trail of glory behind. They give their spirit to the place where they have lived and remain forever a part of the rocks and streams and the wind and sky.*”

In reality, Brighty was killed and eaten by two snowbound men one winter—a much less noble end for the legendary burro, and a fate

not unlike the fate of many of Brighty's brethren. In fact, from the time of Brighty's death up until the 1970s, thousands of canyon-dwelling donkeys were deliberately slaughtered by the National Parks Service (NPS), who deemed the animals an "invasive" species and detrimental to the native wildlife. The government's reasoning was that donkeys had been brought to the Grand Canyon by prospectors seeking gold, only to be abandoned there when President Theodore Roosevelt turned the Grand Canyon into a National Park. It wasn't until 1971 and the passage by Congress of the Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act that the donkeys in the Canyon were protected, except, of course, by that time all of them had been eradicated from the National Park. While the message of Marguerite's *Brighty* was a character meant to be "*the symbol of the ever-free America,*" according to a reviewer in *The Ludington Daily News* (Michigan), it was not necessarily the truth of the real Brighty's life.

When Marguerite and Sid moved to California years later, Marguerite gave Jiggs to his devoted friend Tex Drexler. Jiggs remained with Drexler until the burro's death in 1974.

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Misty's birthday was celebrated at least once
a year by her (many) youthful fans.



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Sid Henry (seen here holding Misty and Friday at home in Wayne)
was game to play groom but Marguerite was the equestrian in the family.

♦ *Photo courtesy of the Marguerite Henry Collection, The Kerlan, University of Minnesota
Archives originally appeared in DEAR READERS AND RIDERS (Rand McNally, 1969)*

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54



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A rare photograph of Marguerite riding Misty (*top left*), as it was far more often a small group of children who climbed aboard—sometimes on authorized rides, and sometimes not. Art Richardson lived on a farm in Wayne not far from Marguerite (*bottom left*) and was one of Misty's first riders. Judy Coffin (*top right*) was another accomplished young equestrian in Wayne who rode Misty from time to time.

♦ Photos © Grey Villet for LIFE MAGAZINE originally appeared in A PICTORIAL LIFE STORY OF MISTY (Rand McNally, 1976)



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Alex and “Mom Cat”—and Misty too—were allowed free rein in the Henry living room. The Wesley Dennis painting of Sea Star over the fireplace was one of Marguerite’s favorites. Misty’s neighborhood friend Eddie Richardson often joined such gatherings.

♦ Clipping from unknown newspaper and photo courtesy of the Marguerite Henry Collection, The Kerlan, University of Minnesota Archives

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Marguerite cast a wide net in her search for just the right “burro muse” while writing *Brightly of the Grand Canyon* in the early fifties and found a perfect one in Jiggs, who fittingly came from a farm not far from her own Illinois home.



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When Jiggs arrived at Mole Meadow, he fell in love with Misty almost immediately. Misty tolerated him.

♦ *Photo originally appeared in A PICTORIAL LIFE STORY OF MISTY*
(Rand McNally, 1976)