Jessamyn West Collection

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2020
Descriptive Summary
Title: Jessamyn West Collection
Dates: 1920-1990
Collection Number: Coll.2014.001
Creator/Collector: West, Jessamyn; Milhous family
Extent: 570 linear feet.
Repository: Whittier College - Wardman Library

Whittier, California 90602

Abstract: Mary Jessamyn West (1902-1984) was an American writer with Quaker roots. She was the cousin to the 37th President of the United States, Richard Milhouse Nixon. Jessamyn lived in Yorba Linda and attended Whittier College as a student and after graduation taught as an English professor. The collection holds her personal book collection including the authors mentioned in her stories and speeches. The collection also holds various photos, press releases, correspondence, novel drafts, and galley prints of her published works. English is the primary language of all texts; however, some of her novels have been published in languages around the world. The bulk of West’s manuscript series contains original handwritten drafts. The second step of editing can be observed in the various typed versions of novels, short stories, and speeches. Special care is taken to preserve the original newspaper or magazine clippings of published stories. The series of speeches are accompanied by individual work records to help identify common themes, date delivered, the purpose of the speech, geographic location of speech, and abstract denoting comparisons between speeches. There are two series within the speeches that need to be noted; “Getting Personal” and “Responsibility to Writers and Readers.” These two sets of speeches provide multiple examples of West’s writing style and process. There are four speeches on how and why to deliver speeches properly. This finding aid will be helpful to professors teaching English, speech, poetry, and literature from the Transcendentalist era. Students in these classes will be able to access primary sources illustrating the process for screenwriting, publishing novels, magazines, and delivering speeches.

Language of Material: English

Access
Open for research, with the following exceptions: Personal diaries and journals are restricted until 2050.

Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
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Acquisition Information
The collection was donated in its entirety by Jessamyn West and posthumously by her family.

Biography/Administrative History
Jessamyn West was born in 1909 into a Quaker family by father, Eldo Ray West (1879-1969), and mother, Grace Anna West (1882-1959) in North Vernon, Indiana. The family moved to Southern California when she was 6 years old. Jessamyn had a younger sister named, Carmen. Jessamyn’s mother was cousins to Richard Nixon’s mother. Jessamyn often babysat Richard when he was a child. Jessamyn’s passion for reading started when she was 12 years old when the first library opened in Whittier, CA. Jessamyn graduated with an Associate Bachelor’s degree from Whittier College in 1923. Jessamyn went onto the University of California at Berkeley to study her Ph.D. in English when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She later worked as an English professor at Whittier College. Jessamyn was diagnosed with tuberculosis while studing for her PhD in 1932. Facing her death, a friend told her to knit a blanket for her mother, Grace to remember her by, Jessamyn elected to write instead. There she spent hours over the years on bed rest writing the stories she recalled from her mother’s time in Indiana. It was not until after Jessamyn married Max McPherson that she started to submit some of her writing samples for publication. From there she was published in all the major magazines and Readers Digest in the 1940s’. By the 1950s, her novel, The Friendly Persuasion was adapted for the screenplay with director William Wyler. Jessamyn and Max adopted Ann McCarthy from Ireland in 1956. After reaching literary success, Jessamyn was invited to deliver speeches all across the nation to librarians, educators, book clubs, and commencement ceremonies at Whitter. In 1932, West suffered from tuberculosis and was subsequently sent to a sanitarium to recover. Her time battling tuberculosis, both in the sanitarium and at home in the care of her mother, was instrumental in shaping her life and her writing. Ms. West was second cousin to President Richard M. Nixon, and a fellow alumnus of Whittier College. Later in life Jessamyn moved to Napa Valley, Calif. with her husband, where she died in 1984 due to complications from a stroke.

Scope and Content of Collection
The written work of Jessamyn West starting during her years in college, short stories she wrote while on bed rest for tuberculosis, manuscripts of novels and screenplays, as well as speeches made from later in her life. The collection also includes West’s personal library of several thousand printed books, personal journals, and a few photographs.

**Indexing Terms**

Quaker women
Quaker authors
Quakers in literature
Quakers
Authors, American
Women's studies
Friendly Persuasion - Motion Picture
Speech making - writing
Writing
West, Jessamyn
Milhous family
Whittier College (Whittier, Calif.)
Indiana
Napa County (Calif.)
Whittier (Calif.)

[Container List]