Susan Glaspell in Context provides new, accessible, and informative essays by leading international scholars and artists on Pulitzer Prize winner Susan Glaspell’s life, career development, writing, and ongoing global creative impact. The collection features wide-ranging discussions of Glaspell’s fiction, plays, and nonfiction in both historical and contemporary critical contexts and demonstrates the significance of Glaspell’s writing and other professional activities to a range of academic disciplines and artistic engagements. The volume also includes the first analyses of six previously unknown Glaspell short stories as well as discussions with contemporary stage and film artists who have produced Glaspell’s works or adapted them for audiences worldwide. Organized around key locations, influences, and phases in Glaspell’s career, as well as core methodological and pedagogical approaches to her work, the collection’s thirty-one essays place Glaspell in historical, geographical, political, cultural, and creative contexts of value to students, scholars, teachers, and artists alike.

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SUSAN GLASPELL
IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY
J. ELLEN GAINOR
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Preface

In 1920, as Susan Glaspell was drafting her play *Inheritors*, the world was suffering from the devastating Spanish flu pandemic that had begun in 1918 and ultimately infected 500 million people, about 50 million of whom, historians estimate, died from the virus. It cannot be a coincidence that Glaspell built into *Inheritors* the background story of a woman who rushed to the aid of a neighboring immigrant family in the throes of a diphtheria outbreak – another highly contagious disease at the time – and then succumbed to the infection. For Glaspell’s 1921 audiences, this narrative of illness and sacrifice would have resonated profoundly. In 2021, as I write this preface, the story resonates anew.¹ This detail from *Inheritors* provides just one example, however, of the ongoing relevance of so much of Glaspell’s writing. Her short fiction, novels, dramas, and nonfiction were all interlaced with her cultural moment, capturing the social milieux, the shifting political tides, and the interpersonal dynamics she observed in the Midwest, on Cape Cod, and in Greenwich Village – her three homes as a writer – as well as on her international travels. For readers and audiences today, her work not only reflects the tenor of her time, it also simultaneously reveals significant connections and parallels to our own, demonstrating unequivocally why her writing remains so salient.

When feminist historians and literary critics began rediscovering Susan Glaspell in the 1970s and 1980s, they responded to her truthful representations of women’s lives and the innovative compositional strategies she used to depict the challenges women faced in a male-dominated society that imposed a “separate spheres” ideology of strict gender roles for men and women. These scholars’ foundational works reverberated in a number of directions: toward renewed theatrical interest in Glaspell’s plays; the republication of select drama and fiction; and further research that engaged an ever-widening array of approaches that consider Glaspell and

¹ I am grateful to director Andrew Cassel for noting this historical parallel.
Preface

her writing in an expanding set of historical, theoretical, and critical contexts. That work continues in this volume.

We use six organizing frames through which to explore Glaspell’s life, career, and legacy. The first, “Susan Glaspell’s Early Writing and Her Midwestern Contexts,” situates Glaspell geographically and culturally as a native of Davenport, Iowa. This region proved formative for her development as a writer, through the social and political perspectives she encountered that continued to shape her work. Essays in this group engage key facets of Glaspell’s early career; they include a biographical overview complemented by an analysis of the Midwestern region as it informed foundational notions of American culture and American identity. Glaspell’s initial career in journalism paralleled that of other women writers who rose to prominence in the early twentieth century; her emergence as a short fiction writer then put her in the company of male and female authors defining this form within an American context. Our discussion of six newly discovered Glaspell stories from early in her career, recently made available digitally, further connects these early professional experiences with her development as a fictionist and dramatist, particularly as evidenced through her two best-known works, the one-act play *Trifles* (1916) and its short story counterpart “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917). Glaspell’s hometown friendships with George Cram (“Jig”) Cook (whom she married in 1913) and Floyd Dell expanded her philosophical, spiritual, and intellectual horizons further, through their shared membership in the Monist Society and interest in left-leaning politics. The three friends’ relocation to Chicago connected them to the artistically vibrant and politically active bohemian community there. Later in her career, during the Great Depression, Glaspell returned to Chicago to work for the Federal Theatre Project, a part of the Works Progress Administration, renewing her dedication to the Midwestern region, but also experiencing governmental strictures that grated against her political and artistic values.

The Greenwich Village, New York, bohemian community proved to be a magnet for many from the Chicago circle in the early twentieth century. The second cluster of essays, “The Bohemian Context: Greenwich Village, Provincetown, and the Rise of American Modernism,” explores key Village institutions such as the Provincetown Players, founded by Cook, Glaspell, and others in 1916, for which Glaspell wrote most of her plays. As part of the Little Theatre movement in the United States, the Players fostered original dramaturgy and explored their vision of the American experience. *The Masses*, a Village periodical that championed leftist politics and vanguard social movements, published contributions from writers affiliated with the
Players who were exploring related themes on stage. These Villagers, many of whom summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, were at the forefront of American modernism as it was developing through the visual, literary, and performing arts and intersecting with other cultural and political advances of the 1910s and 1920s. The friendship of Glaspell and Eugene O’Neill, whose dramas were first presented by the Players, exemplifies the synergistic creativity between modernists. Glaspell’s dramas, stories, and novels reflect profound engagement with the literary and theatrical techniques, as well as the narrative concerns, of modernism. These engagements also prompted Glaspell to explore, across her career, the place of art and artists in the modern world—questions that would most notably shape the narratives in *The Comic Artist* (1927) and *Alison’s House* (1930).

The third set of essays, “Susan Glaspell and American Culture and Politics,” looks at specific dimensions of her writing emerging from this transformative period and its potent avant-garde sensibilities. At a time of polarized political views on race and ethnicity, immigration, and the status of indigenous peoples, Glaspell confronted reactionary and conservative ideologies that ran counter to fundamental concepts of democracy. In the lead-up to and aftermath of the Great War, she examined the political rhetoric and personal views that shaped the United States’ responses to the conflict, at home and abroad. Deeply interested in scientific, medical, and psychological discoveries of her moment, as well as their popularization in the media, Glaspell produced timely fictional and dramatic works reflecting these trends. She explored the relationship between higher education in the United States and the political, scientific, and sociological perspectives taught therein. And she considered, with both humor and pathos, how all these various forces coalesced through the intimate lives of her characters.

The fourth section, “Susan Glaspell, Women Artists, and Feminist History and Criticism” connects current considerations of Glaspell’s career with the feminist scholarly legacy that is largely responsible for Glaspell’s importance to American literary studies; American theatre studies; women’s, gender, and sexuality studies; and legal studies. Glaspell and other women stage artists developed structures of feminist dramaturgy, feminist directing, feminist performance, and feminist leadership that remain pivotal to theatre today. Yet Glaspell’s feminism must be understood in its time; the tensions and contradictions we perceive in her writing in all genres around gender roles; sexual relationships; and attitudes to home, family, and career reflect evolving notions of feminism. Glaspell was acutely aware of how ideas about women’s lives and work were shifting;
she brings an historical sensibility to her depiction of a famous woman poet, possibly modeled on Emily Dickinson, to illustrate the various social and familial pressures shaping women’s lives from the late nineteenth century through the postwar period. This play, *Alison’s House*, earned Glaspell the Pulitzer Prize in 1931 – a confirmation of both Glaspell’s skill as a writer and her astute grasp of issues central to American culture. Glaspell’s clear-eyed understanding of how American patriarchy impacts women’s lives is one of the through-lines of her oeuvre and is integral to the value feminist legal scholars have perceived in her twinned works, *Trifles* and “A Jury of Her Peers,” canonical texts for this field.

Glaspell’s standing within these disciplines cannot, however, confine our sense of her reach. The fifth set of essays considers “Susan Glaspell in Broader Geographical Contexts.” During her lifetime, she wrote important works set in – or related to – other locations, especially Greece, where she and Cook lived from 1922 to 1924. Her reflections on Greek life and culture, and their significance for Cook, strongly shaped the latter half of her career. Moreover, as the West emerged from World War I, Glaspell’s work was enthusiastically received by theatre patrons and readers, and thoughtfully discussed by critics in England. From that time to the present, we can trace the continued expansion of interest in Glaspell’s writing worldwide, through translation and production in locations across the globe.

The final group of essays explores “Susan Glaspell on Stage and Screen.” Her writing continues to influence other artists who have adapted her works for Hollywood films and experimental opera, written a prequel to *Trifles’* “Jury,” and transformed her fictional narratives for the stage and screen. Her work provides a model of excellence in creative writing classes, suggesting still more impact to come. The artistic merit of such undertakings is represented well by the Academy Award–nominated film adaptation of “Jury,” directed by Sally Heckel. The insights directors bring to Glaspell’s work, and understandings we gain through their renderings of her dramaturgy in live or – most recently – virtual productions, remind us of the vital importance of her creative process and of our participation in the communities that embrace and revere the artistry of Susan Glaspell.
Acknowledgments

The global community of Glaspell scholars is comparatively small, but enormously dedicated. Many members of that community contributed to this volume, and on their behalf, I thank all those who have aided this project, which has been a labor of love for an artist whose work we revere. The mutual support, expertise, generosity, and collaborative spirit of these colleagues, especially those who comprise the past and present leadership of the International Susan Glaspell Society, made this collection possible. I am indebted to them for their commitment, patience, and faith and trust in my editorship.

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A Chronology of Glaspell’s Life and Works

1876  Born July 1 in Davenport, Iowa
1894–96  Writes for the Davenport Weekly Republican
1895  Graduates from Scott County Normal Davenport Training School
1896–97  Society Editor of the Davenport Weekly Outlook
1896  First short story, “Tom and Towser,” published in Davenport Weekly Outlook
1897  Enrolls in Drake University
1898–1903  Writes for the university literary magazine The Delphic
1899  On graduation, hired full time as reporter for Des Moines Daily News
1900–01  Assigned by the paper to cover Margaret Hossack murder trial, the source for Trifles and “A Jury of Her Peers”
1901  Glaspell resigns from Daily News and returns to Davenport to focus on creative writing
1902  Short story “By the Might of the Pigskin” published, initiating regular short fiction publication that continues through 1927.1 Summer graduate study at the University of Chicago
1902–04  Earns early prizes and cash awards for short fiction
1908–09  Travels in Europe
1909  Novel The Glory of the Conquered: The Story of a Great Love
1911  Novel The Visioning
1912  Short story collection Lifted Masks
1913  Marries George Cram (“Jig”) Cook in Weehawken, New Jersey; they make their home in Greenwich Village, New York

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1915  Novel *Fidelity*; one-act *Suppressed Desires*, co-written with Cook, premieres in Provincetown, Massachusetts

1916  *Trifles* premieres in Provincetown; Glaspell, Cook, and colleagues form theatre group that in September officially becomes the Provincetown Players, subsequently based in Greenwich Village

1917  Provincetown Players stage one-acts *The People, Close the Book*, and *The Outside*; short story “A Jury of Her Peers”

1918  “A Jury of Her Peers” republished in *The Best Short Stories of 1917*; Provincetown Players stage one-acts *Woman’s Honor* and *Tickless Time*, co-written with Cook

1919  Provincetown Players stage *Bernice*; one-act *Free Laughter* written, remaining unproduced and unpublished during Glaspell’s lifetime

1920  *Plays*, a collection of Glaspell’s one-acts and her first three-act play, *Bernice*

1921  Provincetown Players stage *Inheritors* and *The Verge*

1922  Cook and Glaspell leave New York for Greece; Provincetown Players stage *Chains of Dew* without Glaspell’s direct involvement

1924  Cook dies in Greece; Glaspell returns to Provincetown and begins eight-year relationship with Norman Matson

1926  Memoir/biography of Cook, *The Road to the Temple*

1928  Novel *Brook Evans*; play *The Comic Artist*, co-written with Matson, premieres in London

1929  Novel *Fugitive’s Return*

1930  Play *Alison’s House* premieres in Liverpool, England in November, followed by New York premiere in December

1931  *Alison’s House* wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama; novel *Ambrose Holt and Family*

1933  New York premiere of *The Comic Artist*

1936  Glaspell appointed Director of the Midwest Play Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP)

1938  Glaspell resigns from the FTP and returns to Provincetown

1940  Novel *The Morning Is Near Us*. Long-format story for children, *Cherished and Shared of Old*

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See Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* for more details of Cook’s leadership and Glaspell’s productions by the Players.
A Chronology of Glaspell’s Life and Works

1943 Novel Norma Ashe

c. 1944 Play Springs Eternal, which remained unproduced and unpublished during Glaspell’s lifetime


1948 Glaspell dies July 27 in Provincetown