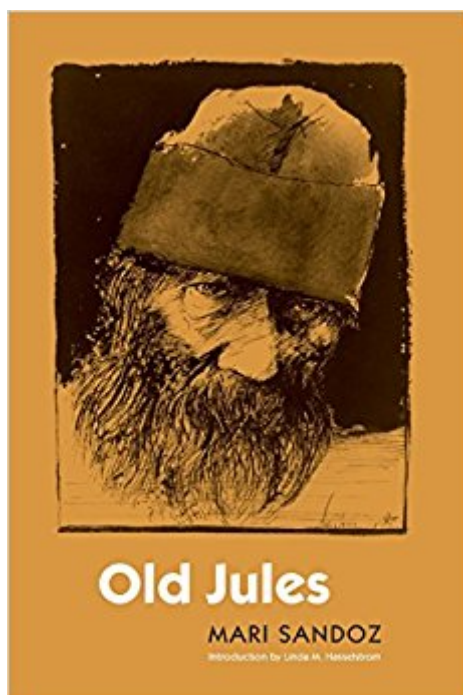


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# Old Jules



## Synopsis

First published in 1935, *Old Jules* is unquestionably Mari Sandoz's masterpiece. This portrait of her pioneer father grew out of the silent hours of listening behind the stove or the wood box, when it was assumed, of course, that I was asleep in bed. So it was that I heard the accounts of the hunts, the fights with the cattlemen and the sheepmen, of the tragic scarcity of women, when a man had to marry anything that got off the train, of the droughts, the storms, the wind and isolation. But the most impressive stories were those told me by Old Jules himself. This Bison Books edition includes a new introduction by Linda M. Hasselstrom.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A realistic biography, a rare find. On putting down this book one feels that one has read the history of all pioneering." —New York Times Book Review (New York Times Book Review)  
"An amazing portrait. Mari Sandoz has written the truth. And she has given it to us as if she had cut it, like a sod, from the live ground." —New York Herald Tribune Books (New York Herald Tribune Books)  
"It is a magnificent job. The great virtue of Miss Sandoz's book is that you can see it happening. There is a good deal of America in *Old Jules*. It is, heaven knows, an enthralling story. But it is more than that, and much deeper. It is an experience in citizenship." —Saturday Review of Literature (Saturday Review of Literature)

Mari Sandoz (1896–1966) is the noted author of *Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, and *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, all available in Bison Books editions. Linda M. Hasselstrom, teacher and editor,

is the author of eleven books of nonfiction and poetry about the northern plains, including *Between Grass and Sky* and *Feels Like Far: A Rancher's Life on the Great Plains*.

*Old Jules* is a fascinating look at life on the northern Great Plains and provides a great counter to the sanitized versions of America's frontier, for those of us that learned about it through media like "Little House on the Prairie" and "Bonanza" style depictions. For that, it is a great book. But it is up to each reader to decide if Jules was a great guy who succeeded despite the tribulations and hardships of his place and time, or if he was an abusive husband/father who fled his prior home and simply did as he pleased for the rest of his life. This is the enigma...My own opinion is that Jules was somewhat mentally unstable. His leaving Switzerland is understandable, despite the vast majority of immigrants from Europe having been from lower class families than his who had rather more limited opportunities in the 'old country'. By that I mean the West had plenty of cultured people who were attracted to the openness of the frontier (both societal and geo-physical); we just don't hear so much about them. This story indicates he was educated and may have been a medical student, although it's left speculative. He apparently consulted frontier doctors, and performed rude medicinal and sanitary practices that don't square with what one could safely assume he ought to know if he had medical training (even for those times). Although both author/daughter Mari Sandoz and her younger brother (who wrote "Son of Old Jules") later dismissed the idea that their childhoods were unusual for that place and time, they clearly were extreme. Possible explanations for his lack of concern for his family never really come out in the book. I highly recommend the book. It begins immediately after the "Indian Wars" period but before society with its laws and structure had really taken hold. One thing I was unaware of is the prevalence of suicide in those days: it seems to have been fairly common among settlers who reached the end of their endurance (this occurs in another famous book "My Antonia" by Willa Cather. Though technically fiction, Cather's book is the same timeframe and is based on real people and events she knew as a child). There is also mention of several cases of people being sent East to asylums. They just couldn't take the hardship of their ordeals. For me, the biggest problem in understanding Jules the man is trying to square his upbringing (young Swiss privileged playboy/student) with what he became (a greasy old man who disdained government - despite the letters he wrote and his advocacy of the farmers versus cattlemen in the struggle to control western Nebraska - and who had minimal concern for his own family). I wonder if some sort of movie could be made of the story. It tells a lot about the REAL frontier and its hardships, rather than the "log cabin" or "cowboy" themes we're all used to. This era is almost forgotten today. Notice that you can today buy homes modeled on log cabins, of which

there are any number of restored examples - but there are almost no old sod houses left. Its almost like there's no nostalgia for that epoch of American history, which is telling by itself.

Oddly but wonderfully written biography by the daughter of a plains homesteader. Brutally honest. Her Father would be classified as a narcissistic sociopath by today's standards; "My way or the highway". Men back 100 years ago followed the biblical tenet: wives obey their master. If you can stomach the man through this, he proves to be a frontier friendly person. He took in many a stray. He was a brilliant, tenacious horticulturalist...he had to be both to endure the harsh weather and landscape that was / is present in western Nebraska. Like those first pioneers across the Great American Desert, he persevered. Land ownership was more than his ideal...it was his mantra. A great read...I love this author's storytelling methods & vocabulary. Brilliant!

It is a very interesting book and historically accurate. We have family from that area of the country and grandpa was very similar to Old Jules. I bet great grandpa was too. They felt they were doing you a service by making you hard and tough, and that meant little affection. However, grandpa mellowed in old age, it seems Old Jules started out old and stayed that way. To be fair, it is rather ridiculous for any of us to judge these people. They lived an extremely hard way of life. Most Americans nowadays would have a stroke of the power went out for an hour.

I've known about this book for years, and have at last have read it. Having driven through the Sand Hills of Nebraska a number of times, and especially the area from Running Water, the Nibbrara River, and all the way to Valentine, I have wondered what it was like to settle this part of America. It is a wonder to me that anyone could have sought out this area to make a home, even if the land was free. Mari Sandoz' book about her father, Old Jules, gives us a look into the lives of such hardy settlers, and the tremendous difficulties they faced. And yet many, like Jules, made it their life's goal to stick it out and to somewhat tame the land. Mari Sandoz does a great job of bringing the reader into the presence of that time.

A well researched memoir by the daughter of the title character. Mari Sandoz captured well what she grew up with: the rough living on the edge life on the high plains. It's amazing how even handed her treatment of her father is despite the utter lack of encouragement or nurturing from him. Though his enthusiasm for work had fits and starts, he eagerly pursued activities that helped the community he lived in grow and overcome disasters at the whim of nature and at the hand of malevolent

humans. Significantly, the book brings light to the struggle that provided plot lines to so many westerns I watched as a kid: the cattle ranchers who guarded the free range versus the farmers who fenced off their fields from the trample and forage of range cattle. Surprising cameo appearances of several nationally important people from that late 19th and early 20th centuries helped connect the story to a timeline I was more familiar with. Read as a history or a family drama and be ready for a look into the world of the pioneers.

So far I have enjoyed this book very much. I have only read about 50 % of it. but when I was a young man I knew the area in that part of the country very well, therefore knowing more of its history has been educationally. GBC

This is based on the actual happenings of a settlement in W. Nebraska featuring a man called Old Jules. I found it hard to read sometimes as Jules was very rude to his wife and children. But he hung in there for the welfare of the settlement and shows the grit that was needed for that era. (A man who is reading the book with us as part of a book club really likes the book so much that he was sorry when the book ended.) The book is written by Jules' daughter who admires her dad and thinks he made a significant contribution to the panhandle of Nebraska. She verifies the happenings as accurate.

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