Josephine Lawrence
A Writer of Her Time

by Deidre A. Johnson
www.readseries.com

Although Josephine Lawrence's name is almost unrecognized today, during her lifetime Lawrence's work intersected with New Jersey audiences on almost every level: children heard her stories on the radio, read them in the newspaper, and encountered more of her narratives in scores of popular series books published under her own name and several pseudonyms; adults consulted the women's page she edited in the *Newark Sunday Call,* discussed her best-selling

books, and, later, enjoyed her book reviews in the *Newark Sunday News;* movie audiences viewed *Make Way for Tomorrow* based on one of her most successful novels. For over fifty years, new works from Lawrence reached receptive (albeit shrinking) audiences, who viewed her stories as reflecting contemporary situations or problems affecting the average family.

Ironically, while Josephine Lawrence's name was readily recognizable to the reading public, little was—and is—known about her private life. So fiercely did Lawrence guard her privacy that until recently few biographers were able to identify accurately the year of her birth. Genealogical records indicate that Josephine Lawrence and her twin brother Harlo (or Harlow) were born on March 12, 1889. In a biographical sketch requested by her publisher, Lawrence wrote that she was "Born in Newark, educated, also inadequately, in the public schools, no college," though she supplemented her education with courses in New York City. Her father, Elijah Lawrence, was a physician; census records suggest that sometime between 1900 and 1910, he gave up his practice and moved the family to a farm in Hopewell, New Jersey.

Lawrence displayed writing talent even in high school, and, by 1915, was editor of the children's page of the *Newark Sunday Call.* Her own fiction, unsigned, often appeared on the page, relating the adventures of characters such as the Gingerbread Man, Princess Charlotte Russe, and the George Washington Doll. In 1921, when the newly-established WJZ began broadcasting from Newark, Lawrence's sketches became part of the broadcast line-up as The Man in the Moon Stories.

By the time Lawrence's fiction aired on the radio, she had already started her publishing career. About 1918, she approached Edward Stratemeyer, then one of the country's

Newark Sunday Call 50 Years Old.

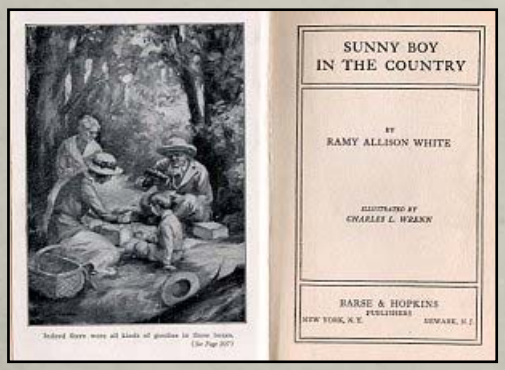
NEWARK, N. J., May 20.—The Newark Sunday Call will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary tomorrow, issuing a special edition of 132 pages in honor of the event. The Call is one of the leading Sunday papers in New Jersey and has a record of never having missed publication of a regular edition.

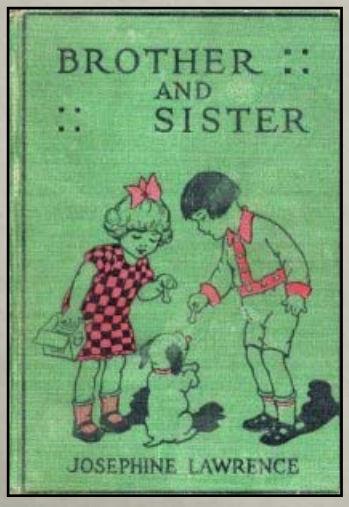
The New York Times noted the 50th anniversary of the *Newark Sunday Call* in 1922.

The New York Times
May 21, 1922

Lawrence's sketches were broadcast on Newark's WJZ radio station starting in 1921.

http://home.comcast.net/~tcoco/wjz.html





Lawrence's children's books.
http://readseries.com/joslaw/index.htm

most successful children's authors, to ask for advice about a manuscript. Instead, Stratemeyer recruited her to work for his writing syndicate as a ghostwriter for children's series books. From 1919 until 1934, Lawrence drafted approximately forty-seven titles for syndicate series. Most were aimed at younger children, the same audience Lawrence reached with her stories for the children's page, and told of happy boys and girls leading comfortable lives filled with small adventures. Characters such as Sunny Boy and Honey Bunch visited relatives in the country or at the seashore or engaged in creative activities with friends at home. The titles of these stories highlight the cozy, everyday nature of the narratives: *Honey Bunch: Her First Little Garden, Honey Bunch: Her First Visit to the City, Sunny Boy and His Playmates, Sunny Boy in School and Out, The Riddle Club in Camp, The Riddle Club Through the Holidays.*

Lawrence's work for the Syndicate encouraged her to try creating and marketing her own series. Her first attempt, *Brother & Sister* (6 vols. 1921–27), was similar to her Syndicate fare. Advertisements described the series as relating the doings of "the youngest of a large family of children . . . [who] are so eager to do as the others do [that they] sometimes tumble into a peck of mischief." Even many of the titles were similar to her Syndicate series: *Brother and Sister's Schooldays, Brother and Sister's Holidays, Brother and Sister's Vacation.* As Lawrence continued to create series, she introduced a few more memorable protagonists with a greater sensitivity to social issues. The central characters in the *Elizabeth Ann* (8 vols, 1923–29) and *Linda Lane* (6 vols., 1925–29) series are away from or without biological parents for the duration of their series. As they stay in different households, they become more aware of others' financial needs and domestic situations; both encounter wealth and poverty, notice contrasts between households managed with efficiency and those showing

carelessness or waste, and occasionally reflect on different lifestyles and behaviors.

In addition to series with continuing characters, Lawrence also wrote a number of very short stand-alone stories, which her publisher issued as brightly illustrated slender volumes in generically titled series (Kiddie Wonder, 6 vols, c.1926; Toyland, 9 vols., 1928). In the ten years between 1921 and 1931, Lawrence created approximately fifty books that were published under her own name—all the while continuing her duties as a Syndicate ghostwriter and her work at the *Sunday Call.*

By the 1920s, Lawrence's responsibilities at the *Call* had also been expanded to include editorship of the Household Page. A biographical profile from the late 1930s by a former colleague explained that her editorial duties meant she "produced eighteen columns of copy for those two pages" weekly and occasionally "filled in on special stories for the city editor or one of the feature editors." Just as her work on the children's page had proved useful to the transition into juvenile fiction, so, too, would Lawrence's time writing and editing the Household Page yield benefits beyond employment with the paper.

"I'm Glad That I Was Born a Woman"

After Girlhood, When Some of Us Would Give Almost Anything to Be a Boy, We Find That Generous Compensation Is Ours After All.

No two thoughts on this week's topics—that elusive creature known as the "average woman," has no desire to change places with the average man—motherhood and the maternal instinct compensate her for all she has to endure. If she is denied children of her own, she can still mother other women's children. Whimsically speaking, there are many trifling blessings accruing to her, but without exception each letter received this week stresses the one dominant fact that motherhood, realized or potential, is a woman's glory.

Dear Household Editor:

One reason why I am glad to be a woman is, Women are naturally born mothers. I for one seem to be especially endowed with that gift, to mother not only my own family, but others, that I think are in need of it. It is my greatest pleasure to be planning and doing for others and make it easy for them. Another reason is, a woman is, even in the present advanced time, shown more respect and consideration than men. She is also complimented and flattered more than men, and what woman does not yearn for compliments and flattery once in a while? R. R.

What good does it do a temperamental soul to read her clothes, if she has to sew up the rents? Naturally she saves her ravings along with the ravellings. Then she calls common sense to her rescue, and decides that, after all, she has the best of it. If she were a man she might have to give up her seat in the trolley—that is, if she were a gentleman.

Dear Household Editor:

To be perfectly frank, I am not always glad to be a woman. Once in awhile I say to myself that I'd give almost anything in this world to be a man, but that is when the monotonous round of house work "gets on my nerves," and I feel as though I could utter shriek upon shriek and rend my hair and clothing. But I know that any rending of clothing would only mean some more mending for me to do, so I calm myself. Most of the time I am very glad to be a woman. Why? Because I certainly do think, as a rule, we have the best of it. Social etiquette says the man must rise and give his seat to a lady no matter how tired he is. The law says a man must support his family no matter how inefficient he may be as a money maker. Motherhood is glorified and lauded to the skies. What about Father, the wage earner? Don't you know his love for the children is just as praiseworthy, and just as deep as the Mother's? I say again, I'm glad to be a woman. Take it all in all, we have the best of it. L. E. M.

Little girls used to have to stay in the house and wash the dishes. Now they seem to roller-skate more. Be that as it may, A. M. L. thinks that washing dishes in a home of her own is sometimes a pleasure and then the years she has spent taking care of children and not minding her own business

der and delight a child of her own was to mean.

Dear Household Editor:

So often during my childhood days the one thought uppermost in my mind was, "Why wasn't I born a boy?" Having ten brothers and sisters all younger than I, I always envied the "boys," as they were free to roam the streets, while I took care of baby or washed dishes. The first time I was really glad to be a woman was when my first baby was placed in my arms. Sorrows and failures were soon forgotten and every time the children say "Mother" I am glad I am a woman and wouldn't change places with any mere man. A. M. L.

Woman, crushed to earth—by injustice or misfortune or a bad headache—will rise again, mainly because continued prostration places her new spring hat in jeopardy. It is not given to any man to know the complete and solid and impregnable satisfaction that goes with pretty clothes—how should he know, when one considers the garments that contrast him!"

Dear Household Editor:

Many times as a child I wished to be a boy, but since I've grown to womanhood I am glad that I am a woman. I have a seven months' old girl and am proud to be a mother. The mother has a duty to make the home cheerful and comfortable and I would rather do that than be the man who has to go to business.

I like darning, cooking and all other feminine work in the household and that makes me glad to be a woman. I am also glad to be a woman because I like women's clothes and do not like a mannish style. It makes a woman unattractive. G. S.

"The power behind the throne"—isn't that enough to be? At least one woman thinks so. Feminine influence, as a matter of fact, is blamed and praised for three-fourths of what happens and the pity of it is that so much of the influence is unconscious. Sometimes we blindly announce that we've shed our responsibility when, in reality, it is a force too big for us and refuses to be discarded.

Dear Household Editor:

Men can knock us, but what in the world would they do without us. There is no man on earth with whom I would change places, although mine is a modest lot in the common class. I think—I may be conceited—that it is a grand and glorious feeling to be a woman when womanhood is the element which makes it easier for men to breathe in this universe.

I always feel a woman directly or indirectly is the cause of a man's success or absolute failure. Men slave under hardships because of some woman in their lives. Wonderful women we have now, too, great as any man, and if we could mobilize an army of world women we could wage a war, without bloodshed, and a epic and span new world would be our victory in a week—anybody not proud to be a woman? J. P.

* * * Now is the time when nothing is denied a woman. She can soar to any heights * * * Sex has nothing to do with success in life."—E. L.

* * * From a married woman's point of view * * * engaged, all she sees is happiness * * * looking forward to becoming mistress of her own home and then, later, the real thrill of her life, when the nurse puts a little bundle * * * into her arms."—D. E. L.

* * * At night, when a man comes home tired and weary * * * one feels she is a little help and comfort in this world of ours."—M. B.

* * * I am the mother of two mighty fine little fellows, and I am fortunate enough to be blessed with a husband, who is courteous and considerate * * * all in all, I'm entirely satisfied that I'm a woman."—M. MacD.

* * * Because God has granted unto woman the divine privilege of being a mother."—E. K. B.

* * * I was created for a purpose, a purpose that only some woman can carry out; that is to have a refining influence upon the world."—B. P.

* * * Man * * * often suppress their better selves, thoughts, opinions and emotions, for fear of being dubbed effiminate * * * We

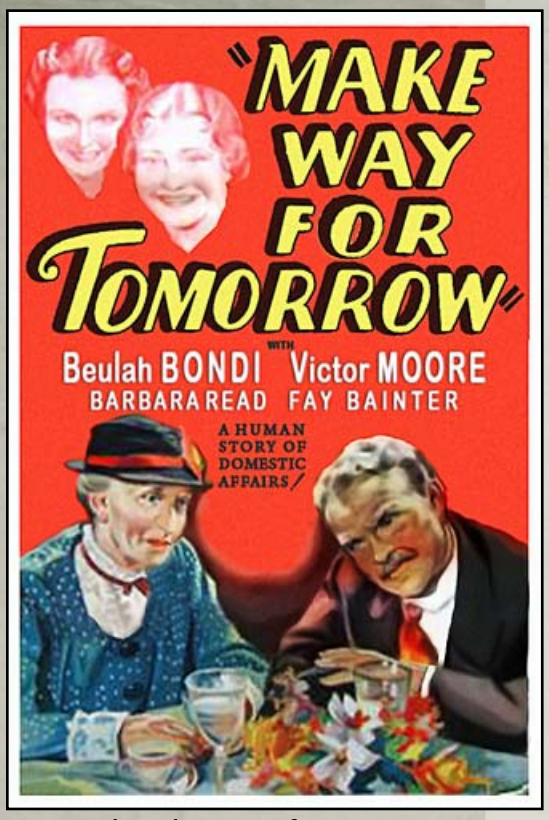
SHE said, modestly, that it wasn't much, but it was something. That's the tone we adopt these days when we speak of saving. Of course, we expect a rainy day, but not a flood, and, anyway, there are hundreds of people who don't save a cent.

Well now, perhaps last year you were thrifty, or perhaps you've started out well this year and have a definite plan for stopping small leaks. As a budget plumber, the average woman shines. And it is quite possible to tone down expenditures without lowering the standard of living. For the five best letters received this week on the topic, "Little Leaks I Have Stopped," and a word or two about the actual saving involved, five cash prizes of $1 each will be given.

Write your letters on one side of the paper only, signing full names and addresses. Initials will be used for publication. Letters should not exceed 200 words in length and must reach this office not later than the first mail Wednesday morning, January 28. The prize winners will be used Sunday, February 1. No contributions can be returned and no payment in addition to the winners specified, will be made. Address the Household Editor, care the Sunday Call.

One of Lawrence's "Questions-and-Answers" columns from *The Sunday Call's* Household Page.

http://readseries.com/joslaw/qa.htm



Promotional poster for Leo McCarey's 1937 film adaptation of Lawrence's novel, *Years Are So Long*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Make-way-for-tomorrow-1937.jpg

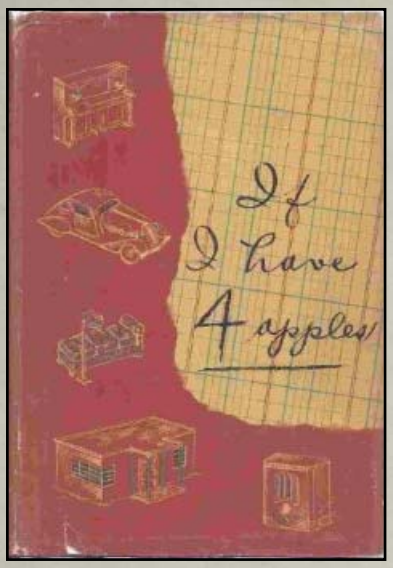
Although Josephine Lawrence was clearly established as a juvenile author, she wanted to write for a different market and thus began to devote more time to drafting a novel. Concerned that her name was linked to stories for children, she submitted the manuscript under the pseudonym Lynette Elaine West. When Aventine Press accepted *Head of the Family,* Lawrence identified herself, and the book was published under her name in 1932. Although she would ghostwrite one or two more series books for the Stratemeyer Syndicate, never again would Lawrence's name appear on a new children's book. That phase of her career had ended.

Described in the publisher's ads as "A novel, startlingly realistic, tuned to our times, that carries a ringing challenge to women to reassert their rights—to men to reassume their responsibilities," *Head of the Family* nonetheless attracted little notice. Not so Lawrence's next book, published two years later. Heralded as by the *New York Times* as one of the year's best books, *Years Are So Long* launched her career as a novelist. A timely, painful study of the problem of aging parents and adult children's response to their plight, the much-discussed *Years Are So Long* was not only selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection but also adapted and filmed as *Make Way for Tomorrow.* A press release for the novel included the information that Lawrence worked on a newspaper and "likes newspaper work because she believes it keeps one in close touch with the mass of humanity," also a selling point for much of Lawrence's subsequent fiction.

Promotional picture of Beulah Bondi and Victor Moore.

http://www.allposters.com/-sp/Make-Way-for-Tomorrow-Beulah-Bondi-Victor-Moore-1937-Posters_i9337211_.htm

If I Have Four Apples, Lawrence's third book, was, if anything, even more successful than its predecessor.



If I Have Four Apples.
http://readseries.com/joslaw/index.htm

Simply put, the story tells of a family unable to live within their means or to grasp the concept of a sensible budget, despite the best efforts of the helpful household editor of a local paper. Published during the Depression, the story addressed multiple financial issues all too familiar to readers: buying on installment plans, the expense for newlyweds of setting up households, the debate about the value of owning one's home instead of renting. Within a week after its release, *If I Have Four Apples* made the *New York Times*'s list of best-selling fiction in the city; three weeks after its release, it occupied the top slot. Over the next few months, the *Times* tracked its position on lists of best-sellers across the country, book groups featured it in discussions, the Book-of-the-Month Club selected it as another of their offerings, and Josephine Lawrence's name became known to readers nationwide.

Lawrence's fourth book, *The Sound of Running Feet,* was a near-contender for the 1938 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. (The committee listed it and *Northwest Passage* as second choices if John Marquand's *The Late George Apley* should prove unsuitable, calling it "a realistic and compassionate but in no way doctrinaire study of the lives of a typical group of lower middle-class men and women living in contemporary America.") The remainder of Lawrence's writing career, however, never earned the level of acclaim of those early works. She may have exhausted her most powerful ideas or settled into more of a formula (a charge found in several reviews), or merely been content to write what some might have classified as saleable fiction rather than lasting works of literature. She once told an interviewer, "I'm no Shakespeare; I can't write brilliant, beautiful phrases, open up a world with a sentence, and I know I can't and never try."

Instead, Lawrence wrote steadily, often turning out a book a year. Generally, she selected a contemporary

Artur Platz

The Musical Monitor, Volume 6, 1916

THE LOST SANTA CLAUS BY JOSEPHINE LAWRENCE

The Lost Santa Claus

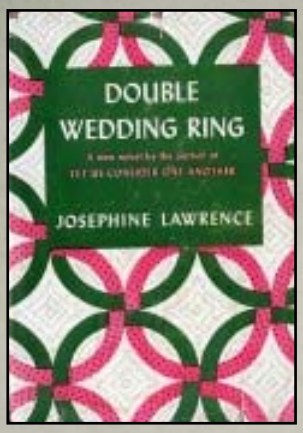
The Milwaukee Journal, December 24, 1944

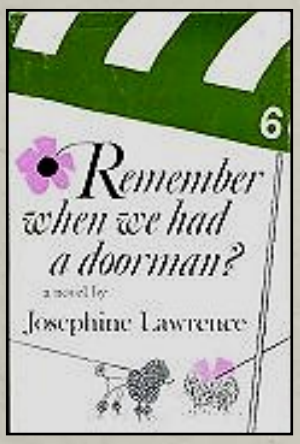
problem, devoted several months to collecting material, developing characters to illustrate several aspects of the problem, and outlining the story. She then typed a draft and revised it: her novels, she noted, usually required two drafts. Almost every article about Lawrence included mention of her strict regimen of putting in three hours of work a night. ("I came direct from the office to my work, didn't even bother about dinner," she told an interviewer.)

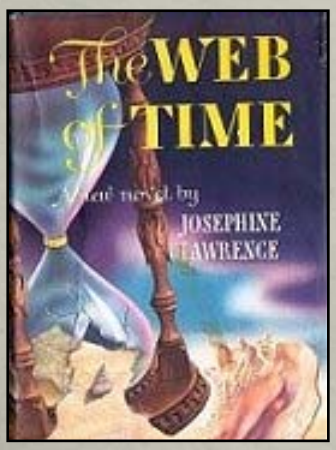
Lawrence continued to live alone in Newark in what she described as "a small apartment" within walking distance of the newspaper until 1940. That year, she married Artur Platz, and the two took up residence in Manhattan. Platz worked as a musician and a model; he appeared as Santa in advertisements for Lucky Strike cigarettes and some brands of liquor, and by the early 1950s was also doing an occasional television commercial.

Other than acquiring a husband, Lawrence seems to have done little to alter her routines, spending days at the *Newark Sunday Call* and writing three hours each weekday evening. Indeed, a biographical sketch of Artur Platz in a Canaan, New York, newspaper suggests that he and his dog spent most summers in that town while Lawrence remained in the city. When the *Sunday Call* folded in late 1946, Lawrence moved to the *Newark News* and at some point began editing book reviews and writing a column titled "Book Marks."

During the 1940s, in addition to writing novels, Lawrence occasionally contributed short pieces to magazines. "Lend Them Your Ears," in the May 1942 issue of *The Writer,* advised aspiring authors not to isolate themselves but to mingle with people and "Listen, just listen . . . never be too busy, or too tired, or too preoccupied to listen to people" because doing so helps a writer understand character. In the mid-1940s, Lawrence also penned several pieces for Sunday supplements and at least one item for the *Women's*







http://readseries.com/joslaw/joslaw2a.htm#marriage

Home Companion. Unlike her novels, these were light fare—a combination of unlikely situations and predictable romance. In "The Lost Santa Claus" from December 1944, for example, two sisters spending the holidays in a country cottage after a heavy snowstorm are startled by the arrival of a young man dressed as Santa carrying a sack of toys, who explains that he lost his way en route to a family gathering. When a disaster at a neighbor's home leaves several children devastated at the thought that Santa won't find them, the costume and gifts come to the rescue—and the shared efforts to save the children's Christmas also lead to a hint of potential romance.

Like her magazine stories, many of Lawrence's books from the 1940s focused on women, but in less rosy situations. *Kirkus Review* summarized *There Is Today* (1942) as a story "dealing with women in wartime—to marry or not to marry, to have children or to wait." *Double Wedding Ring* (1946) centered on a mother's concern for her adult children (including a son sent off to fight during the war) and the marital strains caused by her husband's midlife crisis; *The Pleasant Morning Light* (1948) featured three cousins, all single, worried that the aftermath of World War II meant they would not find spouses and pressured to marry by family and societal expectations.

During the 1950s, Lawrence continued to turn out a book a year, sometimes returning to familiar subjects such as motherhood and marriage with war on the horizon (*Song in the Night,* 1952), other times addressing family tensions from other causes, such as adult children making demands on parents (*The Empty Nest,* 1956); several books considered contemporary issues like forced retirement at age sixty-five (*The Web of Time,* 1953).

Lawrence was widowed in April 1963 and sometime thereafter donated some of her letters and manuscripts to Boston University, though she also continued to work and

Josephine Lawrence in her later years.
http://readseries.com/joslaw/joslaw2a.htm#marriage

write. Several of her later books drew tangentially on elements from her own life or experience: *In All Walks of Life* (1968) is set in a newspaper office and consists largely of scenes depicting the sometimes hectic nature of the work, its internecine squabbles, and occasional miscommunications with a public ("Constant Reader") that seems more interested in horoscopes and syndicated features than the news itself. A reporter for the *Newark News* recalled that after its publication "for a while it was fair game in the City Room trying to match the characters in the book to the author's co-workers." *Remember When We Had a Doorman* (1971) is about life in an apartment building in New York City apparently not unlike the one in which Lawrence lived.

Lawrence's last book, *Under One Roof,* was published in 1975. Ironically, it drew on a concept she had used almost 50 years earlier in her juvenile series about the orphaned Linda Lane, the idea of constituting a household of unrelated people to share a home and form a makeshift family. In *Roof,* a young woman buys a large Victorian home and finds eleven people—an elderly man and woman, a married couple with teenagers, an unmarried female novelist, and assorted others, including three orphans—to live in it. Sadly, the novel received tepid reviews, which may have dissuaded her from further publications.

Josephine Lawrence died at her home in New York City on February 22, 1978. Her *New York Times* obituary described her as a "Novelist of Middle-Class America" remarking that "most of her work dissected, in an intimate way, her contemporaries" and quoted Sinclair Lewis's praise for her "unusual power of seeing and remembering all the details of everyday living, each petty, yet all of them together making up the picture of an immortal human being."

In the past decade, Lawrence's work has been receiving

more attention, in part because of its depiction of the 1930s and of women's lives. In *The Middle Class in the Great Depression: Popular Women's Novels of the 1930s,* Jennifer Haytock devotes a chapter to *If I Have Four Apples* and a contemporaneous novel. Carmela McIntire, an English professor at Florida University, has also published a study of *Apples,* "The Arithmetic of Aspiration." Additionally, McIntire prepared and edited a critical edition of *If I Have Four Apples* in 2011, following that with a critical edition of *Years Are So Long* in 2012. Thus, two of Lawrence's best-known works are back into print and available for rediscovery by a new generation of readers.

For even more about Josephine Lawrence, cited sources and transcripts of her work and interviews, see the author's website:
http://readseries.com/joslaw/index.htm