



O My America!: Six Women and Their Second Acts in a New World

Sara Wheeler

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In *O My America!*, the travel writer and biographer Sara Wheeler embarks on a journey across the United States, guided by the adventures of six women who reinvented themselves as they chased the frontier west.

Wheeler's career has propelled her from pole to pole—camping in Arctic igloos, tracking Indian elephants, contemplating East African swamps so hot that toads explode—but as she stared down the uncharted territory of middle age, she found herself in need of a guide. "Fifty is a tough age," she writes. "Role models are scarce for women contemplating a second act." Scarce, that is, until she stumbled upon Fanny Trollope.

In 1827, Fanny, mother of Anthony, swapped England for Ohio with hopes of bolstering the family finances. There, failure and disappointment hounded the immigrant for three years before she returned home to write one of the most sensational travel accounts of the nineteenth century. *Domestic Manners of the Americans* made an instant splash on both sides of the Atlantic, where readers both relished and reviled Trollope's caustic take on the newly independent country. Her legacy became the stuff of legend: "Trollopize" emerged as a verb meaning "to abuse the American nation"; Mark Twain judged her the best foreign commentator on his country; the last king of France threw a ball in her honor. Fanny Trollope was forty-nine when she set out for America, and Wheeler, approaching fifty herself, was smitten. Fanny was living proof of life after fertility, and she led Wheeler to other trailblazers: the actress and abolitionist Fanny Kemble, the radical sociologist Harriet Martineau, the homesteader Rebecca Burlend, the traveler Isabella Bird, and the novelist Catherine Hubback—women born within half a century of one another who all reinvented themselves in a transforming America, the land of new beginnings.

In *O My America!*, Wheeler tracks her subjects from the Mississippi to the cinder cones of the Mayacamas at the tail end of the Cascades, armed with two sets of maps for each adventure: one current and one the women before her would have used. Bright, spirited, and tremendous tantrum-throwers, these ladies proved to be the best travel companion Wheeler could have asked for. "I had more fun writing this book than all my previous books put together," she writes—and it shows. Ambitious and full of life, *O My America!* is not only a great writer's reckoning with a young country, but also an exuberant tribute to fresh starts, second acts, and six unstoppable women.

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