

Discussion Questions for the Book "Old Jules"
Created by Sarah Polak, Director of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center

Do you think that Jules was tough to survive the Plains or did the Plains make him tough? In the beginning of book, when he is in Valentine and in a few other places in the book, we see a compassionate Jules. On the other hand, Jules was undisputedly violent to his wife, children, and animals.

Jules came from Swiss aristocracy. Do you think the ever saw anyone in the Sandhills as "his equal?"

Documentation about Jules' attendance in medical school is limited, but we know that he was well educated. He, however, disapproved of Marie/Mari's reading and writing. English was rarely spoken in the home, according to Caroline, the youngest daughter of Jules and Mary. Why did he not want his female children educated?

One question that I have always had is – how did Caroline feel about being portrayed as such a burden in the garden scene. Do you think that Mary felt the same way?

Sandoz skips a great deal of time at the end of the book. Do you think that this weakens the book or does it humanize the book?

In November 1928, Marie received word that her father was dying. She visited him in the Alliance (Nebraska) hospital and was shocked by his final request – to write his life story. Why do you think that Jules chose her, rather than one of his other children, to write his story? Why do you think that Jules decided that his story needed to be written? Why did Mari feel the need to fulfill her father's request?

Mari received word in March 1935 that her most recent version of *Old Jules* won a non-fiction contest held by Atlantic Press. Before this work could be published, however, she would begin the long standing battle with editors over the right to retain her distinctive Western idioms rather than use standardized English. How would her book have been different if she had used standardized English?

The book was well-received critically and commercially when it was published in 1935, and became a Book of the Month Club selection. Some readers were shocked at her unromantic depiction of Old Jules, as well as her strong language and realistic portrayal of the hardships of frontier life. Do you think her portrayals were realistic?

Other books that were published in 1935 include: The postman always rings twice by James M Cain; Good-bye, Mr. Chips by James Hilton; The thin man, by Dashiell Hammett; Butterfield 8: a novel by John O'Hara; Tortilla flat by John Steinbeck; The African Queen by C S Forester; "National Velvet" by Enid Bagnold; Laurian Jones. All of these other books were later made into very successful movies. MGM had optioned Old Jules for a movie. The Sandoz Center is home to some of the location scouting shots that were taken for the movie. With the illness and subsequent death of Irving Thalberg, the movie was never made. If the movie were to be made today who would you cast in the following roles: Old Jules, Mary, Gentleman Jim, Rosalie?

In the 1930s, one of the best known figures of the West was Tom Mix. His last screen appearance was in 1935 with the Mascot Pictures serial "The Miracle Rider." Also that year, Texas governor James Allred named Mix an honorary Texas Ranger. What contradiction or similarity is there between the iconic figures of Tom Mix and Old Jules?

A house divided by Pearl S Buck was also printed in 1935. Both books deal with class, race, wealth, conflict among and between cultures, and the land. Discuss the similarities between the books.

Do you think Mari loved her father? Do you think Mari understood her father?

Do you think Mari loved her mother?

Mari had three brothers and two sisters – all younger. There are few mentions of them in book; yet, she mentions Grossmutter quite often. Why?

If Jules is the hero of the book, who or what is his foil? Is Jules the hero of the book?

There is some speculation that Mari's marriage in 1914 to neighbor Wray Macumber may have been arranged by Jules. Nowhere in the book is any of that discussed. Mari reveals many harsh truths about herself and her family in the book. Why nearly 20 years after her divorce does she not discuss this part of her life?

Do you think that Mari's depiction of town differ from the depictions of the country - in terms of the politics, jealousy, and the "mistreatment" of Old Jules.

Jules was – and is – infamously known for hating cattle ranchers. Jules saw himself as a town builder and thought that the ranchers and their land ownership were interfering with his vision. However, Jules and Mary feed the cowboys and Jules raises cattle. Do you think Mari gives the cowboys a "fair deal" in the book?

I have heard from many visitors that they have read "Old Jules" in their 20s, 30s, and 40s and the book was different each time. If you have people of different ages in your book group, simply asking them what they take away from the book may be interesting as well as those who have read the book before and how the experience with the book this time differs from the previous read.

Many reviewers have said that Mari writes with a detachment in this book. Do you think that is accurate? Do you think she was emotionally detached from the place and the people in the book or do you think that is a device she used to help her write a fuller story? Does the detachment that Mari writes with in this book reflect the detachment that Jules felt toward the land and the people on it?

Mari was very much a woman of her time and she often used her books to make social commentary. She began the book after her father's death in 1928 and finally had it published in 1935. What commentary may she have been making on the late 1920s and 1930s with her book?

The Social Security Act was passed in 1935. With his leg injury, he would have qualified for benefits. Do you think that if the Social Security Act benefits would have been available to Jules he would have used them? What do you think he would have thought about the Act?

When Jules left Switzerland to come to America, there was much conflict and regional fighting. Do you think that influenced his perception of the military?

Do you think that Jules would have been a different person if Rosalie had joined him in America?

Why do you Jules felt such a connection with the Lakota?

What do you think are the reasons that "Old Jules" is still is read and that the story still resonates with people today?

Was Jules an evil man?

At the time of the book's publication, Mari did not change some names to "protect the guilty," but if you lived here you knew who was who. Many, including the Sandoz family, were shocked at the secrets that Mari shared about her family and the Sandoz family neighbors. Why do you think that Mari did not name

some, but named others in her book? Do you think that Mari understood the impact that the book would have on her family? Should she have even worried about that or was the story more important?

Mari's mother Mary was still alive at the time of the publication of the book. Mari does not write frequently of her mother in the book. From your reading of the book, do you think that Mari viewed her mother as a sympathetic figure? Tragic? Heroic?