

A Child Is Born

AXELSON

READ THE BOOK



SEE THE PICTURE

A Warner Bros. picture starring
Geraldine Fitzgerald and
Jeffrey Lynn, who are
shown above.

A story for all
the women of
the world—and
for every man
who has ever
loved . . .

CAXTON

the intimate agony of

mary mcdougal axelson's *life begins*

marilyn hoder-salmon

On August 26, 1932, the Times Square Hollywood Theater, having been dark for many months of that cheerless depression year, lit the Broadway night in gala readiness for a grand re-opening. A sell-out crowd of New York notables and Hollywood celebrities converged to support Warner Brothers' financial gamble to counter losses with the release of an important film, *Life Begins*. In the world premiere crowd, a frizzy mass of gold hair framing her proudly animated face, was the author, Mary McDougal Axelson, who at the age of forty-one was witnessing the achievement of two cherished dreams: success in the form of instant fame and public awareness of her belief that motherhood was life's supreme adventure.

The evening was a focal point in the history of this forgotten American film classic.¹ The source of Mary's story was the autobiographical journal that she kept while pregnant, including her seven-week confinement as a patient in the Oklahoma City Hospital maternity ward during 1928. As an indicator of social history, the journal documented the hospital milieu, reflecting on the quality of medical care, the in-vogue attitudes toward childbirth, and the rarely noted self-exploratory probing of a pregnant woman's inner thoughts on childbirth and motherhood. The chronological development of Mary Axelson's *Life Begins*, as a play, film and novel, occurring between 1928-1940, constructed a pattern of public taste as it pertains to prudery in relation to maternity, the Hollywood scene, and the frustration of a woman artist struggling to assert her professional rights.

Mary Axelson's own life evolved from a series of adventures

that were in themselves made of the drama that theater relishes. Born in 1891 of parents who were Western pioneers, Mary balanced several careers with originality and skill, becoming in turn, suffragist, author, social reformer, political activist, oil and land broker, and maverick. In the best tradition of the independent woman of her era, Mary eschewed marriage for a career, shocking her family by leaving the Victorian certainty of their Oklahoma gentility for the risk of New York City's bohemian Greenwich Village. There in the center of the reform idealism of the 1910s and 20s, she filled scrapbooks with clippings of her published poetry and records of her activism. Hailed in the press as "Oklahoma Mary," she received notoriety for idiosyncrasies that included such habits as carrying a pistol and doing her own automobile repairs, while she earned a reputation for the fiery speaking technique and reform zeal acquired by campaigning in Oklahoma's wild oil-districts for prohibition. Mary was an organizer and publicist for the New York State Women's Suffrage Association during the "decisive battle" period and an early volunteer of the Women's Trade Union League. Always a woman of many enthusiasms, she combined her feminist and political interests by becoming the first woman campaigner in a presidential election, when she was sent in 1916 to organize the women voters of the suffrage state of Kansas for the Democratic Party.

In 1923, Mary met Ivar Axelson, an economist with a passion for the theater. After a tempestuous courtship punctuated by a cross-country chase, the two were married. Mary, a mature woman in her thirties, was confident in the manner of the emancipated woman of her era that she would, in equal partnership with Ivar, continue to pursue her own interests. The newlyweds experimented with masculine and feminine roles while working together on common objectives, the first being to secure a financial base in order to free themselves for creative work. Mary's father, Judge D. A. McDougal, a Florida land speculator in the "boom" years, opened a sales office for the couple in Miami, and they proceeded to become highly successful brokers. After a year in business, they were able to take a leisurely six month European holiday before resuming their planned careers. Ivar had a job waiting for him as professor of economics at the University of Oklahoma, where Mary intended to study and write.

Shortly after they were settled in Norman, the couple who felt themselves to be uniquely happy, began to wish for a child. The subject of parenthood became a strong force in their lives. Although the physicians who examined Mary, warned her that thirty-seven was a dangerous age for a first pregnancy, she stubbornly persevered. When the classic symptoms occurred, she and Ivar were thrilled. On October 21, 1928, Mary began to keep a journal recording her preoccupation with maternity: "Creation is a divine act between a woman and God."² Fascinated by the concept of birth, she intellectualized the experience as a purely female phenomenon, writing of the male role: "Mens bodies seem so barren to

me, futile, uninteresting and sterile—that is they can never know the quickening of life in their own bodies. Of course they produce the original germ cell, but it is such a passing—transient thing—unidentifiable with the actual creation of a human being.”³

She was jubilant, writing of motherhood, “How I do long to be one of their band, one of the great secret sisterhood—the life givers,” and she was solemn in turn, “Only four months now until I give birth. Maybe only three months until I receive death instead.”

It might be viewed as inconsistent to associate Mary’s yearning for motherhood with her feminism were it not for these three beliefs: one, that birth was tied to intellectual creativity (“Perhaps motherhood will be the touch that will release me from these chains which prevent the final attainment and fulfillment of my talent”⁴); two, that women of the professional class of the 1930s believed they could manage a family and a career with equal ease; and three, that childbirth was the supreme test of courage for human beings.

Reluctantly, Mary capitulated to medical advice urging her to be hospitalized early as a precaution. She was later to write, “I spent seven weeks in the maternity ward, learning a great deal about what was going on around me.”⁵ All of the incidents she observed, the unmarried girls, the despondent wives, the prison woman, the immigrant woman—were recorded as little dramas of birth and death focused between patients, families and staff—the raw material upon which her drama *Life Begins* was based. She carefully noted the callousness of physicians and interns, the use of experimental techniques on the free clinic patients and the nurses’ frustration with the doctors’ unnecessarily harsh methods of gynecological treatment. Her major interest was the sociology of pregnancy and birth, such as in the way class distinctions gave way before the commonality of birth: “The free masonry among mothers! There is no thought of differences here. It is very beautiful and should make all women democratic.”⁶

But perhaps the most dramatic incident emerging was her own precarious condition. The doctors were concerned and her and Ivar’s anxiety grew, tempered by Mary’s intense longing for the child: “A woman goes down into suffering and faces death to snatch her child into life—what an adventure. I sometimes think that men enviously go to war in emulation—but that is destructive and this creative.”⁷ In that journal entry Mary “gave birth” to the idea which she was later to give national exposure as the much interviewed author of *Life Begins*, a concept of male and female psychology which is very much at the base of the Freudian theoretical neo-feminist revisionist thinking of our own times.⁸

Mary and Ivar gave their permission for the then risky Cesarean operation, if the baby was imperiled. Mary wrote, “I wouldn’t give up my life for this child, but I am ready to take chances for it.” After a long labor the doctors operated, delivering a healthy baby girl to the weak

but happy Mary. Weeks later Mary Ivonne's arrival was announced in a letter to family and friends: "It strikes me that there is no adventure like the adventure of birth, with such a gorgeous, glorious prize if you succeed and with death waiting to catch you if you trip up."⁹

During the next year the Axelsons moved to New York City, where Ivar planned to study for his Ph.D. at Columbia University. While Mary was content in her new role of mother and happy to be living in New York again, she was discouraged by the long lapses between publishing her work. Ivar suggested that she study playwriting, an idea that intrigued her enough to take a course at Columbia. Of her first play, she was to later say: "The drama that surrounds the beginning of life is stupendous. It astounded me that no one had seen it before . . . I started out to write with my baby on my lap." With a pile of sharpened pencils by her side, Mary would write a few words, then as the baby grabbed for the pencil, Mary would take another one and start the cycle all over again when all the pencils were on the floor. In this manner Mary wrote *Birth*.¹¹

Hatcher Hughes, theatrician and Mary's teacher, recognized the potential of his student's work, putting the play into production as director of the Morningside Players, a prestigious Manhattan Little Theater group. *Birth* played to full houses with an extended run to accommodate ticket purchasers. The first major review set the tone: "*Birth* is pretty raw stuff, competently enough written to be not at all revolting in its depiction of the maternity ward of a hospital."¹² Praise for the play was tempered by distaste for the subject matter. Mary was thrilled by the reception of her work, taking delight in approval from her literary friends, such as in this note from Stephen Vincent Benét: "I was on the edge of my chair from the minute the curtain rang up. . . . The balance between emotion and comedy is splendid."¹³

Birth was a play in three acts, the action taking place entirely in a hospital maternity ward over a span of two days. The central character, Grace Sutton, has been brought from state prison to give birth. We are told that Grace killed a man in self-defense; few details are given, but sympathy is with Grace, who, it is understood, has been sentenced unjustly. Nurse Pinty says, "If there'd been any smart men on that jury they'd have given her a medal."¹⁴ Florette, a patient, remarks, "There are a lot of men in this world who ought to be killed."¹⁵ Grace has joined a ward consisting of a representative mixture of womanhood; the modern single woman, the "hard-boiled" chorus girl, the matronly woman expecting her sixth child, the resentful young bride, and other "cases." In this melodrama each woman, regardless of status or circumstance, is presented with dignity and given approval and support by the other women. In Mary's ward women span the gamut—they face their ordeals alone, have loving families, are doomed, survive with courage—no one is judged and all are part of a "great sisterhood." In a place where the

feminine spirit is dominant, a cynical question in reference to the suffering seen in the ward is asked of Mrs. Smith by Florette, "Can you still believe in God?" and the response is, "Believe in God? I know her!"¹⁶

Of the men, only Grace's husband, Jed and Dr. Lee, who Mary patterned after her beloved friend and physician, Dr. Mary Roudebush, have redeeming qualities. The other male characters are bungling husbands and insensitive medical staff. In the dialogue Mary demonstrated her theory that men create war and other follies as compensation for being unable to create life. For example, Mrs. Smith responds to Grace's anxious query about childbirth by telling her, "It's an adventure—Why, having a baby is the most glorious adventure on earth! That's why men go to war or hunt. . . . They're hunting for a big adventure like having a baby."¹⁷ Mrs. Smith is herself gleefully satisfied having given birth in the taxi, thereby trapping her horrified husband, who is unable to escape the event as he had for the arrival of their other children. A nurse says that the ward reminds her of her war experiences, with the women "waiting in a dug-out to go over the top." The doctors "reassure" worried patients by remarking, "Every woman who goes in there takes her life in her hands, but very few of them die." Mary's figure of modern womanhood is Rose Lorton, who is single, expecting, and defiantly proud, planning to give her baby every scientific advantage while she "shows women they have a perfect right to have babies without being burdened by a husband."¹⁸

The play became famous for the last scene, suggested by Mary's own experience. Grace's life is in jeopardy as her labor pains begin. The doctors confer. Grace or the baby? Who shall be saved? Murmurs of conversation are heard as husband Jed waits in anguished isolation. One doctor is concerned about being late for a social engagement, another is eager for the experience of doing a "section," an intern excitedly phones his fiancée, "A good set of pictures of a cesarean section would mean a lot to me just now. But damned if I'd want to feel I killed a woman just for that. So I'm glad I don't have to decide it."¹⁹ The scene shifts. Shadows fall. Night comes. "After all she *would* have to practically spend the rest of her life in prison." The decision is made to operate. For Grace it is fatal. Life in the ward goes on. A nurse hands Jed the baby girl. The curtain falls.

After the Morningside Players production closed, four producers came to Mary with offers for a Broadway run. Mary chose Joseph Santley, primarily for the superstitious reason of his wife having had Cesarean births, auguring a good-luck omen for the show. The play went into rehearsals as *Life Begins*, starring dramatic actress Joanna Ross in the role of Grace and ingenue Glenda Farrell in the comic role of Florette. An exuberant Mary was soon spending all of her time at the theater. Ivar obligingly moved the family into a Broadway hotel for the duration so that Mary could spend time with Mary Ivonne during rehearsal breaks.

The play opened on Broadway on March 27, 1932. The reviews echoed the sentiments of the original production's critics, by recommending the play, while disproving of the "sanitary enamel" maternity ward atmosphere as distasteful to men and the "sad ending" as inappropriate during a depression. An exemplary review noted, "*Life Begins* at the Selwyn plays through its eight scenes in the halls and a six-bed ward of a maternity wing of a city hospital and never loses its grip of either the story or the steady interest of the audience. . . . It is one of those section of life dramas that may have to fight for a wide popularity."²⁰ Another review titled "Mother Complexities" noted, "People seeking diversion need not look to this play. . . . Serious drama laid in the maternity ward could hardly be called diverting. By the time of the second intermission men of affairs in the lobby and the smoking room were saying *Life Begins* had been something of an ordeal."²¹ Ed Sullivan endorsed the play in his column, saying it was "emotionally true," but adding, "The very tautness which it inspires makes it a good play but destroys its commercial value."²² Robert Benchley, writing for the *New Yorker*, said, "She did hit upon something new in a *mise-en-scène* and wrote some very touching and amusing dialogue. *Life Begins* is a play you might very well have seen to advantage, if you don't mind maternity wards."²³ One reviewer declared, "To men, while it may be a moral lesson in the appreciation of a woman's part in this vale of tears, it may be also a somewhat unpleasant way of driving that lesson home." The general consensus was that the country was weary of "gloomy plays," and as the critic further noted, "The audience desperately wants these young people to be happy, they do not need a reminder that life is real, life is earnest and the dreams of men untrue."²⁴ A perusal of Broadway titles during this period reveals that the public was "sated with realism," the "hit" shows included, "Springtime For Henry," "The Good Fairy," "The Laugh Parade," "Face The Music," and "Of Thee I Sing."

Joseph Wood Krutch in an essay for *The Nation* dispensed with the "stage full of pregnant women" aspect of the play by noting that the times had changed since men learned of the interesting condition of their wives by the "delicate innuendo of unwonted needlework." His major focus was a prognosis of how future students might study the times by reading Mary's play:

Could any other age, I asked myself, possibly know what to make of this particular blend of traditional sentiment and rather self-conscious objectivity . . . remember two things about the vocabulary of the twenties and thirties: first, then it was that love ceased to be either a sin or a sacrament and became "self-expression," second, that though married women of the times spoke seldom of wanting children, yet it was quite common for them to remark that they thought they owed it to themselves to have the experience of motherhood.²⁵

Regardless of such thoughtful reviews, the public did not come, seeming to agree that “the birth rate will undoubtedly decline for a while until New York forgets the intimate agony of Mary McDougal Axelson’s *Life Begins*.” Greatly disappointed, Mary and Ivar attended the final performance of the two week run.

Meanwhile, Warner Brothers had approached Joseph Santley who now owned the production rights to Mary’s play to negotiate a contract. Undismayed by the drama’s brief stage life, Warner’s embarked upon the filming with a stellar cast and plans for an extensive publicity campaign geared to bring the company out of its depression year decline by bringing in high box-office returns with *Life Begins*. Loretta Young played Grace, Glenda Farrell repeated her stage role, Eric Linden played Jed and Aline MacMahon was cast in the role of the supervisory nurse. They led a renowned cast of supporting actors. Mary was bitterly let down when director James Flood assigned the screen play to Hollywood writer Earl Baldwin. Rejected by the executive staff, she was reduced to corresponding with cast members as a link to the filming and was reassured when Ruthelma Stevens wrote, “I know you’ll be happy to learn that the picture is being shot almost line for line from the play.” Mary’s cousin, character actress, Elizabeth Patterson, had a minor role, a coincidence which provided Mary the opportunity of an insider’s vantage point. When Mrs. Patterson told Mary that she was not receiving screen credit as author, Mary wired Jack Warner, “As the author of *Life Begins* I should greatly appreciate your consideration to a letter sent to you today special delivery unless Mr. Baldwin should in the meantime give birth to a baby.”²⁶ Her letter argued that Baldwin’s name would “not arouse any feeling of authenticity among the masses of women who were expected to see *Life Begins*.” Warner responded to her pleading and reordered the frame to read, “*Life Begins* by Mary McDougal Axelson, Screen Adaptation by Earl Baldwin.”

In a pre-release letter to employees, Warners’ indicated the special expectations pinned on the film: “Make *Life Begins* the beginning of a new life in our business. . . . We are doing a sincere job in trying to make the kind of entertainment that will make the country happier.”²⁷ The company engineered a high-pressured campaign capitalizing on the film’s controversial subject of “exposing the secrets of the maternity ward.” Industry publications eager to back Warner’s gamble gave the film generous praise: “It is done with unity and compression to a degree rarely attained in motion pictures, the narration is precise and sharp.”²⁸ The world premiere festivities were replete with Hollywood stars, McDougal family friends, such as Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Alfred E. Smith, and celebrities from all strata, with the center of attraction being the reopening of Broadway’s Hollywood Theater. The mood, one of plucky celebration, was intensified by the morning newspapers hailing *Life Begins* as the start of a new era in film-making. Warners’ was richly

rewarded, since the film was to earn over a million dollars. *Variety* reported “the largest crowds in six months” and listed the earning records. The first week’s receipts at the Strand were \$39,231.00; in Pittsburgh, the first week’s business netted \$19,000. *The Motion Picture Herald*, *Variety* and the other film dailies continued to report on the “large crowds” and earning record of *Life Begins*.²⁹

Regina Crewe, New York *American* film critic, wrote a characteristic review in which she first blamed Hollywood for the “blueprint” formula that catered to the “feeble-minded exposition of saccharine stories,” then gave *Life Begins* her unqualified recommendation, calling it “one of the most unusual, daring, dramas ever offered on stage or screen. . . . It’s a startling tensely dramatic subject, treated with exquisite taste and deep understanding.”³⁰ Warners’ was prepared for the critical acclaim, releasing full page advertisements offering a \$5,000 reward to anyone who could find in the dictionary a stronger adjective than those used in the reviews, listing over fifty, such as, courageous, fascinating, radical, witty and poignant. The theater scene was photographed and released with this headline, “Cheering, clamoring crowds block Broadway.” One of the many promotional innovations was the offer of a one-year contract and Loretta Young as godmother to the first infant born after the film’s national release date. The West Coast reception was equally favorable with Hollywood chronicler Louella O. Parsons leading the acclaim: “*Life Begins* is an extraordinary motion picture. Daring in its treatment,

human in its developments and exceptional . . . intensely realistic.”³¹ Popular novelist Fannie Hurst in an article on film discussed Mary’s work as being unusual in that it was geared to “the adult mind, assuming normal mental development on the part of the audience.” She noted that the film, “which deals frankly with childbirth would only a few short years ago have fallen beneath the censor’s hatchet.”³²

Male reviewers repeated the pattern of the play criticism for the film, objecting to the “indelicate” of the subject, while recommending the film. One such review began, “The subject of parturition, a delicate one at best, is treated with impressive dignity in *Life Begins*. . . . Evi-

FLYER from Warner’s for *Life Begins*, 1932. MMA collection, University of Miami.



CAN YOU STILL THRILL?

Can you still thrill to beauty, reality and life?

Can you still feel for your fellow men and women?

Can you still enjoy something different from anything you've ever seen?

Can you still look facts in the face?

Can you still thrill at the first cry of a newborn babe?

Can you still pity a mother who made a mistake about love?

Then *this* is your picture

LIFE BEGINS

WITH
LORETTA YOUNG • ERIC LINDEN
ALINE MACMAHON • PRESTON FOSTER
GLENDA FARRELL

Directed by JAMES HODGE Co-Directed by BUDDY MESSENGER

A FIRST NATIONAL and VITAPHONE
P I C T U R E

More compelling than Ben Hur—Greater than The Birth of a Nation—Surpassing The Big Parade—

dently an authority on the subject, Mrs. Axelson has provided dialogue that rings with an eavesdropping realism." Another asked, "Will men like it? I doubt that considerably. Women will like it through either morbid curiosity or through the drama inherent in its theme." The New York *Sun* critic, remarking on a scene where Florette sings rowdily after drinking from a smuggled bottle of gin, noted that "it was somewhat macabre from the sensitive male viewpoint." Columnist Arthur Brisbane, admired the film, writing that it was no fun, but courageous for the cinema, adding that it "ought to be seen by those husbands who go for a walk when their baby is born and by those that oppose birth control in all cases."³⁴ With the male viewpoint dominating the film's commentators, one can speculate as to the sex of the anonymous reviewer who wrote, "It is a crowning revelation of the sublime masculine ego that neither of them [the two directors] felt called upon to call in a woman co-director."³⁵

In the American heartland, reviewers were not as open-minded regarding the film's realism, moderating their columns with warnings to the public: "It is hardly to be recommended for children or prospective mothers," and, "I do not think the general run of fans care to be confronted with such grim realism." While all agreed that *Life Begins* was a "woman's story," they differed on predicting public reaction: "It revives memories mercifully dulled by time and sharpens the anxiety of the uninitiated," or in this vein, "Women will love it and men will learn a lot that it would be well for them to ponder." A few critics were shocked by the film, cautioning their readers, as did the *Denver Post*: "The film violates common rules of decency. The producers are making a powerful argument for a law prohibiting the showing of this picture and others of its type. . . . Its outright frankness in dealing with biological facts best left for the doctor's consulting room is what condemns *Life Begins*."³⁶

Held over in movie houses throughout the nation, *Life Begins* became one of the major film successes of the era. There are two likely explanations of why the play closed and the film succeeded: first, the Broadway producer had limited funds, restricting his ability to stay open long enough to build audience interest and Warners' had vast resources; second, potential theater audiences were more sophisticated than the film public, who may have been attracted by curiosity to see a film that ignored the "secret and shameful" public attitude toward maternity by candid presentation in their neighborhood picture show.

Mary was accorded national public exposure, particularly in the West where she was remembered for her poetry and activism. She enjoyed her new popularity, accepting with alacrity invitations for interviews in which she always discussed her "grand adventure" theme: "How strange it seems, when you think of all the plays which have been written about men's adventures, bravery and sacrifice in war, that no one has ever

written about the great adventure of a woman giving birth,” and “The dialogue of which the New York critics wrote so much was composed from remarks I have heard women say all my life.”³⁷

The film continued to enjoy an unprecedented run, while the public took sides in the “maternity” theme controversy. The Associate Superintendent of New York Woman’s Hospital wrote to Mary disputing the “raw stuff” charge and supporting the film as being “true to life.” Dr. William Brady, syndicated columnist, angrily charged that the film misrepresented facts and was unfair to doctors, claiming that to have Grace die when so many modern techniques were available was unpardonable: “Does it not leave a lasting impression on the minds of the girls and young women who see the show?”³⁸

Warners’ packaged the film for foreign distribution, and as an international favorite *Life Begins* was shown all over the world, achieving even more notoriety by being banned in several nations, most notably England. A letter from a London friend informed Mary that, “The Lord Chamberlain definitely will not permit a showing in Great Britain.” The noted European critic, Karin Michaelis, was ecstatic in her review, which set the tone for the foreign reception, by calling the film, “A hymn to mother love, the greatest of all loves.”

Buoyed by this success, Mary continued to write plays. She and Ivar decided to risk moving to Los Angeles hoping that by being physically located in the center of the film industry they would be afforded greater opportunity to sell Mary’s screen plays. She wrote prodigiously for the next several years. Her play *Last Day*, was produced by Hudson Fausett for the Monmouth Community Players (New Jersey) in the spring of 1935. Its theme was from the occult, combining “metaphysics and gangsters” as one reviewer noted. *Life Comes to This*, a play about old age was produced in the Hollywood Little Theater in 1937 and directed by Edward Gering. He also directed Mary’s *Strange Reprieve* for the Westwood Theater Guild in 1940. The film *His Second Wife* was based on Mary’s play *There were Two Women*, a melodrama whose plot concerned the eternal triangle in the form of the handsome scientist, the beautiful but empty-headed wife and the beautiful but too serious secretary. A troubling event of those years was Mary’s law suit against Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, who she charged based their very successful *The Scoundrel* (1935) on her *Last Day* script which had been copyrighted in 1934. Charges were eventually dropped on the advice of the Axelsons’ attorney, who felt that regardless of their evidence the suit would be too costly in money and time.

Austrian producer Henrich Krauz contacted Mary to discuss the producing of her play in Vienna. The Nazi government was interested in the play, presumably since it glorified motherhood. Mary’s happiness at having her work on the stage again was shortlived, since once again, despite generous critic praise, the public charged that it was “too serious”

and the show closed. At this same time, the British censors lifted the ban on *Life Begins*, releasing the film under a new title, *The Dawn of Life*. British film fans were told it was “unfair to strain people’s emotions,” and the film was given an overwrought reception: “It is harrowing. You see Loretta Young brought from gaol . . . gaol life has sapped her strength . . . you actually see flashes of the operation.”³⁹ The *Daily Express* critic



SNAPSHOT, possibly by Mary McDougal Axelson, showing *A Child is Born*, from the scrapbooks of MMA, in the MMA collection at the University of Miami.

wondered in print, “Are people in this country gradually getting used to the idea that babies are not found in cabbage patches?”⁴⁰ Other reviewers warned that it was not a film for young married men or expectant mothers. “At last,” the theaters proclaimed, “the censors permit us to screen the most daring film the camera had ever been allowed to show.” The British run of *The Dawn of Life* was a late but unqualified success.

Meanwhile, Mary painfully reassessed her Hollywood years and accepted the discouraging fact that the rewards for all her hard work had been very minimal. Discouraged, the Axelsons were considering moving back to New York City when Mary learned that Warners’ was scheduling a re-make of *Life Begins* with a new title, *A Child Is Born*. The studios were eager for scripts, since 1939 was a time when depression weary people flocked to the inexpensive entertainment that films offered. The movie house was a place where national myths were upheld, giving citizens hope in the future and a welcome respite from a dull and uncertain reality through a world of fantasy and dreams. In this case a “formula” that worked once was tried again.

Mary was avid to have a role in the production, but she was once again rejected. Hollywood’s reputation for heartless cruelty was upheld when producer Sam Bischof told a demoralized Mary that they would make the picture “horrible” because that’s “box-office.” Tormented, Mary wrote in her diary, “The one bright monument of my writing career to be sullied and wrecked.”⁴¹ Later, she was greatly relieved to learn that the original script would be used intact. Filming began with Geraldine Fitzgerald, Jeffrey Lynn, Gale Page, Gladys George and Spring Byington in the leading roles. Mary haunted the studio each day, maneuvering her way onto the set. Fearful that if she left during the lunch break she would not be allowed back in, she hid and ate fudge. Ignored by the staff, she brooded, “I am flung out, pushed aside, forgotten as if I didn’t exist.” However, soon her time would be taken by a Warners’ suggested project; the re-writing of the play into the novel form

with publication planned to coincide with the film's premiere. Mary worked exhaustingly to finish a draft which was submitted to Caxton Printers, Ltd. and rushed into print. The book jacket featured the film's stars in an embrace with copy reading, "The novel of every woman's great adventure." In what was one of the original movie and novel marketing package tie-ins, readers were told, "Read the book—See the picture."

Warner executive Irving Rubine invited Mary to lunch, so that he could encourage her to attend the world premiere in Kansas City, and urge her to pay for her expenses by securing a speaking engagement while there. She was incensed, raging, "I am sick of being exploited for Warners' benefit. . . . They are making a fortune from the dream of my heart." She requested a salary for promotional work and when she was turned down, refused to attend. As a final insult the studio sent out press releases saying that Kansas City was Mary's birthplace ("another Warners' lie") and that she would attend the opening.

Judging from the receptions accorded these films, there was less tolerance of "risqué" or "sacred" (as in maternity) subjects in 1939 than in 1932. The Motion Picture Code was instituted in 1934 in response to charges from public interest groups that films were corrupting audiences with "objectionable" themes and scenes. When *A Child Is Born* was released public prudery called for such restrictions as not allowing anyone under eighteen to see the film. In some communities audiences were segregated, "Night performances for men only, matinee for women only." The film had an especially hard time in Mary's home state of Oklahoma. Reporter Malvina Stephenson sent a Central Press Association release to over five-hundred newspapers charging, "Best Sellers Arouse Oklahomans." Reprinted throughout the West, the story told how "Two current best sellers are smearing Oklahoma . . . John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Mary McDougal Axelson's *A Child Is Born*."⁴² In Mary's novel, Mrs. Stephenson wrote, Oklahoma mothers were represented by, "A murderess, an unwed chorus girl, and an insipid young bride," and further, "It bares the privacy of the maternity ward." The president of the state Pioneer Club was quoted as saying, "Pioneer motherhood is the backbone of the state, Oklahomans shudder to have Hollywood broadcast such lines from the movie screen." She predicted mass picketing of the film throughout the West. Mary, who had been known as "Oklahoma Mary," in the press, was bewildered by this reaction to her work, particularly since the location of the maternity ward beyond its designation as a "city hospital" is never revealed. Warners' countered by inviting prominent citizens in Western cities to attend special screenings. In each city, as in Tulsa, newspapers reported the event with such headlines as "Women Leaders See Preview." This article noted that, "A hand-picked group of Tulsans, civic and social organizations, parent teacher associations, will view the film to see if the neurotic character of women



Mary McDougal Axelson

is portrayed.”⁴³ Apparently it was not, since the women liked and approved the film for general viewing.

The New York critics, as they had in 1932, discussed the film in terms of male sensibilities, with headlined reviews such as “Men Flock to see Picture Dealing with Hospital Maternity Ward.” For the third time, Mary responded to interview requests that invariably touched on the “great adventure” theme: “The challenge of motherhood is precisely the same appeal to heroism that was felt by the young men who went to the trenches during the great war. Adventure, the gamble with fate—that is what motherhood means.”⁴⁴

The novel meanwhile, billed as a “woman’s story” was a commercial success, even though the critics were unenthusiastic, as illustrated by this comment from the *New York Times*: “It’s obvious dedication to the travail of motherhood seems to have a particularly morbid inspiration.”⁴⁵ However, many women enjoyed the novel, responding to the melodrama of lines such as these, “He clutched the child to his breast, holding his face down against her warm little ear. ‘Oh, Grace!’ he sobbed. ‘O Grace! Grace! Grace!’”⁴⁶ The novel was eventually translated into six languages. Mary enjoyed the renown, which gave her lasting satisfaction. Years later, as an elderly woman, she would write to a young cousin, “I once had a taste of triumph when my first play was produced by Warner Brothers and shown all over the world.”⁴⁷

Mary’s later years were marred by misspent energies, family misfortunes, grief and illness. Her own idealized dream of motherhood was shattered by a series of deplorable events in the life of Mary Ivonne,

resulting in their estrangement. When Mary was eighty-one, exhausted with life and incurably ill, she was hospitalized in Miami. Then, four days before she died, as though she herself were writing one of the contrived endings for the more than twenty melodramas she authored—patients, nurses and doctors were invited to Mary's room to watch with her, a televised screening of *A Child Is Born*.⁴⁸

Miami, Florida

footnotes

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1. The manuscripts, play and film documents including publicity clipping files are in the Mary McDougal Axelson Collection, University of Miami, Otto Richter Library, Coral Gables, Florida. Hereafter cited MMA.
2. MMA, *Journal*, Collection no. 6, 1928, entitled, "Birth Journal," p. 9.
3. *Journal*, 21 October 1928, p. 12.
4. *Journal*, 29 October 1928, p. 22.
5. MMA, "Autobiography of Mary McDougal Axelson." Holograph in four pads. Pad no. 3, p. 90.
6. *Journal*, 17 January 1928, p. 93.
7. *Journal*, 14 January 1929, p. 84.
8. Jean Strouse, ed., *Women and Analysis* (New York: 1974), 205. In this series of essays in response to Freudian thought, a tradition begun in 1926 by Karen Horney ("One receives a most surprising impression of the intensity of this envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. . . .") the concept of "male envy of creation" is discussed by such contributors as Elizabeth Janeway, Margaret Mead, Juliet Mitchell, Marcia Cavell and Robert Coles.
9. *Journal*, copy of letter, 28 February 1929.
10. MMA, Sallye Little Brandt, "The Play Begins," *Oklahoma University Magazine*, clip-file no. 56.
11. The original title *Birth* was changed to *Life Begins* for the Broadway production.
12. MMA, Josef Israels, *This Week in New York*, 9 March 1932, clip-file no. 55.
13. MMA, letter to MMA from Stephen Vincent Benet, 31 January 1932, clip-file no. 55.
14. MMA, *Life Begins*, Act. I. p. 2.
15. *Life Begins*, Act. I. p. 37.
16. *Life Begins*, Act III. p. 3.
17. *Life Begins*, Act. III. p. 23.
18. *Life Begins*, Act. I. p. 36.
19. *Life Begins*, Act. III. p. 18. This dialogue had been overheard by Mary in relation to the case of a Mexican woman in the ward whose baby was stillborn.
20. MMA, Burns Mantle, "Drama of Maternity," *Daily News*, 30 March 1932, clip-file no. 57.
21. MMA, Stirling Bowen, "Mother Complexities," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 1932, clip-file no. 57.
22. MMA, Ed Sullivan, "Joanna Ross Hits Mark as Does Glenda Farrell," *New York Graphic*, March 1939, clip-file no. 57.
23. MMA, Robert Benchley, "The Theater," *The New Yorker*, 9 April 1932, p. 26, clip-file no. 57.
24. Burns Mantle, "Drama of Maternity," *Daily News*, 29 March 1932, clip-file no. 55.
25. MMA, Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Nation*, 13 April 1932, clip-file no. 57.
26. MMA, copy of telegram in Scrapbook no. 53.
27. MMA, copy of Albert Warner letter, 4 September 1932, Scrapbook no. 53.
28. MMA, Terry Ramsaye, *Motion Picture Herald*, 13 August 1932, clip-file no. 56.
29. MMA, *Variety*, 25 October 1932. *Motion Picture Herald*, 19 October 1932, clip-file no. 55.
30. MMA, Regina Crewe, "Life Begins Premiere at Hollywood Tonight." *New York American*, 26 August 1932.
31. MMA, Louella O. Parsons, *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, 28 October 1932, clip-file no. 53.
32. MMA, Fannie Hurst, "Are Movies Growing Up," *Modern Screen*, clip-file no. 53.

33. MMA, Thornton Delehanty, "The New Films," *The New York Evening Post*, 26 August 1932, clip-file no. 53.
34. MMA, Arthur Brisbane, King Features Syndicate, Inc., 1932, clip-file no. 57.
35. MMA, "This Week's Film Turned Toward Unusual Theme," *Kansas City Star*, clip-file no. 53.
36. MMA, Fred Speers, "*Life Begins* Is Film Violating Common Rules of Decency," *The Denver Post*, 21 August 1932, clip-file no. 55.
37. MMA, "*Life Begins* is From Notes Written In City Hospital," *Oklahoma City Times*, 29 August 1932, clip-file no. 53.
38. MMA, Dr. William Brady, "Maternity Movie Misrepresents Facts," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 April 1933.
39. MMA, "Which Shall Die," *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 26 July 1935, clip-file no. 54.
40. MMA, "Film Gets Past Under New Name," *The London Daily Express*, 26 July 1935, clip-file no. 54.
41. MMA, *Diary*, Collection no. 41 p. 90.
42. MMA, Malvina Stephenson, "Best Sellers Arouse Oklahomans," Central Press Association, 9 December 1939, clip-file no. 54.
43. MMA, "Women Leaders See Preview of *A Child Is Born* Today," *The Tulsa World*, 25 December 1939, clip-file no. 54.
44. MMA, "Men Flock to See Picture Dealing with Hospital Maternity Ward," *Brooklyn Times Union*, clip-file no. 55.
45. MMA, Beatrice Sherman, "Fiction in Lighter Vein," *The New York Times*, 3 September 1939, p. 16.
46. Mary McDougal Axelson, *A Child Is Born*, (Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1939) 298.
47. MMA, copy of letter to "Frankie," *Diary* no. 42, p. 68.
48. United Artists has the rights to *A Child is Born* and it is infrequently shown on late night television. I have been unable to verify the existence of any extant prints of *Life Begins*.