“Pulp Fiction”: Edna Ferber’s
Come and Get It and Ecofeminism

Edna Ferber’s novel *Come and Get It* is pulp fiction not so much because of its dealings with sensational subjects or its being printed on low-quality paper as because it is about the making of pulp, the logging industry in Wisconsin in the early half of the twentieth century, the empire-making of Barney Glasgow. Granted, the book does contain some melodramatic elements: the lust of a sugar daddy for a sweet young thing, the sudden *deus ex machina* when that sugar daddy dies in a boating accident, the social-climbing tendencies of that opportunistic young woman once the wealthy Barney Glasgow dies and she can marry his son, heir to his fortune. Still, *Come and Get It* is of interest not because of its melodrama but because what it reveals about the status of women and the status of the environment in Wisconsin around the turn of the century right up until before World War II. It is also is an impressive testimony to the “Wisconsin character,” as Ferber defines it. In her novel, Ferber rewards those who are unpretentious, work hard, save their money yet do not become seduced by the trappings of material success into becoming what they are not. She is also extremely aware of the way in which Midwesterners define themselves—sometimes defensively—against standards set in the east.

Given the recent interest in such local environmental issues as what to do about the high concentration of PCBs in the Fox River and in such national gender-political issues as the sexual predation of our own president upon young women like Monica Lewinsky, it would appear to be a timely moment in which to examine the kinds of connections Ferber makes in her novel between the treatment of the environment and the treatment of women.

After giving an overview of Ferber’s life, I will provide a brief plot synopsis for those unfamiliar with this relatively obscure novel, address what kind of a feminist she is, and then go on
to argue that it is tempting to read Ferber as a kind of proto-ecofeminist in some parts of *Come and Get It*, even though her primary sympathies are not so much with those who share her gender or ideological stance towards the environment as with those who share her values about the salubrious and ethical benefits of hard work.

**Edna Ferber’s Life**

Edna Ferber is described by her biographer, Julie Goldsmith Gilbert (Ferber’s great-niece), as a “massive little woman” who may have been physically tiny—she was only 5’2”—but was extremely strong-willed. The Ferber in Gilbert’s biography could be fiercely protective of those she loved, while unsparingly savage towards those for whom she felt contempt; there’s a kind of masculine swagger in Edna Ferber, according to Gilbert’s presentation. Ferber had a great deal of respect for the common worker, enjoyed being in the position of the sharply observant onlooker, gave lavish meals, was given to fits of outrage, had difficulty trusting others, and always wanted to be the one who rejected first. Gilbert writes that Ferber’s life was antiseptic—absolutely no excesses were allowed. She was a Middle Western maiden lady who took care of her mother, her family, and her typewriter. She recycled herself with every book, and each seemed a testament more to her own health and vigor than to inspiration. With themes like Seattle, Oklahoma, Alaska, New England, the West, Texas—she had no time or penchant for personal probing. There was too much to do. Her ego was as mammoth as her scope, and no man, vice, crisis, or illness was going to deter her. An obsessive in the most productive sense, a spinster in the most resolved sense, a plain woman who kept herself in silk purses, and an angry daughter who determinedly made her mother’s life roses... one would assume that her bill of mental health was immaculate. A presumption. Her complete devotion to her mother Julia bordered on the incestuous. Her hatred of her sister Fannie was at times close to being pathological. Her need and ability to ‘play God’ was despotism at its worst. There were chinks in her armor. Many. (Gilbert, 13)

Edna Ferber was born on August 15, 1885, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, of Jewish parents. According to Gilbert, Edna’s mother had wanted a boy, whom she would have named Edward. Instead, she had a second girl, and she named her Edna. Edna’s father, Jacob, was a Hungarian; her mother, Julia, was born in Milwaukee. Her father was the owner of a general merchandise store, first in Iowa, then in Appleton (on College Avenue). Her older sister, Fanny, and Edna had frictive relations for much of their lives, perhaps because Fanny was the more beautiful of the two, but there may have been other reasons as well.

At 17, Ferber graduated from the Ryan High School in Appleton. For her graduating essay she wrote an account of the life of the women workers in a local mill. The local editor of the *Appleton Daily Crescent* saw it, recognized that it was good reporting, and gave her a job in 1903 as a local reporter at $3.00 a week—a huge salary for a young woman in a small town. She then was graduated from the Appleton paper to Milwaukee, where she was also a reporter. While she was earning a living as a reporter, she wrote *Dawn O’Hara*, her first novel. It sold well. While it was in the press and selling during 1911 and 1912, Ferber began publishing the story of Emma McChesney, a travelling saleswoman. The character appealed to the
public, and Ferber’s success began to grow. In 1913, the stories were collected under the title *Roast Beef Medium*, and that book also sold well. This was followed by *Buttered Side Down*, another collection of short stories, and more novels, *Fanny Herself* (1917), *Cheerful by Request* (1918), *The Girls* (1922), *Show Boat* (1926), *Giant* (1952), *Ice Palace* (1958), and others. She was a prolific writer, with a total of twelve novels—including *So Big*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize in 1924—twelve short story collections, two autobiographies, nine plays. Twenty-five of her properties sold to the films, although “only” ten of her works were actually made into motion pictures. She never married, and she died in 1968 at the age of 83.

**Come and Get It : Plot Synopsis**

*Come and Get It* was published in 1935, just before World War II struck in Europe and Asia and at a time of labor strikes in the United States. *Porgy and Bess* was opening in New York at this time; the following year *Gone with the Wind* was a best-seller, and Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* was released.

In *Come and Get It*, Edna Ferber chronicles the rags to riches tale of the handsome Barney Glasgow, who marries the boss’s homely daughter in order to consolidate his wealth and become one of the leading lumber barons in the state; after Barney’s death about two thirds through the novel, she goes on to describe his son’s inheritance and augmentation of the Glasgow fortune.

Barney Glasgow is orphaned at the age of 14 and taken under the wing of Swan Bostrum. The young Barney proves a quick study in how to fell a tree and how to make himself indispensable to his boss. He discovers the various illicit but technically legal ways of acquiring land with lumber on it. Through clever bits of legal fraud, Barney wins his way into his boss’ heart and business. He secures his career when he opportunistically marries the boss’s “thin-lipped, hook-nosed, bony” daughter, Emma Louise, who is several years older than the dashing Barney. Barney is not attracted to his wife, nor does he like his calculating son Bernard, although he is fond of his daughter Evelyn. Evelyn, following in her father’s footsteps, is in the process of marrying a person she does not love simply because he is the son of another lumber baron, and because she feels that this is what she is expected to do. The marriage is even more of a travesty because she really loves and is loved by a handsome Italian worker, whose love she sacrifices in order to maintain her social standing. Prior to his marriage to Emma Louise, Barney and Swan both had been attracted to a pretty young prostitute, Lotta Morgan. Barney loves her, but Swan does the right thing and marries her. Lotta remains married to Swan for ten years and then, after giving birth to a little girl Karie, dies.

Then the plot skips ahead 35 years, and we meet Karie’s daughter, Lotta Lindbeck (Lotta II). At age 18, Lotta II is now a “ravishing beauty.” Barney never actually forces himself sexually upon her, but he is infatuated with her, showers her with gifts, and regards her as his possession. He wishes to marry her and feels that with all the millions he has, it’s a shame that he remains married to a homely woman whom he does not love. He is therefore incensed to discover Lotta and his son Bernie kissing at a party and to learn of Bernie’s intention to marry her. The two men fight and nearly kill one another. Barney threatens to disown his son, whom his wife hides. Then, when everyone in the family but the son Bernie decide to go out on a boat, the boat explodes. Bernie becomes heir to the Glasgow fortune and marries Lotta.
The rest of the novel follows the career of Lotta Glasgow, who is shunned by the wealthy women of Butte des Morts; in frustration she becomes an expatriate, travelling in Europe and repudiating the life she once lived in Butte des Morts. But her grandfather Swan, the moral authority in the novel, returns to Iron Ridge to resume his humble life among the pine trees. Lotta’s mother Karie, although she stays with her daughter and helps her care for her grandchildren, remains as down to earth, unpretentious, and seemingly uncorrupted by wealth as she ever was. Lotta, of course, becomes a complete social-climber and snob, flaunting her newfound wealth. Against her will, her European-born children become intrigued by their American origins. When their father loses millions during the Great Depression and has a nervous collapse, his wife reluctantly returns home with their grown children—who are excited about the paper mills but who also want to travel across America and learn about their native land.

The novel ends with Lotta and Karie and the grandchildren helping to celebrate Swan’s 85th birthday up in his tiny cabin up north. The old man can still heft an axe, and he cuts down a 100 year old pine tree while his daughter Karie yells “Come and get it!” to the gaping crowd.

**Public Reception of the Novel and Brief Critical Evaluation**

The public’s initial response to *Come and Get It* was anger. Specifically, Ferber’s treatment of Polish-American workers was perceived as pejorative, discriminatory. Gilbert defends Ferber: “Ferber, always true to authentic ethnicity, had used the term ‘dumb Polack girls’ in the context of the story. No doubt, in her research of the territory, she had heard it mentioned. To Polish-Americans, it was unmentionable” (Gilbert 329). Gilbert even received a letter of protest from a congressman. Others complained that Ferber had conducted her research for the novel in a way that violated the etiquette of the time. Gilbert writes:

> When she went to Wisconsin to do research for *Come and Get It*, she enlisted the help of an executive of a large paper mill in Neenah . . . . The executive gave her all she needed to know. What he didn’t know was that he unwittingly gave her himself to use as the main character in her book . . . . What stung him was not so much her portrayal of him, but the fact that she never, after their long sessions together, even wrote him a thank-you note. And, as is often the case in tight-knit societies, everyone knew about her rude conduct. The whole town tsaked. (330)

In my opinion, *Come and Get It* is not Ferber’s best work. The characters seem a bit two-dimensional: the dashing robber baron, the dowager wife, the blond bombshell. The plot plods along somewhat tediously until Barney’s lust for the young Lotta develops; then it suddenly erupts into melodrama, only to have Barney’s family (with the exception of his heir, Bernard) die in a rather improbable plot contrivance.

Ferber herself recognized that this was not a perfect novel. In her autobiography *A Peculiar Treasure*, she writes about how “in the writing of the novel *Come and Get It*, [sic] I was guilty of . . . [a] . . . stupid blunder. I killed Barney Glasgow in the middle of that book because he was dominating the story. The book gave a gasp right there, and the murder was doubled.” (223) Ferber further confesses that “Plot is something that doesn’t interest me. Character I find absorbing. My novels usually are character-strong and plot-weak. I’d be sorry to have it the other way
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round” (224). There is, of course, a rather transparent and somewhat defensive false dilemma implicit her assumption that a writer will inevitably make mistakes in one area, either in developing characters or in developing plotlines.

**Ecofeminism Defined**

Its failings notwithstanding, when I first read this novel and in subsequent readings of it, I was struck by the sorts of connections Ferber invites us to make between Barney’s ravaging of the land—with no intentions of replenishing the lumber supply once it has been depleted—and his desire to ravage his best friend’s granddaughter, again, with little thought about what the consequences of this action would be on his friendship with Swan, on his relationship with his children, or on his relationships with the people of his community. Vaguely remembering that ecofeminists also draw connections between the treatment of the land and the treatment of women, I did some research into ecofeminism and then re-read the novel through the lens provided by that ideological perspective.

Ecofeminism, I found, is a relatively recently coined term used to link the domination of both land and women without regard for the feelings or desires of the women or for the future productiveness of the land. Literary ecofeminists explore the manifold ways in which the exploitative treatment of women reflects a similarly exploitative and opportunistic treatment of the environment. Marie Mies and Vandana Shiva in *Ecofeminism* describe the origins of ecofeminism, “which grew out of various social movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s . . . The meltdown at Three Mile Island prompted large numbers of women in the USA to come together in the first ecofeminist conference—‘Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism [sic] in the Eighties’—in March 1980, at Amherst. At this conference the connections between feminism, militarization, healing and ecology were explored” (Mies and Shiva 13-14).

Gretchen Legler discusses what an ecofeminist literary criticism might look like: “Ecofeminist literary criticism is a hybrid criticism . . . that gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature and the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (quoted in Warren 227). According to Legler, “many canonical authors still place nature ‘out there’ as an ‘other.’ Many canonical authors refine and entrench the notion of nature as a sacred place where only solitary, single, and chaste men go to cleanse their spirits and be one with God” (quoted in Warren 229). Legler suggests that “critiquing canonical works through an ecofeminist lens might include investigating the ways in which gender, race, and class are represented in and inform the writings of these ‘fathers’ of American nature writing”; she goes on to suggest that ecofeminists might well study the texts of such contemporary women writers as Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Linda Hasselstrom, Sue Hubbell, Alice Walker, Leslie Silko, Diane Ackerman, and others in order to study how their “postmodern pastoral” is a vision “informed by ecological and feminist theories, and . . . that images human/nature relationships as ‘conversations’ between knowing subjects” (quoted in Warren 229).

Putting it bluntly, Legler suggests that ecofeminists today might take one of two tacks: bashing the likes of Melville and Hawthorne as perpetuators of a colonialist
approach to nature or marveling at the subversive strategies of Silko and Dillard. Her assumption seems to be that the nineteenth-century male writers will inevitably "get it wrong" in their representation of nature as a feminine category to be transcended, while the late twentieth-century female writers will "get it right." My approach is to ignore these polarized positions and stake out a third possibility in examining the work of a woman writer for whom gender alone is not, as we have seen, an easy means of identification with others—for whom a hard work ethic was a more important means of identification—in order to see where she fits into the vast gulf between Melville and Dillard, in order to investigate how her novel might be read as a precursor to ecofeminist paradigms.

An Ecofeminist Reading of *Come and Get It*

Let us return to Ferber’s novel. That Barney Glasgow has a nakedly exploitative relationship to the land and to women is evident in the very title of the novel *Come and Get It*, the title of which may be read as a double entendre, conflating the desires for (lumberjack) food, (cheap) land, and (extramarital) sex. In fact, at one point, Katie warns the lovely Lotta to be suspicious about the extent of Mr. Glasgow’s attentions to her. Her exact words to Lotta—“A girl looks the way you do men just think they can come along and help themselves” (177)—underscore this connection between appetite for food and appetite for sex. Barney’s lust to wring profit from the land and his lust to consummate his relationship with the lovely granddaughter of his best friend are clearly equated: he feels he is entitled to both, and his sense of self-restraint towards Lotta is slowly weakening at the point when he is suddenly killed off in the narrative.

Moreover, although his son recognizes the importance of replanting new trees for future generations to harvest, Barney—in his infinite stubbornness and shortsightedness—refuses to do so. Then again, he also lacks the vision to see that his son’s plans of inventing paper cups and paper towels for bathrooms are viable economic ventures. So Ferber suggests that Barney’s tense and competitive relationship with his son prevents him from perceiving where his future economic success lies. Barney’s son Bernie, though not well-developed as a character, represents a kind of progress over his father in the sense that he is more rational, more far-sighted, more genuinely devoted to his wife, and also—interestingly—slightly more androgynous. Bernie never needs to desire a mistress because he is married to the most desirable woman he knows, nor is he a Lydgate character freighted with a gorgeous but insipid wife who cannot understand his ambitions. It is as if Ferber grudgingly rewards him for being more restrained and far-seeing than his father, even though she is not as compelled by him as a character.

In addition to these larger plot contours which indicate Ferber’s making a connection between Barney’s unbridled desire to harvest as many trees as possible and to possess Lotta, there are at least four identifiable passages from the text which become illuminated by an ecofeminist reading. In these passages, Ferber covers a gamut of attitudes towards women and the environment. Women like the horse-faced Emma Louise are identified as stifling agents of civilization; their association is with smothering domestic interiors which drive Barney to seek the freedom of the almost masculine northern woods. At the same time, insofar as beautiful young women like Lotta are represented as vulnerable, consumable commodities, they are identified with those elements of
nature which are, to Barney’s way of thinking, “tailor-made” for raping: that is, the forests of pine trees which furnish Barney with lumber. Women also furnish Barney with cheap labor for his rag-paper mill, and they satisfy male appetites—while suppressing their own—in two ways: by feeding the lumberjacks, as Barney’s mother does, and by offering men like Barney fantasies of sexual availability and a renewal of youthful vigor, as Lotta does.

Consider the first passage, which occurs relatively early in the novel:

If the thick, rich routine of the well-ordered household and the feminine possessiveness of Emma Louise and Evelyn threatened to smother [Barney] completely, he escaped to the northern woods whence he had come, and in that pine-laden atmosphere found healing. (12)

Here, manipulative women like Emma Louise are identified as stifling agents of civilization, threatening to smother Barney, virtually forcing him into the healing arms of his mistress, the great outdoors. This theme of Barney’s need to escape is developed in the novel: whenever Barney feels oppressed by Emma Louise within the domestic sphere of his home in Butte des Morts, he retreats up north to Iron Ridge, a small camp devoid of the comforts of home but also mercifully devoid of the entrapments and social restrictions imposed by the likes of Emma Louise. Barney feels he can be himself, be authentic, eat simple lumberjack fare, and be bawdy while he is in Iron Ridge. Barney’s retreats to Iron Ridge prefigure and foreshadow his illicit desire to make Lotte Lindberg his mistress.

In the second passage, Barney surveys the “Polish and Bohemian” women working in the rag-paper mill:

Barney had always hated the rag-paper mill over at Grand Chute . . . The mill made the finest grade of writing paper obtainable—much superior in texture and quality to the wood-pulp paper manufactured in this Butte des Morts mill. Barney almost never visited it, and only from necessity. He hated the rags piled mountain high; he loathed the rag sorting room with its cloud of dust and lint whirling up from the sorting bins over which the girls bent. They wore pieces of gauze tied across their faces, futilely, to shield mouths and noses. They coughed, and their complexion was a curious clay gray. Polish and Bohemian, most of them, they lived the other side of the tracks or over on the Flats . . . Though the odors of the wood-pulp mill were none too ambrosial Barney did not find them offensive. Of the rag mill he said, “It stinks.” He seemed to find something peculiarly obnoxious in the smell of the acids that reduced old rags to the least common denominator of white pulp. Even the magic of the process by which a pair of tattered overalls might be transformed into a fragrant love-missive, or an old shirt or pair of ragged muslin drawers might, Cinderella-like, emerge as a delicately tinted invitation to a ball, did not interest Barney. He liked the process of the wood-pulp mill. Great flat cars out in the yards, loaded with fourteen-foot hemlock spruce, balsam and jack pine, pungent, redolent of the north. (35)

Although the rag paper mill “made the finest grade of writing paper obtainable,” Barney rarely visits it. Although the wood pulp mill sends forth fumes every bit as malodorous as those of the rag-paper mill, it is only the latter’s fumes that Barney finds offensive. Why the discrepancy between Barney’s reaction to the rag-paper mill and the wood pulp mill? Ferber suggests that on some level Barney realizes that his female
workers are suffering from their exposures to the chemicals, and he can hardly stand to witness their daily sacrifices of their health for economic survival. Ferber also suggests that perhaps there is something distressingly "feminine" about the rags—a scrounged, found, endlessly folded, and molten set of materials that originate in domestic interiors and that are less "masculine" than the solid, imposing slabs of "fourteen-foot hemlock spruce" found at the wood pulp mills. Lest we miss Ferber's proto-ecofeminist critique, her narrator even imagines how one might more positively view the processing of the rags as a kind of transformative, fairy-tale process by which "an old shirt or pair of ragged muslin drawers might, Cinderella-like, emerge as a delicately tinted invitation to a ball." That allusion to Cinderella underscores the pathetic economic realities of the women who work in Barney's rag-paper mills and the extent to which they perhaps fantasize about the only possible means of escaping their drudgery. Barney is not so much oblivious to their plight as he is sub-consciously shamed by it, hence, his avoidance of the rag-paper mills.

Consider how Ferber rather heavy-handedly underscores the theme of Barney's patriarchal power in this third passage:

[Barney] was a great grand duke riding toward his duchy—forests, streams, villages. Fish, deer, birds. He liked to survey largely his holdings—his mills, his lands, his crops, his timber, his employees, their families, keeping a firm possessive hand on all. A Goth turned patriarch, but not yet ready to enjoy the benefits of his ravishments. He never looked on his vast possession as an empire, though it was that. To him it was just so many tons of this, acres of that, pounds or square miles or cords of the other. A tree was potential pulp to him, a river something on which to float boats or drive logs. A hill was a rise of ground which might conceal ore, a free waterfall was unenharnessed machine power. (66)

Again, this passage most forcefully exemplifies the extent to which we are invited to see Barney as the dominating and dehumanizing patriarch who equates his workers with the stuff of nature—regarding them all in a proprietary light as his possessions, as his subjects, as fodder for his profit, regardless of the short-sightedness of his schemes. The allusion to the Goths, Teutonic peoples who invaded and settled in parts of the Roman Empire in the third to fifth centuries, establishes Barney's transition from invader to settler to patriarch. "Ravishments" nicely concretizes the connection Ferber wishes us to draw between Barney's actual rape of the land and his unrealized desire to rape/seduce young Lotta Lindbeck.

Finally, in the fourth passage, we are treated to an image of woman as provider of the food that she not only cannot enjoy but that sickens her:

[Barney's mother Nellie] did man's work... The great gross mounds of food which daily she provided for the voracious men sickened her. She ate nothing, finally, but a crust of bread and cup after cup of scalding black tea. (84)

Woman is handmaiden to lumber mill productivity though she is alienated from her work; woman is untempted by the highly desired fruits of her labor. That Barney's mother dies of consumption is one of the more interesting ironies in the early parts of this novel; it suggests that what kills her is some self-destructive element as if she has been starved for so long that her body
begins to consume itself. Barney never consciously makes the connection between the premature death of his own mother and the short lifespans of the girls working in his rag-paper mill over at Grand Chute—although perhaps he makes it unconsciously, and this is part of his aversion to the rag-paper mill—but we as readers are encouraged to see that he is unconsciously perpetuating a cycle in which poor women are ground up and spit out as they provide cheap labor and profits for the likes of Barney Glasgow.

As in the fiction of her Victorian literary predecessors (and I am thinking more of Charlotte Bronte than of George Eliot now), women are identified with the provision of food for male appetites, but Ferber, unlike her Victorian predecessors, makes a critical distinction between the older female “martyrs” and the younger, more androgynous, more “selfish” females. While the older women in the novel (like Barney’s mother and then like Barney’s wife) provide ample feasts for the menfolk, they themselves abstain from eating much at all. Barney’s wife Emma Louise, though “by nature a stingy woman,” “set a lavish table at Barney’s insistence” while “sipping coffee and nibbling dry toast” (15). And, as I just noted, Barney’s mother, a cook in a lumberjack camp, slowly dies of consumption. But if one is tempted to conclude that Ferber believes that female desire must always be kept in check while male desire runs rampant, one must qualify this generalization by noting that Ferber depicts younger women like Evelyn and Lotta devouring, without restraint, both food and fortunes. Both Evelyn and Lotta have healthy appetites for food and sex—Evelyn committing adultery with her Italian worker on the eve of her wedding, and Lotta doing whatever is necessary to consolidate her social position.

Ferber’s Feminism

Just what kind of a feminist is Ferber? Ferber is like George Eliot in being hard to assimilate comfortably under the category of feminist. Both Eliot and Ferber led lives working in a male-dominated profession, but if one examines their novels, one finds that they do not necessarily provide for their heroines the same sort of pathbreaking boldness that they themselves enjoyed. If Eliot’s female protagonists are systematically denied the opportunities to fulfill themselves in some sort of meaningful work (their very paucity of options eliciting our sympathies), Ferber’s female protagonists in Come and Get It take upon themselves the full-time “work” of trying to manipulate wealthy and powerful men. Unlike Eliot, who attempts to penetrate the opacity of even the self-centered Hetty Sorrels and Rosamond de Vincys in her narrative worlds, Ferber invariably caricatures and condemns such female characters who attempt to eschew hard work by playing upon their feminine wiles; her sympathies are always with the under-appreciated working class women (the nannies, the waitresses) who serve such entitled women. Class privilege, then, becomes the dividing line across which Ferber’s sympathies cannot pass—unless, that is, the female who inherits such privilege still takes solace in the stabilizing effects of hard work.

Yet as I mentioned earlier, Ferber herself was an unusually outspoken woman and perhaps slightly ahead of her time, insofar as she was able to succeed in a man’s world. In one of her autobiographies, she writes: “If men ever discover how tough women actually are they’ll be scared to death. And if women ever decide to throw away that mask, wig and ruffled kimono and be themselves, this will be another [female-dominated] monarchy—and perhaps it’s about
time” (quoted in Gilbert 82). In *Come and Get It*, she is somewhat interested in depicting power struggles between the sexes, and she is sympathetic to smart women who are deprived of the opportunity to make the best use of their talents in the work force. For example, at one point her narrator expresses sympathy for Barney’s daughter Evelyn, who is smart enough to run a paper mill but is forced by social convention into marrying a man she does not love: “Born out of her day she could, ten years later, have run one of her father’s mills; driven an ambulance in France; started a career of her own choosing. And now Evelyn was to be married” (21). Ferber also represents sympathetically the hard-working, plain Karie Lindbeck because Karie never loses her down-to-earth self, even among the crowned heads of Europe, and because Karie remains with her social-climbing daughter despite the fact that she “work[s] harder than any servant you get, only I don’t get paid for it” (431).

Still, it is perhaps a bit wishful for us to call Ferber a feminist or even a proto-feminist. While a woman writer like George Eliot might be willing to soften her judgment towards those beautiful female characters who end up doing great harm to themselves and others, Ferber has little patience for those beauties like Lotta who trade on their looks in order to advance themselves up the social ladder. Given the premium she puts on the value of hard work, it is entirely understandable that she resent those who need do no work other than apply make-up and then go out and seduce lumber barons. However, one cannot help but wonder—politically incorrectly, of course—if her being the plain sister of a beautiful woman might not have played a role in Ferber’s scathing contempt for the opportunistic bombshell Lotta. Then again, Ferber never makes any effort to represent sympathetically the bourgeois, horse-faced wife of Barney Glasgow either. Indeed, the narrator seems just as judgmental of Emma Louise as Barney is: “It was incredible that any woman—even a plain woman of 56 who has been married years before for her money, and knows it—could be so utterly lacking in coquetry as to appear before a man in such grim habiliments” (10). Disappointingly, there are no moments in the narrative when Ferber’s narrator attempts to enter into the consciousness of Emma Louise, never attempts to imagine what it might feel like to be a homely woman married for one’s money. Perhaps the topic was a little too close to home for Ferber, who was—again, like George Eliot—widely regarded as a plain, hard-featured woman.

**Conclusions**

Would it be fair to call Ferber an early ecofeminist? At times, she seems like one, especially when she writes such lines as “A tree was potential pulp to [Barney], a river something on which to float boats or drive logs. A hill was a rise of ground which might conceal ore, a free waterfall was unharnessed machine power” (66). Although he prides himself on exercising great self-restraint when he does not actually rape Lotta, Barney is equally exploitative of both women and nature: in Karie’s words, he thinks he can “come along and help [himself]” to a portion of forest and Lotta. As I have also noted, the title “Come and Get It” reflects not just the call to meal time but Barney’s greed in acquiring land cheap from the government in order to rape it of its trees. And the “it” in “Come and Get It” takes on clearly sexual undertones when Barney contemplates the seduction of Lotta.

In her developing of the character Barney Glasgow as a power-hungry, dominating,
greedy, ruthless, opportunistic, and wasteful patriarch, Ferber certainly seems to be advancing a proto-ecofeminist critique. Barney is a patriarch tailor-made for an ecofeminist critique, although, to be fair, he also provides the novel with its most vital energies: Ferber realized that as an artist she sacrificed the aesthetic design of her novel when she killed him prematurely.

However, and this is why I feel I must qualify my stance by acknowledging that one is only “tempted” to pronounce her a proto-ecofeminist, Ferber never really sustains a pro-woman or pro-environment stance for very long. Perhaps for all her bravado and swagger in her diaries and autobiography, she sensed in this novel that she was engaging in a kind of cultural critique that was, like Evelyn Glasgow, about fifty years ahead of its time. I suspect she had some reservations about making the truly scathing and sustained challenge to patriarchal authority that she could have made if she were, say, Margaret Atwood.

Finally, the novel is not about progressive ideology so much as it is about the sustaining quality of certain values, an ideological stance of a more traditional sort. Women and men who work hard and never lose their appreciation for the moral value of hard work fare best in this novel. Beautiful women who expect their looks to work for them are ostracized and unhappy; successful men who have stopped working with their hands die prematurely. The message is clear: those who continue to work hard, to endure privation, to avoid being seduced by the trappings of material success into becoming what they are not are those who thrive and live to be 85. If there are seeds of a proto-ecofeminist sensibility in the work of Edna Ferber, they remain intact and identifiable but in a largely dormant state.

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Endnotes

1Interestingly, in the movie version of the novel, that mistake would not be repeated; director Howard Hawkes insured that Barney would remain alive at the end of the film, unpunished for his sins of lust and greed.

2At the end of Hawkes’ film based on the novel, Barney sadly witnesses the elopement of Lotta and his son, all the while banging tearfully on a triangle and shouting “Come and get it!” to the guests at his party. It is as if the old man is forced to reconcile himself to his newfound role as passive provider for the appetites of others when his own appetites (for sex, for domination over Lotta) cannot be satisfied. The dinner triangle that he bangs also visually reinforces the idea of a triangulated state of affairs between (failed) father, (successful) son, and the love object (Lotta) whom they both desire.

Works Cited


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