

About O.E. Rølvaag

Ole Edvart Rølvaag was born in a fishing village in Dønna, Norway, on April 22, 1876. He immigrated to the United States in 1896 and worked as a farmhand in South Dakota from 1896–98. After graduating from Augustana Academy in Canton, South Dakota, in 1901, Rølvaag earned a B.A. from St. Olaf College in 1905 and returned to the college to earn a M.A. in 1910. Between his B.A. and M.A., he studied at the University of Christiania.

From 1906 to 1931, he served as a professor of Norwegian language and literature at St. Olaf. During his career he authored Norwegian language textbooks and novels, essays, and poems about the Norwegian-American immigrant experience. Two of his novels, *Giants in the Earth* (1927) and *Peder Victorious* (1929), received international acclaim as accounts of immigrant pioneer life on the Dakota prairies in the 1870s.

Rølvaag worked to preserve and enrich Norwegian-American culture during his lifetime. He helped found the Society for Norwegian Language and Culture in 1910 and the Norwegian-American Historical Association in 1925. In 1926, Rølvaag was knighted (Order of St. Olav) by King Haakon VII of Norway.

Fiction

Amerika-Breve, 1912

Letters from America published under the pseudonym Paal Mørk. Translated as *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, 1971. Rølvaag's first published novel tells the story in a series of letters to his father and brother back in Norway of the young Per Smevik as he journeys to America, first landing on a farm in South Dakota and eventually finding an opportunity to go to school. The story is a charming and largely autobiographical account of the immigrant's initial difficulties and gradual adaptation to life in the new land. The title of the English translation comes from one of his first letters, where the protagonist writes that his first life was lived in Smevik, in Norway, his second life was on the boat and train journey to America, and now he is about to embark on his third life as a newcomer in America.

Paa Glemte Veie, 1914

On Forgotten Paths published under the pseudonym Paal Mørck. The only novel by Rølvaag that was never translated into English *Paa Glemte Veie* tells of the religious conflicts in a Norwegian immigrant family and community on the South Dakota prairie. Chris Larson is in danger of losing his soul and his religious daughter Mabel attempts to save him from the clutches of Satan. In this novel Rølvaag works to create an original plot with believable

characters, and though unsuccessful in its attempt to merge religion with art, the novel does foreshadow some of the conflict in *Giants in the Earth*.

To Tullinger: Et Billede fra Idag, 1920

Two Fools: A Portrait of Our Times

The English translation, given the title of *Pure Gold* (1930) is a substantial reworking of the Norwegian original, so much so that when it was published in Norway the publisher had it translated into Norwegian from the English text and given the title *Rent Guld* [Pure Gold] rather than the original Norwegian title *To Tullinger*. Both titles hint at what the novel is about. The main characters, a simple Norwegian-American farm couple get caught up in a frantic pursuit of riches and end up freezing to death on either side of a closed door. Ironically, the money belts in which they kept their “treasure” were burned for fear of contagion. In *Pure Gold* Rølvaag paints a convincing, occasionally humorous, and in the end tragic portrait of the fools who reject their own cultural heritage and instead fall in love with money.

Længselens Baat, 1921

Translated as *The Boat of Longing* (1933) this novel is the only one of Rølvaag’s novels in which a substantial portion of the action takes place in Norway. *The Boat of Longing* tells the story of a young immigrant’s life in Norway and in Minneapolis. The sections that take place in Norway are mystical and romantic, the sections that take place in urban America are harshly realistic. The novel emphasizes the relationship between art and cultural inheritance and points out that art does not easily thrive among the rootless and insecure. It is an indictment of an America that rejects and ignores the value and the very soul of the immigrant. It’s not strange that the story in this novel seems unfinished, for Rølvaag himself labeled it “Book One.” Unfortunately, he was never able to continue the story with Book Two.

Giants in the Earth, 1927

- *I De Dage--: Fortælling om Norske Nykommere i Amerika, 1924* (In those days—A story about Norwegian immigrants in America)
- *I De Dage--: Riket Grundlægges, 1925* (In those days—Founding the kingdom)

These two volumes were translated as *Giants in The Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (1927). *Gants in the Earth* follows a Norwegian pioneer family's struggles with the land and the elements of the Dakota Territory as they try to make a new life in America. The book is based partly on Rølvaag's personal experiences as an immigrant, and on the experiences of his wife’s family who had been immigrant homesteaders. The novel depicts snow storms, locusts, poverty, hunger, loneliness, homesickness, the difficulty of fitting into a new culture, and the estrangement of immigrant children who grow up in a new land.

Peder Seier, 1928

Translated as *Peder Victorious: A Tale of the Pioneers Twenty Years Later* (1929). *Peder Victorious* continues the story of the Holm family of *Giants in the Earth*, concentrating on the youngest son, Peder, the only child born in America, and his relationship with his mother Beret, with the Norwegian-American church, with the surrounding community, and with the American school system. In the course of this novel Peder comes of age and ends up married to Irish-American Susie. In spite of its title the main character in the novel is Beret, showing how she becomes the best farmer in the community in spite of her struggle to adapt to the new culture and language.

Den Signede Dag, 1931

The Blessed Day

Translated as *Their Father's God*, this final novel from Rølvaag's pen continues the story of Beret, Peder, and Susie and shows how Peder's rejection of his cultural heritage affects every aspect of his life. The community they live in is divided and these divisions of language, customs, religion, and politics affect the marital relationship between Peder and Susie. The community suffers a drought, Susie suffers a miscarriage, Beret dies, Peder's political ambitions fail, and in the end Susie takes their child and leaves him. In this novel Rølvaag portrays the development of a new society and gives an accurate description of the political shenanigans of the period.

Fortællinger og Skildringer, undated, 1932

Stories and sketches

This slim volume of short stories and sketches was compiled and published after Rølvaag's death by his friend Waldemar Ager. Rølvaag wrote a number of such shorter pieces that appeared in magazines and newspapers. Some of these were later collected and translated under the title *When the Wind is in the South and Other Stories* (1984). Most of the stories are humorous and all focus on the foibles of Rølvaag's fellow Norwegian Americans.

Non-fiction

In addition to his fiction, Rølvaag, often in conjunction with other Norwegian-American scholars, published several textbooks, handbooks, and glossaries intended for use in Norwegian-American schools, often incorporating his own short pieces in the anthologies. Of these *Deklamationsboken* from 1918 [The declamation book] might be the most interesting. This collection of poems and short pieces was intended to be used by pupils in the declamation contests that were widely used in schools at the time.

Omkring Fædrearven, 1922

About our Ancestral Heritage

This volume of essays was translated in 1998 under the title *Concerning Our Heritage*. Rølvaag divided this collection into three parts, dealing respectively with heritage, literature, and the name change. Much of the material in the first section of the book is taken loosely from lectures he gave to students at St. Olaf and from essays in newspapers and magazines. The second section comes largely from a series of polemical newspaper articles defending Norwegian-American literature from a series of anonymous attacks, and the third section is based on a series of articles he wrote in a church publication where he was objecting to removing the word “Norwegian” from the name of the Norwegian Lutheran church in America, and also to the reduced use of the Norwegian language in church services. *Concerning Our Heritage* was aimed at Rølvaag’s fellow Norwegian Americans and was his attempt to convince them of the value of maintaining their own cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage and adding it to the mosaic that makes up the American society of which they are now a part.