



# Improbable Fiction: The Life of Mary Roberts Rinehart

*Jan Cohn*

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The mystery stories and other popular fiction of Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876–1958) brought her wealth and fame, but she was much more than a writer. She was a well-known American, respected and loved during a time when few women achieved national influence.

Her early life was conventional enough. Trained as a nurse, she met and married a physician, with whom she had three sons. She was living the stereotypical life of a young matron in Allegheny (now part of Pittsburgh), when her husband's investments evaporated during a stock market crash. She began writing as a means to supplement the family income.

Rinehart became a prolific writer. In addition to her mysteries, she wrote serious fiction, plays, poems, magazine articles, and editorials. Her regular contributions to the *Saturday Evening Post* were immensely popular and helped the magazine mold middle-class taste and manners.

In this fascinating account of a woman ahead of her time, Cohn illuminates the tensions that pervaded Rinehart's life. Rinehart's commercial success conflicted with her domestic roles of wife and mother; she often endured periods of illness and depression but also pursued adventure, including a job as the first woman war correspondent at the Belgian front during World War I. Throughout, Cohn presents Rinehart as a woman of many complexities whose zest for life always prevailed.

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