

How I Survived the Great Depression - and the power of popular fiction.

by Eva Imes Wood (1908-1980)

(Excerpted from a letter dated August 31, 1967)

I had graduated from the State College of Washington [now Washington State University in Pullman, Washington], in June 1933. it was a real sacrifice on the part of my mother to help me through the last two years of college there. She was a widow and had no real means of income. She had just been wise in the handling of her property. My two brothers each helped me a little also.

When I graduated my mother was so in hopes I would get a teaching job; we really needed it badly, but much to my surprise they told me at the college placement office that there were 15 graduates for every job. This was during the depths of the depression. They went on to explain that they would place only Washington girls who grew up there and went all the way through school there and advised me to return to California from which I came! I was really bitter about this - to think that they would accept my out-of-state tuition and all and not warn me about this in advance. Well, I went to Walla Walla where [my brother] Leighton and [his wife] Margaret and Mother and [my sister] Dorothy were. it really was not "home" for me, and I really was not welcome there as I was just another "mouth" to feed and they all looked at me with pained accusing eyes to think that I had graduated from college and had no job!

Even my mother didn't want me around, and I found out later that one of her reasons was because she did not want me to contract the T.B. that Dorothy had - and at the same time they were all keeping it a secret from me.

So, from an ad in the paper I "hitched" a ride from Walla Walla Washington to Berkeley California — believe it or not — this is something I had never told !!

At Berkeley I was all by myself. I walked and walked near the campus of the University of California until I found a room for \$8.00 per month. It was sort of a little attic room on the 5th floor up. Then I went to the teachers placement bureau and filled out forms.

I was told then that there were so few teaching jobs and so many applications that they would be placing the California graduates and advised me to get my first job from the school from which I graduated! So here I was little Orphan Annie with no one claiming me and no one wanting me! At a second appeal to the employment office, I was advised to enroll at the University to acquire a General Secondary Credential and some local recommendations. I had only a very little money. How come I had even a little money? As I had received none from anyone since before graduation; and I was supposed to have used that all up. And I had earned none.

Well, this is the way it was: My mother, and Leighton between them were sending me just barely enough during my senior year (the year before) for me to get by on. Then, when it became evident to [my brother] Merl and [his wife] Adelaide that I was going to actually graduate from college, Merl sent me money with instructions to have a really *fine* graduation. I said nothing about having any extra money, and I spent no extra - just kept right on scrimping! So in Berkeley I counted up and found that I had enough money for the first semester's tuition and books and one month's rent. So I enrolled in the University which left me nearly broke.

I then walked from place to place hunting for a job. I landed a waitress job on the north end of the campus. I worked 1 hour at noon and 1 1/2 hours at dinner. I earned just a little food and 35 cents per hour and could just barely get by. Because of this little cafe's poor location and therefore poor business, it had to close its doors in about one month. So I had no job. I got some babysitting jobs, and finally got a job in a little eating stand on the south side of the campus. This was for only one hour at noon. They were really stingy with their food; they would pay me 35 cents for the hour's work and would give me a cheap sandwich or a bowl of soup - not both!!

I had to eat for the rest of the day on just the 35 cents per day. Needless to say I would buy the cheapest possible food at the grocery store, but still I got hungrier and hungrier, and it became increasingly difficult to study. I would study in the library and would sit there with a gaunt stomach, finding it difficult to concentrate well, but I plodded on and on.

Earlier, after I had gotten well settled in the University, I had written to a friend or two at Sebastopol and to two of my old favorite profs at the Santa Rosa Junior College where I had graduated in 1931. Professor George Bartlett, my former Political Science Prof, who had always considered me a bright and friendly girl, answered my letter and met me one day at the library of the Univ. of Calif. He was a kindly, gray haired elderly man. After quizzing and quizzing me, he decided for himself that I was really hungry.

I would never have told this. He insisted upon taking me out to a big dinner - and oh wait that food good - the best I've ever had in my life!

After quizzing me some more, he insisted upon lending me \$25.00. I would not accept it for a long time. I was very proud, and I had been taught never to borrow money lest you couldn't repay it. He talked me into staying in the University and in my borrowing the \$25.00 from him and assured me there were no strings attached and on and on.

(Later, I repaid him in full and incidentally I had repaid both Leighton and Merl in full with interest later.)

My this \$25.00 was a lot of money! I was very very careful with it!! And it put me through the last 6 weeks of my first semester of the University of California.

After my last exam, I went to the U.C. student placement office and procured a job running a soda fountain in a drug store in Oakland by that lovely lake there. This was the middle of December - the end of the 1st semester at Cal. I had decided to work full time and not return to the U.C. graduate school as it was just too hard to study on an empty belly and with inadequate clothing. But lo and behold two days before time to register for the second semester, my dear friend Professor Bartlett showed up and insisted that he just had to see me. Again, it was a fine dinner, and over much protest of mine, he talked me into returning to the University for the spring semester and to borrow money by the month from him. This I did. In June of 1934 I received my Calif. General Secondary Credential and you know the rest about my many years of teaching.

Later, one time I asked my good friend, Professor George Bartlett, why he had helped me through and helped me get on my feet professionally. He never answered. After I had asked him the question for several times, one day he finally said, "Eva, read *"Magnificent Obsession"* by Lloyd C. Douglas. I did.

Many years ago my very good friend Professor George Bartlett died, an old man by now. When I went to see his wife, his second wife now, in Santa Rosa, she was finding out to her amazement about some of the many good turns he had done for so many people and he told no one about it as "he had used it all up himself."



Left to right - George Bartlett, Evelyn Wood, Eva Roberts, Harold Jr. being held by Eva Imes Wood, Mrs. Bartlett, 1952

***Magnificent Obsession* by Lloyd C. Douglas (1929)**

[amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) Synopsis:

Magnificent Obsession was one of four of Lloyd C. Douglas' books that were eventually made into blockbuster motion pictures, the other three being *The Robe*, *White Banners* and *The Big Fisherman*.

Robert Merrick is resuscitated by a rescue crew after a boating accident. The crew is thus unable to save the life of Dr. Hudson, a physician renowned for his ability to help people, who was having a heart attack at the same time on the other side of the lake. Merrick then decides to devote his life to making up for the doctor's, and becomes a physician himself.

The book's plot portrays Mrs. Hudson, the widow, moving to Europe after her daughter, Joyce, is married. Merrick progresses in his career, and in the story's climax, gets involved in a railway accident in which Mrs. Hudson suffers serious injury. Merrick is instrumental in her recovery.

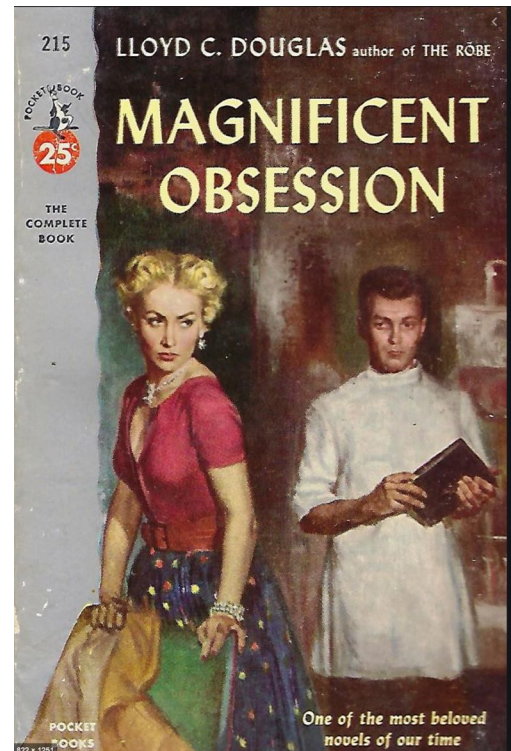
The story behind the novel, and the identity of the surgeon on whose life it is based, is mentioned in articles in the American Association of Neurosurgeons' journal AANS Neurosurgeon, *Magnificent Obsession* and "Inspirations and Epiphanies"

The theme of the book is based on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 6:1-4): "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.....That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly."

The philosophy behind the book is also partly that of "pay it forward", the idea that good deeds received are not to be paid back to the doer of the deed, but to a needing person in the future.

Douglas later wrote another book in response to the flood of letters he received from readers who wanted to know where they could find the book to which he referred in the novel, *Dr. Hudson's Secret Journal*. The Robert Merrick character decoded the journal, from which he learned the secret of his extraordinary success as a doctor. (According to the book, the secret was the literal practice of doing good deeds secretly, and thereby reaping spiritual power to use in becoming an excellent Doctor.)

Douglas later wrote, after his book became a best-seller and was made into not one, but two blockbuster movies, and inspired a TV series which aired in syndication from 1955 to 1957 (78 episodes): "*When my opus was finished I named it *Magnificent Obsession*, and sent it to a publisher who had previously brought out a book of mine, a group of religious essays. My manuscript promptly bounced back. The publisher (a good friend of mine, by the way, both before and after he rejected my story) explained that his readers saw no future for it. He figured that it might sell a few hundred copies to my parishioners, but he would prefer not to list it."*





Magnificent Obsession (1935 film) by director John M. Stayl, starring Irene Dunne and Robert Taylor. The film later was made into several radio plays in 1937, 1941, 1944 and 1949, with later versions performed by actors Don Ameche, Myrna Loy, and Willard Waterman.



Magnificent Obsession (1954 by director Douglas Sirk, starring Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman, who was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress for this film.