Jean Webster
(July 24, 1876 – June 11, 1916)

(From Vassar Encyclopedia)



Alice Jane Chandler Webster was born in Fredonia, New York in 1876, Webster came from a renowned family: her great uncle was Mark Twain, and her father was the publisher Charles Webster. She changed her name to Jean after becoming roommates with another Alice at the Lady Jane Grey School, a finishing school she attended for three years after graduating with a concentration in China painting from the Fredonia Normal School in 1894. The concentration in China painting, biographers Mary and Alan Simpson (Vassar's seventh president) point out, helped develop young Jean's skills in illustrating her works.

In 1897, at age 21, Webster entered Vassar. Webster had a wonderful time at college, and this experience supplied the material for her books such as *When Patty Went to College* and *Daddy-Long-Legs*. Her friend and roommate, the future poet Adelaide Crapsey, inspired and joined in many of the creative ventures, and her college life. Declaring English as her major, Webster studied literature, wrote plays, worked and published for the college journal (Vassar Miscellany), edited and illustrated the yearbook (Vassarion), and wrote a "chatty" news column for the The Poughkeepsie Sunday Courier.

Webster's other concentration was economics. She was inspired by Dr. Herbert Mills' course on "Charities and Corrections" and began work with the College Settlement House, a connection that lasted a lifetime.

In her junior year she traveled to Italy, where she became friends with Ethelyn McKinney, whose brother Webster would marry. Upon graduating from Vassar in 1901, Webster moved to New York City, where she worked as a freelance writer for various New York magazines. Her first series of short stories were compiled into Webster's first novel, *When Patty Went to College*, published in 1903. Altogether Webster wrote eight novels, many plays, and several unpublished stories. *Daddy-Long-Legs*, the story of an orphan who is sponsored through college by an anonymous benefactor, was Webster's most popular work. According to Karen Alkalay-Gut, Webster's works, though light and witty, were subversive commentaries against the patriarchal Victorian society of the early 1900's when women still did not have the vote. Many of Webster's works addressed social ills of the day, such as the state of orphan asylums in the country. Daddy-Long-Legs directly challenged this issue; the promotion of Daddy-Long-Legs leagues and the sale of Daddy-Long-Legs dolls went towards placing orphans in suitable families.

An avid traveler, Webster visited many countries in her lifetime with her best friend, Ethelyn McKinney. Webster was secretly engaged to Ethelyn's brother, Glenn Ford McKinney for eight years; they kept the romance clandestine because McKinney was unhappily married. Finally obtaining a divorce, McKinney married Webster in 1915. Around this time *Daddy-Long-Legs* was touring across the nation to successful reviews, and Webster completed her final novel *Dear Enemy*, a sequel to *Daddy-Long-Legs*. Webster divided her time between New York City and a home on Tymor Farm, in Union Vale near Vassar College (her daughter eventually attended Smith). In 1916, shortly after giving birth to a daughter, Jean Webster McKinney, Webster died from complications of childbirth. She was 39, at the height of her success as a storyteller and social activist.

renowned family /rɪˈnaʊnd ˈfæm(ə)lɪ/ famous family
a benefactor - a patron
Vassar College (/ˈvæsər/ VASS-ər) is a private liberal arts college in Poughkeepsie, New York.
subversive - trying to destroy or damage something
asylums - /əˈsaɪ.ləm/ institution giving shelter and other help to poor or suffering people

Answer the questions:

1. Where was Jean Webster born? When?
2. Why was her family famous?
3. Where did she study?
4. What were her first books?
5. What sciences was she interested in?
6. Who was her husband?
7. What was her final novel?
8. Why did she die?

LIVEWORKSHEETS