

Willa Cather
NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

VOLUME 54, NO. 3

SPRING 2011

Yours Sincerely

Finding Cather's
Correspondence
with Alfred A. Knopf

Plenty of "0"s
The Cather-Knopf Letters
and One of Ours

Cather's "ordinary" readers
Fan letters and hearty sympathies

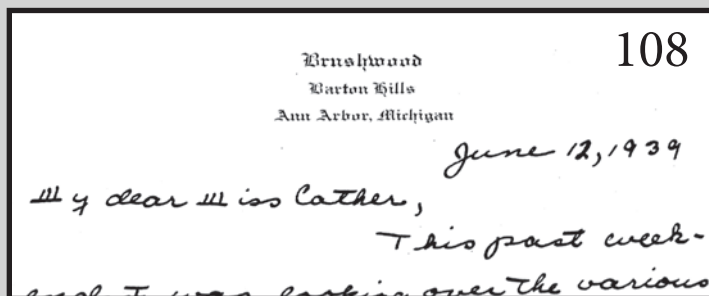
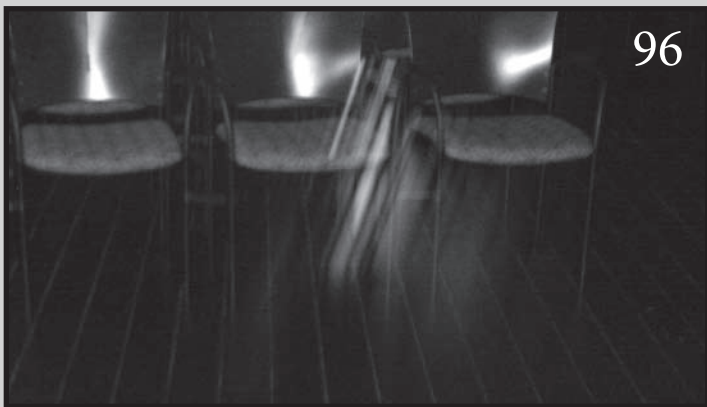
plus

Ghosts in the Opera House, oh my!



WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

VOLUME 54, NO. 3
SPRING 2011



Contents

- 95 Letter from the President
SUSAN MAHER
- 96 The Ghosts Among US
STEPHANY THOMPSON
- 98 Finding Cather's Correspondence
with Alfred A. Knopf
ROBERT THACKER
- 101 The Newly Discovered
Cather-Alfred A. Knopf
Correspondence and *One of Ours*
RICHARD C. HARRIS
- 108 Focusing on Cather's Readers,
Past and Present
CHARLES JOHANNINGSMEIER

Letter from the President

SUSAN MAHER

Among the most memorable scenes in the “Friends of Childhood” section of *The Song of the Lark* is Thea Kronborg’s acquisition of her own room. The “constant turmoil” of family life recedes, and Thea is able to strengthen the core of who she is, who she must become. “She thought things out more clearly,” we are told. “Pleasant plans and ideas occurred to her which had never come before.” A room of her own, a space for imagination, allows Thea to enhance and grow her artistic being.

In the same way, the Cather Foundation, in imagining new space for itself and renovating the Red Cloud Opera House between 2001-2003 (built 1885), has found new vision for its enterprise. Now a center for educational events, like the annual Spring Conference and cultural events that span the arts, the Opera House graces Webster Street and draws visitors to Catherland from all over the world. Since its reopening, the Opera House stands as a realized idea, a dream manifest. The Opera House’s success, though, has stirred the Foundation’s communal imagination further. With invaluable archives and material artifacts that help chronicle Cather’s life and career and the evolution of Red Cloud, the Foundation has looked at itself, and like Thea, now feels that there is more to be had. These archives need a home. At the same time, the efforts of the Cather Foundation are now truly national and international, approaching the vision that Mildred Bennett once had for this unique organization. The Opera House cannot hold the whole of our imagination any more.

Former Executive Director Betty Kort understood that “pleasant plans and ideas” required commitment, time, and energy. She looked at the Moon Block next to the Opera House with others, and they saw the next stage of the Cather Foundation’s development in Red

Cloud: a state-of-the-art archive, teaching and research space, and much needed green room for the Opera House stage. More space would allow for other improvements to offices, galleries, and the gift shop. This group, led by the indefatigable Betty, also envisioned collaborative space that could also keep Red Cloud’s downtown vital—bays for businesses and second story apartments for residents. When this business block is renovated, it will preserve the history of an American small town and promote the legacy of Red Cloud’s greatest talent, Willa Cather.

In this Cather Foundation narrative, Mildred Bennett is our formative Thea. She was the first dreamer of the Cather Foundation. Around her kitchen table, she grew a vision, and her vision grew other visions, including Betty’s. Past Board President and current Executive Director Jay Yost has helped position the Foundation to complete this next renovation, and when the Moon Block project is completed something akin to a National Cather Center will exist. As Thea’s story shows, it does not take much—just a small bedroom

space—to ignite large, compelling dreams. Thea achieves success and brilliance, while keeping grounded in her experience as a girl growing up in Moonstone. In a few years’ time, when construction is well underway and new facilities emerge from the Moon Block, the Cather Foundation will be able to showcase a gem from the past that promises a vital, brilliant future.



The Opera House and the Moon Block, 1910



The Ghosts Among Us

STEPHANY THOMPSON

Presently, as I looked with satisfaction about our comfortable sitting-room, it flashed upon me that if Mr. Shimerda's soul were lingering about in this world at all, it would be here, in our house, which had been more to his liking than any other in the neighbourhood. . . . I was not frightened, but I made no noise. I did not wish to disturb him. . . . It was as if I had let the old man in out of the tormenting winter, and were sitting there with him. . . . Such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda's memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him.

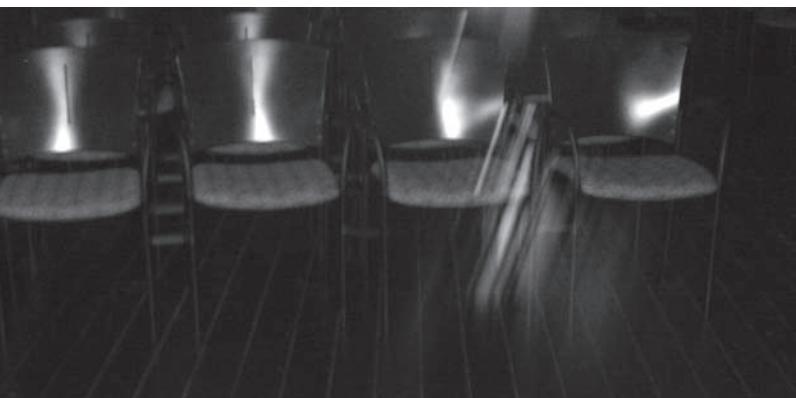
—Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather's Red Cloud seems to be filled with souls to this very day. The town known for its rich culture and history, which has intrigued scholars, historians, and tourists for generations, is also becoming known for its less obvious residents, ghosts. Red Cloud ghost stories have been told since the founding of the town, but within the past few years there appears to have been an increase in paranormal activity, especially within the walls of the very structures that Cather wrote about, visited, and lived in.

No one knows this better than the Willa Cather Foundation tour guides. Ask one of them about the spirits lingering in town and they will tell you without a glimmer of doubt that they do exist. The first story you are likely to hear is about the Matinée Ghost of the Opera House. Almost every day, in the middle of the afternoon, tour guides positioned at the front desk on the first floor of the building hear the sound of footsteps and chairs sliding, seemingly coming from the Opera House auditorium above. A romantic would explain this occurrence in this way: a soul from the past has returned to the place that they enjoyed so much during their lifetime; they are taking their seat for the matinée.

Overall, performers feel a sense of warmth and "good karma" about the facility, different from any other venue they have visited but they too have experienced a sense of something from beyond this world. In 2009, during a tribute show to his father, "Remembering Ricky Nelson," Gunnar Nelson experienced shortness of breath and had to leave the stage for a few seconds during the show. Gunnar explains his experience:

"My family has always been 'sensitive' to things many others can't see or feel. . . . I seem to have even more of that gift than most of them. The second I walked into the Opera House, I could feel much more than the ghosts of past performances that have graced the stage . . . my feelings were specific. I could 'see' a woman in period costume (bustle and such) who carried herself like a diva waiting for her cue. I also got an asthma episode . . . a rare occurrence to me that usually signals I'm somewhere that's burned in the past, and people have struggled to breathe and perished from it. I don't know how far off I am or not . . . but these 'hits' were instant and powerful the second I walked in. I can't WAIT to play there again!"



A strange image in front of the Opera House chairs.
Photo by T.R.I.P. Ghosthouse Investigations



Matthew and Gunnar Nelson performing at the Opera House.
Photo by Barb Kudrna

In the same year, playwright A.P. Andrews, director of the Paper Plane Theatre residency, had the following experience:

“After shutting the doors to the theater and shutting off the lights, I heard chairs being scooted (a very loud sound on those particular floors) and heard laughing inside. I turned and began to walk down the staircase to the front lobby, and as I did I heard footsteps on the stairs behind me. I ran down the rest of the stairs, where another member of my company was who had also heard the noises. We left as fast as we could. I had just done a complete sweep of the building to make sure all the other company members had gone home. I can say with confidence that no one was in the theater at the time. I returned to the building a half hour later with a few more people and we walked through the building together. No one was there. Throughout our month at the Opera House, there were multiple times when members felt they weren’t alone in empty rooms; never something dangerous or scary, but a presence nonetheless. It’s something we grew accustomed to throughout our time there.”

Twice during the summer of 2010, local paranormal investigators, T.R.I.P., accompanied by two staff members, set up their equipment overnight in the Opera House. Their experiences were dramatic: positioned cameras were moved; a recorded voice from the basement may have said “help me;” the sound of footsteps trailed down the back steps of the fire escape, then they would hear the rattling of the door to the basement at the end; a haze swept through the auditorium; camera batteries drained in seconds; a flash was caught on video that swept across the back curtain from a stage light (supposedly ghosts get their power from lights). But the most activity came from all the lights upstairs. For the two-month duration of the T.R.I.P. investigation, random lights from the stage, auditorium, and crew’s nest flashed on and off. It would happen during shows, tours, and at all hours of the day and night. Local electricians consulted with the company that installed the lights when the Opera House was restored in 2002, but there was no technical explanation. One of the most poignant moments during the search for ghosts happened when staffers and investigators sat in the front row of the Opera House chairs in complete darkness. They heard the faint sound of music and then swirling footsteps across the stage floor. Again, a starry-eyed observer may say that performers from the late nineteenth century have returned to the Opera House in their draping costumes to twirl and waltz across the stage.

There are many stories from other Cather sites as well. Footsteps are often heard in the upstairs of the Burlington Depot while a tour is taking place, even though no one is there. This space was originally used as a bunkhouse for railroad workers. Past stories tell of noises from this space that



Orbs in the Baptist Church. Photo by T.R.I.P. Ghosthouse Investigations

sounded like men playing poker. When T.R.I.P. investigators asked the question, “What are you doing here?” out loud, the recorded muffled response said “playing games.” On a tour of the Grace Episcopal Church a couple from out of state and their guide heard a woman’s sigh coming from the angel window above the doors. Staffers working on the Baptist Church heard the sounds of people sitting down in a pew behind them. A pest control employee was inspecting the Harling House basement when not only did the ceiling light go out but also his battery-operated flashlight at the same time. Staffers have heard slamming doors and experienced someone following them up the stairs from the basement of the Garber Bank. This corresponds with an account from a frightened contracted maintenance person, who reported that he heard footsteps and a sweeping sound behind him while going up the stairs.

As Director of Foundation Programming since 2003, I have spent much time in the Opera House, and yes, I have felt a presence, heard noises, and witnessed lights flashing, usually a single stage lamp in the far corner. By and large, I feel that these encounters come from a source of love and that the spirits that live where we work allow me to do my job without interference because they appreciate that the Foundation brings performers and audience members to their eternal and beloved stage. Perhaps they choose to follow the words of the famous choreographer Merce Cunningham in his reference to performing:

It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive.



Finding Cather's Correspondence with Alfred A. Knopf

ROBERT THACKER

This essay is structured by four moments.
Here's the first one:

More than twenty years ago at the Third International Cather Seminar, held in Hastings and Red Cloud in 1987, James Woodress gave a talk connected to his now indispensable biography, *Willa Cather: A Writer's Life* (1987). It was just appearing that year. Among other matters connected to his research on it, Woodress addressed the ever-vexed question of Cather's letters. In the midst of this discussion he commented that at the time there were 1,500-1,600 letters extant, but he went on to say that he expected others to continue to turn up. Certainly Woodress was right: Janis Stout's *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* (2002) lists 1,817 letters, and in *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather: An Expanded, Digital Edition*, coedited by Andrew Jewell, the number has risen to about 2,500.

A second moment occurred in October 1999 at the Mesa Verde Symposium on Cather and the Southwest. In conversation with Becky Roorda about archival matters connected to my own work on S. S. McClure and Cather, we found ourselves musing on the likely existence of reader's reports on Cather's four novels published by Houghton Mifflin. After all, we surmised, it was a large firm that published multiple titles; Ferris Greenslet, Cather's editor, was but one director of the firm; decisions to publish were doubtless made corporately based on the recommendation of a sponsoring editor. A month or so later, having inquired after these reports to an archivist at the Houghton Library at Harvard, I still remember the thrill I felt when she replied to me that those reports had been located and copies were about to be mailed to me. My own surmise is that Greenslet provided copies of his reports to E. K. Brown when the latter was working on his *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (1953). Brown clearly had them at hand as he discussed the making and publication of the four Houghton Mifflin Cather novels. That said, those reports are not among Brown's papers connected with the biography at the Beineke. For their parts, Woodress and other subsequent biographers make no mention of them.

The third moment was one I did not experience. I've

only read about it. It happened on September 27, 1987. It involved Helen Knopf, Alfred's second wife, and Peter S. Prescott (1935-2004), a New York writer then contracted to produce a biography of Alfred A. Knopf, a book he began but never published. (There still is no biography of Knopf, although the person now working on one, John Thornton, has a role in this story. We should all hope that his book will appear soon.) Prescott was visiting Helen Knopf at her home in Oregon. Writing in his personal journal, Prescott describes what happened as he prepared to leave to return to New York that day:

On Sunday morning, after I thought we'd concluded our work, [Helen Knopf] just happened to mention that she had the correspondence between Willa Cather and her husband. In a metal file so heavy it might have contained gold bars. Would I like to see it? No one else had, including Cather's biographers. I could hardly believe it. I haven't counted any part of it yet, but there must be 100 letters from WC, nearly all handwritten, and the carbons of A's replies to her, in files dated by year from 1919 until after her death. The whole brouhaha over the title of "One of Ours" is there. I had thought AAK had thought up the title, but no; it was WC's, arrived at when Fanny Butcher, not A, persuaded her "Claude" wouldn't do. A didn't have the wit to realize why OOO was better, didn't care which title was used, but WC knew exactly why OOO was better: the sound, the three O's. Helen suggested she send the file on to me. I suggested that I leave with her one of my two canvas bags, containing laundry and inessentials, and muscle the file back with me myself on the plane, where I could keep an eye on it. Why trust the mail? And, for that matter, why trust Helen to send it on? She may have second thoughts. She can hardly have second thoughts about returning my laundry.

Thus I do learn the scholar's trade. (September 29, 1987)

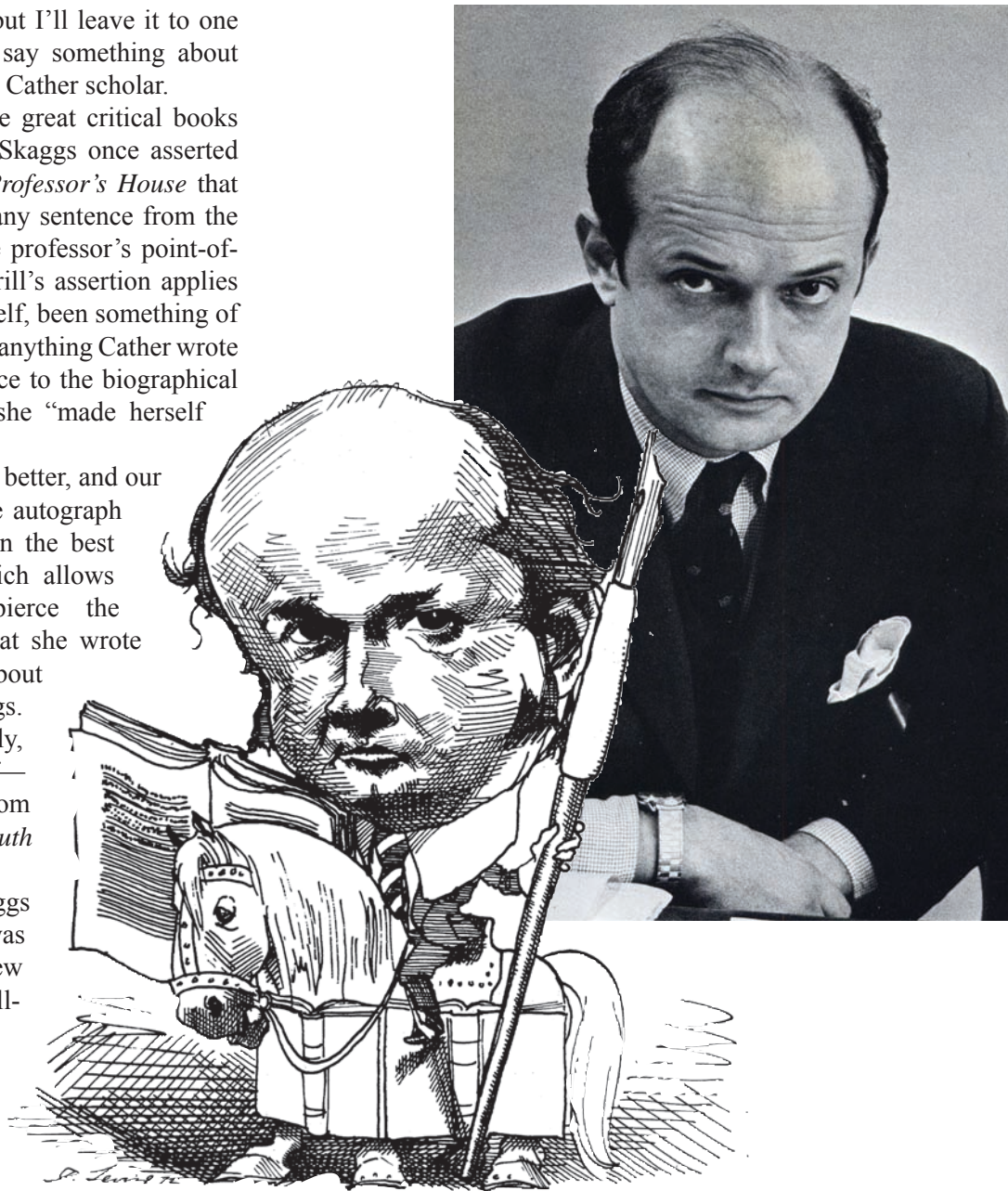
There is one more moment yet, but I'll leave it to one side for the time being in order to say something about Cather and the peculiarities of being a Cather scholar.

In what is for me still one of the great critical books on Cather, the late Merrill Maguire Skaggs once asserted of the third-person narrator in *The Professor's House* that "we cannot entirely or naively trust any sentence from the narrator who largely speaks from the professor's point-of-view" (67). It seems to me that Merrill's assertion applies abundantly to Cather too. I have, myself, been something of a continuing skeptic toward just about anything Cather wrote about herself, especially with reference to the biographical period between 1896 and 1918 as she "made herself born" as a writer.

Trust is one thing, but knowing is better, and our ongoing discovery of more and more autograph letters by and to Cather moves us in the best direction. That direction is one which allows us—Cather's own scholars—to pierce the dissimulations and half-truths of what she wrote about herself, regarding herself, and about the circumstances of her own makings. Utterly key to such questions, certainly, are her relations with Alfred A. Knopf—both before and after she moved from Houghton Mifflin to Knopf with *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920).

Here again, Professor Skaggs appears in my story. When she was organizing her brilliant 2005 Drew Cather Symposium—an event well-detailed in *Willa Cather: New Facts, New Glimpses, Revisions*, a volume she coedited with John Murphy—Merrill directed each of us, her invited speakers, toward those elements of the Drew collection that she thought would most interest us. In my case, knowing that I had just completed an archive-based biography of Alice Munro, Merrill directed me toward the correspondence between Joan Crane, who was in the late-1970s compiling her *Willa Cather: A Bibliography* (1982), and Frederick Baldwin Adams, Jr., at one time Director of the Pierpont Morgan Museum, a lifelong bibliophile and early collector of Cather's works. It was a relation previously unknown to me, but given my interests, it proved one I found to be fascinating.

Another moment: In the midst of this research, I ran across a letter—written on 16 July 1979—in which Crane writes about a near mistake Adams had caught for her and comments that "I do not want to give Mr. Knopf apoplexy



Pictured above: Peter S. Prescott in 1968 and as depicted by David Levine in 1972 for the cover of *Soundings: Encounters with Contemporary Books*. Images courtesy Anne Lake Prescott and Antonia Prescott.

before he has let me read his personal correspondence with Willa Cather, as he kindly said he would do." When I read that for the first time in 2005 it had been some years since I had looked at the Cather-related materials in the Knopf collection at the Ransom Center at the University of Texas, but I knew that scholars had no awareness of "Mr. Knopf's personal correspondence with Willa Cather." Equally, I knew from having looked at the Ransom that only a few letters from Alfred to Cather were there and that the correspondence



was between Cather and Blanche Knopf. My interest arose and certainly was piqued.

Through my Munro connections at Knopf, I inquired about the status of a biography of Alfred A. Knopf. I learned that Susan Sheehan—a *New Yorker* writer—had begun a book in the 1970s, interviewing people, compiling materials, and the like. She gave the project up, but sold her research materials to Prescott. Somewhere in the midst of these inquiries, I discovered that Richard Harris had also run across these facts and, in his own work around 1999-2000 connected to his scholarly edition of *One of Ours*, had begun searching for these letters and even found and spoken to Prescott himself. Prescott, wanting to keep the letters confidential, was not willing to let Harris see them. These things stood until 2009, when I picked up the trail again and made further inquiries at Knopf, eventually locating John Thornton, a New York writer and agent now at work on the Knopf biography. He sent me to Anne Lake Prescott, Peter Prescott's widow; Mr. Prescott died in 2004. Not incidentally, Anne Prescott is also the Helen Goodhart Altschul Professor of English at Barnard College, a scholar of the Renaissance, Edmund Spenser, and Sir Philip Sidney. One of ours, you might say. In July 2009, Richard and I were able to visit with Anne Prescott in New York where she allowed us to copy her copies of the Cather-Knopf correspondence—some 1,600 pages in all. At the same time, she let us see his papers connected to the project and, finally, let us have the beginnings (about 165 manuscript pages) of his biography of Knopf. Ironically, it gets only to the point in Knopf's life when he met Cather.

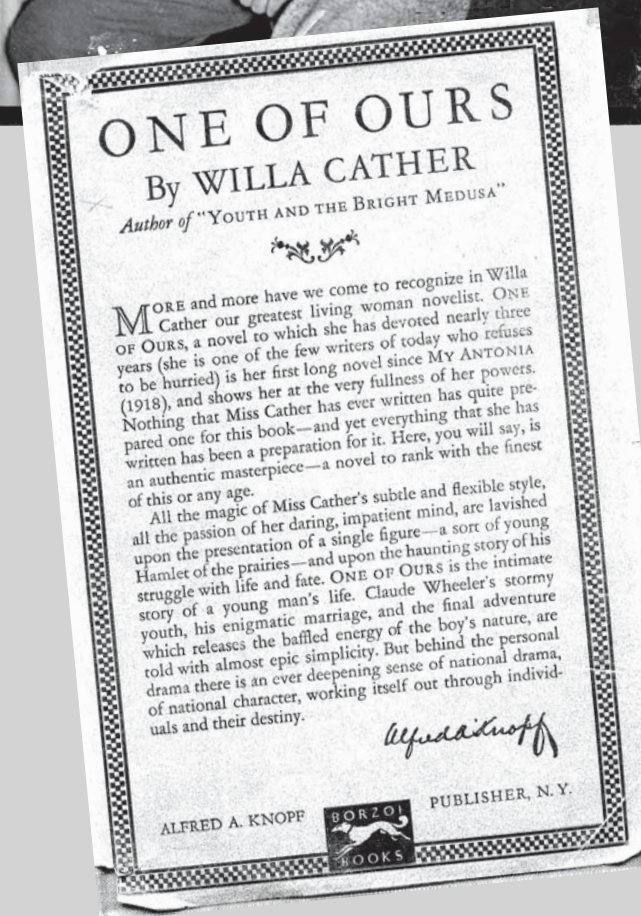
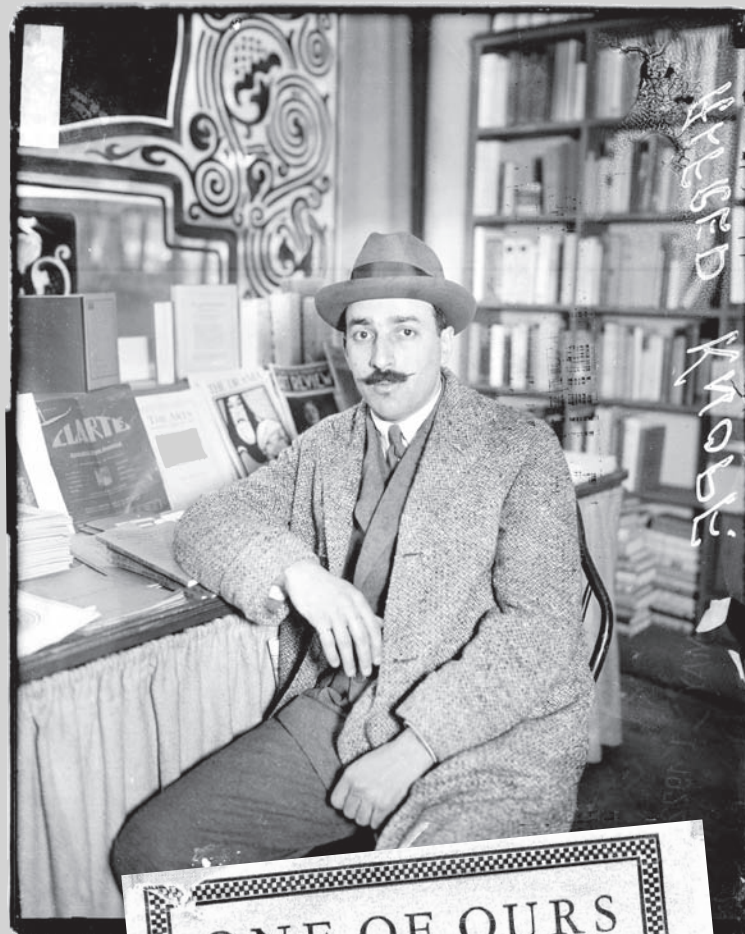
Concurrently, and unknown to us, Andrew Jewell located the original letters. They are held as part of the Barbara Dobkin Collection in New York City, available for reading in a spacious and comfortable reading room at 712 Fifth Avenue. Andy and Tom Gallagher have compiled an inventory, one that lists 931 separate items, including about 250 autograph Cather letters.

WORKS CITED

Prescott, Peter S. Personal Journal. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Skaggs, Merrill Maguire. *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990. Print.

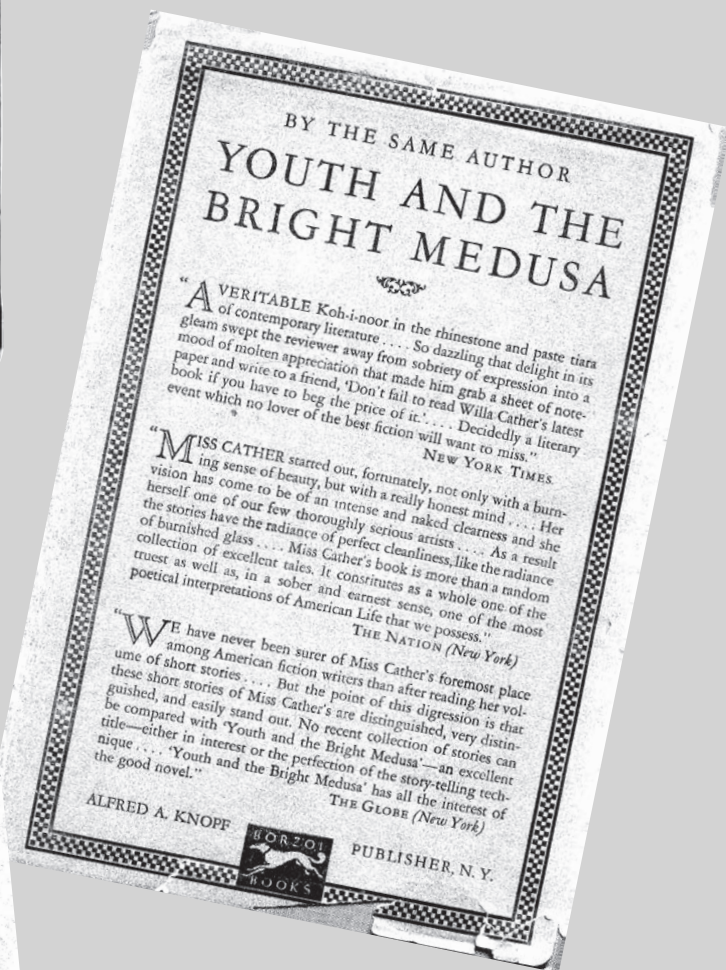
Thacker, Robert. "My Gratitude is in Excess of Mere Manners to Express": Facts, Gossip, and the Foundation of the Adams-Crane Correspondence." *Willa Cather: New Facts, New Glimpses, Revisions*. Ed. John J. Murphy and Merrill Maguire Skaggs. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2008. 244-51. Print.



Pictured left: Alfred A. Knopf in Chicago in 1922.
Photo from the Chicago Daily News collection,
Chicago History Museum.

The Newly Discovered Cather – Alfred A. Knopf Correspondence and *One of Ours*

RICHARD C. HARRIS



Pictured above: the front and back faces of the jacket for the original publication of *One of Ours*. Edith Lewis wrote the first draft of the front cover jacket text and Alfred A. Knopf suggested changes. On the back, Knopf placed excerpts from past reviews—at Cather's request.

In *Willa Cather Living* Edith Lewis asserts, “Next to writing her novels, Willa Cather’s choice of Alfred Knopf as a publisher influenced her career, I think, more than any other action she ever took” (115). The recently discovered Cather-Knopf correspondence clearly substantiates that assertion. The material will doubtless be mined for some time to come as Cather scholars explore both the personal and professional aspects of the Cather-Knopf relationship. While the collection includes two letters from 1919, one of which involves Cather’s attempt to arrange a meeting with Alfred Knopf, the collection really begins with the year 1921. The following discussion focuses on the correspondence having to do specifically with the period between 1921 and 1923, the pre-and post-publication period of *One of Ours*, the first of Willa Cather’s novels published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

This correspondence in some cases further documents events with which we are already somewhat familiar—for example, Fanny Butcher’s role in convincing Cather to change the title of the novel from “Claude” to “One of Ours.” In other cases the correspondence reveals interesting information not previously known to Cather scholars, e.g., Cather’s having changed the title for book two of *One of Ours* from “Old Falsehoods” to “Enid” (WC to AK, 26 Aug. 1921).¹ Most interestingly, however, the hundreds of pages of correspondence document the fascinating relationship between author and publisher and provide yet more information on Cather the professional writer.

Although we may never know the truth about how Knopf became Cather’s publisher—James Woodress calls Cather’s account of how that happened “another piece of autobiographical fiction” (317)—Cather’s personal and professional relationship with Alfred and Blanche Knopf clearly did



7 September, 1921

Miss Willa Sibbert Cather
Red Cloud, Nebraska

Dear Miss Cather:

Thank you for your letter of September first. I am afraid that my judgment about titles for this novel is not worth much any more. Anyway, ONE OF OURS doesn't move me either for or against and you may regard me as entirely satisfied to use CLAUDE if that is absolutely what you want. I don't think Fanny Butcher's reaction is any different from what that of ninety-nine people out of a hundred's would be, but what you said in your previous letter is pretty convincing. Of course you will understand that I am entirely willing to use ONE OF OURS if that is what you want.

I am hoping to get the balance of the manuscript within a week, and am looking forward eagerly to reading it. Meanwhile I hope the printer is starting to set the first part.

With kind regards, I am

Yours sincerely,

ALFRED A. KNOPF, Inc.

President

That Cather respected Knopf's attitude toward book publishing and appreciated his respect for her work is clear throughout the correspondence of this period. She stubbornly fought against but then took his advice about re-naming "Claude," and in a 21 September 1921 letter she notes that she has taken all his suggestions about the last section of the book. In a 26 August 1922 letter to Knopf, she says that his having ordered a second printing of *One of Ours*, even before the release of the first printing, demonstrates his great faith in her, a confidence that Cather finds inspiring. The letters also reveal how much she treasured his friendship and how much she depended on him and his publishing house to see her as special and to take care of her. For example, in a letter simply dated "Sunday night"—how we appreciate Cather's tendency to date her letters thus!—she thanks Knopf for seriously listening to her recount her troubles a few nights before. In another letter dated "Saturday" she mentions a picture of Blanche and a bottle of Riesling that Alfred has sent and notes, humorously, that she and Edith Lewis, having begun

From Claude to One of Ours: Determining the title of Cather's novel is a story unto itself, well documented in the letters between Cather and Knopf.

become central to her career. The correspondence from 1921 to 1923 sheds light on a number of topics, including (1) Cather's trust in Knopf as her publisher, as well as her rather demanding attitude, (2) Cather's stated intentions in writing *One of Ours*, (3) the debate over the title of the book, and (4) Cather's involvement in the preparation and promotion of the volume.²

the bottle the night before, still have enough left for this night. She assures Knopf that this is evidence that she is not a heavy drinker. On 6 April 1922 Knopf writes to Cather, who apparently was planning a vacation of sorts and had consulted him for his advice on where she might go: "Mr. Mencken asks me to tell you to avoid Maryland at all costs." Atlantic City, however, will be OK.

While Cather had nothing but affection and respect for Knopf, the correspondence also makes it clear that she was not reluctant to tell him exactly what she expected from him and his staff and what she thought about the service Knopf,

Inc. was providing. This, of course, was a tendency clearly documented in her correspondence with Ferris Greenslet, her previous editor at Houghton Mifflin. For example, in September 1921 Cather requests that Knopf, Inc. send a photograph of her to the leader of one of the Nebraska literary clubs at which she will be speaking. When she learns that the photograph had not been sent as requested, she writes to Knopf, criticizing his publicity department. In a return letter Knopf explains that the person assigned to send the photograph had failed to do so, and he assures Cather that he *himself* has taken care of the matter (21 September 1921). Indicative of the developing relationship are the salutations to these letters. Initially Cather's letters begin "Dear Mr. Knopf"; later, they most often begin "Dear Alfred." Alfred's letters to her, however, almost always begin "Dear Miss Cather."

Cather also requests time and again that Knopf arrange to have copies of her books, books by other authors, or copies of reviews sent to her or to friends. While it is understandable that books published by Knopf could easily be provided, her requests—or demands—also run to other matters. For example, in a long August 1922 letter, Cather tells Knopf that Dorothy Canfield Fisher has not sent a copy of her review of *One of Ours*. She instructs Knopf to *call* Fisher in Rome, at once to tell her to send a copy as soon as possible (11 Aug. 1922). Again in August of 1922 Cather writes to Mr. Spier of Knopf, Inc., who is handling publicity for her books, telling him to be sure to have specially printed blue stationery ready for her when she returns from Breadloaf, Vermont. On August 24 she laments the stationery's having been sent to New Brunswick by mistake and launches into what she admits is a tirade. She concludes with a request for two dozen packages of film. On August 26 she tells Spier that she has received the stationery, which, in fact, had not been mailed to New Brunswick, but which, having been poorly packed, has arrived a poor mess. It could not have been unusable, however, for she adds that no envelopes have been included and asks that ten dozen be sent immediately.

In late March 1923 she requests that Knopf, Inc. send her a new typewriter; a reply dated April 4 informs Cather that a Number 5 Oliver typewriter will be sent and also, in response to a question from Cather, advises her on the best way of dealing with her baggage on her impending trip to Europe. In several subsequent letters Cather repeatedly complains that the typewriter has not yet arrived and asks for an explanation. In another letter dated "Sunday" [17 Sept. 1922], although she is in New York, she asks Knopf to please tell someone who is trying to contact her that she is in Philadelphia and is unavailable. She often asks Knopf to deal with various types of nuisances with which she herself does not want to bother.

The letters directly related to *One of Ours* provide a particularly interesting portrait of Cather as professional writer. On 12 January 1921, Cather had written to Ferris Greenslet, announcing her intention to give the manuscript of her new novel "Claude" to Knopf (Houghton Library, Harvard U). Cather's first letter to Knopf regarding her work is dated 24 January 1921. There Cather insists that Knopf and his staff not reveal to anyone that she is working on a novel that involves the recent war. She tells Knopf that this new book is about a boy's life and that is of primary importance. In a November 1921 interview with Eva Mahoney, Cather would describe her new novel as the story of "a red-headed prairie boy" (*Willa Cather in Person* 39), and after *One of Ours* was published and reviews appeared, she would continue to express frustration that too many critics had refused to see the novel as the story of that boy.

Two letters in particular reveal the details of the "battle" between Cather and Knopf over the title of the book. Cather, of course, made it abundantly clear the title she wanted was "Claude." In a letter dated 26 August [1921], Cather, writing from Toronto, informs Knopf that she has some sad news for him: the title of the novel will have to be "Claude"; that is the only title she will accept for the book. She has considered another title for several months, and she absolutely hates it, adding that it sounds like a title for an Alice Brown book.³ Since this is a book she is writing for herself, Cather declares, she doesn't want it spoiled by a title she doesn't like.

Cather then presents several arguments for the use of "Claude." First, "Antonia" had not seemed like a promising title, especially since some readers were unsure as to how even to pronounce the name, but that title had been fine. Secondly, for low-brow readers "Claude" will be just fine; high-brows ought to figure that Cather knew what she was doing when she gave the book that title. If an accomplished, well-known writer (note that Cather confidently places herself in that category) puts a title on a book, readers and critics should realize that he/she had a good reason for doing so. In addition, Cather argues, in *What Maisie Knew* Henry James had named a major character "Sir Claude," and there seems to have been no objection to that. Finally, Cather asserts her title is not a sissy title like "Reggie"; rather, it has a clumsy romantic quality, which is just what Claude Wheeler has. Whether or not anyone else likes the title, the title will be "Claude," Cather declares, and that is that.

In that same letter Cather mentions that she is leaving for Red Cloud. It was on that trip, during a stop in Chicago, that she talked with Fanny Butcher, who finally convinced her that "Claude" simply would not do. In her account of the conversation she and Cather had about the title, Butcher later recounted that her advice as both bookseller and reviewer apparently made a strong impression on Cather (364). (For



6 February, 1922

Miss Willa Cather
5 Bank Street
New York

Dear Miss Cather:

I am not altogether satisfied with Miss Lewis' description of ONE OF OURS and I have changed it somewhat as you can see from the enclosed. I have had to do this hurriedly and I think it can be improved -- perhaps by you or by Miss Lewis. The second paragraph I think is first rate -- it tells all that should be told about the book itself. What we need is an effective preliminary trumpeting as we can cook up. It is my opinion that the same text can be used and should be used for both the catalog and the jacket and that the extra paragraph which Miss Lewis supplied for the catalog would be better omitted.

I do not know if I can make myself clear, but this is what I mean. In the case of YOURS AND THE BRIGHT MEDUSA it was very important to get people interested in what was in the book; in the case of ONE OF OURS I think to start with that our job is to shout about the book as arbitrarily and as superlatively as we can, simply letting your admirers know that it is here and that we think it is great.

I have usually with good effect signed with my autograph the catalog and jacket of about one book a season at the outside. I would like to do this for your book if Miss Lewis would not object to my lifting stuff of hers for the purpose. I want to put over ONE OF OURS just as personally as I can, not only because I think your work is ripe for this, but because of my great enthusiasm for the book itself.

I have asked Mr. Bragdon to design a binding, and hope to be able to show you something when we return. Meanwhile you be thinking about this.

With kind regards, I am

Yours sincerely,
ALFRED A. KNOPF, Inc.

President.

P.S. Copy for contents and title page received O.K.

while (and which she hated vehemently a week before), Cather adds that this title does have certain merits: it has a number of "O's," it sounds nice and has a mystical quality, and it is easy to pronounce. Several subsequent letters reveal that Cather becomes more comfortable with the new title and that Knopf is greatly relieved that she has agreed to it. He writes on September 7th that he is not particularly enthusiastic about "One of Ours" either, informs Cather that if she really wants him to use the original title, he will do so, but adds that 99 out of 100 people would not like "Claude."

Knopf's comments in this letter, as in many others, exemplify his wish to please Cather, a tendency she obviously found very appealing. What really impressed Cather and others, however, was Knopf's innovative and aggressive marketing of their works. Cather's two major objections to Houghton Mifflin's handling of her books were what she considered unimaginative production and less-than-successful promotion of her work. As was noted previously, a number of letters to Greenslet from 1918 until her break with the Boston publisher in early 1921 convey her dissatisfaction

Knopf recommends enhancements to Edith Lewis's description of One of Ours in order to "shout about the book as arbitrarily and as superlatively as we can."

Knopf's account of what happened, see "Miss Cather" [*The Art of Willa Cather* 206]). At any rate, on September 1st, only six days after she had told Knopf in no uncertain terms that he would have to accept "Claude" as the title for her novel, Cather wrote to him on stationery from the Hotel Clarke in Hastings, Nebraska, that "Claude" still seemed to be the right title but that Butcher had convinced her that it was not a wise title. Declaring that she will be satisfied with "One of Ours," an alternative title that she has been thinking about for a

with the appearance of the volumes and her belief that Houghton Mifflin did not market her works aggressively enough. She often pointed out to Greenslet the strategies employed by other publishers—Alfred Knopf was one she no doubt had in mind—and encouraged him to convince the publicity department to follow suit. As David Porter and others have shown, with Knopf Cather was, from the outset, directly involved in the design, preparation, and marketing of her books; she had a voice and she did not hesitate to make her opinions and wishes known.

This aspect of her relationship with Alfred Knopf and Knopf, Inc. is obvious in much of the correspondence from 1921 on. Again focusing only on that correspondence

related to *One of Ours*, we find, for example, that Cather, having received a proof sheet of the title page, deems it excellent, but she is quite dissatisfied with the proof of the original dedication page for the new book, which is dedicated to her mother, asserting that the sort of type that had been chosen was not good enough for anyone's mother (WC to Josephy, undated). In a handwritten note scribbled on the sample title page she is returning, Cather asks where the production department found such ugly looking type.

The level of detail that Cather addressed in the making of the book is nowhere revealed more obviously than in a 9 January 1922 letter in which she tells Mr. Spier that she is very pleased with the specimen pages she has received for *One of Ours* but that he *must* instruct the printer to put spaces between dashes and the words that precede and follow them. A month before the official publication date of the book, Cather notes errors she has found in the edition; Knopf answers, apologizing and promising that they will be corrected in the third printing, a second printing already having been ordered (AK to WC, 21 Aug. 1922).

Cather replies on August 26th that she will want to see proofs of the third printing to make certain that in correcting the original text the printers don't make even more errors.

Finally, Cather's direct involvement in the publicity for and marketing of her book is quite obvious. Again, as Cather scholars have noted in the last decade in particular, Willa Cather was no ivory tower artist, no aesthete interested only in art for the sake of art. She was a very ambitious *professional* writer. Numerous letters from 1921 to 1923 attest to her interest in and concern with this aspect of her literary life. In early 1921 she writes to Knopf that Sinclair Lewis's remarks about her in a lecture he had recently given in Omaha (see *Willa Cather in Person* 24-25) were very generous and that she was especially pleased that he had encouraged the audience to buy all her books (14 April [1921]). Four months later Cather urges Knopf to explore the possibility of serial publication of "Claude" (26 Aug. 1921); he answers immediately that he will contact the editors

6 April, 1922

Dear Miss Cather:

Mr. Mencken asks me to tell you to avoid Maryland at all costs. The weather he says would be no better now than Long Beach and the places he could name would be attractive only to fishermen. He recommends Atlantic City, for which I am sure you will present him with the order of merit.

Mrs. Knopf joins me in very kind regards, and we both hope that you are getting along first rate.

Yours sincerely,

Miss Willa Cather
Eye and Ear Infirmary
Second Avenue
New York

Knopf passes along useful advice from H. L. Mencken, an early supporter of Cather's work.

of four periodicals to see if there is any interest (26 Aug. 1921). Serial publication, of course, did not happen, as no magazine, it seems, was interested, one sending a rejection of Knopf's proposal within two days. Perhaps it was difficult for Knopf to interest someone in a book the subject matter of which he was forbidden to reveal. In a letter simply dated "Saturday" (Andy Jewell has tentatively dated this letter as early February 1922), Cather acknowledges the difficulty she has created by insisting that no one know that her new novel involves the war. There Cather informs Knopf that she is enclosing the text for the dust jacket, indicating that it has been written by Edith Lewis and noting that Lewis says it was quite difficult to write an advertisement for a book when the author insists that no one be allowed to know what the book is about.



M04

November 20, 1922.

Miss Willa Cather,
5 Bank Street,
New York City.

Dear Miss Cather:

THE LOST LADY is altogether superb - as fine a thing certainly as you have done, if not the finest. My enthusiasm for it, you see, is limitless; I think you are a very wonderful writer.

Mrs. Knopf and I both agree that you ought to be restrained by law, if necessary, from publishing this book with anything else. It belongs alone, exactly as Ethan Frome belongs alone, and you are very unjust to it and to yourself, I think, for feeling otherwise.

As regards serialisation: I should advise you to let it go if you can get a very substantial price and if you want the money. Otherwise, it seems to me altogether too lovely a thing to let any magazine editor I know read, except in book form. "Pearls" and "swine" and all that -. Other people may not agree with me here and you can decide, but in any case I think it would be foolish to let Van Boren have first look at it.

My very hearty congratulations!

Yours sincerely,

ALFRED A. KNOPF, Inc.

K. BO

was the source for the fictional David Gerhardt in her novel. In other words, Cather, in a fashion very typical of authors or movie actors today, "made the rounds" in publicizing herself and her work. She wrote Knopf on 21 September 1921 that she did not enjoy the lectures and interviews but that she was doing this for Knopf, Inc.; Alfred Knopf answered on the same day that he hoped she knew how much they appreciated the publicity she was generating. Various subsequent letters record the efforts of the Knopf publicity department to arrange pieces on Cather in the New York papers, to provide copies of the novel for potential reviewers and other readers, and to make arrangements for reviews by Fisher and others. One letter of note reveals Cather's request that Knopf be sure to arrange for a review by Sinclair Lewis; she says she is certain he will write a good one—ironic in that his review, a scathing attack on the novel, would disappoint her greatly.

Despite her disappointment at negative reviews, Cather was delighted with Knopf's commitment to her and to *One of Ours*. He was showing a confidence in and appreciation of her and her work that she felt Houghton Mifflin had not, and

he was promoting her work as they had not. Knopf provided encouragement and gave Cather confidence. For example, in a 21 September 1921 telegram to her, Knopf wrote: "Just finished the book. Congratulations. It is masterly, a perfectly gorgeous novel, far ahead of anything you have ever yet done, and far ahead of anything I have read in a very long while. With it your position should be secure forever. I shall be proud to have my name associated with it" (Woodress 319-20). Given some of the reviews that would appear a year later when *One of Ours* was published, especially those of Mencken and Lewis, Cather's reply to the telegram, written from Red Cloud two days later, is notable. She tells Knopf

Cather and Knopf weighed the benefits of serialization for A Lost Lady, a book Knopf here calls "as fine a thing certainly as you have done, if not the finest."

The year 1921 saw Cather submitting to numerous interviews, notably one with Latrobe Carroll that appeared in *The Bookman* in May 1921 and another with Eva Mahoney that was published in the *Lincoln Sunday Star* in November. More than a half dozen other articles appeared on her in various Nebraska papers during the year. Shortly after the publication of *One of Ours* the next fall, Cather revealed in a lengthy *New York Herald* article that David Hochstein

that his enthusiastic response has taken a load off her mind, and adds that if *One of Ours* is not a good book she will have to look for something else to do because her instincts, theories, and experience tell her it is.

Whatever certain critics had to say, Cather was also delighted with the sales of *One of Ours*. Highbrows like Heywood Broun might dismiss the novel, she declared, but sales figures said the readers were interested nonetheless. She was delighted when Knopf informed her a month before publication that for a printing of 15,000 copies he already had 11,000 orders. At the same time, he added, he had already ordered another 10,000 copies to be printed (21 Aug. 1922). Cather replied on the 26th that she certainly hoped he wouldn't be stuck with unbought copies. The next day Knopf wrote her that 12,000 copies had already been sent out. By the end of December he was able to write that over 35,000 copies had been sold in less than four months (29 Dec. 1922). On 14 May 1923 Knopf would cable Cather in Ville d'Avray, France, with news that *One of Ours* had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Cather's reply, a manuscript letter dated "Ville d'Avray, May 16," expresses delight at having received his cable and mentions that so many cables had arrived on the 14th and 15th that the Hambourgs' handyman was afraid another war had broken out. Typically, she also hopes the publicity about the prize will stimulate sales and thus will benefit both of them.

The success of *One of Ours* radically changed Willa Cather's life. She was still receiving royalties from Houghton Mifflin, but the earnings statements from Knopf, Inc. for 1922 and 1923 make that point abundantly clear. A 24 February 1923 Income Tax Return Statement from Knopf notes that Knopf had paid her \$1,301.82 in 1922. A 3 March 1924 letter from Knopf, Inc. informs her, "We are to-day reporting to the Commissioner of the United States Internal Revenue Office, for royalties earned during the year 1923, the sum of \$19,470.10," equivalent in today's terms to approximately \$245,000.

Cather had successfully—very successfully—escaped the cornfields of Nebraska. From now on she would take her place, beside Edith Wharton, as one of *les grandes dames* of American fiction. Alfred A. Knopf had played a major role in making that happen. As Edith Lewis comments, "[H]e gave her great encouragement and absolute liberty to write exactly as she chose—protected her in every way he could from outside pressures and interruptions—and made evident, not only to her but to the world in general, his great admiration and belief in her" (115-16). During his tenure as head of the company he founded, Alfred Knopf would publish numerous Pulitzer Prize winners and Nobel laureates. It seems there were none whom he appreciated, respected, and admired more than Willa Cather.

NOTES

1. While Cather's tendency to provide incomplete dates for her letters has been frustrating for scholars, in this collection her correspondence received at the office of Knopf, Inc. was routinely stamped with the date on which the letter was received. Thus, for example, the letter regarding her acceptance of the title "One of Ours," which is simply dated "Sept 1st," can be verified as having been written on September 1, 1921, by the Knopf stamp that indicates that it was received on "Sep 7 1921." In other cases a letter simply dated by the day of the week can be assigned a date of composition by noting the date received on the Knopf stamp and using a perpetual calendar. Letters written to the Knopfs at their residence often cannot be positively dated.

2. For Alfred Knopf's account of the events leading to Cather's change of publishers and the publication of *One of Ours*, see 'Miss Cather.'

3. Alice Brown (1856-1948) was described by one source as New England's most distinguished native spinster writer (<http://www.seacoastnh.com/women/brown.html/>). She was also one of the country's most prolific writers: in the decade before the publication of *One of Ours*, Brown published more than a dozen books. Typical Brown titles were *The Rose of Hope* and *The Day of His Youth*.

WORKS CITED

- Butcher, Fanny. *Many Lives—One Love*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. Print.
- Cather, Willa. Letter to Ferris Greenslet. 12 January 1921. Houghton Library. Harvard U.
- . *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*. Ed. L. Brent Bohlke. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986. Print.
- Cather-Knopf Correspondence. The Barbara Dobkin Collection. New York.
- Knopf, Alfred A. "Miss Cather," *The Art of Willa Cather*. Ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1974. 205-24. Print.
- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987. Print.

Alfred A. Knopf correspondence images are courtesy of the Barbara Dobkin Collection, New York City.



Focusing on Cather's Readers, Past and Present

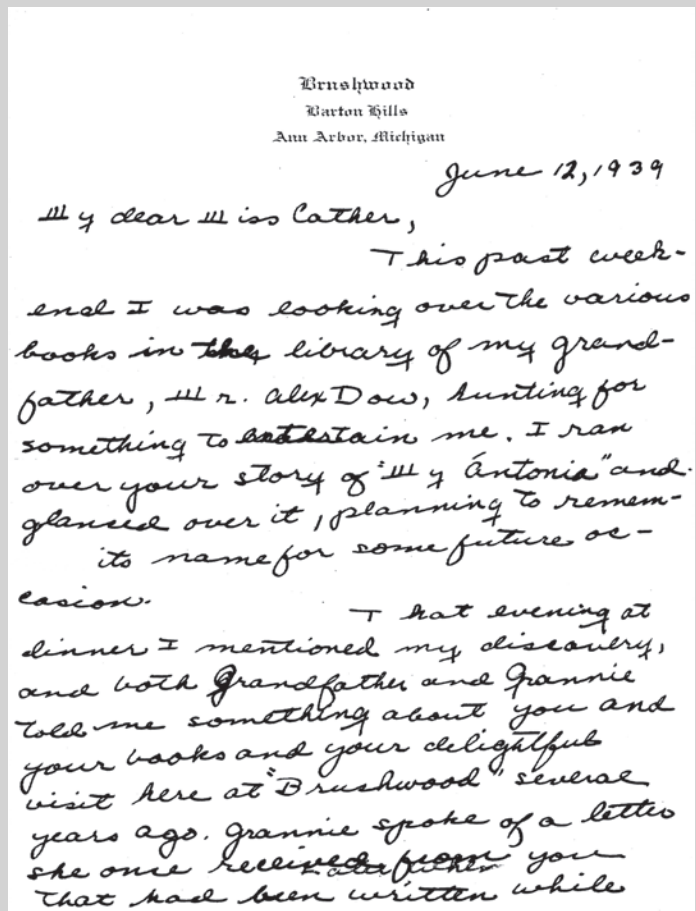
CHARLES JOHANNINGSMEIER

To this little house [E.D.E.N. Southworth's, in Washington, D.C.] for many years each mail brought appreciative letters from thousands of admirers, from young women who aspired to this wonderful craft, or from those who merely worshipped from afar, and who declared that her novels were their spiritual and intellectual food. And if this is not fame, what is it, please? How many of us ever think of writing to Henry James when we approve of him, or beg him to be merciful and recall his heroines to life when they perish, or care very much whether they perish or not? There is an element of unabashed romance in the untutored mind, and of hearty sympathy that we certainly lose in the course of social and mental evolution.

(Cather, "Literature in the Capital," 1901).

In December 1938, a 15-year-old girl named Jean Keppy Winslow drove across Nebraska with her mother and stepfather, en route from their home in Denver to her grandparents' house near Ann Arbor, Michigan. Although at that time she had no idea who Willa Cather was, Cather was soon to be involved in a very interesting episode in this teenager's life, beginning with her grandmother's recommendation just six months later that she read *My Ántonia*. Eventually, by a strange turn of events, this short-lived reading experience would lead Jean, 71 years later, to reread *My Ántonia*, seek out and read other Cather works, and be interviewed by me about her reading and her life.

How—and why—did these recent events transpire? In large part, the answers to these questions have to do with my recent research project of investigating Cather's readers from 1900 up to her death in 1947. When most people think of Cather's "readers" during this time, they usually think of her intellectual friends and acquaintances, professional reviewers, or famous writers such as Sinclair Lewis, Langston Hughes, and others. The reactions of these readers to Willa Cather's works are generally well-documented; either they are indexed in various databases because they were published in newspapers, magazines, or books, or



their names are listed in archive finding lists under the term "Correspondents." Such letters are typically used to fill gaps in Cather's biography, reveal prototypes of certain characters, or indicate how renowned people recognized and applauded the artistic complexity of her works. As a New Historicist, though, I am most interested in understanding what impact Cather and her works had on a broader group of readers and, indeed, on American culture as a whole, not just on a relatively small and unrepresentative sampling of readers. The question guiding my research has thus been: "What did less formally educated, less 'trained' readers make of Cather's works during the years when she was still alive?" To begin answering this question, in the fall of 2007 I started trying to locate examples of Cather's fan mail. Eventually, this led me to talk to the adult Jean Keppy Winslow, now Jean Spero (and hereafter referred to as "Jean"), a retired Human Ecology professor from Otterbein College in Ohio, about the letter she wrote to Cather seventy years earlier, on June 12, 1939 (reproduced above). In the course of my research, too, staff members of the Willa Cather Foundation, knowing of my interest in this type of reader, have passed on to me two more recent letters to Cather, dated 2005 and 2009, respectively. Here I would like to show how all three of

passing by "Brushwood" on a^{2.}
train.

Later when reading the story of Antonia and her life on the Nebraska plains (for nothing could prevent me from reading it now) I realized how much I must have missed by not being here at your visit (for then I was only a little over a year old)

Towards the end of the book I got a bit mix up concerning the time in which the story was placed, and in asking Grannie she said, "Why don't you write Miss Cather and tell her your difficulties."

Now, even though my troubles are solved, I just want to tell you how unexpressably lovely the tale is. Your description of the bleak winters of Nebraska reminded me so much of the country we passed through once in an automobile,

[1939, June 2]
3.

Brushwood
Warton Hills
Ann Arbor, Michigan

though ours was such a short glimpse of it. From the very first I knew Tony and loved and hated her along with Jim.

I indeed, all my plans of the next few weeks shall be shattered, for my only hope is to read more of your stories.

Grannie sends her sincerest regards and hopes to be kindly remembered, and I am sure Grandfather would do the same if he were here at present.

With my best wishes for your health and happiness, and hoping when I have finished all of your present works there will be another in store, I remain,
your trust admirer,
Jean Keppy Winslow

these letters illuminate aspects of Cather's works that have seldom before been examined but which I believe deserve serious consideration.

Cather herself highly valued hearing from "ordinary" readers of her books; arguably, she enjoyed their letters just as much, if not more, than those from more prominent readers. In May 1944, Cather wrote to her brother Roscoe that she had saved three suitcases full of letters from various luminaries; one year later, in May 1945, she told him she also had two suitcases full of letters from ordinary readers. The latter, she emphasized, constituted her best and most valuable royalties of all. Unfortunately, just a little over two years later, shortly after Cather's death, Edith Lewis sent to Carrie Miner Sherwood, Cather's lifelong friend, a package containing all the letters Cather had received from soldiers regarding *One of Ours* "that I have been able to find." In her letter accompanying this package, Lewis wrote, "Willa had one small suit case [sic] full of letters that she had kept all carefully classified and marked. She used to say sometimes that she wondered if she would ever have time to read them over—though some of them, I know, she used to read over, when she had a quiet, peaceful interval." She added, "Both time and space were always great difficulties—there is so

little space in a New York apartment, and there were so many letters and papers of all kinds that she had to keep track of—and it took time and energy to keep them in order. She must have had many, many more soldiers' letters than these—in fact I know she had—but she must have decided at some time that she could not keep them all."

For obvious reasons, I was very disappointed to learn from this letter from Lewis, held by the Willa Cather Foundation, that in the last few years before her death Cather apparently discarded one suitcase full of letters from the type of readers I am most interested in. Nonetheless, after I first read this letter in November 2007, I focused my energies on tracking down as many of the letters as I could from the one suitcase-full that apparently had survived. By the spring of 2008 I had located and examined 77 such letters, all in the collections of the Foundation and Archives & Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

This, I thought, was a pretty good start; however, I was almost certain that there had to be more letters to fill up one whole suitcase. It was with high hopes, then, that I gave a talk about Cather's fan mail at the "Cather's Circles" colloquium at UNL in June 2008, because I thought it might elicit some leads from scholars about where I might



find a few more of these letters, which I supposed would be hidden in scattered archives across the country. Imagine my surprise—and delight—when, after my talk, a man approached me with a folder full of such letters and told me, in response to my astonished reaction, “Oh, we’ve got lots more of these at our house.” Reading his name tag, I realized he was Jim Southwick, son of Cather’s beloved niece, Helen Cather Southwick, and this was how he had come into possession of these letters. That very afternoon I put him in touch with Kay Walter, Director of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln libraries, and before the evening was out he had agreed to donate all the letters he had—eventually I would count 145—to Archives & Special Collections at UNL. As one might imagine, I was absolutely thrilled by this turn of events. Added to the 77 letters I had already found, this would give me a total of 222 letters to work with—a quantity of letters that most likely filled the “small suit case” Lewis had mentioned.

Why, though, should anyone be interested in such letters? After all, they rarely contain what most academics would regard as “sophisticated” interpretations of Cather’s works, and thus they don’t appear to add to our knowledge of the texts’ complexity or artistry. Yet, to me, they do this and much more. Indeed, I believe they add a whole new dimension to Cather studies and represent a new direction that I believe Cather scholars would do well to pursue in the future: how Cather’s works have impacted the world in various ways, one reader at a time. In recent years some Cather scholars have ventured into this topic and offered their hypotheses about the “cultural work” that Cather’s works performed, but thus far these assertions have been supported almost solely with rhetorical references to “Cather’s readers” or quotations from Cather’s texts, with no investigation into who her actual readers were or how they might have interacted with those texts. The actual readers’ responses contained in these letters can, I believe, help us rectify this situation. This type of work will, I hope, allow more Cather scholars to acknowledge that the “meaning” and “significance” of Cather’s short stories and novels are created not only by Cather, who wrote the words in them, or by well-trained academics, but also by less formally trained readers interacting with these texts in their own ways.

It is here, then, that Jean Keppy Winslow Spero needs to make her reappearance. How did I ever find a woman who had written to Cather in 1939 under her maiden name, which she no longer used? Well, the truth is that I didn’t find her; she was the one who made the initial contact with Andy Jewell, the Editor of the Willa Cather Archive at UNL. It was no accident that led her to do so, however; her contacting Andy Jewell was the direct result of the increased respect that the people at Archives & Special Collections at UNL has

accorded correspondents such as Jean. When Jim Southwick made his donation of fan letters to UNL, all involved agreed that more attention should be paid to these correspondents, and thus their names should be included in the finding aid of the Susan J. Rosowski Collection, where the letters were so fittingly placed. This in turn allowed Jean to find her 1939 letter when she Googled her maiden name in the fall of 2009.

Talking and corresponding with Jean on numerous occasions since that time has forcibly reminded me that each reader brings his or her own experiences to reading Cather, and that these in turn allow them to “personalize” their own readings of her works. In Jean’s case, behind her letter is a fascinating, complex history.

To uncover this history, I first turned to her original letter. What prompted Jean to write to Cather in 1939? As so many fans did, she spent much of her letter explaining to Cather the specific circumstances that prompted her putting pen to paper:

This past weekend I was looking over the various books in the library of my grandfather, Mr. Alex Dow, hunting for something to entertain me. I ran over your story of “My *Ántonia*” and glanced over it, planning to remember its name for some future occasion. That evening at dinner I mentioned my discovery, and both Grandfather and Grannie told me something about you and your books and your delightful visit here at “Brushwood” several years ago.

In ways, this letter is typical of many written to Cather: it not only tells how its author came to read one of Cather’s works, but it also reveals that word-of-mouth recommendations were as important then as they are now.

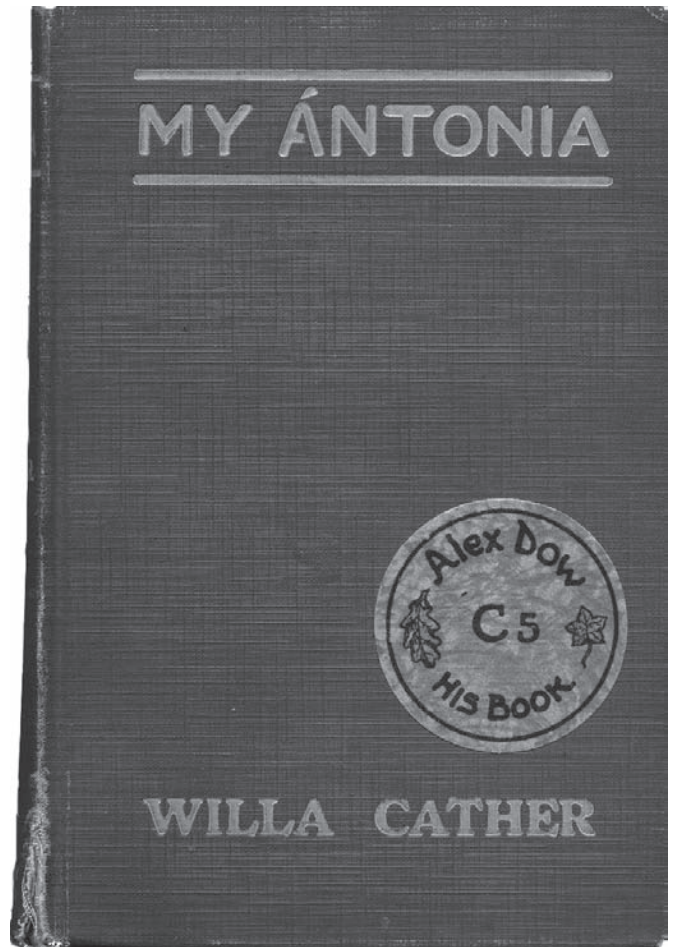
In addition, though, Jean’s letter revealed that this case of intergenerational book recommendation was quite exceptional, because “Grandfather” and “Grannie” were in fact acquaintances of Cather’s. When Cather had traveled to Ann Arbor in June 1924 to receive an honorary degree from the University of Michigan, she stayed with Jean’s grandfather—Alex Dow—and grandmother—Vivia Dow—at “Brushwood,” their large estate outside of the city. Grandfather Alex Dow, the long-time head of the Detroit Edison Company, was a leading Detroit businessman; he had also once been Henry Ford’s boss before the latter became involved in auto-making. Cather came to the Dows’ house because Mr. Dow was a major benefactor of the University of Michigan and Mrs. Dow was a friend of the university president’s wife; together they volunteered to host distinguished visitors at their home. It’s quite possible, too, that Mrs. Dow’s relationship with Cather began before 1924; Jean believes—but is not certain—that her grandmother had met Cather in Arizona a few years before this. The connection

was maintained as late as 1942, when Mr. Dow died and Cather sent Mrs. Dow a note of condolence.

Thus, when young Jean Winslow told her grandparents about finding *My Ántonia* on the shelves of their house library in 1939, it's little wonder that her grandmother highly recommended that Jean read it. Significantly, though, the book actually belonged to her grandfather, who appears to have both read it and highly valued it. A truly self-made man, Dow came to the U.S. at an early age from Scotland and attained only an eighth-grade education. Nonetheless, as Jean recalls, he "Read everything under the sun" and designated a substantial separate room at Brushwood as a library. He also promoted wide reading among others, frequently lending out books but regarding them so highly that, as Jean notes, he "got mad as hell if people didn't return them."

Fortunately for posterity, after the deaths of her grandfather and grandmother in the 1940s, Jean either asked for, or "snatched" her grandfather's copy of *My Ántonia* (whether the library included other works by Cather is still undetermined). Examination of this particular volume (see image to the right) reveals it is a 1918 first edition that is well-worn from multiple readings. On the title page, Jean's grandfather wrote, in cursive, "Alex Dow | Ann Arbor | March 24 | 1922," which indicates he had acquired it before Cather's visit in 1924 and felt called to "personalize" his copy. Interestingly enough, it is not signed by Cather; Jean surmises that having her do so probably just never occurred to her grandfather. The latter would have known that Cather's signature would have made the volume more valuable in monetary terms; his not having Cather sign the volume, I believe, signals that he appreciated its literary value more than its potential monetary value. In addition, a handmade sticker on the cover of the volume marks it as "Alex Dow | His Book," with "C5" written between these lines; Jean has explained to me that this would have referred to its location on her grandfather's library shelves.

Alex Dow treasured *My Ántonia* both before and after Cather came to visit his house. Such a finding contradicts any notion that Cather was—or is—a chiefly "women's author" (indeed, the majority of the fan letters Cather saved were from men). Dow liked this novel so well that he continued to think of it even years later, as shown by his clipping Cather's poem, "Poor Marty," from the *Literary Digest* magazine of May 1931 and pasting it to the front end papers. For some reason, when Dow read this poem, written by Cather as a tribute to her family's servant Marjorie Anderson (b. 1854 - d. 1924), it must have reminded Dow of something he had perceived in *My Ántonia*. My guess is that Dow's interest in the poem, described by Cather as "A lament for Martha, the old kitchenmaid, by her fellow servant, the stableman," in which he wonders who will do all of Marty's chores now



Jean Spero became the owner of her grandfather's copy of My Ántonia.

that she is dead, came not only from his being reminded by it of *Ántonia* herself, but also possibly from his own empathy toward—and concern about the treatment of—working-class women. This stemmed in part from the life history of his own sister, who had worked as a servant in Scotland but died at a young age shortly after rejoining her brother in the U.S. As is so often the case for readers, then, it is quite likely that the appeal of this novel for Alex Dow was due to the personal connections it suggested.

But it was not only Alex Dow—and Vivia Dow—who loved *My Ántonia*. As Jean told Cather in her 1939 letter, she, too, was enchanted with the novel. Part of her praise is contained in her comment, "From the very first I knew Tony and loved and hated her along with Jim." Cather's attempt to make readers see *Ántonia* through Jim's eyes, it would appear, succeeded, at least with this reader. The highest compliment Jean could pay Cather, though, came when she enthusiastically and confidently stated, "all my plans of the next few weeks shall be shattered, for my only hope is to read more of your stories." She closed by saying that she hoped "when I have finished all of your present works there



will be another in store.”

As a 21st-century researcher, I was struck by these reactions when I first read them, even before I was in contact with Jean Spero. This seemed to me solid evidence that Cather’s works were so intriguing that this correspondent could not rest until she had read all of Cather’s works, and that this reading experience probably had had a profound, long-lasting impact on at least one reader’s life.

But did it, actually? On a conscious level, Jean doesn’t believe it did. As she stated in November 2009, when she first made contact with Andy Jewell, “I’ve pretty much forgotten about all of the Cather novels.” Yet I believe that reading *My Ántonia* did affect her in at least one way: it changed her perception of Nebraska, at least for a short time. Jean formed her initial impressions of Nebraska during her car trip from Denver to Michigan in 1938. At that time, she remembers, she saw Nebraska as “so bleak, so cold, so miserable, so lonely.” Reading *My Ántonia* in 1939, Spero recalled recently, reminded her of how depressed she had been when riding through Nebraska. Yet this is not what she told Cather at the time. Instead, she wrote, “I just want to tell you how unexpressably lovely the tale is. Your descriptions of the bleak winters of Nebraska reminded me so much of the country we passed through once in an automobile, though ours was such a short glimpse of it.” Thus, *My Ántonia* in 1939 at least briefly taught Jean to see beauty even in things (and maybe people?) that at first glance appeared “bleak.” How long her altered perception of Nebraska lasted, however, is uncertain. Despite having driven across Nebraska a number of times between 1939 and 2009, Jean responded in this way to my question about whether reading the novel had affected how she viewed the state: “No, only in retrospect did I think of Nebraska and *My Ántonia* after our [2009] trip and my reading [the novel] again” after she had found the letter listed online.

Talking with Jean some 70 years after she wrote her letter, I was also somewhat surprised and disappointed to learn that she had not in fact followed through on her pledge to read Cather’s entire literary corpus and eagerly await her latest production. As she recalls, “Well, I did read *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and I loved that because I connected it to our wintering in Arizona twice before going to live in Denver.” She remembers, too, that she “might” have read *O Pioneers!*. However, she confesses that after these she read no more of Cather’s works until 2009. Jean tells me that as an eighth grader she loved Shakespeare—revealing a rather advanced level of literary appreciation—but that when it came to novels she preferred Romantic works (under the blankets with a flashlight) and the “potboilers” her mother passed on to her; at that point in her life, she recounts, she found the other Cather works she glanced at

rather, well, dull and plotless. Like so many young readers then—and today—she preferred action, not lots of character development and description, and as a result never fulfilled her promise to Cather.

One might thus conclude that Jean’s interactions with Cather’s fictions began and ended in 1939, and that they had no long-lasting impact on her life. This, however, is not true at all, as my talks with her have revealed. Having been prompted by finding her own letter to Cather, Jean tells me that she has reconnected with Cather by rereading *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She notes that since having read it the first time, in 1939, “I had forgotten about *My Ántonia* completely [but] after having read it again I could imagine why I liked it at age 16.” Jean has also expanded her knowledge of Cather by reading a number of her other works, such as *O Pioneers!* and has enjoyed them very much, especially the short stories in *Obscure Destinies* (“Old Mrs. Harris,” “Neighbour Rosicky,” and “Two Friends”).

For the most part, this new appreciation of Cather’s fictions has to do with Jean’s own changed life circumstances. With age, she says, has come greater interest in reading about “land, the people, and the cultures,” and she loves how Cather treats these subjects. As she perceptively notes of Cather, “She really is a painter at heart. Her plots seem to be an after-thought.” Interestingly enough, too, after rereading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* last year, Jean asserts that it is still her favorite, but now it is because she and her husband made many enjoyable trips to Santa Fe over the years. Thus, one thing is evident in Jean’s experiences with Cather’s texts and is corroborated by many other fans’ letters: one of the main reasons for their appeal was the way in which their depiction of certain *places* conjured up very positive personal memories.

Another part of the appeal of Cather’s works for Jean today is contained in her statement, “As an adult in the 21st century I do have a very different slant on all of them! I’m a feminist at heart!” As a result, she likes the strong female characters such as Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda and was quite angry at the way Mrs. Harris was treated. Jean believes that this feminism is not solely the result of reading Cather’s fictions, though; instead, she ascribes it more to the respect that her grandfather Alex Dow believed women deserved. Nevertheless, one is tempted to hypothesize that some of Cather’s portrayals of strong women that Jean read as a teenager might have in a small way reinforced and strengthened what she had already learned from her grandfather, and contributed to Jean pursuing an education later in life, eventually becoming a professor at a time when not many women occupied such positions.

Significantly, it was Jean’s grandmother who suggested

that her granddaughter write directly to Cather herself and supplied Jean with Cather's address, forging a female bond across generations. And when Cather replied, as she so often did to her fans, Jean states, "What I can remember vividly is how surprised I was when Miss Cather wrote back." The effect of this letter was apparently quite enduring, for she recalls, "I have always been so tickled that I made an impression on an author." Her pleasure, unfortunately, is matched now by her disappointment in not being able to find that letter; after having looked high and low in her house, she now thinks she probably put it in a high school memory book that was destroyed when her basement flooded a number of years ago.

Jean, it is clear to me from my research, is not alone in being deeply moved by Cather's works, often in ways that academics don't typically recognize. Many readers have been influenced by *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for instance, to pursue or continue religious vocations, as evidenced not only by numerous letters from the late 1920s and 1930s but also by the more recent testimony of the Right Reverend Frank Griswold, the 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, who wrote in 2010: "It would not . . . be an exaggeration to say that Willa Cather is partly responsible for my having chosen the path I have chosen."

Testimonials as to the effects of Cather on readers continue to be created, even today. Rather surprisingly, people still write to her. Some correspondents recognize she is dead; others do not. For instance, only a few years ago a California man named "Tom" (not his real name) brought a postcard with him from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris when he visited Red Cloud. On one side of this postcard is a reproduction of Van Gogh's "La nuit étoilée, Arles" (1888), and on the other his message to Cather. Significantly, the card is not postmarked; instead, "Tom" slipped it inside the secretary in the foyer of Cather's childhood home, where it remained hidden until a staff member found it in the summer of 2009. Addressing his object of veneration familiarly, he writes, "To Willa: I thank the creative forces of the universe for Red Cloud and Willa Cather. I am learning to rebel less against my humanity & realize the richness of life lies largely in our perceptiveness." To me, these sentiments forcefully represent the power of Cather's words to inspire and change readers' attitudes and behaviors, echoing Jean's comment that *My Ántonia* taught her to see a seemingly "simple" tale as "unexpressably lovely." My efforts to contact the writer, given certain other evidence on the card, have thus far been unsuccessful. But if and when I do make contact, I would want to ask: Which of Cather's works did you find especially encouraging of "perceptiveness"? Did you alter your travel plans to make a quasi-pilgrimage to Red Cloud? What made you think of her when you were in Paris?

At least with "Tom," since he had visited Cather's childhood home, one would not have to ask whether he knew that Cather has been dead for over half a century. The same cannot be said for the author of a second letter, received at the Cather Foundation in Red Cloud in November 2005. Unlike "Tom," this young woman, a student named "Mary" (again, not her real name), typed a lengthy (one page, single-spaced) letter to Cather that detailed how and why she responded so positively to one particular character, Ántonia. For instance, she cites Ántonia's ability to learn English as an inspiration for her to work harder in Spanish class, and she respects the way Ántonia "made a great sacrifice [sic] for her family [sic] welfare." What she most admires, though, is Ántonia's ability to overcome all the obstacles life puts in her path: dislocation from her home country, having to learn a new language, dealing with her father's suicide, and giving "up her education as well as her social life to help her family out in a time of need." To this young woman, Ántonia, like Cather, is real; in fact, she confesses that Ántonia's "character feels so true to life that it makes me wonder if this novel is a biography."

What, then, did this young reader take away from her experience of reading *My Ántonia*? For one thing, she found inspiration for being strong in the face of adversity and in appreciation of her own family's support. In powerful, direct, and heartfelt language, she states, "I know that throughout my life I will be faced with many difficult situations and when those times come I know I will pick up your book and just think of Antonias [sic] life, trial [sic], and tribulations all of which I could never see myself facing alone." For another, she gained a strong female role model. To this reader (and I suspect to many others), Ántonia is far from a symbol of defeat, of what happens to women who stay on the prairie as farm wives. "Mary" concludes her letter: "I want to thank you Mrs. Cather [!], for writing this book [*My Ántonia*] because it has given me the determination to conquer everything and anything that I know I will be facing sometime during my life."

Jean, "Tom," and "Mary" wrote to Cather not to "touch fame" or necessarily to get a response (although some other correspondents did just this). What they wanted most was to connect to the author of stories that had moved them deeply. Their letters are powerful reminders that to most readers, a literary text represents the character and personality of its author, and that they view reading a fictional text as a way to learn from other people's mistakes, as well as an opportunity to meet role models they might wish to emulate. As we teach students and others about the "meaning" of Cather's works, I believe we would do well to remember this, and to respect the responses of "the untutored mind" and "heartly sympathy" possessed by ordinary readers, as



Cather did. Their understandings of texts are not necessarily “better” or “more genuine” than those offered by more educated readers, but they are certainly more than naive “misreadings.” Listening to such voices today exposes us to interesting, alternative interpretations of Cather’s works, ones grounded in readers’ personal, lived experiences rather than in knowledge of artistic movements, prevailing ideologies, and so forth. Doing so also, I would suggest, gives us a better idea of the broader cultural work performed by Cather’s texts among thousands, if not millions, of readers, past and present.

WORKS CITED

All quotations from Jean Spero included in this article come from her multiple e-mails to me and to Andy Jewell (Editor of the Willa Cather Archive at UNL), as well as from our many phone conversations. I am very, very grateful to Jean, who since I first contacted her in December 2009 has repeatedly—and patiently—answered my many questions about her experiences.

Cather, Willa. Letters to Roscoe Cather, 13 May [1944] and 9 May 1945. Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection (MS 316). Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Lincoln, Nebraska.

—. “Literature in the Capital.” *Index of Pittsburgh Life* 16 March 1901: 8-9. Reprinted in *The World and the Parish*, ed. William M. Curtin. Vol. 2. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 828-833. Print.

—. “Poor Marty.” Originally published in *Atlantic Monthly* 147 (May 1931): 585-587. Reprinted in *Literary Digest* 109 (9 May 1931): 24 and the third printing of *April Twilights and Other Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933. Print.

Griswold, Rev. Frank T. “Not Stories at All, But Life Itself.” *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* 53.3 (Spring 2010): 60-68. Print.

Lewis, Edith. Letters to Carrie Miner Sherwood, 15 November [1947] and 19 December [1947]. Willa Cather Papers, Willa Cather Foundation, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

“Mary.” Letter to Willa Cather, 21 November 2005. Willa Cather Foundation, Red Cloud, Nebraska. Efforts to contact the author have been unsuccessful.

“Tom.” Postcard [2009], Willa Cather Foundation, Red Cloud, Nebraska. Efforts to contact the author have been unsuccessful.

Winslow, Jean Keppy. Letter to Willa Cather, 12 June 1939. Susan J. Rosowski Cather Collection (MS 228). Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Contributors to This Issue

Richard C. Harris is the John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities and an assistant dean at Webb Institute on Long Island. He has published extensively on Willa Cather in a number of journals, including *Cather Studies*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Midwest Review*, and *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*. He is the volume editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *One of Ours* (2006).

Charles Johanningsmeier is Professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where he teaches a wide variety of American Literature courses. He especially enjoys teaching a graduate seminar on Willa Cather, during which his students take field trips to the UNL Library’s Archives & Special Collections and to Red Cloud. His Cather-related research interests chiefly involve understanding how readers have interacted with Cather and her works.

Robert Thacker teaches at St. Lawrence University. He has written the Cather section of *American Literary Scholarship* since 2009, has coedited *Willa Cather: A Writer’s Worlds* (Nebraska 2010), and is now at work on the Scholarly Edition of Cather’s *Poems*. A revised and updated paperback of his *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* will be published in May by McClelland & Stewart, Toronto.

Stephany Thompson is Director of Programming at the Willa Cather Foundation. A Red Cloud native, she joined the Foundation professional staff in 2004 and holds a B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

VOLUME 54, NO. 3
SPRING 2011

The Willa Cather Foundation

Established 1955 by Mildred Bennett
www.WillaCather.org

Copyright ©2011, Willa Cather Foundation

ISSUE EDITOR: Steven Trout, *Fort Hays State University*
CO-ISSUE EDITOR: Katherine Jones, *Fort Hays State University*
MANAGING EDITOR: Thomas Reese Gallagher
COPY EDITORS: Virgil Albertini and Dolores Albertini
DESIGN: Kelly Blanchat

ISSUE EDITORS

Ann Romines, *The George Washington University*
Robert Thacker, *St. Lawrence University*
Steven Trout, *Fort Hays State University*

The Willa Cather Newsletter & Review welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should not exceed 3,500 words; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as an e-mail attachment and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the Seventh Edition of the *MLA Handbook*. Essays and notes are listed in the *MLA Bibliography*.

Direct essays and inquiries to Ann Romines at
annrom3@verizon.net.

Send letters and news items to:

Newsletter & Review
The Willa Cather Foundation
413 North Webster Street
Red Cloud NE 68970
tgallagher@nyc.rr.com

Willa Cather Newsletter & Review (ISSN 0197-663X)
is published three times a year by:

The Willa Cather Foundation
413 North Webster Street
Red Cloud NE 68970

(402) 746-2653
(866) 731-7304
Fax: (402) 746-2652
E-mail: info@willacather.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

Virgil Albertini, *Fairway, Kansas*
Bruce P. Baker II, *Omaha, Nebraska*
Susan Maher, *University of Minnesota Duluth*
John J. Murphy, *Santa Fe, New Mexico*
David Porter, *Skidmore College*
Ann Romines, *The George Washington University*
John N. Swift, *Occidental College*
Robert Thacker, *St. Lawrence University*
Steven Trout, *Fort Hays State University*
Joseph Urgo, *St. Mary's College*

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

OFFICERS

Susan Maher
President
Thomas Reese Gallagher
Vice President
Glenda Pierce
Secretary
David Porter
Treasurer

ADVISORY MEMBERS

Bruce P. Baker II
Laurie Smith Camp
Charles Cather†
Carol Cope
Jim Fitzgibbon
Jane Renner Hood
Betty Kort
Mellanee Kvasnicka
Gary L. Meyer
Lucia Woods Lindley
Dale McDole
Nancy S. Picchi
Rhonda Seacrest
John N. Swift

BOARD MEMBERS

Virgil Albertini
Sara Corless
David B. Garwood
Joel Geyer
Ron Hull
Andrew Jewell
Ruth H. Keene
Lynette Krieger
Fritz Mountford
John J. Murphy
Charles A. Peek
Guy Reynolds
Ann Romines
Nancy Sherwood
Steve Shively
James P. Southwick
C. Kay Stahly
Robert Thacker
Gary W. Thompson
Steven Trout
Joseph R. Urgo
Lu Williams
John A. (Jay) Yost

† *Deceased*

THE INTERNATIONAL CATHER SEMINAR 2011

JUNE 20-25, 2011 | SMITH COLLEGE, NORTHAMPTON, MA

The 13th International Cather Seminar will focus on the legacy of nineteenth-century culture in Cather's life and work, exploring the transition from a Victorian to a modernist America. We envision this as a continuation and perhaps an expansion of the conversation about the nature of Cather's modernism that emerged from the 2009 Chicago Seminar. Through its papers and plenary sessions, the Seminar will address intersections and connections between Cather's writing and this time of cultural transformation, including her relation to nineteenth century writers and cultural figures, to the histories of race, sexuality, and class identity, and to the intellectual ferment that has defined this era.

The Seminar will take place on the campus of Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, a setting replete with connections to Cather's life and work, and close to many sites of literary and cultural interest, including Emily Dickinson's house in nearby Amherst.

WILLA CATHER AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

The Seminar will feature addresses by distinguished scholar Nina Baym and acclaimed novelist Sue Miller, through whom we will continue the Seminar tradition of hearing contemporary writers discuss their encounters with Cather's fiction. It will include plenary addresses by eminent Cather scholars, among them Deborah Carlin, Richard Harris, Melissa Homestead, Andrew Jewell, Marilee Lindemann, Mark Madigan, John J. Murphy, Michael Peterman, Guy Reynolds, Ann Romines, John Swift, Robert Thacker, and Steven Trout.

The Seminar's opening reception will feature an exhibition of Cather materials from Smith College's Mortimer Rare Book Room and from the collections of David Porter and others. Also planned are a trip to the Cather-Lewis gravesite in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, and a closing banquet, featuring a performance of Aaron Copland's *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

For a registration form and further information, visit www.WillaCather.org or <http://cather.unl.edu>.



Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Red Cloud NE
Permit No. 10