

# WILLA CATHER

## PIONEER MEMORIAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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## Ella Cather Lewis Influenced Many Leaders

*Ella Cather Lewis, niece of Willa Cather and advisory member of the WCPM Board of Governors, passed away this summer. The N&R reprints this tribute, which first appeared June 30. — SR*

When people talk about Ella Cather Lewis, they smile. She touched many lives in a caring way.

The former Long Beach City College speech professor and student affairs adviser died Wednesday, June 27, 2001. But she will live on in the hearts and work of generations of Long Beach College students, where she taught from 1949 to the late 1970's.

"Her legacy is that her students always came first," said Dr. Virginia Baxter, dean and executive director of the Long Beach City College Foundation.

Ella came from a family who left legacies, a family of achievers. Her aunt, Willa Cather, remains an icon in American literature. Her father was the first All-American at the University of Nebraska.

Ella achieved, too—coaching and inspiring young people to reach their dreams. One of those students, Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill, who also served as LBCC's president, became a close friend.

"She was a role model for me, both as a student and when I started working at City College," O'Neill said. "She was a mentor. I learned a great deal from her. She was the sort of person who made things happen."

O'Neill and Lowell Johnson, Lewis' fellow professor of speech at LBCC, talk of her charm.

"She was elegant and had such a strong presence. She was a Renaissance woman who loved traveling, books and cooking. She was so good at everything," O'Neill said.

Johnson added, "She was immaculately dressed, with a tremendous, droll sense of humor, with a twinkle in her eye."

But Ella was also a private person, who "was never one to talk about herself," said Bill Millington, formerly of the LBCC board of trustees. Millington says Ella's father was a petroleum engineer who raised his family on what is now Rio Hondo College in Whittier. When the college was built, the former Cather home became the student affairs building.

In addition to her students, her famous aunt was among Ella's passions. When the Willa Cather Memorial and Educational Foundation was established in 1955 at Red Cloud, Nebraska, she assisted. At the time of her death, she was on the foundation's board of governors and had regularly attended the annual Willa Cather Spring Festival in Red Cloud.

Said Steve Ryan, executive director of the foundation, "We have lost a dear friend."

Ella had excellent writing skills, said LBCC's Millington. But not in the vein of her aunt. When the student affairs office received letters and comments critical of their work, Millington would have Ella respond. Many minds were changed because of her words, he said.

"She could write a mean piece herself. I think there was a lot of Willa Cather in her," he said.

But it is Ella's caring that is remembered the most.

"She was just an exceptional person. She loved what she did. She was exemplary," O'Neill said.

Ella was born in Smethport, Pa., and was a graduate of UCLA. She was preceded in death by her husband, Harry Lewis, a longtime French teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach. Her only survivor is her sister, Catherine Cather Lowell.

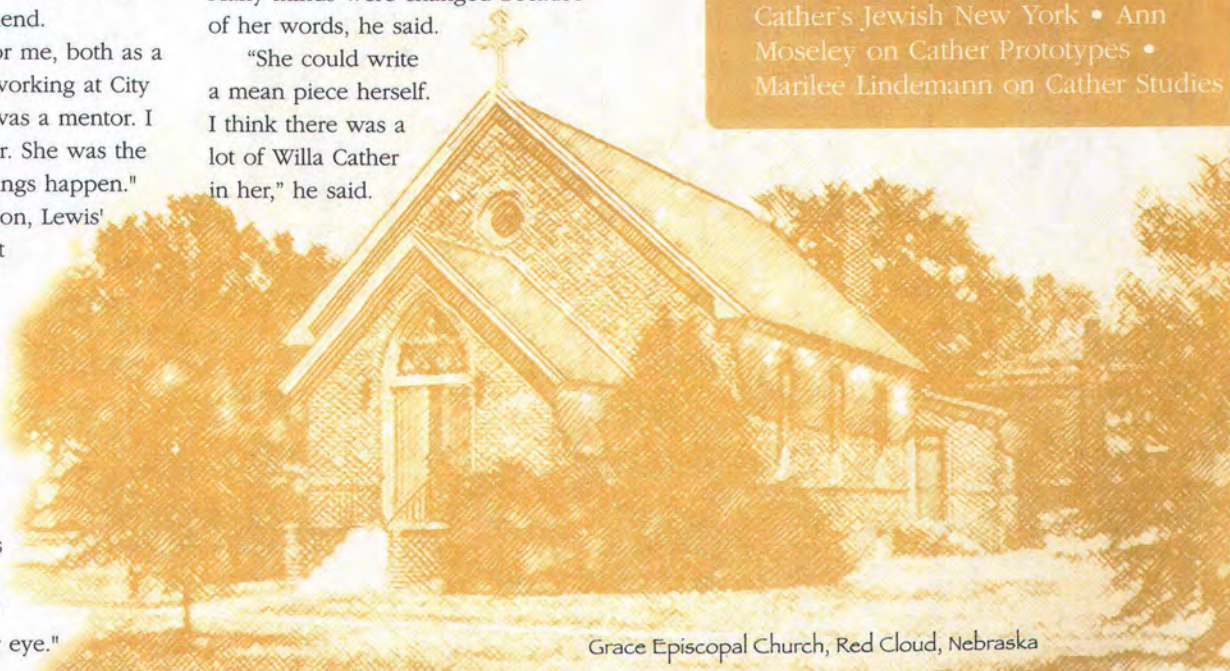
Services were at Stricklin Snively Mortuary, Long Beach, California.



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Grace Episcopal Church, Red Cloud, Nebraska

## Issue Editor's Note

One of the great pleasures of being a part of the WCPM is participating in a community of readers and scholars who approach Willa Cather's writing in an exhilarating variety of ways. This issue introduces you to the work of several of these interesting people, including a banker, several professors from across the U.S., a medical doctor, and a graduate student. First, you will meet some of the Cather collectors whose discoveries have become important resources for scholars and readers. Jay Yost shares a selection from his growing collection of vintage photographs of early Red Cloud and explains how such pictures have helped to illuminate the Nebraska world of Willa Cather for him. Then, Susan and Jim Rosowski interview Robert and Doris Kurth, the creators of an important collection of Cather books, manuscripts, and memorabilia, about some of their most engaging finds.

Our scholarly essays in this issue introduce two new contributors to the *N&R*. In "Architectures of Ethnicity: Willa Cather's Jewish New York," Lisa Marcus places Cather's 1912 story, "Behind the Singer Tower," in the context of attitudes to anti-Semitism in the early twentieth century U.S. Michael Schueth, in his first published essay on Willa Cather, considers how her early scrutiny of the "star system" and the careers of such actresses as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse provided models for Cather's invention of her own public persona as a writer. In our ongoing series of commentaries on the state of Cather studies, Marilee Lindemann, continues the dialogue begun by John J. Murphy and Joseph Urgo in the Fall 2000 *Newsletter and Review*, offering a very different perspective.

Yet another perspective comes from Ann Moseley, who reports on one of the most exciting moments in her research as an editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *The Song of the Lark*, as she followed in Willa Cather's footsteps on her 1912 visit to Walnut Canyon, Arizona. This will be the first of a series of reports on the surprising discoveries that the Cather Scholarly Editions are producing.

As always, you will also find reports from the WCPM President and Executive Director and lively news of WCPM activities all over the country. We hope this issue will be a reminder of the variety and the energy of Cather studies, and an invitation to join in the WCPM's activities yourself!

— Ann Romines, Issue Editor



## Contributors to this Issue

**Marilee Lindemann**, Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland, is the author of *Willa Cather: Queering America* (Columbia UP, 1999) and of essays about Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett. She has edited *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* for Oxford University Press and is currently preparing a Norton Critical Edition of *My Ántonia*.

**Lisa Marcus** is Associate Professor of English and Chair of the Women's Studies Program at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Her work on Cather has appeared in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South* (UP of Virginia, 2000). The essay published here is part of a book project tentatively titled "Nordomania: Fictions of Jewishness in the 1920s."

**Ann Moseley**, the William L. Mayo Professor at Texas A&M University-Commerce, is the volume editor for the forthcoming Scholarly Edition of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (U of Nebraska P) and the author of essays on Cather that have appeared in numerous journals.

**Sue Rosowski** is Adele Hall Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is author of *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* and of *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* (U of Nebraska P, 1986 and 1999), editor of *Cather Studies*, General Editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, and a member of the WCPM Board of Governors.

**Jim Rosowski**, a professor of biology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is an astute observer of Cather studies and an enthusiastic collector himself.

**Michael Schueth** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he is currently the editor of the Cather Colloquium's newsletter, *The Mowers' Tree*. He plans to write more on Cather and celebrity culture in his dissertation. The essay published here was originally presented as a paper at the Western Literature Association meeting in 2000.

**Jay Yost** is a native of Red Cloud; he was actually born in the Second Cather Home (then the Maynard Hospital). He is an attorney and, for eighteen of the past twenty-one years, he has lived in New York City, where he is a Private Banker at Citicorp. He is a member of the WCPM Board of Governors and promotes historic preservation in Red Cloud. He also continues to collect memorabilia on Cather, the towns in Webster County, and old opera houses in Nebraska and Kansas.



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[www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org)

# Postcards to the Past

Jay Yost

I stumbled into collecting old postcards of Red Cloud and Catherland after a lifetime of close encounters with the prairie towns of Cather's fiction. When I was growing up, our family's idea of fun was getting in the car and driving somewhere ("fun" being a relative concept for grown-ups when you're packing five kids into a '67 Impala with no air conditioning). Most of our forays consisted of touring our hometown—a hometown we



*Downtown Red Cloud as seen from Fourth Avenue and Webster Street looking south. You can approximate the date of this photo card by knowing that the W.C.T.U. fountain at the center of the intersection was installed in 1908, and the streets (shown in dirt here) were paved with brick in 1917. Jay Yost Collection.*

shared with Willa Cather and her family, checking out the rest of Webster County, and discussing who lived in a certain house when and what connections we had to those folks on one side of our family or the other. This habit of repeated touring and oft-repeated stories has driven more than one in-law, pseudo-in-law and even repeat Red Cloud visitor to make sure that they have a polite excuse ready when we offer to take them "for a ride." In my opinion, it was their loss, and still is. As my parents regaled the five of us with stories of a home's now-departed inhabitants, I couldn't help but imagine what those houses and farmsteads looked like when their owners were young and ambitious and proud of their small piece of Western civilization on the prairie. It was these rides that planted the seeds of my fascination with seeing how things had been.

My craving for imagining the past was further encouraged in the late seventies when my history-crazed sister gave me a copy of Mabel Cooper-Skjelver's book, *Webster County: Visions of the Past*. This truly wonderful labor of love chronicles the architectural heritage of each of the county's sixteen precincts, one of which, of course, is Catherton. (And, yes, the book is available for purchase at the WCPM Bookstore, both in

Red Cloud and online.) Many of her photos were taken from old postcards that photographers produced for their customers to send to friends and family members "back East." Unfortunately, this marketing device seems to have died out by the First World War.

In addition, a number of Skjelver's photos came from *Scenes In and Around Red Cloud*, a series of at least four booklets produced during the first decade of the 20th century by *The Webster County Argus*, one of the predecessor newspapers to today's *Red Cloud Chief*. The publisher of *The Argus* was a booster for the town and he distributed these 25- to 30-page publications to subscribers on a complimentary basis. The booklets contained no text, only simply captioned photos of the town, its public buildings and its most noted homes, as well as some industry and rural sites. (And, yes, you can pore over enlarged and laminated copies of *Scenes In and Around Red Cloud* at the WCPM, the town's Auld Library, or the Webster County Historical Museum.) Many of these photos were also reproduced as postcards, especially the ones of downtown that show the horse-drawn streetcar that ran from the railroad depot to the two big hotels that sat at the west corners of Fourth Avenue and Elm Street. In the photo card at left, the awnings billow, the suspended streetlights sway, and the streetcar begins the final block of its route.

Several years ago, my (very) reluctant partner and



*A 1909 photo postcard of David H. and Dora (Henderson) Kaley in front of their home at 909 North Seward Street where they lived from 1901 until Dave's death in 1951 and Dora's in 1958. Jay Yost Collection.*

I purchased the 1888 Charles W. and Cyrelia A. Kaley home at 9th Avenue and Seward Street. The house is one of those that lined "Quality Street" in Lucy Gayheart's Haverford, one of Cather's many depictions of early Red Cloud. Soon after we purchased the Kaley home, a niece of theirs lent me a turn-of-the-century photo postcard of the home (shown above), from

## POSTCARDS

(continued)

which I had a 3" x 5" negative made. The scene showed a beautifully maintained Queen Anne house with her great uncle and aunt, Dave and Dora, both in hats, sitting proudly in their horse and buggy on the lawn. When the photo shop blew the picture up to 24" x 30", the detail captured in the print is such that you can clearly see the nail holes in the skirt of the fence behind them. You can't ask for much more when you're (slowly) restoring a gem of an old house.

After my fortuitous exposure to the postcard of the Kaley home, I began collecting other real-photo postcards of scenes from Red Cloud and the surrounding towns. The quality of many of these cards is amazing, since the negative originally produced was often the same size as the postcard itself. I have since added to my collection, and with each new entrant, my fascination with the visual history of Webster County and its concomitant impact on Cather grows.

Visual history of this quality allows us a century later to see much of the world that Cather saw growing up—the same world that she, while sitting in her New York apartment decades later, vividly recalled in her Nebraska novels. These postcards allow us to get a good idea of what she experienced when, as a young girl, she went running out the front door of her house, passing by the wooden storefronts that stood facing Webster Street where the City Park now sits, waving hello to someone



*The 1883 State Bank Block Building sits on the northwest corner of Fourth Avenue and Webster Street. The darker colored building to the right of it, with nine arched windows and a central cornice ornament, is the 1885 Opera House, whose restoration is in progress. Jay Yost Collection.*

coming out of Miner's Store, stopping to buy some candy at the Bon Ton Cafe's counter, catching sunlight on her face and her shorn locks as she emerged from beneath one of the numerous store awnings, watching the streetcar's horses kick up dust as they rounded the

corner by the then-three-story New York Store that abutted Governor Garber's bank, circling the tree that stood in front of Dr. Cook's Drugstore, and later crossing the street and clambering up the long flight of steps of the Opera House to watch Old Blind Joe prepare for that evening's performance.



*Red Cloud's streetcar was captured here as it began its run from the trolley barn at the northeast corner of Fourth Avenue and Elm Street. It is thought to have been the last horse-drawn streetcar operating in the country when removed in 1917 or 1918. The author is plotting to someday have it reinstalled. Jay Yost Collection.*

These cards also demonstrate how incredibly lucky we are that the buildings Cather knew are still in existence, and how we can help to assure the town's future by ensuring that we save its past. (Which, of course, is just another one of the myriad of things your contributions to the WCPM are helping to do.)

Cather once said that the much of the material for her writings came from the life experiences she had before she was fifteen. Even though I too grew up in rural Nebraska and return there often, I can't even remember how many bushel of corn an acre has to produce in order to make my other sister's farmer/husband happy. I have always been astounded by how Cather took in all that she did during those years, and how she was able to use it so beautifully years later. As I study my photo postcards and as I continue to delve deeper into Cather's writings, I'm seeing more and more of an analogy between the two: each is a snapshot of a time gone by; each helps us to understand how we got to where we are today; and each, while seemingly easy to comprehend, becomes incredibly complex as you begin to realize all of the detail contained beneath its surface.



# Cather and Her Stars: Negotiating a Culture of Celebrity in the 1890s

Michael Schueth

“. . . for with all its splendor and magnificence this world would be very poor were it not for the memory of its great.”—Willa Cather, *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln) 11 November 1894.

By the time Willa Cather arrived at the University of Nebraska in 1890, American culture was in the midst of radically shaping and defining itself in terms of a growing commercialism. It was an age in which anything or anybody could become a commodity; advertising ruled the visual landscape in newspapers and magazines through new printing technologies allowing for half-tone reproductions of photographs and increasingly complex graphic design layouts. As cultural art historian Sarah Burns has noted, “American readers now lived in an environment permeated and saturated by the printed word and, even more significantly, the printed image” (5). Importantly, this was also a time when “celebrity” became a mainstream word in American culture. As a marketable product for the consumption of mass audiences, the celebrity became something more than a well-known historical or political figure, and the culture of celebrity complicated the production of art in American culture. As Burns argues in her study of late nineteenth-century American artists, “Whether courting publicity or shunning it, the artist of the period had to confront an unavoidable fact of modern life: in addition to being a producer of aesthetic commodities, he (or she) had to become a commodity as well—a consumable personality, fodder for a curious public never satisfied for long” (5). The Gilded Age had created a new commercial system in which, to be a financially successful, a writer had to mediate his or her texts to the public. Through the presentation of writers as “professional writers,” as personalities in magazines, newspapers, and advertisements, the role of the author had changed significantly into a business. Managing a career now had as much to do with publicity as with the writing itself.

While Willa Cather achieved fame and literary success in the twenties and thirties, her fundamental understandings of celebrity culture were formed during her university years between 1890 and 1895. During this time, she achieved minor celebrity status on campus and, as drama and literary critic for the Lincoln newspapers, she developed multiple perspectives on celebrity culture through her interactions with some of the leading actors and actresses of her time. Sarah

Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, Richard Mansfield, and Clara Morris were among the actors Cather reviewed, and in doing so, she confronted fundamental questions about the celebrity culture that surrounded her. What was it to be a private person in a public world? Where and how were an individual's public and private lives separated? And most crucial, was it possible to create Art while striving to succeed in a celebrity-driven market place?

In this essay I argue that, through Cather's fascination with the actors of her time, she was deeply engaged in exploring the culture of celebrity, and through her drama criticism she was discovering the means by which she could negotiate her own dawning celebrity. As a student at the University of Nebraska, Cather published her creative writing, served on the staff of the literary magazine (she was editor of the *Hesperian* in 1893) and yearbook, performed in campus theatricals, and held executive positions in the campus literary society. During these years she also had her own columns in the Lincoln city newspapers in which she reviewed performances of various kinds: the circus, church services, books and, of course, the theatre. Most important for this essay, Cather was the regular drama critic for the Lincoln *Journal* beginning in the second semester of her junior year. These activities necessarily brought Cather to public attention in ways similar to the famous actors and actresses she was reviewing, and it is not coincidental that her interest in celebrity culture occurred at the moment she was emerging as a public figure. While Cather was interested in many aspects of the “star system,” as William Curtin has called it, two are especially relevant to my argument here, and both appear in her drama criticism: first, the presentation of the self as a public “self”; and second, a concern for the split between private and public.

## I. Presentation of the Self

The theatre, more than any other cultural force, gave Cather access to women who had created themselves as public figures. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has noted in her work on celebrity culture in the late-nineteenth century, “historically, women have rarely been the authors of their own representations, either as makers or as models” (72). Throughout Cather's childhood and young adulthood years, the theatre exposed her to a wide variety of actresses who, to a large extent,

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(continued)

authored themselves and reaped artistic success as well as financial profit from their commodification. In Cather's day, stars held power in creating public identities since, by the late-nineteenth century, star power drove the theatre industry (Curtin 31). Through magazines, newspapers, and first-hand experiences with varying touring drama companies that performed at the Red Cloud Opera House, Cather took part in a revolving world of spectacle—a world that celebrated women who defined their public selves and who garnered fame and wealth from careers they helped to create.

By the time Cather came to Lincoln as a university student, she was taking the lessons she learned from the theatre to heart. She made herself known on campus as a “personality,” as one student recalled her. Warren Woods, a classmate of Cather's, explains that she “was a Maverick. She wore her hair cut short—was assertive and independent, in her actions and demeanor—hence became an outstanding personality on the campus” (Shively 131). As Woods explains, Cather was known for more than her short hair cut and assertive manner; the design of her personality lay in the complex mixture of her dress, mannerisms, circle of friends, and university activities. Grace Morgan Riley remembered Cather as a “unique figure” for her “mannish clothes” and her ability to argue the “birds off the bushes” (Shively 122-123). Jasper Hunt recalled her involvement in the Union literary society and her circle of “prized” friends such as Will Westermann, “one of the university's most cultured scholars,” as well as her association with the “family of Chancellor Canfield and his highly gifted daughter,” Dorothy (128). While contemporaries' memories vary, they consistently note Cather's dress, her literary and journalistic work, as well as the activities and social circles she cultivated. These recollections suggest

Cather's success at developing a “personality” that remained vivid despite the passing of time and the fading of details. As Jesse B. Becher recounts, “the ‘effect’ is what I remember” (124).

While Cather was well known for her boyish hair and clothing, she nevertheless changed her appearance dramatically midway through her college career. The boyish appearance of the late 1880s and early 1890s may have reflected her love of the theatre, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has recently suggested, but her later decision to feminize her dress may also indicate the degree to which Cather understood herself as a public figure with a professional status. In a 1912 letter to Mariel Gere after her mother's death, Cather recalled that it was Mrs. Gere who persuaded her to change her hairstyle and learn to spell (WC to MG, 24 April 1912). Significantly, Mrs. Gere's husband was the editor of the *Journal*. Whether or not Mrs. Gere was the only influence on Cather's changes in her hair and clothing, the dramatic shift in Cather's appearance reflects a growing sophistication in her understanding of how image mattered in her world. Cather did not merely grow out of her boyish look. She exchanged one public performance for another. Looking the part of a successful college student and professional

writer, Cather assumed a more complex role than her boyish costume had allowed. While, as Wolff suggests, “the adolescent Willa Cather understood the fact that unconventional dress could act as force for social disruption” (207), the young professional Cather began to understand the ways in which such an unconventional dress and its resulting disruption could work against her. An undated photograph of Cather working at her desk at the *Nebraska State Journal* provides clues to how Cather presented herself in the “role” as a journalist (fig. 1). With her dark-colored cap typical of nineteenth-century journalist offices and her dark-colored dress with large, pluming shoulders,



Figure 1: Cather as journalist at the Nebraska State Journal office. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection.

Cather is appropriately dressed as a professional woman of the period. Cather's pose sitting at her desk writing suggests a momentary "performance" as a journalist for the camera: with her left shoulder turned out, she allows viewers to see the hardworking journalist "caught" at her desk, writing. Professional dress emerged by the end of the Gilded Age as a way of binding up one's identity to one's profession, and this was reflected in clothes professionals wore. Thomas Eakins shows this shift well in his paintings *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and *Agnew Clinic* (1889). In the earlier portrait, Dr. Gross performs surgery wearing a dark suit and tie, generic clothing that suggests little about his exact profession. By the time of Eakins' later painting, *Agnew Clinic*, Dr. Agnew, the other doctors, and the nurse all wear uniforms establishing a work-related hierarchy.<sup>1</sup>

Such uniforms reveal how professionalism had become a performance in itself, and for Cather, professional performance was a gateway into an adult world. Now forging her own role as a journalist, Cather left behind the boyish image of her favorite stage stars.

Other photographs taken during Cather's senior year reveal her keen sense to adapt to the situation at hand. For professional photograph sittings, Cather posed in her graduation gown, an opera cape, and an elaborate ball gown. As Janis P. Stout writes of these senior-year photos, they "convey a theatrical flair" that suggests Cather's ability "to move back and forth" in her modes of self-presentation (41, 44). While these formal studio photographs reveal much about the "roles" Cather played for the public camera, informal snapshots suggest the performances of her daily life. For example, in a 1894 snapshot the undergraduate Cather anticipates the pose she would assume for Edward Steichen in 1926: Cather stands against the rock with her arms crossed, looking confident and happy. Her clothing, especially her hat, lapels, and bow tie, express the playfulness of "dressing up" in a costume.

## II: Private v. Public

One of the issues that Cather was working out concerned how the celebrity places himself—or herself—between private and public spheres. It involved a negotiation that would be crucial in her own development. William Curtin notes that when Cather wrote about performers' private lives, "her interest was manifestly not in gossip for its own sake, but a part of her concern with the personal element in their success" (32). Indeed, gossipy journalism on the stars spawned a new genre of articles that became wildly popular in 1890s magazines—the celebrity portrait. Richard

Ohmann, who has written extensively on turn-of-the-century magazines, explains that, "The celebrity article collected memorable facts into an illusion of intimacy with the great man or woman. The 'visit' admitted readers to the home or country retreat of painter, writer, or statesman and documented what would be now be called his 'lifestyle'" (230).

In 1894, '95, and '96 Cather explored the issue of privacy by writing about Eleonora Duse, who was rivaling Bernhardt in fame and critical acclaim. Duse, however, did not exploit her personality to the press as Bernhardt had, and Cather was intrigued by Duse's ability to keep her private life private, noting: "Of her own personality, of her private life, the public has never had a glimpse; we know as little of it as we know of Shakespeare . . . Even the most imaginative newspapers cannot say what wines she drinks, what books she reads, or who are her friends. In this respect she is greater than any other woman who has ever been before the public" (K4153). Cather found in Duse a romantic woman artist—elusive, spiritual, and enigmatic. As Cather suggests here, the line between private and public was specifically important because Duse was a female artist. Without a strong tradition of public women to model from, Cather was searching out ways in which women could create art without becoming mere instruments of their art. Two decades later in her 1915 novel, *The Song of the Lark*, and in her short story the following year, "The Diamond Mine," Cather returned to the topic of artists in a celebrity-driven culture and to her concern over the price that celebrity exacted in women's private lives. Toward the end of the novel, Thea admits to Archie that her work has overtaken her personal life. "It's like being woven into a big web," she tells him. "You can't pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life" (456). In the "Diamond Mine," Cressida Garnet, a world renowned opera singer and subject of the story, tells the narrator that while she has "a sort of professional personality," she doesn't have "very much that's personal to give people" (79).

Cather's fascination with the public and private continued throughout her drama reviews, perhaps most strikingly in an 1896 review contrasting the private Duse to the very public Bernhardt. For Cather, the polar tensions of celebrity resided in these two women, tensions between privacy and public exposure:

Her great contemporary [Bernhardt] has given herself body and soul to the public, but Duse has kept her personality entirely free, her relations with her public are of the most self-respecting and platonic

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(continued)

character . . . . She is like some veiled sister of the church whose good deeds are known to many, but whose face no man sees. (K4154)

Cather's analogy between women artists and nuns is telling in that in becoming a "sister," one must necessarily break ties with the material world and live in isolation. In an "age of microscopic scrutiny and X rays," as she called it, an artist's job was to maintain the "true dignity of art," requiring artists to "drown and hide a life" (K4154). While Cather certainly appreciated her privacy, she also expressed conflicting attitudes about fame. As L. Brent Bohlke noted, Cather "sought fame but disliked attention" (xxi). Searching for some suitable compromise to either total exposure or utter seclusion, Cather was trying, through her fascination with Duse and Bernhardt, to understand how she could sustain her artistic aspirations in a world that fed upon public personalities.

Even while Cather admired Duse for her ability to be a private woman in a public world, she was nevertheless fascinated with the private lives of some of her favorite actors such as Julia Marlow and Sarah Bernhardt. Certainly Bernhardt had a colorful life: she often wore men's clothing (looking, as a 1915 biographer says, "something like a thirteen year old boy"), she slept in a pear wood coffin, and she kept a variety of exotic animals as pets, including a monkey, alligator, and a lion (Izzard 31). And while Cather celebrated Bernhardt's genius, she also celebrated Bernhardt's melodramatic lifestyle. In an 1895 "The Passing Show" column Cather relates:

Poor Bernhardt is in trouble again. A young woman named Klein has been protesting for several years that she is Bernhardt's daughter, and recently she has become so violent in her persecutions that she makes life almost unbearable and Bernhardt has sent her to an asylum. A certain Parisian newspaper insinuated that she had used the peculiarly powerful influence she held in certain quarters to get the girl out of the way. (*Courier*, September 21, 1895)

Cather writes about Bernhardt's private life as if it were a theatrical role from the star's public career. On the one hand, she sympathizes with "poor Bernhardt" who (as if in melodrama) is suffering from the persecutions of a would-be daughter and a gossip columnist; on the other, she reveals no interest in the girl whom Bernhardt sent to an asylum and no curiosity about the sensational facts of the story. Cather leaves those details to a "certain Parisian newspaper," and she resists turn-

ing her columns into the popular gossipy journalism that permeated the popular press. As this Bernhardt example reveals, Cather was taken up by the public personalities of her favorite actresses. Solomon-Godeau calls this fascination with the public lives of actresses the "spectacle within the spectacle," the play within the play (68). When Cather was watching Bernhardt on the stage, for example, she was not merely watching the actress play *a* character, but rather watching Bernhardt act simultaneously as *two* characters—as the character in the play and behind that role, Bernhardt the personality. Cather, too, played many "roles" simultaneously: as student she fit into the roles that were demanded of her as journalist, student, and friend.

Throughout her university career, Cather was working (consciously or not) on the foundations of her fame and public identity. By 1905, with the publication of *The Troll Garden*, Cather began shaping and controlling her public image as the child who "ran wild playing with the little herd girls and visiting the Danes and Norwegians, who had settled there as farmers" (Bohlke 3). This "romantic vision," as Bohlke notes, was "used again and again until it would seem that even Cather herself began to believe it" (xxii). By creating this mythic childhood, Cather was retelling a Wordsworthian version of the "fair seed-time" of her poetic soul, transplanting her public's attention to the wilds of her Nebraska youth. Cather's myth, much like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, drew attention away from her biography and toward (as scholar Russell Noyes says of Wordsworth) an understanding of the "unusually rich imaginative experiences" that became the "tracing steps by which the mind absorbed and reshaped external circumstances until true knowledge and imaginative powers had been attained" (242). Calling up memories of herself as a child roaming freely on the open plains was, in fact, a brilliant act of double performance. By recalling her childhood self to her readers, she offered to them a sense of personal relationship, even intimacy. Yet, even as her story of childhood forged a relationship with her readers, it also directed their attention away from her personal life. That is the paradox of her achievement: by offering intimacy through the "performance" of her own life, Cather maintained the privacy she needed to protect her art, and herself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Uniforms in the medical profession were also brought about by emerging science on the germ theory. Dr. Agnew, according to Diana E. Long, was "the first fully committed" to the theory (189).



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## An Interview with Robert and Doris Kurth, Cather Collectors

Sue and Jim Rosowski

We are all indebted to book collectors who combine a love of books with a discerning eye and a commitment to creating a legacy for the future—which is to say that we in Cather studies are indebted to Robert and Doris Kurth. Robert Kurth grew up in Lincoln and received both undergraduate and M.D. degrees from the University of Nebraska there. He and his wife Doris became interested in the works of Willa Cather in 1975 and spent the next twenty-five years assembling a personal library that they recently donated to the Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries. The collection includes rare first editions, correspondence to and about Cather, photographs, and other materials such as copies of articles written by Cather, postcards, song lyrics, and menus. Moreover, it contains forty rare books from Cather's personal library, including her copies of *My Ántonia* (containing a letter from Annie Pavelka) and of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. "Personal Copy" in Cather's hand identified this volume as hers, as do the items she included among its pages: photographs of herself on horseback in the Southwest, a colored print, and a letter from a reader sending her a picture of Kit Carson. As is evident from work on the Cather Scholarly Edition as well as in publications and conference publications, the Robert and Doris Kurth Collection is already making an impact on Cather studies.

We recently talked with the Kurths at their home in Prairie Village, Kansas.

*Sue & Jim Rosowski:* When someone assembles a significant collection, it seems as though he must always have been collecting, from the cradle. But of course that's not the case: collecting starts somewhere. I wonder if you remember when you became interested as a collector in books?

*Robert Kurth:* Yes, I do remember very well. We had gone down toward Kansas City, Missouri, and it was pouring rain—just pouring. To get out of the rain we ducked into the Glen Bookstore, and once inside we talked with Ardis Glen. At first it was just general conversation, but then I found that she had a number of books that had to do with writers I had heard about. At this point in the conversation she intimated that I should be a book collector; we were talking about Nebraska, and Nebraska authors, and she mentioned Willa Cather. She led me to a shelf that was devoted to Willa Cather's books, most of which were first editions.

## CATHER COLLECTORS

(continued)

I ended up purchasing eight books, and took them home, and started reading them.

After I started reading, I started to become more interested, and also more interested in other Nebraska authors—Sandoz, and Neihardt, and Wright Morris, and some lesser known authors like Nellie Snyder Yost, and some of the poets, like Ted Kooser.

I traveled around quite a bit during those days—Florida, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Salt Lake City, Denver, San Francisco—as part of my ongoing medical education. And so it became interesting, when I happened to be at these places, to scout around in different book shops looking for good first editions.

In looking at these different places I found some interesting items. But the thing that jelled the collection was hearing about the sale in California. That's an interesting story, what can happen once you get started. A psychiatrist—a friend of mine who is a book collector—heard about a Cather collection for sale. While I was sitting in my chair reading about it, I got a call from Pat Phillips [former Executive Director of WCPM] saying, "Might you be interested?" What a coincidence—I have the catalog right in my hands!" I said, "Certainly, I'm interested."

*Doris Kurth:* It was an experience, bidding through an auction house. You have to send references—with the written bid. The minister, the hospital where Bob worked, the bank. And then I had to fire this letter off express mail, because he didn't decide until the last minute.

*RK:* Within a couple of weeks we knew that we got the winning bid. Then they shipped the books, which was about a month later. We had one of our friends over—a librarian, so someone who would appreciate it all—and we had a kind of Christmas party opening presents. Of course, each item was individually wrapped. I was so excited, seeing what was there. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—a beautiful copy with a watercolor in it, along with the pictures of Kit Carson

and the photographs of Willa Cather on horseback. And Willa Cather's copy of *My Ántonia*, which was in terrible shape. When we were up to Lincoln we saw what the conservators had done with it, and it was remarkable. And the Pavelka letters, too, in it.

*S&JR:* What are some of the results that you've seen from your collection?

*RK:* It's been interesting, seeing how scholars have responded. The Quebec International Seminar was in 1995, and Charles Mignon presented a paper using our copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Another big item in the shipment from California was McClure's *Autobiography*, with his inscription to Cather. In Quebec I met Robert Thacker and heard him give a lecture on this book, and so I gave him a copy of the inscription, which is something he used in his edition of that book. And Ann Romines brought up the fact that she was interested in that particular edition of *The Song of the Lark* that was in my collection.

Once you get started, things happen. Sitting next to us at a cultural event was a couple who run the bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas. And one night they handed a blank copy of *Lucy Gayheart* to me—one of the dummy copies that salesmen used to take orders before it was actually published. Joan Crane [in *Willa Cather: A Bibliography*] mentions dummy copies; I think there were four of Cather's works that had dummy copies.

*DK:* Our children got into the act. Our son Hugh picked up some library editions in Pittsburgh, and Bob's niece, and another niece going to school in Columbia, Missouri.

*RK:* You meet interesting people. Ernie Long—an extraordinary character who smoked continuously and who you'd think didn't know anything. But it was through him that we got the copy of *April Twilights*

And the spin-offs from collecting Cather were something. Mainly—seeing Red Cloud and attending conferences over the years—all so related to her canon.

*S&JR:* You're from Nebraska, Bob, and you are both from the Midwest. How has collecting related to your own background?



*Doris and Robert Kurth in their home library in Prairie Village, Kansas.  
Photo by Jim Rosowski.*

# Architectures of Ethnicity: Willa Cather's Jewish New York

Lisa Marcus

RK: I look at these books as part of my heritage. It was collecting something that had a personal connection, and tied me with the history of Nebraska and my upbringing. I've read in a lot of different fields, but the things that affect you so personally—where you grew up and what happened during those times—have depth. So with Willa Cather, here's not only a woman from the same state, but who went to the same school I did, the University of Nebraska. I can still remember different people—like when I went to high school, a guy who really stood out was Ted Sorenson, who was a good friend of my brother. He was the number one debater, and he had a limp, these are things I still remember, as part of my experience growing up. You wonder how you were influenced by these people, by thinking that he's a great guy.

SEJR: If someone were starting to collect, what would you say to them?

RK: You have to have consideration for where you are going to store the books. It's a great responsibility, and one that involves air conditioning and humidity. You are really a steward, a preserver. We had been through a fire in my medical office, and we were aware that something can happen.

I had a friend who had a fine horn collection. Esoteric, strange horns. "Whatever happened to your horns?" I asked him when I saw him. He said that he started to be concerned about keeping them safe and so gave them to a museum. But later he learned that the director had no interest, really. So he got them back. It's a dilemma, who can take care of them, and who will utilize them.

DK: Also, if there's a family involved, then the family has to be encouraging. Accept the fact that we're stopping in every bookstore. Our kids were tolerant of our shenanigans.

SEJR: What are you reading now?

RK: Now that I'm retired, I want to read some things again. *Huckleberry Finn*, for example. It's a child's book, but it's more than that. It's everybody's book. The other thing is going back to the classics. *Tom Jones*, and *Silas Marner*—just great. Recently there seems to be a rejuvenation of the early classics, new translations for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*.

Every once in a while—if my stack of books is down—I'm going to plow through Virgil and Ovid, the *Metamorphoses*. I just like to take enough time to really do it.

Note: For more information about the Kurth collection, go to [www.unl.edu/libr/libr/spec/kurth.html](http://www.unl.edu/libr/libr/spec/kurth.html) or call the University of Nebraska Archives and Special Collections at 402-472-2531.



## I. Architectures of Ethnicity

In the opening pages of Cather's 1912 short story "Behind the Singer Tower," the Singer Tower and the Statue of Liberty are posed as oppositional symbols of New York's ethnic architecture dueling for the soul of New York.<sup>1</sup>

One character, with the solidly Anglo-American name of Johnson, muses aloud, reading the New York skyline from a launch on the Hudson River: "Did you ever notice . . . what a Jewy-looking thing the Singer Tower is when it's lit up? The fellow who placed those incandescents must have had a sense of humor. It's exactly like the Jewish high priest in the old Bible dictionaries" (46). Zablowski, a Jewish doctor with "sad" and "thoughtful eyes" shakes his head and responds: "No, it's not semitic, Johnson, that high-peaked turban is more apt to be Persian. He's a Magi or a fire-worshipper of some sort, your high priest. When you get nearer he looks like a Buddha, with two bright rings in his ears" (46). Gazing at the great cityscape of Manhattan, Zablowski deflects the Anglo-American gaze that equates materialistic excess with Jewishness, replacing it with his own Orientalizing vision: he sees a turbanned Magi or Buddha atop the noted building rather than a praying Jewish patriarch. Yet, despite Zablowski's dissenting reading, Cather's story persists in portraying the New York skyline as an ethnic landscape over which a threatening Jewishness looms:

Zablowski pointed with his cigar toward the blurred Babylonian heights crowding each other on the narrow tip of the island. Among them rose the colossal figure of the Singer Tower, watching over the city and the harbor like a presiding Genius. He had come out of Asia quietly in the night, no one knew just when or how, and the statue of Liberty, holding her feeble taper in the gloom off to our left, was but an archeological survival. (46)

This account—of masculine genius and potency dominating over the feeble relic of femininity—suggests the rise of vulgar capitalism over and against the more progressive forces of democratization embodied in the weakened and dimly visible Statue of Liberty. But this reading of the New York skyline tells us something more, I think, about the landscape of ethnicity—what I am calling Cather's architecture of ethnicity. New York is rendered legible in this scenario; indeed it is personified, as a giant Jewish body threateningly imposing its "New

## CATHER'S JEWISH NEW YORK

(continued)

York idea" on the nation. That Johnson personifies the Singer Tower as a Jewish Gulliver, whose "presiding genius" outshines Lady Liberty's, indicates some measure of the paranoia that many Americans felt about Jewish infiltration and, as one journalist wrote, "invasion."<sup>2</sup>

Hallet, another member of the boating party and a central voice in the story, points to the irony of Lady Liberty's enfeebled position in relation to the Eastern giant:

"Who could have foreseen that she, in her high-mindedness, would ever spawn a great heathen idol like that?" Hallet exclaimed. "But that's what idealism comes to in the end, Zabrowski." Zabrowski laughed mournfully. "What did you expect, Hallet? You've used us for your ends—waste for your machine, and now you talk about infection. Of course we brought germs from over there," he nodded to the Northeast. (46)

Zabrowski cannily points to the ambivalence expressed in Hallet's reading of the skyline. On one hand, New York represents the idealistic view of America as a nation of immigrants, welcomed through the skirts of Liberty's gate. But, on the other hand, these same immigrants, Liberty's "spawn," have the potential to turn on their mother, polluting the nation with germs of their difference. While Hallet sees the "Jewy-looking" Singer Tower as embodying threat and disease, impurity and infection, Zabrowski calls him on it—these Eastern Others have in fact embraced and epitomized the most American of ideals in rising to the heights of Liberty's dream.

### II. "Jewy" New York

Burton Hendrick, writing for *McClure's* magazine in 1907, described what he termed "the great Jewish invasion" of New York. The article, which appeared during Cather's tenure as an editor of the magazine—and which she surely read—catalogues with some anxiety New York's increasingly Jewish visage. Writing that "Our greatest city is already, as far as numbers are concerned, largely Semitic" (307), Hendrick goes on to describe New York as a veritable Jewish "colony," a "modern Zion," and concludes that:

Unquestionably, we are thus face to face with one of the most remarkable phenomena of the time. New York, the headquarters of American wealth, intelligence, and enterprise—the most complete physical expression, we have been told, of the American idea—seems destined to become overwhelmingly a Jewish town. (310)

A largely favorable treatment of Jewish immigration and industry, the article nonetheless expresses a certain trepidation about the Jewish infiltration of New York. While Hendrick seems to admire Jewish enterprise, he describes the streets of New York "impassably clogged with Jewish pushcarts," noting that "the New Yorker constantly rubs elbows with Israel." In an odd mixture of lament and admiration Hendrick advises: "take a walk up Broadway or the business sections of Fifth avenue—the names on the signs are almost invariably Jewish . . . Drop in at the Opera or the theater—the bediamonded audience, and even the performers, are frequently members of this race" (309).

The kind of anxious admiration that Hendrick expresses about Jewish industry and enterprise shows up in Cather's own journalistic reflection about New York Jews. In a much-cited 1914 theater review of New York character acting for *McClure's*, Cather's remarks on the successful and long-running play "Potash and Perlmutter"<sup>3</sup> show her embrace of ethnic caricature. Cather celebrates the play's verisimilitude in portraying New York life, accepting Potash and Perlmutter as not mere character types, but as representative Jews. Speaking of the play's depiction of New York, she writes,

This is not the New York of Babylonian towers and sky-effects which the settlement house school of poets write about, but it is the city with which the humble resident of Manhattan island has to reckon and to which he has to adapt himself. The apartment houses are built for—and usually owned by—



THE JANGLING PARTNERS are a wonderful pair. Jewish merchant, the unadulterated article, who is But Perlmutter (Alexander Carr) is a step further on mustn't plead, when a business man

Potash or Perlmutter; the restaurants are run for them; the shops are governed by the tastes of Mrs. Potash and Mrs. Perlmutter; and, whether one likes it or not, one has to buy garments fundamentally designed to enhance the charms of those ladies. (46)

Whether one likes it or not, we hear Cather saying here, one must acclimate to the Perlmutters—to a New York increasingly run by and for Jews. Like Hendrick's depiction of a New York "impassably" crowded with Jews, Cather's claim that one cannot escape Jewish influence reflects a paranoid over-inflation of Jewish affluence. But again, like Hendrick, Cather's portrait is ambivalent, her anxiety infused with admiration. Jews are highly successful, woven into (and weaving) the fabric of the nation, but, at the same time, they are pushy, gaudy and imposing—unwanted, obtrusive outsiders. The play's imaginary New York resonated with Cather's own vision of the city:

In this play you have a group of people who make the external city, who are weaving the visible garment of New York, creating the color, the language, the "style," the noise, the sharp contrasts

which, to the inlander, mean the great metropolis. People who are on their way to something are always more conspicuous and more potent than people who have got what they want and are where they belong. The city roars and rumbles and hoots and jangles because Potash and Perlmutter are on their way somewhere. (46)

Here as elsewhere, Cather registers an ambivalent response to Jewish New York. For Cather, Jews at once provide glitter and excitement while also being conspicuous and crass, offering up ethnic local color that represents the "great metropolis" to an "inlander" like Cather. Jews are thoroughly American—as "people on their way to something" they embody the vitality and energy of American commerce. But their very conspicuousness and "potency" evokes in Cather a nagging discomfort at the fact that, "like it or not," Jews have knitted themselves into the cultural tapestry of New York.

The ambivalence about New York's Jews that we see registered in both Hendrick's and Cather's essays for *McClure's* increasingly gave way, in the America of the late teens, to a more virulent anti-Semitism. Madison Grant, New York patrician and racial nativist, did not take kindly to the suggestion that New York was being "invaded" by Jews. In his 1916 treatise *The Passing of the Great Race* he cautioned:

The man of the old stock is being crowded out of many country districts by these foreigners just as he is to-day being literally driven off the streets of New York City by the swarms of Polish Jews. These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals. (91)

For Grant this was cause for the United States to close its borders to Asia and Southern Europe, and he was instrumental in promoting the passage of the anti-immigrant legislation that burgeoned after World War I. While Grant's nativist animus extended to all non-Nordic peoples, his most venomous attacks fell upon Jews, and were fueled by an anxiety over the future of his native city, New York:

Large cities from the days of Rome, Alexandria, and Byzantium have always been gathering points of diverse races, but New York is becoming a *cloaca gentium* [this translates as a sewer of the nation or a drainage ditch of the races] which will produce many amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors that will go beyond the powers of future anthropologists to unravel. (92)

While Cather never approached Grant's virulent anti-Semitism, Burton Hendrick did. In 1923 he



Potash (on the right), played by Barney Bernard, is the old-fashioned always a salesman, always pushing his line, always a two-price man. the way. He has learned that there are times when a salesman must be a spender and do things handsomely.

ruary, 1914. WCPM Archives.

## CATHER'S JEWISH NEW YORK

(continued)

published *The Jews in America*, which painted an unflattering portrait of Jews from Eastern Europe and encouraged immigration laws calling for their exclusion. (In 1924 such laws were enacted as part of the Johnson Immigration Act.) Hendrick's shift from anxious admiration to anti-Semitic nativism between 1907 and 1923 perhaps best captures the change in attitudes toward Jewish immigration and assimilation in the teens and twenties.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding the cultural framework of shifting attitudes toward New York Jews during the teens helps Cather readers to situate the ethnic cityscape of "Behind the Singer Tower." Such contextualization renders the story more legible as a textual register of cultural anxiety about Jewishness, about New York, and about who the rightful inheritors of America's promise could be.

### III. "Behind the Singer Tower" and "Ethnic Horror"

"Behind the Singer Tower" has been read as a muckraking exposé, a Flaubertian exercise, a veritable American "heart of darkness."<sup>5</sup> Of Cather's recent critics, only Loretta Wasserman details what she calls Cather's "semitism" in "Behind the Singer Tower," and it is her lead that I wish to follow here. Wasserman's important study chronicles Cather's Jewish figurations in an attempt to reconcile them with her reputation for celebrating other immigrants, particularly Scandinavians and Bohemians. Like Wasserman, I am not interested here in condemning Cather as an anti-Semite, but rather in culturally situating her "semitism." Though, as Wasserman reminds us, "some of [Cather's] best friends were Jews" (3), one can hear in Cather's symbolic figurations of Jewish New York echoes of the "ethnic horror" registered by Nativists like Madison Grant.

If Cather's ambivalent attitude towards Jews is figured in the opposition of the Singer Tower and the Statue of Liberty, the heart of her story centers around a third symbol of New York's ethnic architecture, the fictional Mont Blanc Hotel. In the story's frame tale, Cather's characters view the New York skyline on the eve after the hotel has been ravaged by a terrible fire, killing hundreds. This fire seems to symbolize a rottenness at the core of what the story calls the "New York Idea." Indeed, the story seems to function as a kind of cautionary tale about dangerous industrial zeal and unchecked greed, hence its reputation as Cather's one attempt at social protest fiction. The narrator observes:

[W]e realized that, after the burning of the Mont Blanc, the New York idea would be called to account by every state in the Union, by all the great capitals of the world . . . [it] would bring our particular type of building into unpleasant prominence, as the cholera used to make Naples and conditions of life there too much a matter of discussion[.] . . . For once we were actually afraid of being too much in the public eye, of being overadvertised. (45-6)

Significantly, the rottenness contaminating the "New York Idea" is linked to a Jew—Stanley Merryweather, the builder of the Mont Blanc. The story within Cather's story, narrated by Hallet, himself an engineer, recounts his experience working under Merryweather on the foundation of the Mont Blanc, and his affection for a young Italian immigrant brutally sacrificed to Merryweather's unethical and stingy eagerness to cut corners despite risking his workers' lives.

Hallet's story offers us two versions of the American immigrant. Italians, though constantly referred to as "dagos" by Hallet, figure as desirable immigrants in this narrative. As the story opens, the men in the launch are passed by a boat filled with immigrants called the *Re di Napoli*, and the regal title of the ship is mirrored by the succeeding images of Italians in the story, which stress the noble Western traditions of Italian culture. Even the humble worker who captures Hallet's affection, Caesarino, is a diminutive Caesar, recalling the glory of Rome. Although he hails from a "goat track" and is portrayed as an idyllic, romanticized peasant, his pastoral virtues also make him the ideal immigrant: he's hardworking, respects Hallet, his boss, loves his mother, and, most significantly, he is a temporary pilgrim who desires to return to his native Italy once he has earned a sufficient sum of money. Hallet's rather maudlin affection for Caesarino seems dependent on Caesarino's dog-like humility and loyalty. The story's other noble Italian, an opera singer, is also a transient in New York, bringing his European high culture to the United States, with the promise that he will always return to his country estate in Naples at the end of opera season. Both of these Italians are killed by the Mont Blanc: Caesarino is crushed beneath falling equipment when a faulty cable about which Hallet warned Merryweather snaps, and the tenor dies leaping dramatically from the flaming building. The opera singer's death is described in particularly grisly detail—his severed hand, left hanging off a window ledge, seems an especially gruesome pound of flesh exacted by the Jewish industrialist as sacrifice to his American dream.

While the Mont Blanc consumes the noble Italians, the story's other immigrants, Jews, not only survive the

horror, they lie at the heart of this “New York Idea” gone wrong. The Mont Blanc is, after all, Stanley Merryweather’s hotel: the fire, the story tells us, is his fault. Merryweather is a curious character who fortuitously inherits his wealth and his legitimacy from a rich Scotch Presbyterian uncle who funds the Mont Blanc project. But even though Merryweather is only half-Jewish, his “racial characteristics” are readily apparent to characters like Hallet. As Madison Grant insisted, “the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew” (18). Confirming his racial identity, Merryweather marries a “burgeoning Jewish beauty” named Fanny Reizenstein whom he hangs with “the jewels of the East until she looked like the Song of Solomon done into motion pictures” (48). Merryweather is depicted in what Wasserman calls “venomous” terms: the story describes him as “glitteringly frank,” “insultingly cordial,” he “blossom[s]” in clothes of “an unusual weave and haunting color”—in short, he is the gaudy and stock caricature of a Jew of the Perlmutter variety. Like Perlmutter, Merryweather earns a kind of grudging respect for his brash American initiative: “I’m not underestimating the value of dash and intrepidity,” Hallet remarks, “he made the wheels go around” (51).

Although he functions as a double for Merryweather in the story, Zablowksi is a different kind of Jew. While Merryweather’s name registers assimilation and aspiration, Zablowksi seems a newer comer—he has not taken an anglicized name—and is thus more containable, because more recognizable. While he is an invited member of the boating party, Zablowksi is the butt of Hallet’s teasing throughout the story, and the final jab comes when Johnson claims that whatever happens to New York, the city is nonetheless “ours”—meaning American. Hallet jumps in to say, in the final lines of the story: “don’t call anything ours, Johnson, while Zablowksi is around” (54). This closing reference to Jewish acquisitiveness offers a climax to the story’s homily about Jewish infiltration. Hallet’s uneasy laughter provokes the reader to believe that the Jew might indeed take what is proclaimed by the story as “ours.” Zablowksi, we note, is not one of “us.”

Finally, I’d like to turn back, as the story does, to the Singer Tower, the “Jewy looking thing” that pollutes Cather’s New York skyline. After Hallet finishes his tale of the unfortunate Caesarino, he wonders aloud, “there must be something wonderful coming. When the frenzy is over, when the furnace has cooled, what marvel will be left on Manhattan island?” Zablowksi, dipping back into a kind of Eastern relativism, sighs a “dreamy” response, “what has been left often enough before . . . what was left in India, only not half so much”

(54). Zablowksi implies that the Empire State is fated to be like other empires: the monuments it builds, at tremendous human sacrifice, will endure as vestigial relics of the glory and costs of empire building. But the text tells us that Hallet “disregards him,” offering this vision instead:

What it will be is a new idea of some sort. That’s all that ever comes, really. That’s what we are all the slaves of, though we don’t know it. It’s the whip that cracks over us till we drop. Even Merryweather—and that’s where the gods have the laugh on him—every firm he crushes to the wall, every deal he puts through, every cocktail he pours down his throat, he does it in the service of this unborn Idea, that he will never know anything about. Some day it will dawn, serene and clear, and your Moloch on the Singer Tower over there will get down and do it Asian obeisance. (54)

Hallet’s startling reference to the terrible biblical Moloch completes the story’s vision of ethnic horror. Whereas in the story’s first personification of the Singer Tower, Johnson saw a praying Jewish patriarch, Hallet now overlays that image with the figure of Moloch, collapsing the two figures together and thus conflating them. The Jewish patriarch, then, becomes Moloch—a heathen idol who requires propitiatory sacrifice to fuel his furnace. The story seems to suggest that the destructive, consuming materialism of New York is the false god of Jews like Merryweather. The dawning of a new age—the “unborn idea” that Hallet prophesies—will cause this false idol to kneel in obedience to a higher power. Of course, the Singer Tower was not long the tallest building in New York, and increasing nativist sentiment against Jews and other immigrant groups led to severe immigration restrictions in the 1920s. Cather’s story leaves us with two opposed readings of New York’s ethnic architecture: Hallet’s prophecy of a transcendent and ethnically cleansed ideal emerging from New York’s conflagration, and Zablowksi’s quiet, and ultimately silenced, dissenting voice that counters Hallet’s ethnocentrism.

Critics of “Behind the Singer Tower” have cautioned against aligning Cather with Hallet’s anti-Semitism, and some have even suggested that, by making Hallet so vicious, her story offers a critique of anti-Semitism. Cather’s own retrospective reflections on her *McClure’s* years seem to disown any such clearly political motive in her fiction:

When I first lived in New York and was working on the editorial staff of a magazine, I became disillusioned about social workers and reformers. So many of them, when they brought in an article on fire-trap tenements or sweat-shop labour, apologetically

# CATHER'S JEWISH NEW YORK

(continued)

explained that they were making these investigations "to collect material for fiction." I couldn't believe that any honest welfare worker, or any honest novelist went to work in this way. The man who wants to get reforms put through does his investigating in a very different spirit, and the man who has a true vocation for imaginative writing doesn't have to go hunting among the ash cans on Sullivan Street for his material. ("Escapism" 24)

Between the literary ambiguities of Cather's fiction and her disavowals of politics, it becomes difficult, and perhaps fruitless, to try to pin down her own ethnic politics and prejudices. Despite Cather's equivocations, it is evident that anxieties over immigration— anxieties with clearly political consequences— did seep into her fiction. The cultural debate about Jewish acquisition and infiltration dramatized in "Behind the Singer Tower" helps position Cather's fiction as part of the shifting discourse about Jewishness and Americanness in the teens and twenties. That Cather continued to engage this cultural debate is perhaps most clearly evidenced by her return, some years later, to the figure of a Jew who infiltrates the ethnic architecture of American society in *The Professor's House*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper was first delivered at the conference "Willa Cather's New York" in June, 1998. I thank my audience, and particularly fellow panelist Robert Miller, for invigorating conversation and helpful feedback. I also thank Ann Romines and Loretta Wasserman for their provocative questions and careful attention to an earlier draft of this piece. Finally, I thank PLU librarian Gail Egbers for dropping everything to help me locate information about *Potash and Perlmutter*.

<sup>2</sup>The term comes from Burton J. Hendrick. See my discussion below.

<sup>3</sup>For Cather's review, see "New Types of Character Acting: The Character Actor Displaces the Star." *Potash and Perlmutter*, a play adapted from short stories by Montague Marsden Glass originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, opened at the Cohan theatre August 16, 1913. A *New York Times* article announcing the play's debut editorialized that the play "proves to be an indescribably enjoyable entertainment." The play was so popular for its mixture of ethnic comedy and sentiment that it ran for 441 performances and later opened in London. In 1923 Hollywood brought it to the screen.

<sup>4</sup>For a more thorough examination of anti-Semitism during this period, see Higham, McWilliams and Sorin.

<sup>5</sup>See Hall for the Conrad allusion, and Haller for a discussion of Flaubert's influence. Haller's piece, beautifully illustrated with images of the Singer Tower, offers a particularly insightful history to the Singer building, and to Cather's *McClure's* years.

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# Research in Progress: Discoveries from the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition The Human Element: Prototypes in “The Ancient People”

Ann Moseley, Volume Editor of *Song of the Lark*

After five days in the Grand Canyon, Willa Cather wrote Elizabeth Sergeant on May 21, 1912,<sup>1</sup> that, no matter how attractive it was, a place with nothing more than a geological history could not hold her interest for very long. The time that Cather spent at the Bright Angel Camp was indeed a hiatus between two intense emotional experiences, for this same letter raves about the beauties of the young Mexican Julio whom she had met just a few days before leaving Winslow for Grand Canyon and, in its reference to meeting her brother Douglass in Flagstaff to explore cliff dwellings along the Little Colorado River, looks forward to her own personal awakening in Walnut Canyon. The vitality of physical places, she insists in “The Novel D emeubl e,” is not so much in their actual existence or even in their presence “in the author’s mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves” (40). Cather’s most memorable characters—Alexandra Bergson,   Antonia Shimerda, Thea Kronborg, Tom Outland, and Archbishop Latour—all share this vital conjunction between place and character. For a place to come alive for Cather, it had to have the human element.

These characters also share another common element, all of them gaining their vitality from real individuals who had, through observation or reading, sparked Cather’s imagination. Although she claimed that her characters were composites, her use of prototypes for her major characters (Annie Sadilek Pavelka for   Antonia; Olive Fremstad and Cather herself for Thea; Dick Wetherill for Tom; and Jean Lamy for Latour) is well known. Even Alexandra, Stout has recently argued, is, like Thea, a projection of Cather herself (111). As shown in notes to the scholarly editions of Cather’s novels, however, Cather did not limit her use of prototypes to her major characters. Identification of prototypes in the Red Cloud area, while not easy, at least has a geographic boundary familiar to Cather scholars, but Cather sought material for her fiction everywhere—and, for “The Ancient People,” Part IV of *The Song of the Lark*, she found it in some unlikely places.

Arriving at Winslow, Arizona on April 19, 1912, to visit her brother Douglass, Cather found the town ugly and dull, as she wrote Sergeant, until she met Julio, who provided her with a store of

images and emotions that would surface in the characters of Johnny Tellamentez and the Ramas boys. Because none of Cather’s surviving letters focus on her visit to Walnut Canyon, the primary source for her experience is her portrayal of Thea’s artistic awakening in Panther Canyon. Identification of literal prototypes from that visit pales in importance to that awakening. And yet one of my most exciting experiences as volume editor of the Scholarly Edition of *The Song of the Lark* has been my discovery in August of 1999 of the prototypes for Henry Biltmer and the ranch house where Thea stays at Panther Canyon.

Because the entrance to Walnut Canyon was changed in the late 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps constructed a visitor center on the north ledge, visitors today do not approach the canyon as Cather did in 1912. Like Thea, Cather and Douglass would have ridden southeast from Flagstaff, entering the vast fissure from the west through the gentle and relatively shallow Ranger Canyon. Still standing today near the entrance of Ranger Canyon is Cliffs Ranger Station, a structure initially built in 1904 to house Walnut Canyon’s first ranger, William Henry Pierce, the prototype for “Old Biltmer.” This Union Civil War veteran was seventy-one in 1912, indeed “old” to an energetic and relatively young woman of thirty-eight. The daughter of a Confederate soldier, Mrs. Pierce lived with her husband and cooked for visitors just as Mrs. Biltmer does.

Even after I identified the Pierces as prototypes for the Biltmers, I continued to search the surrounding area for the “ranch house” until I finally realized it was right under my nose. Guided by Head Ranger Tom Ferrell on a tour of the Old Trail that ran by Ranger Cabin and through Ranger Canyon, I met Ranger Pam Meck coming out of the cabin. When I told her what I was looking for, I was astonished when she replied, “Yes, Cather signed the logbook on May 23.” Although the logbook

that early visitors signed has since been lost, corroborating evidence of Cather’s stay does exist. Not only had Meck seen more than one reference to it, but in 1982 William Howarth reported in *National Geographic* that “The visitors’ register at Walnut Canyon National Monument is signed ‘Miss Cather’ on May 23, 1912” (85). Further correspon-



“Forester’s Cabin, Walnut Canyon, near Flagstaff, Arizona, ca. 1910. NAU. PH. 2000.7, Cline Library, Northern Arizona University.”

## "THE ANCIENT PEOPLE"

(continued)

dence with Howarth revealed that he had seen Cather's signature for both May 23 and May 25, 1912. Although a kitchen was added between 1904 and 1906,<sup>3</sup> Cather probably stayed in the original main room of the cabin, with its curtainless window through which "the first fierce shafts of sunlight darted" (297). No reference to Douglass's signature has surfaced, so one can only surmise that—given the limitations of the cabin—he camped outside. Neither is it clear where Cather spent the night of the 24th—but she could have stayed in the cabin again, at a nearby ranch, or even—like Thea—in one of the nearby cliff dwellings with Douglass.

In Walnut Canyon Cather found not only prototypes for her characters but also something much more important. In the pottery fragments, intimate dwellings, and vast perspectives that she had missed in the Grand Canyon, she also found the human element that was essential to her art.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although I used Cather's actual letter, I am grateful to Janis P. Stout for allowing me to examine her chronological calendar of the letters (to be published by the U of Nebraska P), which includes a brief summary of each letter and pertinent dating and bibliographic information.

<sup>2</sup>Pam Meck was working on a grant application for the restoration of the Ranger Cabin and continued to look for the logbook until she died of cancer on June 12, 2000. Jeri DeYoung, the Director of Walnut Canyon and Waputki National Monuments, Flagstaff, Arizona, continues the search. Ms. DeYoung's aid and cooperation has been invaluable in my research on Walnut Canyon.

<sup>3</sup>According to Jeri DeYoung and Melinda Short, two additional rooms were added to the cabin by 1915, one serving as a museum and the other as additional room for visitors.

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## Disagreeing to Agree: A Reply to John Murphy and Joe Urgo

Marilee Lindemann

We live within societies whose aim is not simply to combat radical ideas—that one would readily expect—but to wipe them from living memory: to bring about an amnesiac condition in which it would be as though such notions had never existed, placing them beyond our very powers of conception.

—Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

That Willa Cather hated critics has never particularly surprised me. They were not always kind or fair in their judgments of her work, particularly in the 1930s, when she was dismissed as nostalgic and reactionary by a younger generation of mostly leftist critics. That Cather's critics today show signs of hating themselves *is* surprising to me, because Cather studies seems in an exceptionally vibrant state, with scholarly editions and important critical volumes popping out like spring wildflowers. Such works have helped to secure Cather's place both in the canon and in the kinds of conversations that are so crucial to 21st-century literary study, which continues to be fascinated by the worldliness of literary texts, by their complex entanglements in social and historical processes. So it is surprising and for me a bit saddening to see two major Cather critics, John Murphy and Joseph Urgo, whose scholarship I have long admired and whose comradeship I value, seeming to lament many of the trends in Cather studies that I have found to be most productive and appearing to long for a return to the good old days when Cather criticism devoted itself chiefly to appreciating the aesthetic and humanistic values of her work. Their exchange in the Fall 2000 *Newsletter and Review* grew out of emphatic disagreements they aired at the 1999 Mesa Verde conference, but I am struck by the powerful areas of agreement that emerge in their correspondence over precisely what I have described as the worldliness of Cather's texts and what others might less charitably describe as the politics as well as the practices of contemporary literary criticism. I insert myself into this conversation with respect for both parties and with a sincere desire to continue a debate that I think is healthy for Cather criticism—and perhaps for Cather critics.

In the course of their exchange, a clear and to me troubling pattern of agreement is evident. Urgo envisions "a 'Cather and No Place' conference. . . where no one would be allowed to mention a biographical, historical, social (race, sex, gender, any), geographical, or political matter, but where scholars and readers gen-

erally would be compelled to articulate the transcendent experience of Cather" (45). Taken to an extreme, this pattern would result in the "amnesiac condition" Terry Eagleton describes in the passage I have used as an epigraph, as Cather studies would seem to erase the hard work of trying to elucidate the author's vexed relationship to the world in which she lived and wrote. Murphy, though generally defending the importance of historical and textual scholarship as a means of enriching readers' experiences of texts, bemoans the loss of "interest in aesthetics" and "expanding vision" (50) and describes himself as "intolerant . . . of some things going on in the profession, like convoluting rather than illuminating texts, serving personal proclivities in the name of literary scholarship, dedicating oneself to demolishing hated texts, skimming or intentionally distorting texts to serve some political agenda" (49-50). Urgo takes up Cather's defense of art as escapism and says his quarrel is with our laxity as educators in instructing students how to read the language of escape in order to refresh and recharge the spirit. Instead of exploring the value of literary experience, we seem to want to become sociologists, or psychologists, or historians" (47). Murphy agrees, noting that "we've educated lots of 'experts' who lack or are incapable of the imaginative, creative experience and can't help their own students to have it" (48).

The teachers and critics conjured in these remarks remind me of the "hypothetical young man" Cather herself conjured up in the sardonic revision of her essay on Sarah Orne Jewett published in *Not Under Forty*—so much so, in fact, that I kept waiting for Murphy or Urgo to describe their miseducated "experts" as "violently inoculated with Freud" (93) as well, no doubt, as with Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick. They name no names, however, opting instead for a series of vague yet highly charged insinuations about "personal proclivities," "political agenda[s]," and bad reading strategies. *Good grief*, the reader of their exchange is invited to exclaim, *on top of everything else, they—whoever "they" are—SKIM!*

There are many things that disturb me about this caricature of my profession, but one of the most troubling is that it comes from two fellow literary critics and not, as such caricatures usually do, from journalists who for one reason or another have been assigned to cover an academic conference. Indeed, their caricature resembles in many respects the one drawn by journalist Joan Acocella in her slender, provocative *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, which seems to have set off something of a backlash against feminist, lesbian/gay/queer, and various other, roughly oppositional engagements with Cather's work.<sup>1</sup> Like Acocella, Murphy and Urgo attack such criticism by invoking a dubious, if

not wholly specious, opposition between aesthetics and politics which assumes that in an ideal world the one would have nothing to do with the other. By the terms of this opposition, aesthetics are somehow apolitical and therefore uniquely capable of revealing the truth of the literary text, while politics are inevitably distortional, perverting the text in the interest of serving some "agenda." Can it really be possible at this point in the history of the discipline to imply that there is such a thing as a criticism without a politics, an interpretation without an agenda? And why is it that lesbianism—a thing not named but clearly implied in Murphy's commentary—is considered a "personal proclivity" likely to result in tendentious readings while the longing for transcendence is presumed to "bestow vision and insight"? (Murphy and Urgo 49).

Greater minds than mine have labored in recent years to demonstrate that the opposition between aesthetics and politics is itself deeply political, a mechanism by which power disguises its operations, setting up "art" and "literature" as autonomous realms "sequestered," as Terry Eagleton puts it, "from all other social practices" (9). Willa Cather seems to have bought into such an opposition, though it has always seemed to me that her paeans to the "Kingdom of Art" and her musings on art as escapism were undercut substantially by the shrewdness with which she and her artist-heroines managed the less exalted material and economic realities of their careers. *The Song of the Lark*, for example, casts no judgment upon Thea Kronborg for "holding out for a big contract" (555) when she realizes she is in a position to do so. Cather herself was equally shrewd in deciding to leave Houghton Mifflin and trust her future to the brash young publisher from New York, Alfred A. Knopf, in part because he promised to make her more money than the staid Boston house ever had. Apparently, the "Kingdom of Art" is an earthly kingdom after all.

As a counter to my friend Joe Urgo's fantasy of a "Cather and No Place" conference, I would offer up the fantasy of a conference called "Willa Cather: Without Reverence," where no one would be allowed to dismiss a paper simply because it was "theory-driven" or because Cather herself would not have liked it. I have never believed that Cather (or, in truth, any writer) required the reverence of her readers, no matter how much we might admire her talents or believe she has enriched our lives. Believe it or not, I plead guilty to both of those charges and in fact spend a lot of time in my classes engaged in good old-fashioned close reading, leading my students line-by-line through a passage, pausing occasionally to linger over an exceptionally beautiful phrase or image—and even daring to label it as such. My Willa Cather does not require special handling, for she is entirely able to withstand

## DISAGREEING TO AGREE

(continued)

whatever I or any other critic might "do" to her, which is why the image of Cather as the victim of so-called political criticism has always baffled me. Reverence and appreciation have not been the primary functions of literary criticism for more than thirty years, but a skeptical, tough-minded, socially engaged critical practice does not necessarily result in the destruction of aesthetic pleasure. If it did, I would have to find another way to earn a living. If, on the other hand, John and Joe, your dreams were to come true and Cather studies were to re-ground itself in aesthetics and neo-Arnoldian tributes to the soul-refreshing powers of Literature, then, I predict, the nightmare imagined in "Miss Jewett" would likely become "Miss Cather's" reality: she would seem hopelessly remote from the world of modern readers, who would understandably "find very little on her pages" (92).

The fact of the matter is that the very work you seem to deplore has performed the dirty yet necessary task of making Cather relevant to a postmodern generation of readers who are, yes, "violently inoculated" with Freud and Foucault and MTV and a seemingly endless supply of inane TV game shows. Lest you think my reference to "relevance" is but further proof of my unholy alliance with vulgarians of every sort, bear in mind that financially strapped university presses would not be willing to invest precious resources in scholarly editions and critical monographs if they did not believe that Willa Cather were still a (relatively) hot commodity in today's highly competitive literary universe. Their eyes are as clearly on the bottom line as Cather's were when she wrote to Ferris Greenslet in 1915 urging him to push *The Song of the Lark* even harder than he had *O Pioneers!* because she felt the book had a lot of momentum in it and she wanted to sell a good many copies.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, I find it thrilling that the writer whose achingly beautiful prose captivated me twenty years ago nowadays turns up regularly on *Masterpiece Theater* and NPR as well as in the pages of *American Literature*, and that Duke and Routledge seem almost as interested in her as the University of Nebraska Press has traditionally been. I would rather see Cather as the subject of lively and contentious debate than as the object of mere admiration, set up on some pedestal "beyond sex, beyond time" (Murphy and Urgo 47). To wish for that is, in my judgment, to risk turning her into the Lost Lady of American literature, which would be a far greater tragedy than the possibility that some theory-loving graduate student might misread *My Antonia*. Misreading is better, I hope we can agree, than not reading at all.

**Editor's Note:** If you would like to join this conversation and respond to John Murphy, Joe Urgo, and Marilee Lindemann, send an e-mail message response to our Managing Editor, Steven P. Ryan, at [sryan@gpcom.net](mailto:sryan@gpcom.net). Your ideas are welcome! — AR

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Space limitations prevent me from a full unpacking of the caricature of "political" criticism deployed in Acocella's book. I will, however, direct the reader's attention to her two chapters on "Cather and the Feminists" where she depicts feminist criticism as a conspiratorial effort to recruit Cather to the feminist "team" (41) or to "rehabilitate" her (49) when her commitment to feminism seemed undercut by male narrators and other signs of an unsisterly male identification (38-9). Lesbianism, in Acocella's view, was the "ingenious" "solution" to the "problem" of "Cather's insufficient feminism," a way of "tak[ing] [Cather] in hand and firmly [leading] her back to the subject of gender" (51). Throughout, Acocella uses the narrative technique of indirect discourse to create the illusion of access to the minds and motives of "the feminists," which heightens the aura of political conspiracy, of literary criticism as a kind of hostage-taking. A similar caricature emerges in Murphy and Urgo's exchange, particularly in Murphy's remark, quoted in full in the previous paragraph, about critics "serving personal proclivities in the name of literary scholarship" (49).

<sup>2</sup>Willa Cather, letter to Ferris Greenslet, 28 April 1915, Willa Cather Letters, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

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# Preserving Significant Place: A Message from the President

Dear WCPM Members,

This year's Spring issue of the WCPM Newsletter and Review announced the opening of our national four-year campaign to raise \$875,000 to match the Challenge Grant awarded us last December (by the National Endowment for the Humanities). The purpose of this campaign is to create a permanent endowment for operating the renovated Opera House in Red Cloud—which will be our new WCPM headquarters and a vital center for Cather studies, cultural and educational events, and artistic performances. I'm happy to report that over last summer we achieved the first in several campaign milestones set for us by the NEH, raising \$50,000 by August 1st. This success is owed to the extraordinary efforts of the WCPM staff and a task force of volunteer Board members, who energetically took on the unfamiliar task of fund-raising. And it's also thanks to all of you across the country who responded so generously to our letters and phone calls. As President of the Board of Governors I sign thank-you letters to our donors—a pleasant task that reminds me constantly of the many personal commitments that make the WCPM possible.

As individuals we have a host of different reasons for these commitments to the Foundation. I think, though, that one of the most powerful attractions that

Willa Cather holds for us—one of the qualities that we find most worth our emotional investments—is her communication of the significance of place in the lives of humans. Her relations to the places of her life (which became the places of her fiction) were famously complicated and ambivalent, but they were always passionate. And her simple descriptions of these places kindle responsive passion in us, her readers.

To care for Willa Cather's art is for me inseparable from caring for her tangible landscapes. This is why Red Cloud is a magical place for Cather readers, and presumably why a project like the Opera House's renovation and endowment is able to fire the imaginations of so many of us. The project is certainly about preserving a historic site and memorializing a particular way of life; but it's also about honoring the emotional charge that quite ordinary places—childhood homes, graduation platforms, rural fields and city streets—carry in all of our memories.

If you have not visited Red Cloud, I hope that you will before too long. It is a remarkable place, and it reminds us forcefully of what we value in Cather's work, and why we value it.

Best wishes,  
John N. Swift, President,  
WCPM Board of Governors



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## Letters to the WCPM

We would like to express our appreciation for the generous manner in which everyone at the WCPM received our group last week in Red Cloud. The members of the seminar at the University of Kansas are from schools all over the country, and they were very impressed by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and by Red Cloud. Betty, Judy, Dorothy, and Nancy were particularly helpful in making our visit in Red Cloud a resounding success.

You can be assured that fourteen more high school and middle school faculty will take positive impressions of Red Cloud back with them to their schools and will continue ardently promoting the reading of Willa Cather.

We hope to return again soon. Thank you again for all your assistance in making our trip so successful.

*Sarah L. Young, Assistant  
Dr. Janet Sharistianian, Director*

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS NEH SEMINAR FOR THE HUMANITIES ON  
WILLA CATHER AND EDITH WHARTON AS WOMEN WRITERS

Dear Cather Friends/Visitors to Willow Shade,

Les (Lester) Wisecarver, caretaker at Willow Shade for 22 years, died August 7 of throat cancer. Visitors to Willow Shade will recall Les, though I think you will mainly recall the warmth and droll humor of his wife, Phyllis. The year Dave and I sold Willow Shade (1998), Les had hoarseness of voice and finally went into the VA where cancer was diagnosed. Phyllis said he died peacefully.

Phyllis is now living in a home on the property of Les's nephew. If anyone wants to send her a note or card, she would love to hear from you. Her years at Willow Shade meant a great deal to her, and she enjoyed meeting you all. I can truly say about Phyllis that she was "born interested." Her new address: Phyllis Wisecarver, 393 Cedar Grove Road, Winchester, VA 22603.

Dave and I are fine and hope all of you are, too.

*Susan Parry*

*Willow Shade was the Cather family Virginia home before their move to Nebraska in 1883. — SR*

We saw you on C-SPAN on the Cather show a few weeks ago and you were great—and the show was great. Brian Lamb is a national hero—or should be. Congratulations! With best regards,

*Jeffrey Hayden and Eva Marie Saint*



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The *Newsletter and Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters to the Managing Editor. Scholarly essays should not exceed 2500-3000 words; they should be submitted on disk in Microsoft Word or WordPerfect (8 and up) and should follow *The MLA Style Manual*.

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Essays and notes are listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.



## **WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION (The Willa Cather Society)**

Founded 1955 by Mildred Bennett

Mrs. Bennett and seven other founding members of the Board of Governors defined the Foundation's mission, which has evolved into these

### **AIMS OF THE WCPM**

To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.

To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.

To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.

To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

### **BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

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### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Steven P. Ryan

# News from the Executive Director



It has been an exciting summer here.

First, C-SPAN cable television network broadcast live from Red Cloud July 2 as part of its *American Writers: A Journey Through History* series. I hope you were able to watch it, or one of the several repeat airings. Copies of the program are available at the WCPM bookstore.

We welcomed C-SPAN with a special program July 1 in steamy Grace Episcopal Church. UN-L doctoral candidate Ann Tschetter and Norma Ross Walter Scholarship winner Lacey Worth delivered papers; Professor Darrel Lloyd, WCPM Board of Governors, read passages from Cather; students from Ellsworth, Kansas, High School gave an audio-visual presentation on Cather and the Great Plains; and Marcia Thompson and Barb Sprague of Red Cloud provided music.

The C-SPAN operation is a marvel to behold. Swiftly and deftly, its thoroughly professional crew began transforming Red Cloud into a telecast site. Cameras appeared on rooftops. A production mini-village sprouted behind the post office. The WCPM visitors' center and Cather Childhood Home grew thick with cables, lights, cameras, and technical gear.

Almost immediately upon the opening of the broadcast, calls from across the country poured in. One Illinois couple, watching the program from a motel room in Kearney, left for Red Cloud during the break. Throughout the remainder of the summer, visitors—having revised their travel plans upon watching the program—flowed into Webster County. All in all, it was wonderful exposure for Cather and the Foundation. And the town thoroughly enjoyed its moment on national television.

Our thanks to Brian Lamb, Maura Pierce, Jim Clark, and Anne Haller of C-SPAN for bringing their extraordinary series to Catherland. We are now glad to count them as friends.

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Second, we met our first goal toward matching the National Endowment for the Humanities grant for the Opera House endowment fund, passing \$50,000 on July 31. Congratulations to Jane Renner Hood, WCPM Board of Governors, and her hard-working Development Task Force on reaching this milestone. They must raise another \$200,000 by July 31, 2002.

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Third, the Board of Governors voted to move ahead on the Opera House renovation. As we go to press, interior demolition has begun. Farris Construction of Hastings will oversee the project, which is expected to take twelve to 14 months. This long-held dream is about to become a reality . . .

\*\*\* \*\*

Mellanee Kvasnicka and I have had very enjoyable meetings with representatives of the Nebraska Quilters' Guild and the International Quilt Study Center of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in preparation for Spring Festival 2002, "Under the quilting frames': Memory, Storytelling, and Art," next May 3-4. I know many of you are already looking forward to the event.

\*\*\* \*\*

We have sad news to report—the kind that caused Cather to grieve the toll of time and change. Ella Cather Lewis passed away in Long Beach, California, June 27, after a short illness. She was the daughter of Willa's youngest brother, Jack, and sister to Catherine Cather Lowell. I had met with her and Catherine at the former's home last summer. She was a lovely lady with a keen interest in the work of the Foundation.

Also, Susan Parry notifies us of the death August 7 of Les Wisecarver, caretaker at Willow Shade (the Cather family Virginia home before their move to Nebraska in 1883) for 22 years. I met Les one day in June 1998 when, on my way to the Cather colloquium at Drew University, I drove past Willow Shade, hoping to snap a couple photographs. Les came out, introduced himself, and took me on a thorough tour of the property. When it was over, he graciously refused payment. I will always remember his generosity and kindness to this unexpected visitor.

May these friends rest in peace.

—Steve Ryan, Executive Director



Views of the Burlington Station at Red Cloud, Nebraska

# Cather and Quilts: Call for Entries

Nebraska State Quilters Guild (NSQG) is co-sponsoring the annual Willa Cather Spring Festival in Red Cloud on May 3 & 4, 2002. In partnership with the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, NSQG will present a quilt contest and exhibit. Cash prizes and ribbons will be awarded, and the quilts will be exhibited in Red Cloud and other venues. The International Quilt Study Center is also providing support and advice.

Willa Cather mentioned quilts and quilters in several of her novels and short stories. She sewed patchwork as a child and she remembered sitting "under the quilting frames," listening to the talk of her female relatives. You might portray one of her remembered scenes written into her books. Or you might select one of her visual descriptions to depict. Your inspiration might be Cather's wonderful sense of place. Do some summer reading with quilt inspiration in mind, then make a quilt and enter it in the CATHER AND QUILTS exhibit.

#### Here are the rules:

- Anyone can enter a cloth quilt.
- Make a quilt depicting a passage from one of Willa Cather's works.
- The quilt may be abstract or representational.
- The quilt must be designed, constructed and quilted by the person(s) named on the entry.

- The quilt must have been finished after July 1, 2001.
- The quilt must be 3 layers, quilted by hand or machine.
- The quilt must be a minimum 30" in each dimension and not exceed 43" in any one dimension.
- The quilt must have a 4" sleeve on the top and a label in the lower left corner of the back.
- Finalists' quilts must be available to travel on exhibit through May 31, 2003.
- Entrant is responsible for shipping costs to send the quilt. NSQG cannot assume responsibility for return shipping costs for international entries.

#### Timeline:

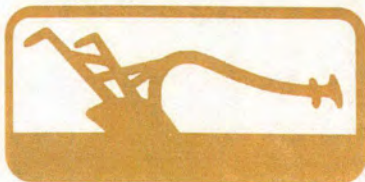
- **April 5, 2002** Two good quality photos (one full view, one detail) completed entry blank and SASE must arrive at NSQG.
- **April 15, 2002** Selected entrants will be notified.
- **April 24, 2002** Quilts must be available for judging and display.

To obtain an entry form contact:

**NSQG, c/o Paulette Peters**

**1110 Skyline Road, Elkhorn, NE 68022.**

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Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial  
and Educational Foundation  
326 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

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