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Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508).

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From Willa Cather's "Books and Magazines" column in the *PITTSBURG LEADER*, both reviews appearing during the year when she was twenty-five. Reprinted here for the first time.

MY *ÁNTONIA*: Early Reviews

First critical opinions of *MY ÁNTONIA* ranged from odd views like that of the *NEW YORK TIMES*: "a carefully detailed picture of daily existence on a Nebraska farm" (Oct. 6, 1918), or the misjudgment of the *BOOKLIST* that *MY ÁNTONIA* would not appeal to as many readers as did *THE SONG OF THE LARK* (Jan. 25, 1919), to H. L. Mencken's assertion in the *SMART SET* that Willa Cather's novel was "one of the best that any American has ever done, East or West, early or late" (March 1919). Generally, critics gave the book very high praise. The following passages are taken from three early reviews that—in notes on clippings or in letters—Willa Cather indicated she liked.

"My *Ántonia*"

From the Red Cloud *CHIEF*, October 10, 1918. Reprinted from the New York *SUN*, October 6, 1918.

There is a special genius of Memory. Where it exists it is capable of accomplishing what no other genius can reach. The classic modern example of it is Joseph Conrad's story, *YOUTH*—a thing of terrible poignancy, of wonder and tears. If a writer is so blessed as to be able, only one or two times, to recapture the past and rekindle the ancient fires he will leave a name remembered and loved from generation to generation.

Of living American writers there is particularly one who has this great gift. Willa Sibert Cather, writing *O PIONEERS!* made an indelible impression upon the minds of those who read that novel, an impression which was merely confirmed with satisfactory completeness by her own confession afterward. And what she confessed to was simply this: Translated from Virginia to the Nebraska prairie in the '80's, she lived a life of quite unusual intensity.

What Willa Cather got out of her childhood was a wonderful awareness of the few people about her and of the soil they struggled upon and of the struggle itself, as desperate as that of the lonely swimmer to keep afloat in midocean. This soil was an ocean, an illimitable ocean of tall red grass, forever billowing in the wind so that the visible earth appeared as restless as horizonless waters.

"As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running."

The words are Jim Burden's and the perception is that of a ten-year-old set down for the first time in the plains of the middle West. But the picture is the picture cinematographed on a woman's brain and projected on the pages of Willa Cather's new book, *MY ÁNTONIA*.

The most extraordinary thing about *MY ÁNTONIA* is the author's surrender of the usual methods of fiction in telling her story. Time and again as you read the book it strikes you what an exciting novel Miss Cather could have made of it if she had wanted to plait the strands of her story into a regulation plot. But she renounces all that at the beginning in a brief introduction.

The introduction acquaints us with Jim Burden, a New York lawyer of wealth and reputation, whose youthful fortunes were much advanced by his marriage with the only daughter of a distinguished man. There appears never to have been love in that marriage. Only one woman ever really influenced Jim Burden's life or kindled his imagination—*Ántonia* Shimerda, later *Ántonia* Cuzak—a Bohemian girl who had been his playmate in their childhood on the Nebraska prairie. Miss Cather asks us to accept the story of *Ántonia* as set down by Burden. It is a series of memories exclusively; it has continuity and it has development; but it has not and could not have any of the plot or suspense which could so easily be managed by telling the story in ordinary fashion. It would have been so easy for the author to have told her tale herself and to have matched *Ántonia* against the woman who became Mrs. Burden; the complete contrast between the two would

have been dramatic enough in all conscience, and the struggle in Jim Burden could have been made wholly plausible. Then why didn't she do it that way?

Because to have done it that way would have branded her narrative as purest fiction in the mind of every reader; a comfortable sense that none of this ever had happened would have gone with you all the way through the book, absorbing as it would have been. But now you are positively uncomfortable from page to page with the conviction that all of this has happened! By deliberately and at the outset surrendering the story teller's most valuable prerogatives Miss Cather has won a complete victory over the reader, shattering his easeful assumption of the unreality of it all, routing his readymade demand for the regulation thrills and taking prisoner his sense of what is his rightful due. It is as if General Foch were maneuvering. The strategy is unfathomed and the blow falls in a most unexpected quarter. You picked up MY ANTONIA to read a novel (love story, of course; hope it's a good one) and find yourself enthralled by autobiography.

What vivid autobiography it is we cannot indicate adequately. For a great part of the book Antonia (the Bohemians accent the first syllable of the name strongly, and this should be remembered in pronouncing the title)—for perhaps half of the book Antonia stands out not much more distinctly than a half dozen other people. The reader is puzzled to understand why she should mean so much to the boy Jim Burden. It takes the last fifty pages, we suspect, to make it clear just what she meant and how deeply, even as it took the sight of her and her children, after an interval of some twenty years, to make this clear to Jim himself.

The real interest of the narrative pending the final and moving disclosure of Antonia Cuzak, the interest and the rich delight of it, the heaped up satisfaction, lies in the simple and perfect picture of pioneer life. It lies in the figure of old Mr. Shimerda, a sad and stricken aristocrat, and in the account of his ghastly death. It lies in the figures of Jake and Otto. It rests in the portraits of Jim's grandfather and grandmother, of Pavel (or Paul) and Peter, the Russians, and their dreadful story. Mr. Shimerda, kneeling before the lighted Christmas tree on which all the colored figures from Austria stood out in the candle flame; Otto cheerily carpentering Mr. Shimerda's coffin; Peter and Pavel and the bridal night in Russia which was also the night of the wolves; Crazy Mary, chasing Lena Lingard with a corn knife to "trim some of the shape off her"; Lena, with her violet eyes, giving away her heart when she feels like it but never losing her head; Blind D'Arnault, the negro musician, and his strange story; the revelations regarding the satyr, Wycliffe Cutter; a performance of CAMILLE in Lincoln, Nebraska; the worldly success of Tiny Soderball—these are the raw materials of romance, but the very substance of actuality. They need only to be skillfully related, and in handling them Miss Cather does unflinchingly well. Nor is her accomplishment easy; murder, suicide, debauchery and occurrences that were not only unvarnished but unvarnishable are quite as much a part of what she has to handle as the happy, domestic scenes natural to childhood. She is no feminine Zola, fortunately; without any smirch of realism she achieves the happiest reality. A young writer who wants to deal honestly and yet inoffensively with a variety of difficult things can learn big lessons from reading this book. . . .

Paper Dolls or People

From a one-page flyer of the (Chicago) DAILY NEWS OF BUSINESS, April 12, 1919. Reprinted from the Chicago DAILY NEWS.

Some books are written about paper dolls—cleverly designed and smartly painted and dressed, but flat. Close the book and they lie quietly between the pages until some young person takes them down ten years later and says, "How quaint"

"My Antonia," by Willa Sibert Cather, hasn't a paper doll in it. The people come out of it as you read it and refuse to be put back on the shelf with the book. They go about your work with you, and presently it seems as if you had known them well for a long time.

This quality of realness is important because "My Antonia" tells of the west, and there are novels in uncounted numbers about a pasteboard west, full of gaily colored "cut-out" cowboys shooting up towns, sugar plum western girls and torn paper blizzards. It is a west manufactured by writers who thought they had to make-believe or their stories would not be interesting, and it can be done perfectly by a man who was never outside New York. When it is done it isn't half as important as one of Grimm's fairy tales that doesn't even pretend to be real.

Willa Cather lived in Nebraska when she was a little girl. It was a west that the conventional wild west novels never hint at. Homesteaders were coming into the state from the east and from all over Europe. The prairie flowers were no more varied than the families whose claims cornered and who got their supplies and their mail from the same raw little town.

Bohemians and Russians, Virginians and Norwegians, found themselves neighbors. While they built their dugouts and turned under the sod for their first corn they had to learn each others' racial and individual peculiarities.

Sometimes they clashed tragically. Czech and Austrian found each other antagonistic; slow Swede and fiery Bohemian loved each other to their own hurt. Oftener each discovered that the other was marvelously human and like himself.

Under the common necessity of co-operating in housebuilding and harvesting and educating their children, something very like an informal league of nations resulted. In an amazingly short time the community became American, with common interests and a common language, but with possibilities of varied development that no thoroughbred race could by itself exhibit.

Not since the early colonial times when Spanish, Dutch, English and French were shouldering each other off the American coast has there been opportunity for such racial contact and interplay.

Miss Cather has had the rare good sense to see that the west of the old romantic yarns is dull and shoddy compared to the west that she understands and loves, and she has given us three novels of the west that stand alone in American literature.

"O Pioneers!," "The Song of the Lark" and "My Antonia" can be compared only with each other. They are wise and humorous and often beautiful, but above all, real; and of the three "My Antonia" is most generous of its riches.

It is packed with the feel of the country. A scant paragraph sets you out on the plains, and the



Part of *MY ANTONIA* was written in the summer of 1917 at Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where Willa Cather stayed at the Shattuck Inn. But she liked best to write at a tent set up in the meadow-land surrounding "High Mowing," a place near the Inn rented by two Pittsburgh friends. The snapshot shown above, taken at this time, is reproduced courtesy of the Cather family. Copyright © 1973 by the University of Nebraska Press.

breath of the wind that billows the long grass never leaves your face. The fragrance and color and significance of a whole fruiting orchard rises from another. . . .

If you are looking for light on the minds of the people who are conducting absorbing political experiments on the western plains this winter; if you are homesick for a far-sweeping, simple country; or if—and that is most likely—you want to brush away stiff-jointed literary puppets and live for a while with real people, you will read and give thanks for "My Antonia."

"My Antonia"

The concluding paragraph of "Morals and Art from the West," by Randolph Bourne, in the *DIAL*, December 14, 1918.

My Antonia has the indestructible fragrance of youth: the prairie girls and the dances; the softly alluring Lena, who so unaccountably fails to go wrong; the rich flowered prairie, with its drowsy heats and stinging colds. The book, in its different way, is as fine as the Irishman Corkery's *The Threshold of Quiet*, that other recent masterpiece of wistful youth. But this story lives with the hopefulness of the West. It is poignant and beautiful, but it is not sad. Miss Cather, I think, in this book has taken herself out of the rank of provincial writers and given us something we can fairly class with the modern literary art the world over that is earnestly and richly interpreting the spirit of

youth. In her work the stiff moral molds are fortunately broken, and she writes what we can wholly understand.

WILLA CATHER AT ASTICOU INN

Mount Desert Island, Maine: Summer, 1945

I remember Willa Cather well; she tottered
 Lost, I thought—a fragile tiny woman always
 In a quaint white dress, black stockings,
 High black shoes. Lost by the magnificent
 Ocean where natty aristocrats from Boston,
 Philadelphia played tennis, sailed
 International Class, drank thirstily before
 And after dinner, smoked black-papered
 Cigarettes in silver holders. — Aristocrats
 Who coughed, spoke sometimes to the harmless
 Old lady who nodded **yes**, who hurried away
 To her rooms carrying pat of dinner butter
 And tiny pitcher of cream for evening tea.
 Lost! I thought—until I read **My Antonia**.

Leonard Gilley

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VIEWS OF CHILDHOOD

Passages from two book reviews by Willa Cather in the *PITTSBURG LEADER*, both signed "Sibert."

"Dream Days." Kenneth Grahame. \$1.25. New York: John Lane.

Another volume of those delightful reminiscences of childhood by Mr. Grahame . . . Mr. Grahame is, I believe, a man of affairs, a busy man, connected with the Bank of England, and I often wonder how he manages to carry these exquisite memories and imaginings of childhood with him through the dusty ways of the world, how he has preserved so intact those first mysterious conceptions of the brain, those first acute experiences of the imagination. . . .

We have all dwelt once in that kingdom of lost delight, that fair domain where we could be bloody pirates in the bath tub in the morning, and after lunch pilgrims on our way to the Holy Land, stepping painfully with our bare feet over the gravel walks heated to the temperature of desert sands by the summer sun. We have all known that kingdom where we could be Caesar or Napoleon at will, and where all the splendid dramas of history were enacted again in one small brain. But most of us lose these exquisite fancies early. For a little while, in the early morning of life, they are ours, and then the sun comes up, calling us to the busy day's work, and they vanish as the dew does from the flowers. Even the memory of them dies. But Mr. Grahame has kept the memory of all those poignant delights with singular freshness. He is able to recall perfectly the unspeakable felicities, the unreasonable shadows and fears and mysteries that beset the imagination in its first exuberance of action. He is a fortunate man, this Mr. Grahame, to have kept even the memory of those imaginary adventures before which the utmost possibilities of the grown-up world must pall. I envy him these much more than his official connection with the Bank of England. For where will he ever find tropic seas as fair as those he sailed in his bath tub, where coral islands as balmy as those he explored on the hearth rug before the nursery fire, where a princess as fair as the one he rescued from the imaginary French captain?

What was it Stevenson wrote?
 "Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,
 Say, could that lad be I?
 Merry of soul he sailed on a day
 Over the sea to Skye.
 "Mull was astern, rum on the port,
 Egg on the starboard bow;
 Glory of youth glowed in his soul;
 Where is that glory now?"

Well, Mr. Stevenson kept that glory always; he remained a boy. He went on living romances and writing them and "making-believe" until he died. But Mr. Grahame has had the misfortune to grow up and become a banker. He only plays in memory. I fancy he finds the implacable years between him and the lost Eden, and at its gates the relentless angel, with the sword; and that like one and another of us, he is a king in exile. (December 10, 1898, p. 9.)

"'Ickery Ann and Other Boys and Girls." Elia W. Peattie. \$1.00. Chicago: H. S. Stone. Pittsburg: J. R. Weldon & Co.

. . . Ah, what clever, witty, wicked things that are written to-day for children with temperaments! The gravest ethical and social problems are now discussed in words of one syllable; there are juvenile "Camilles" and "Manon Lescauts" and juvenile books of pity and

horror and death. These things are not always on the surface, of course, but they are a sort of black under-drift in apparently cheerful tales. Now it would be very like Mrs. Peattie to write a lot of children's stories that told much more than they said, had a subdued motif of grownupness and experience and ennui. It was with that expectation that I opened the book, but the stories are not that sort. They are real old-time "kid" stories without even a reminiscent personal touch, such as Mr. Will Allen White's charming stories have, and which few writers of juvenile literature can deny themselves. No, they are not at all of the Kenneth Grahame cult of violet musings. Children do things and eat things in these stories, and they reflect very little. The most temperamentless child might enjoy them; they could be read to an accompaniment of sweet apples and molasses taffy. Little girls whose braids catch on their buttons, and the little boys who tease them will like to read these stories. As I read them I found two, "Bertha's Debut" and "Grizel Cochrane's Ride," that were old friends of mine, for I had come across them some time ago, when I, too, read to an accompaniment of molasses candy. I read them again with pleasure. They form another contribution to the literature of the temperamentless, and I always rejoice to see the temperamentless score. (April 22, 1899, p. 5.)

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AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To secure the bonding, insurance and housing of a permanent art, literary and historical collection relating to the life, time and work of Willa Cather.
- To identify and restore to their original condition, places made famous by the writings of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial in the form of art and literary scholarships.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.



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