

# MY ANTONIA



WILLA CATHER



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## FROM THE PAGES OF *MY ÁNTONIA*

If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. (page 11)

That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (page 17)

The low sky was like a sheet of metal; the blond cornfields had faded out into ghostliness at last; the little pond was frozen under its stiff willow bushes. Big white flakes were whirling over everything and disappearing in the red grass. (page 42)

Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, “My Án-tonia!” (page 78)

Winter lies too long in country towns. (page 110)

“I ain’t never forgot my own country.” (page 142)

She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man and work piling up around a sick woman. (page 174)

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (page 192)

In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again. (page 197)

It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (page 211)

# MY ÁNTONIA



*Willa Cather*

*With an Introduction and Notes*

*by Gordon Tapper*

George Stade

Consulting Editorial Director



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## WILLA CATHER



Wilella Sibert Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in the small Virginia farming community of Winchester. When she was ten years old, her parents moved the family to the prairies of Nebraska, where her father opened a farm mortgage and insurance business. Home-schooled before enrolling in the local high school, Cather had a mind of her own, changing her given name to Willa and adopting a variation of her grandmother's maiden name, Seibert, as her middle name. As a young woman she met Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a schoolmate who would later become the main character in her acclaimed novel *My Ántonia* (1918).

During Cather's studies at the University of Nebraska, she worked as a drama critic to support herself and published her first piece of short fiction, "Peter," in a Boston magazine. After graduation, her love of music and intellectual pursuits inspired her to move to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she edited the family magazine *Home Monthly*, wrote theater criticism for the Pittsburgh *Daily Leader*, and taught English and Latin in local high schools. Cather published her first short story collection, *The Troll Garden*, in 1905. She moved to New York City the following year to work for *McClure's Magazine* as a writer and eventually the magazine's managing editor.

Considered one of the great figures of early-twentieth-century American literature, Willa Cather derived her inspiration from the American Midwest, which she considered her home. Never married, she cherished her many friendships, some of which she had maintained since childhood. Her intimate coterie of women writers and artists motivated Cather to produce some of her best work. Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful author from Maine whom Cather had met during her *McClure's* years, inspired her to devote herself full-time to creating literature and to write about her childhood, which she did in several novels of the prairies; one of the best known is *O Pioneers!* (1913), whose title comes from a poem by Walt Whitman. A critic of the rise of materialism, Cather addressed the social impact of the

developing industrial age in *A Lost Lady* (1923), which was made into a film starring Barbara Stanwyck. For *One of Ours* (1922), a novel about World War I, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

In her later years Cather produced some of her most recognized work. For *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) she won a gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1933 she received the Prix Femina Americaine for *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), a collection of short stories. Two years after publishing her last novel, *The Best Years* (1945), Willa Cather died of a cerebral hemorrhage, on April 24, 1947, in New York City. A collection of short fiction, *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), and a literary treatise, *On Writing* (1949), were published after her death. Among Cather's other accomplishments were honorary doctorate degrees from Columbia, Princeton, and Yale Universities.

## THE WORLD OF WILLA CATHER AND MY *ÁNTONIA*

- 1638** Dutch explorer Peter Minuit leads Swedish immigrants to establish the first Swedish colony in Delaware Bay.
- 1848** The California Gold Rush stimulates emigration from Scandinavia to the U.S. Midwest.
- 1855** Walt Whitman publishes the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems he will expand in several editions before his death in 1892; his poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” which will have an impact on Willa Cather, will be published in his collection *Drum Taps* in 1865 and incorporated into the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1862** The passage of the Homestead Act encourages immigrants to cultivate the U.S. prairies; immigrant settlement in the Midwest increases significantly.
- 1873** On December 7 Willa Cather is born, the eldest of her parent’s seven children, in Winchester, Virginia, a farming village near the Blue Ridge Mountains.
- 1877** Sarah Orne Jewett, who will become one of Cather’s mentors, publishes *Deephaven*, her first collection of stories and sketches, about small-town life in New England.
- 1883** The Cathers join Willa’s grandparents and her uncle George in Webster County, Nebraska.
- 1884** The Cathers settle in Red Cloud, Nebraska, a railroad town on the prairie, where Cather’s father opens a farm mortgage and insurance business. Most of their neighbors are European immigrants. Cather enrolls in Red Cloud High School and meets Annie Sadilek Pavelka, on whom she will base the title character in her novel *My Ántonia*.
- 1890** Cather graduates from high school and moves to Lincoln to study for the entrance exam for the University of Nebraska.  
To finance her education, she works as a drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*.
- 1892** New York City becomes an immigration mecca as Ellis Island opens

- on February 14. Cather's short story "Peter," which will later be incorporated into *My Ántonia*, is published in a Boston magazine.
- 1895** Cather graduates from the University of Nebraska and returns to her family in Red Cloud.
- 1896** She moves to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she begins work as an editor at the *Home Monthly*, a family magazine, and as an editor and drama critic for the Pittsburgh *Daily Leader*, a newspaper.
- 1901** Cather teaches English and Latin at Central High School in Pittsburgh, then transfers to Allegheny High School, where she becomes head of the English Department.
- 1902** She visits Europe.
- 1903** Upon her return from Europe, Cather publishes a collection of verse, *April Twilights*.
- 1905** She publishes *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of short stories; it includes "Paul's Case," a story, set in Pittsburgh, of a young man with tragically frustrated aspirations.
- 1906** Cather moves to New York City to write for *McClure's Magazine*, where she eventually will become the managing editor. She moves in with Edith Lewis, a colleague at *McClure's*.
- 1908** Cather meets Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful writer from Maine, who encourages her to pursue writing full-time and inspires her to write about her experiences in Nebraska.
- 1911** She begins to write "Alexandra," which will become part of *O Pioneers!*, a semi-autobiographical novel about the early Scandinavian and Bohemian settlers of Nebraska.
- 1912** Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, is published, and she works on "The White Mulberry Tree," which will become another part of *O Pioneers!* She visits the Southwest for the first time.
- 1913** *O Pioneers!* is published, dedicated to Sarah Orne Jewett.
- 1915** Cather visits Mesa Verde in Colorado. *The Song of the Lark*, a psychological novel that explores the meaning of aesthetics and music, is published. Cather returns to the Southwest and visits Wyoming and Nebraska; she meets her childhood friend Annie

Pavelka again.

- 1917** While living in New Hampshire, Cather writes *My Ántonia*, based on Pavelka.
- 1918** *My Ántonia* is published to critical acclaim; H. L. Mencken calls it the greatest piece of fiction written by a woman in America.
- 1920** American women win the right to vote with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Cather publishes *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, a collection of eight short stories; *The Nation* hails it as a representation of “the triumph of mind over Nebraska.”
- 1922** Cather publishes *One of Ours*, a novel about World War I.
- 1923** Cather wins the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. She criticizes the developing industrial age in the novel *A Lost Lady*.
- 1925** Cather publishes *The Professor’s House*, a novel that juxtaposes a teacher’s middle-aged disillusionment and his memories of the work of a brilliant student.
- 1926** She publishes another novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, in which the heroine regrets the choices she has made.
- 1927** Cather publishes the historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in the American Southwest. The Hollywood film version of *A Lost Lady*, starring actress Irene Rich, premieres in Red Cloud; a second version, starring Barbara Stanwyck, will be released in 1934.
- 1930** Cather receives the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
- 1931** She publishes *Shadows on the Rock*, a collection of three short stories for which she is awarded the Prix Femina Americaine in 1933.
- 1932** She publishes more short stories in *Obscure Destinies*.
- 1935** She publishes *Lucy Gayheart*, a novel that turns on the tension between artistic values and those of hometown life.
- 1936** Cather publishes *Not Under Forty*, a collection of literary critiques.
- 1940** She publishes *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.
- 1945** *The Best Years*, Cather’s last novel, is published.



- 1947** On April 24 Willa Cather dies of a cerebral hemorrhage in her Madison Avenue apartment in New York City. She is buried in New Hampshire.
- 1948** *The Old Beauty and Others*, a collection of Cather's shorter fiction, is published.
- 1949** Her literary treatise *On Writing* is published.
- 1974** Cather is inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners in Oklahoma City. The Nature Conservancy buys a 210-acre plot of grassland south of Red Cloud and dedicates it as the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie.
- 1988** Cather is inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca, New York.

## INTRODUCTION



IT WAS NOT UNTIL the age of forty-five and the publication of her fourth novel, *My Ántonia* (1918), that Willa Cather established herself as a kind of poet laureate of the American prairie. Although she had been publishing poems, short fiction, and essays since the early 1890s as a precocious undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Cather endured a long apprenticeship of spadework, first in Pittsburgh and then in New York, as a teacher, editor, and journalist. In 1912, after six frenetic years as the managing editor at *McClure's Magazine*, Cather resigned in order to launch her career as a novelist. Her first effort, *Alexander's Bridge*, was a failure in Cather's later estimation, but this Jamesian tale of adultery set in Boston and London provided the impetus for three important novels, written in quick succession, that draw heavily upon Cather's childhood on the Nebraska prairie: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia*.

By the time *My Ántonia* appeared, the influential H. L. Mencken was already one of Cather's champions, but he was not alone in his superlative reaction to what he considered not only Cather's most successful novel yet, but "one of the best that any American has ever done" ("My Ántonia," p. 8; see "For Further Reading"). When Cather died in 1947, her published works included twelve novels, three collections of stories, one book of verse, a volume of essays, and a great deal of uncollected prose, much of which engages subject-matter far removed in time and space from her Nebraska-inspired fiction. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), for instance, is her much-admired historical novel based on the circumstances of a nineteenth-century Catholic mission in New Mexico, while *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), set in seventeenth-century Quebec, is even more remote from the midwestern plains. Yet it is with her prairie trilogy—and *My Ántonia* in particular—that Cather defined her literary voice.

When Cather began working on the stories that would become the nucleus of *O Pioneers!*, writing about farmers in Nebraska amounted to a fairly severe breach of decorum, at least in the eyes of certain members of the literary establishment. As Cather herself put it:

The 'novel of the soil' had not then come into fashion in this country. The drawing room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were smart people or clever people (*Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 963).

Cather was fortunate, however, that a group of iconoclastic young critics were clamoring for American writers to liberate themselves from a "genteel tradition" of high culture ruled by European canons of taste and subject matter. In such works as *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908) and *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), Van Wyck Brooks argued that the United States was suffering from a cultural malaise produced by an unhealthy gulf between these genteel pretensions and the social realities of American life. In his view, this bifurcated condition reflected a longstanding tension between the country's material achievements and its spiritual ideals, a tension symbolized by two American types often at odds with one another. The practical ethos that transformed the United States into an industrialized nation was embodied by the "Pioneer" type, while the more reflective "Puritan" spoke for the country's foundational desire to create a utopian community. Brooks and others were impatiently on the lookout for writers who would usher in an era of cultural rejuvenation by following the example of Walt Whitman, who they believed had reconciled these opposing strains of the American character through his transformation of vernacular materials into a radically new kind of poetry imbued with a transcendent vision of the democratic self.

It is not surprising, then, that Cather's early novels were so well received, since their protagonists tend to fuse the qualities of the pioneer and the puritan. Set in marginal locales far from the centers of genteel culture, these works document the harsh realities of rural life and commemorate the generation of settlers who, in Cather's words, "subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie" (quoted in Lee, *Willa Cather*, p. 8). Part of what makes Cather such an important voice in American literature is that she reproduces the national mythology of the frontier while simultaneously

revising it by placing indomitable women at the center of the cultural script. Conquering the land, however, is only the most obvious part of the story. What is probably most distinctive about the representation of the countryside in *My Ántonia* is the way in which Cather dwells on the more ineffable empowerment of the self as it gives itself up to an overwhelming, sublime landscape.

When Jim Burden, the narrator of *My Ántonia*, first arrives on the prairie, he is profoundly shaken by the featureless void into which he feels he has been marooned:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.... I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.... If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be (p. 11).

In this early scene, Jim is so disoriented by an unfamiliar landscape of absence that he feels obliterated, not uplifted, by its vastness. Like many other characters of modern literature, he is radically alone: "Outside man's jurisdiction" and beyond the power of prayer, he has been plunged into a nihilistic world where things "did not matter." Within just a few pages, however, Jim's alienation modulates into ecstasy. Captivated by the perpetual motion of the "shaggy, red grass," he realizes that the "whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (p. 16). Rather than being terrified by the sensation that he has traversed some kind of boundary, he becomes exhilarated: "I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away" (p. 16). Finally, he gives in completely to the loss of self that is provoked by the formless landscape, within which he feels not like an individual but a mere "something":

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more.... Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun