Willa Cather
Biographical Sketch
by Amy Ahearn

Remembered for her depictions of pioneer life in Nebraska, Willa Cather established a reputation for giving breath to the landscape of her fiction. Sensitive to the mannerisms and phrases of the people who inhabited her spaces, she brought American regions to life through her loving portrayals of individuals within local cultures. Cather believed that the artist's materials must come from impressions formed before adolescence. Drawing from her childhood in Nebraska, Cather brought to national consciousness the beauty and vastness of the western plains. She was able to evoke this sense of place for other regions as well, including the Southwest, Virginia, France, and Quebec.

Born Willa Cather on December 7, 1873 (she would later answer to "Willa"), she spent the first nine years of her life in Back Creek, Virginia, before moving with her family to Catherton, Nebraska in April of 1883. In 1885 the family resettled in Red Cloud, the town that has become synonymous with Cather's name. Leaving behind the mountainous ridge of Virginia for the wide open prairies of the Plains had a formative effect on Cather. She described the move in an interview: "I was little and homesick and lonely... So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn the shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion that I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and curse of my life." She directed this passion for the country into her writing, drawing upon her Nebraska experiences for seven of her books. In addition to the landscape of her new home, Cather was captivated by the customs and languages of the diverse immigrant population of Webster County. She felt a particular kinship with the older immigrant women and spent countless hours visiting them and listening to their stories. This exposure to Old World culture figures heavily within Cather's writings and choice of characters.

In September 1890, Cather moved to Lincoln to continue her education at the University of Nebraska, initially planning to study science and medicine. She had had a childhood dream of becoming a physician and had become something of an apprentice to the local Red Cloud doctor. During an initial year of preparatory studies, Cather wrote an English essay on Thomas Carlyle that her professor submitted to the Lincoln newspaper for publication. Later Cather recalled that seeing her name in print had a "hypnotic effect" on her—her aspirations changed; she would become a writer. Her college activities point to this goal: the young writer became managing editor of the school newspaper, the author of short stories, and a theater critic and columnist for the Nebraska State Journal as well as for the Lincoln Courier. Her reviews earned her the reputation of a "meat-ax critic," who, with a sharp eye and even sharper pen, intimidated the national road companies. While she was producing four columns per week, she was still a full-time student.

Cather's classmates remembered her as one of the most colorful personalities on campus: intelligent, outspoken, talented, even mannish in her opinions and dress. This strong personality would suit her well for her first career in journalism, a career that would take her away from Nebraska. In June of 1896, one year after graduating from the University, Cather accepted a job as managing editor for the Home Monthly, a women's magazine published in Pittsburgh. While she was turning out this magazine almost single-handedly, she also wrote theater reviews for the Pittsburgh Leader and the Nebraska State Journal. Her intense interest in music, drama, and writing continued as she took in the Pittsburgh arts scene. Cather met a fellow theater lover, Isabelle McClung, who quickly became her closest friend. McClung encouraged the writer's creative streak: when Cather took some time away from journalism to fictional bent, she found comfortable lodging in the spacious McClung family home. Between 1901 and 1905, Cather took a break from journalism to teach English in local high schools. During this time, she published April Twilights (1903), a book of verse, and The Troll Garden (1905), a collection of short stories.

Her short stories caught the eye of S. S. McClure, editor of the most famous muckraking journal. He published "Paul's Case" and "The Sculptor's Funeral" in McClure's Magazine and arranged for the publication of The Troll Garden in 1905. In 1906, he invited Cather to join his magazine staff. Once again, Cather returned to her work in periodicals, this time enjoying the prestige of editing the most widely circulated general monthly in the nation. Cather ghostwrote a number of pieces for the magazine, including the year-long series The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science and The Autobiography of S. S. McClure. She continued to publish short stories and poems, but the demands of her job as managing editor took up most of her time and energy. McClure felt Cather's true genius lay in magazine business: he considered her the best magazine executive that he knew. Cather, however, remained unfulfilled in the position. Her friend and mentor Sarah Orne Jewett encouraged the writer to leave the hectic pace of the office to develop her craft. By 1911, Cather acted on the advice, leaving her managing position at the magazine. She was just shy of her thirty-eighth birthday and about to embark on a full-time writing career in fiction.

In early 1912, Cather's first novel, Alexander's Bridge, appeared serially in McClure's as Alexander's Masquerade. Later she dismissed the work as imitative of Edith Wharton and Henry James, rather than her own material. The following year she published O Pioneers!, the story that celebrates the immigrant farmers and their quest to cultivate the prairies. Cather placed her "shaggy grass country" at the center of the novel, allowing the form of the land to provide the structure of the book. She had taken Jewett's advice to heart, writing about the land and people she knew best, and dedicated this "second first novel" to the memory of her friend. Reviewers were enthusiastic about the novel, recognizing a new voice in American letters. In her next book, Cather drew upon her past again, this time telling the story of a young Swedish immigrant and her quest to cultivate her artistic talent. Before writing
The Song of the Lark (1915), she met Olive Fremstad, a Wagnerian soprano, who inspired her to create Thea Kronborg in the form of an artist. The resulting story of Thea Kronborg's development as an opera singer fused Cather's childhood with Fremstad's success.

Cather continued in her autobiographical frame as she wrote My Ántonia (1918), her best loved novel. She placed her childhood friend Annie Pavelka at the center of the story, renaming her "Antonia." Although the story is told through the eyes of Jim, a young boy, his experiences are taken from Cather's, particularly his move from Virginia to Nebraska. Jim's first reaction to the landscape undoubtedly parallels the author's: "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. . . . Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out." Eventually Jim becomes entranced with the vastness of the landscape, feeling himself one with his surroundings: "I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep." Jim's attachment to the land parallels his relationship with Ántonia, his Bohemian neighbor and playmate. When he leaves Nebraska, he leaves behind Ántonia, his childhood, his family, the land: Ántonia comes to represent the West; Jim's memories of her stand in for his lost youth.

Critics unanimously praised the novel. H. L. Mencken wrote, "No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful as My Ántonia." Randolph Bourne of the Dial ranked Cather as a member of the worldwide modern literary movement. The author herself felt a special connection to this story, recognizing it as the best thing she had ever done. As she confided to her childhood friend Carrie Minner Sherwood, "I feel I've made a contribution to American letters with that book." It seems fitting that Cather rests underneath the beauty of this writing: The headstone marking her grave reads: "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."

Desiring a publisher who would promote her artistic concerns, Cather switched her alliances in 1921 from Houghton-Mifflin to Alfred Knopf. Knopf allowed Cather the freedom to be uncompromising in her work; he fostered her national reputation and ensured her financial success. During the 1920s, Cather was at the height of her artistic career. Psychologically, however, Cather's mood had changed. In comparison to her epic novels of the 1910s, Cather's post-war novels seem pervaded by disillusionment and despondency. After publishing Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920), a collection of short stories centered on artists, she wrote One of Ours (1922), a World War I story based on the life of her cousin G. P. Cather. At the end of the novel, a mother reflects gratefully that her son died as a soldier, still believing "the cause was glorious" — a belief he could not have possibly sustained had he survived the war. Although many critics panned it, scores of former soldiers wrote her letters of appreciation, thanking her for capturing just how they felt during the war. Her efforts secured her the Pulitzer Prize for this novel. A Lost Lady followed (1923), for which Cather drew upon her memory of Lyra Garber, the beautiful wife of a prominent banker in Red Cloud. Once again, innocence brushes up against the realities of the world: the young Niel Herbert first adores Mrs. Forrester, then scorches her in disillusionment when she betrays his ideals. In the end he recalls her memory, glad for the part she played in "breaking him to life," and also for her power "of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring." In A Lost Lady, Cather employed her philosophy of the "novel dèmeublé," telling by suggestion rather than by minute details. Most critics applauded the power of her artistry in this novel, although a handful complained about the immorality of the adulterous heroine.

The same theme of disillusionment runs heavily throughout The Professor's House (1925) as well. Godfrey St. Peter, reaching success at middle age, finds himself dispirited, withdrawn, almost estranged from his wife and daughters. As his wife prepares a new house for him, the Professor feels he cannot leave his old home. As his despondency deepens, he turns to the memory of his former student Tom Outland, in whom he recalls the promise of youth cut short by death in World War I. The purposelessness of Tom's death underscores the post-war malaise of the Professor — indeed, of the modernist world. The Professor will always feel solitude, alienation, the sense of always being not-at-home — in short, he concludes, he will learn to live without delight. The novel reflects Cather's own sense of alienation within the modern world.

Cather published My Mortal Enemy (1926) before producing her greatest artistic achievement, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). With the same power she had used to invoke the landscape of the Plains, Cather represented the beauty and the history of the southwest United States. Drawing from the life of Archbishop Lamy, Catholic French missionary to New Mexico in the 1850s, Cather created Bishop Latour, the man who ministers to the Mexican, Navajo, Hopi, and American people of his diocese. Cather took pains with her presentation: her writing was well researched and her attention to the details of layout made this the most handsomely produced book of her career. Critics immediately hailed it as "an American classic," a book of perfection. Cather reflected that writing the novel had been such an enjoyable process for her, she was sad to say goodbye to her characters when she finished. The American Academy of Arts and Letters bestowed the Howells Medal on her for this accomplishment.

Cather wrote another historical novel, Shadows on the Rock (1931), this time centering on seventeenth-century French Quebec. Although her father's death and her mother's stroke slowed progress on this book, Cather felt that writing this novel gave her a sense of refuge during a tumultuous emotional period. By this time, Cather was reaping the rewards of a long and successful career: she received honorary degrees from Yale, Princeton and Berkeley, in addition to the ones she had already received from the Universities of Nebraska and of Michigan. With
the publication of Shadows, Cather appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, and the French awarded her the Prix Fémina Américain. The book enjoyed high sales, becoming the most popular book of 1932. In the same year, she brought out Obscure Destinies, the collection of short stories including "Old Mrs. Harris" and "Neighbour Rosicky."

The pace of her writing slowed tremendously during the 1930s. Cather published Lucy Gayheart in 1935 and Sapphira and the Slave Girl in 1940, her last completed novel drawing from her family history in Virginia. She spent two years revising her collected works for an Autograph edition put out by Houghton Mifflin, the first volume of which appeared in 1937. Having risen as a national icon by the 1930s, Cather became one of the favorite targets of Marxist critics who said that she was out of touch with contemporary social issues. Granville Hicks claimed that Cather offered her readers "supine romanticism" instead of substance. In addition to these criticisms, Cather had to deal with the deaths of her mother, her brothers Douglass and Roscoe, and her friend Isabelle McClung, the person for whom she said she had written all of her books. The outbreak of World War II occupied her attention, and problems with her right hand impaired her ability to write. Still, there were some bright spots in these final years. She received the gold medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1944, an honor that marked a decade of achievement. Three years later on April 24, 1947, Cather died of a cerebral hemorrhage in her New York residence.

Fifty years after her death, readers are still drawn to the beauty and depth of Cather's art. Seamless enough to draw in the casual reader and nuanced enough to entice the literary scholar, Cather's writing appeals to many walks of life. Her faithful portrayal of immigrant cultures has attracted readers outside the United States, and her work has been translated into countless languages, including Japanese, German, Russian, French, Czech, Polish, and Swedish. Scholaristically, Cather has not always held a prominent place in the American literary canon. For many years she was relegated to the status of a regional writer. Within the last twenty years, however, there has been an "explosion of academic interest in Cather," interest that has moved the writer from marginalized to canonical status. In their efforts to expand the canon, feminist critics "recovered" her writing as they remembered the strong heroines of O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia. Likewise, Cather has been reclaimed by old-school traditionalists: currently, she is the only American woman writer included in the Encyclopedia Britannica's list of "Great Books of the Western World" (1990).

Meanwhile, basic questions about Cather's life remain: the writer tried to destroy all of her letters before her death, burning a rich correspondence that would have delighted any researcher. Thousands of her letters escaped destruction, but they are protected from reproduction or quotation by Cather's will. James Woodress's biography (Willa Cather: A Literary Life), the primary source for this account, provides a comprehensive synthesis of Cather's life, gleaned from family records, letters, critical reviews, and recollections of friends and family. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant and Edith Lewis offer more personal accounts of their friend in Willa Cather: A Memoir and Willa Cather Living, respectively. Cather's sexual orientation became a subject of inquiry in the 1980s, with Sharon O'Brien considering the possibility of lesbianism in Cather's life (see Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice). Other critics have examined the larger cultural issues that serve as a backdrop to Cather's writing. Guy Reynolds looks at issues of race and empire in Willa Cather in Context, while Susan J. Rosowski examines the romantic literary tradition out of which Cather wrote (see The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism). Deborah Carlin and Merrill Skaggs investigate her later novels in Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading and After the World Broke in Two. Painstaking efforts have gone toward recovering Cather's juvenilia and journalism, thanks to Bernice Slote (The Kingdom of Art) and William Curtin (The World and the Parish).

Most serious readers of Cather will appreciate the judgment of her made by Wallace Stevens toward the end of her life: "We have nothing better than she is. She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality." It is in this vein of appreciating Cather's sophistication that current scholarship continues to develop.

For works cited go to: www.cather.unl.edu/life.longbio.html#oten22m