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Review of "Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Cather and Austin," By Janis P. Stout

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Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Cather and Austin. By Janis P. Stout. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007. xxii + 295 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.

Janis Stout's credentials are impeccable: as the author of biographies (of Cather and Katherine Anne Porter) and of critical studies of American women novelists, and as denizen of the West and Southwest, she knows her topic. Starting from what she terms Willa Cather's and Mary Austin's "highly visual prose," Stout builds upon an argument about gender in the West made by Cather scholar Susan Rosowski in her 1999 book, *Birthing a Nation*. Stout posits that Austin and Cather encountered a West already pictorially determined by the monumental imagery of white, Anglo-Saxon, adventuresome, imperialist, violent, rugged, and most of all masculine conquerors, but that they set out to counter that image with an alternative vision both feminine and androgynous and thus regendered the West. By the early 1880s, when Cather was growing up in Nebraska, periodicals such as *Century* magazine, read by Cather's family, contributed to the fossilization of masculine Western imagery; paintings by Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell (whose canvases Stout calls "highly narrative") did the rest. In the battle between narrative canvases and visual prose, there are clearly different stories to tell.

Chapters 2 through 5 offer detailed examinations of the role of illustrations and—perhaps even more important—illustrators in key publications by Austin and Cather, with dozens of helpful black-and-white reproductions right next to the discursive text. According to Stout,

Austin's 1903 *The Land of Little Rain* is successfully illustrated and complemented by E. Boyd Smith's "clean, restrained, uncluttered line drawings." Illustrator W. T. Benda, whom Cather chose to provide the plates for *My Ántonia*, similarly gives visual support to one of Cather's most characteristic strengths: the "isolation of details against an uncluttered background," or, to paraphrase Eudora Welty's appreciative comment, Cather's concentration on either "far panoramas or clear foregrounds, with vacancy in the middle distance." Harold von Schmidt's illustrations for the second edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, by contrast, are too prominent in their dark lines and fields to have achieved their stated purpose of serving as background "decorations" to Cather's lucid text, seeming instead to detract and perhaps to overdetermine the reader's imagination.

Stout's chapter 6, "From Seeing to Vision," is a ringing summary of her argument within the framework of current criticism, distinguishing between Austin's more assertive and explicitly feminist regendering of her Western vision and Cather's success, when writing about the West, in overcoming conventional heterosexual love plots that required female submissiveness. Both women, however, remained mired on occasion in the ethnic prejudices of their times—Austin apparently in a more strident manner than Cather—yet both decisively visualized the West as an arena for female and male fulfillment in peace instead of in conquest. Stout concludes with an engaging chapter on Silko's *Storyteller* (with intriguing biographical connections to Cather's visit to Acoma in 1925) and a discussion of the text-plus-illustration interaction between two New Mexico women artists, Barbara Byers and Margaret Randall.

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