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A Tribute to Sue Rosowski

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Susan J. Rosowski, Adele Hall Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, died November 2, 2004. Sue has been an important voice in the Great Plains Quarterly since the beginning. In addition to publishing a half-dozen essays in the Quarterly, Sue reviewed manuscripts, wrote book reviews, and served as a guest editor on multiple occasions.

As one of the foremost scholars on Willa Cather, Sue served as General Editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, University of Nebraska Press, and was the founding editor of the Willa Cather Archive. Additional examples of her contribution to scholarship is evidenced by her receiving the Western Literature Association’s Thomas J. Lyon Award, honoring an outstanding scholarly book on the literature and culture of the American West, for her Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature. Most recently, Sue received the Outstanding Research and Creative Activity Award, the University of Nebraska’s highest system-wide honor for scholarship. As a teacher, she has been honored by Western Literature Association in their establishing the Susan J. Rosowski Award for Creative Mentoring and Teaching in Western American Literature, and the University of Nebraska Foundation now has the Susan Rosowski Cather Endowment.

We asked several of Sue’s colleagues to comment on her life and contributions. Others may honor Sue by contributing to the Susan Rosowski Cather Endowment. You may mail your check to the University of Nebraska Foundation, 1010 Lincoln Mall Ste. 300, Lincoln NE 68508-2886; or to Linda Rossiter, Department of English, 202 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0333. On the check, make a note that your gift is for the Susan Rosowski Cather Endowment.

CHARLES A. BRAITHWAITE
Editor
Sue Rosowski earned her high standing in the education world—no one who saw her in action there has any doubts about that. But I want to try to suggest a whole other dimension, a level of being in fact, that sets her quite apart. (I’m afraid I can’t do it justice.)

For most people, performance is the measure. She gave a great paper; he made three touchdowns; etc. But there are a few, a very few, whose impact is more subtle. With Sue, it centered on her ability to listen.

At one of the Willa Cather seminars, I had a chance to see her in non-action, and when it finally registered on me, two or three years later, I realized that I had seen something rarer than diamonds. No Cather expert, I had spent six months preparing the paper, and while reading it I naturally looked at Sue to see how it was going. She didn’t applaud or give any signs of approval, but there was something about her attention: she was listening with intensity and purposefulness, so much so that it seemed she and I were actually alone, together with Willa, and Willa’s characters as they ran along sidewalks or grew wiser in war or simply bundled up against the Nebraska cold. Nothing could have prepared me for that, and I saw, much later, that this was Sue Rosowski’s greatness—her generous greatness. That is what makes a great teacher, and beyond that, a great human being.

THOMAS LYON
Professor Emeritus, Utah State University
Former editor of Western American Literature

The following comments were delivered at the memorial service for Sue Rosowski on December 10, 2004.

Sue and Jim asked me to speak today and Jim asked me to talk about what Sue really cared about. That’s an easy charge. Sue cared about us. She cared about each person in this room and the many people who want to be here but can’t be. She cared about us. She cared about our work as well as her own, our students and their students as well as her own, our families and her own. She cared about the people who read our books as well as hers, and she cared about the ways we think.

Sue was a thinker. And she was a brilliant thinker: generous, precise, empathic, and collaborative. She spent her seemingly endless gifts freely, in friendship as well as research, in writing as well as teaching, on policy as well as politics. We became better writers, scholars, teachers, citizens, and friends because she held us to her standards.

Sue brought her supple intelligence and fierce will to every one of our meetings.
Whether she carried a thermos and sandwich or she shared out the bill, she paid careful attention to our agendas. I can’t think of much we didn’t discuss. Her method was always Socratic but she had plenty to say. In recent months we talked with her on the telephone. Once when she and I were talking about death, her dinner plate fell and broke and she laughed as she described their loved dog coming to the rescue.

Certainly the interrogation of Sue’s calm voice, her precise choice of words, and the tilt of her fair head as she bent to us, listening, will stay with us. And her practical kindnesses. Once, she and Jim brought an entire wheel of Stilton to a celebration, and she arranged for work of ours to be written and published. But I fear we’ll lose the memory of her toughness. I think she thought she could do anything to save us.

She opened the office door soon after my return work after cancer surgery and she refused to let do with the general evasions. She’d brought with her books of memoir: Annie Dillard’s, Anne Truitt’s, and insisted I begin to write about the experience. When I fought back, she disappeared and returned with an essay she’d published shortly after her own first surgery so many years ago. In it, she wrote that she was not afraid to die. But she was very sad to think she might miss the childhoods of her young sons.

She didn’t miss anything, of course. Sue cared about her sons, her granddaughters, and the rest of her Family and her enormous professional success. She had the best marriage. In the last days of her life, sweet was the word she said.

But we are here now, together, because Sue Rosowski cared about us. And we will sorely miss her long attention. How lucky we all were.

HILDA RAZ
Professor of English and Women’s Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Glenna Luschei Editor in Chief, Prairie Schooner

I first met Susan Rosowsk in 1971 when she was a lecturer in the Department of English at UNL. She left UNL in 1976 to take a tenure-track position in Romanticism at UNO. Her first article was on Coleridge. Soon after joining the UNO faculty, though, Sue began working in earnest on Willa Cather and published her first article on Cather in 1977. By 1982 when UNL rehired Sue on a tenured position, she had acquired a national reputation for her scholarship on Cather. This area was to become her life’s work, and her goal was to make Cather as important in our literary history as any other American writer.

To do that, Sue knew she needed to make Cather matter to us, and she practiced an inclusive and collaborative scholarship that lead others to invest their careers in Cather, too. For some, this was a career transforming experience as Sue reached out to them and made them believe that what they might contribute to Cather scholarship would matter more than anything else they could do. Sue was as good as her word, too, and as she lifted Cather on the ladder of American literature, she lifted her own work and that of many others to national prestige.

As Chair of English for most of the last decade, I shared a sense of partnership with Sue in her Cather enterprises. What was good for Cather was also good for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Department of English. Sue drove a hard and relentless bargain for her Cather needs, not all of which I could help her get on the timetable she wanted them. But, by the end, she had put in place the substance of her vision of Cather studies at UNL, and the designation of the Cather Project as a Program of Excellence at UNL guaranteed that the work she was leaving would go on with the importance she knew it deserved.

When Sue became ill, the intensity of the determination with which she had pursued the work on Cather fed a breathtaking courage in her fight with cancer. She faced the obstacle of health problems with the same optimism
that looked for the best in her colleagues and focused on the silver linings that she insisted every cloud would have. Few of us knew how much she suffered or how difficult the pain was to manage because, when we saw her, she was smiling and planning for the future. In the last weeks of her life she was intent on setting things in order for the Cather Project and her many graduate students. There is no way any of us could have deserved the generosity of her concern that all would go well for us after her departure.

LINDA RAY PRATT, 
Chair, Department of English, 
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Although Susan Rosowski will be indelibly linked with Willa Cather in my mind, it is lines from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* that comfort me since her death, “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles ... I stop somewhere waiting for you.”

I do find her—in her written work, in cards and letters we exchanged, in the typewriter-created notes that she diligently scotched taped to my academic papers, in photographs, in the dozens of wonderful scholars and friends that I met through my work with her, to the purple asters she gave me that bloom annually in my yard. Days after returning to graduate school I was assigned to do research for Sue and it was to be a confluence that through the course of years has created a deep and permanent channel. I recall many days of walking into her office, sitting in a rocking chair, looking at the lace valance over her window—her fingers flying across the keyboard—often while she spoke on the phone that was cradled between her head and shoulder. We would talk first of work details and then segue to grander ideas and aspirations. And she made me feel that most of them were possible.

Cather inadvertently provides a passage that expresses my sentiments for Sue in a letter she wrote to her friend Bishop Beecher (I have taken the liberty of changing the pronoun), “She has the power of making one feel that the present service, the present moment is rich and precious; that life is full of splendid realizations which have nothing to do with material gains and losses. I have never spent an hour in her company without feeling the happier for it, and these meetings, sometimes years apart, have left such vivid pictures in my memory that I often turn to them.”

Sue—even in a life cut too short, left more than most of us can hope to.

MARGIE RINE 
University of Nebraska Press

To many, Susan Rosowski will always be a model not only for the scholarly life, but even more importantly as a wonderful human being. Two words might be used to describe Sue and two brief personal stories perhaps better than any other genre will illustrate how these words—strength and caring—were her “hallmarks,” if you will.

Sue and I became close friends probably later than the hundreds who were so impacted by her much too early death. Our friendship came as a result of our working, literally, every day together for approximately four years on the Plains Humanities Alliance. Together with Deb Eisloffel, Rick Edwards, David Brinkenhoff, Jane Renner Hood, and our partners in North Dakota, Tom Riley and the late Ev Albers, we were able to impress successfully upon the rest of our nation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities in particular, our case. But it was during that process that Sue and I got to know each other so very well.

We shared our dreams, our fears and our hopes, and even our aches and pains. There were many ups and downs during this assignment for the University of Nebraska. That assignment was to weld together as a collaborative scholarly and public force all of the
humanities organizations and individuals not only within our own University and our own state but in five Plains states from North Dakota to Oklahoma. When there were downs, Sue always called upon a strength that got us through. We, she said, must not and cannot fail, and we did not. Together, Sue and I worked directly with over 250 different humanities groups in the five states, and sometimes the critics were tough. Our teamwork pulled us through. When I didn’t hit it off with an important humanities leader we needed to work with, I could tell Sue that I needed to fade into the background, and she took over as a skilled conductor never missing a beat, and conversely when she didn’t click with someone, I came in. Indeed, the former happened far more often than did the latter.

On one occasion several years ago during our pursuit of the Plains Humanities Alliance, we traveled by car—Deb, Sue, and I—to Pierre, South Dakota, to meet with various groups that were bused in from all over North and South Dakota. It was a long, grueling meeting, during which we experienced several Lewis & Clark advocates making a variety of what many felt were impossible demands. We did our best to keep folks focused on the big picture, and we came away afterwards with a number of new friends and strong supporters. On the way home, I began to hear this meowing in the back seat. I knew during the day that Deb and Sue had been huddling more often than usual, but I was preoccupied with the meeting. As the driver, I asked, “What am I hearing?” At this point, Sue confessed that she and Deb had found a kitten that was hanging around the parking lot of the motel conference center. He was very hungry and they had gotten it some milk. Moreover, the kitten seemed homeless. Thus, Sue had decided that perhaps she and her husband Jim might provide it with a home. Oh my, I thought, “Interstate animal abduction.” But then I remembered when my wife Susan had taken a group of her junior high students to a farm near Lubbock, Texas, and had come home with a lost kitten for our daughters. Why not? Of course, once we rolled into Lincoln, Sue needed to let Jim know of this new addition to their household. And so she called him on her cell phone. It was a special conversation. She told him we were almost to his office on campus, and that she had a surprise. His curiosity of course was peaked, and she then told him of the wonderful kitten she had found. Already, the kitten had been named for the place in which he was lost—Pierre. That is not too surprising given the far ranging scholarship of Sue’s pen on place and its meaning in literature. Pierre later acquired a new name, and he had a good life at the Rosowski homestead, but I’ll always cherish that phone call and the caring and love that accompanied it.

These past several years have been difficult and painful ones. Even so, Sue found time to serve on the Center for Great Plains Studies Board, to co-edit with me a special issue of Great Plains Quarterly, to put on the annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies devoted thematically to a sense of place pegged to the five-state Plains Humanities Alliance, and to keep up with her graduate and undergraduate teaching responsibilities and start the very successful Cather Project. The list of Sue’s accomplishments is virtually astounding and unending up to her last days.

Through it all, Sue never forgot her own sense of place and her own humanity. Recently, on August 29, 2004, to be exact, I had a quite surprising and sudden near fatal heart attack. Sue, as her family and many friends knew, was fighting cancer and pain at its most virulent stage. On the very next day as I was gradually rebuilding and coming back to life, and as soon as she found out about it, Sue called our home and left several messages. She wanted to know how she could help, and then she and Jim went to great trouble to have the woman who was fixing nutritious dinners for them fix several for us and Jim brought them over. Here was Sue, fighting for her life, worrying about me and my family. But that was the caring of Sue in full force.

I have never known a more tenacious advocate for the humanities. Having Sue on your
side meant that whatever you were working on, you just knew you were going to succeed. Her grit and determination among her legions of friends are legendary. For us at the University of Nebraska, at the Nebraska Humanities Council, and at the Center for Great Plains Studies, Sue Rosowski constituted an anchor. She was our rock. In particular, she believed in regional studies as a fundamental means to explain the human condition, and toward that end she devoted countless hours of intellectual and public energy. Universities occasionally have a few difference-makers among their faculty. These committed teacher-scholars are shapers and builders. They make things happen; they leave legacies. The University of Nebraska has not just one but three Sue Rosowski legacies—the Center for Great Plains Studies, the Plains Humanities Alliance, and the Cather Project.

Let me conclude by simply stating that so many have been touched in so many ways by Susan Rosowski. Our lives were made immeasurably better by knowing her, and we will always remember each of our times with her. Oh, yes, Sue Rosowski was strength and caring personified.

JOHN R. WUNDER
Professor of History, Co-Director of UNL’s Plains Humanities Alliance Initiative, and former Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies