Review of Modernism and Mildred Walker by Carmen Pearson

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Can a regionalist be a major writer? That’s the question at the heart of Modernism and
Mildred Walker. It's a question that hovers over contemporary responses to Willa Cather and Wallace Stegner. Since their best work inhabits definable places (though far more varied than readers often realize), it's tempting to localize them, limit their power, impact, and appeal.

Not surprisingly, these two writers figure prominently in this sophisticated study of another writer often treated as limited in range (in every sense). Full disclosure: I have written on Walker as a Montana writer, one best known for her brilliant World War II novel Winter Wheat. I'm drawn to this and other Walker fictions (especially The Curlew's Cry) precisely because they do speak to my place, my family's history, our regional preoccupations.

But Carmen Pearson reminds us that Mildred Walker (1905–1998) was a well-read, thoughtful professional writer, raised in Vermont and transplanted to Montana, who carried on actual and conceptual exchanges with important twentieth-century writers (A. B. Guthrie in person, Henry James and Virginia Woolf in her journals). Walker's deceptively readable prose conceals subtexts that readers often skim over or ignore. In a series of chapters exploring different aspects of modernism, Pearson shows that Walker engaged with the central issues of the twentieth century (economics and war, for instance) and experimented with techniques typically associated with early twentieth-century fiction (unstable narrators and formal innovation with each new novel).

In one sense this study is an exercise in definition, working and reworking "modernism" to open up the term to multiple possibilities. Pearson consistently applies a postmodern rereading of this cultural epoch to indicate that this is not your mother and father's modernism, typically associated with an austere, brilliant formalism divorced from social and cultural issues. She is especially eager to debunk the New Critics precisely because they elevated technical excellence over social relevance.

The primary question we ask of any critic is this: Does her commentary make a difference to my response to the texts under discussion? My unequivocal answer in this case is "yes." To return briefly to Winter Wheat: the novel takes on added resonance when read in context of the great war literature produced by Hemingway and Woolf. And it does help to reconsider family relationships in the context of Cather and Faulkner.

Is Walker a major writer? There are two obvious ways to reach that status: an appeal that extends beyond any single region, and recognition by literary scholars that the writer has made a difference to the novel as art form. I'm much more sanguine about Walker's achieving the first.

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