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## Book Review: Shadows on the Rock

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*Shadows on the Rock*. By Willa Cather. Historical essay by John J. Murphy and David Stouck. Explanatory notes by John J. Murphy and David Stouck. Textual editing by Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xii + 682 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$75.00.

As James Woodress, Willa Cather's foremost biographer, remarks, "An historical novel laid in Quebec in the seventeenth century seems an unlikely product from the pen of Willa Cather." Unlikely and unwelcome, some readers might add. Indeed, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) is perhaps the most forbidding of Cather's works. Plotless, slowly paced, and indifferent to the conventions of standard historical fiction, the novel focuses on a single year in the lives of two fictional characters—Euclide Auclair, an apothecary who has left his practice in Paris for the wilds of French Canada, and Cecile, his twelve-year-old daughter. Real-life figures, such as Count de Frontenac, the military governor of Quebec, and Bishop François Xavier de Laval, appear as well, anchoring the action (what there is of it) in a delicately rendered historical milieu.

Ironically, this quietest of novels became the first of Cather's works to reach the top ten bestsellers list. Its appearance even prompted hers on the cover of *Time Magazine*. At the same time, however, the book weakened—at least momentarily—Cather's reputation among a significant number of critics and fellow novelists, who saw her encampment upon the rock of Quebec as a retreat from the harsh realities of Depression-era America.

Even today the position of *Shadows on the Rock* within the Cather canon remains a subject for debate; however, there is no question about the value of this thick (682 pages) and lovingly edited edition. Editors John J. Murphy and David Stouck have crafted a superb historical essay that connects the novel to Cather's lifelong passion for all things French, details her cathartic discovery of Quebec as a symbol of endurance and transcendence (at a time when Cather faced numerous personal tragedies), and offers an overview of her novel's

highly mixed critical reception. In addition, the volume includes a fascinating manuscript fragment that Cather considered using as the final chapter, a letter regarding the novel that she allowed to be published in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, more than fifty pages of explanatory notes, a generous selection of relevant illustrations, and yet another fine textual essay by Frederick M. Link (now a veteran of the Cather Scholarly Edition project) that sets up the list of emendations, rejected substantives, and word divisions.

Fittingly, this volume is dedicated to the late Susan J. Rosowski, the founder of a scholarly edition series that now has few equals in terms of thoroughness, readability, and attractiveness of design. Like the rock of Quebec, to which Cather clung during one of the darkest periods of her life, this edition will endure, serving teachers, students, and general readers for decades to come.

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