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Willa Cather [from *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*]

Melissa J. Homestead

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mhomestead2@Unl.edu

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Cather, Willa (1873-1947), American novelist, Born in Virginia, Cather moved with her family to Nebraska in 1883 and is best known as a novelist of the American prairie. However, her life history and literary output belie this characterization. As a student at the University of Nebraska she published short stories and poems and worked as a journalist. This experience earned her a position at the *Home Monthly* magazine in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When the magazine failed, she stayed in Pittsburgh, first returning to newspaper journalism and then teaching high school. For several years she lived in the family home of Isabelle McClung, a young society woman. In 1906, Cather moved to New York City to join the editorial staff *McClure's* magazine. She lived in Manhattan for the rest of her life but traveled widely in the United States Europe and adopted a series of rural locations north of New York City as summer writing retreats. Cather shared a home in New York for thirty-seven years with Edith Lewis, a magazine editor and advertising copywriter.

Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), appeared shortly after she began a leave of absence from editorial duties at *McClure's*. Both critics and Cather herself dismissed her first novel as a pale imitation of Henry James, but her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), featuring an immigrant Swedish heroine in Nebraska, established her reputation as a novelist of the American West. Cather never returned to magazine editorial work, although a series of articles she wrote for *McClure's* on opera singers led to *The Song of the Lark* (1915), a novel about a Swedish American girl from Colorado who achieves success as an opera singer in Europe and New York. Cather's most autobiographical novel, *My Ántonia* (1918), presents its Bohemian immigrant heroine through the eyes of Jim Burden, an orphan from Virginia sent to live with his grandparents in Nebraska. Cather valued the cosmopolitanism that



Willa Cather. Frontispiece from *The Song of the Lark*, 1915. Prints and Photograph Division, Library of Congress

European immigrants brought to the Great Plains. These novels were soon translated into the languages spoken by those immigrants—Czech, Swedish, Norwegian, French, and others—and they found enthusiastic readers around the world.

Beginning with *My Ántonia*, Cather's novels often feature male protagonists. She modeled Claude Wheeler, the protagonist of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *One of Ours* (1922), on a younger cousin stifled by farm life in Nebraska who found meaning and purpose fighting in France during World War I. Critics widely read Godfrey St. Peter, the protagonist of *The Professor's House* (1925), as expressing Cather's own disaffection with modern American culture.

Cather's literary imagination increasingly turned to the past in her later years. Two historical novels—*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), set in

nineteenth-century New Mexico, and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), set in seventeenth-century Quebec—focus on moments of transition in European colonial projects in North America. She turned to her own family's southern history in her last published novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Although she was attacked as conservative and backward-looking by leftist critics beginning in the 1930s, Cather has increasingly been recognized as an important modernist writer who experimented with literary form.

Although Cather positioned herself in opposition to modern commercialism and a tradition of popular women's writing, she published short stories and serialized a novel—*Lucy Gayheart* (1935)—in women's magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. When she died from a brain hemorrhage at the age of seventy-three, she was working on a novel set in medieval France.

[See also Literature, *subentry* Fiction and Poetry.]

Bibliography

O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987). Reprint. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. An influential feminist biography that focuses on Cather's life to 1913, with an emphasis on her gender identity and sexuality and establishing the basis for reading her as a lesbian writer.

"The Willa Cather Archive." <http://www.cather.unl.edu>. Contains the full text of Woodress's biography, as well as numerous other resources documenting Cather's life and works.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. The standard critical biography, covering the entire span of Cather's life.

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