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Book Review: Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World

Steven Trout

Fort Hays State University

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Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World. Edited by Janis P. Stout. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. viii + 240 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$37.50.

This tightly edited collection has two objectives: first, to underscore the importance of material objects in Cather's supposedly unfurnished fiction; second, to remind us of the material conditions under which her work—work that seems, at first sight, aloof from commercial consideration—was marketed and sold. Packed with original research (never before, for example, has anyone bothered to consider how much wealth Myra Henshaw's gold-stuffed "kit gloves" contain or to examine where Cather's name appears in advertising for the 1934 film version of *A Lost Lady*), the volume achieves both goals. Cather specialists and scholars interested in the American literary marketplace will find *Willa Cather and Material Culture* absorbing and rewarding.

Those essays that focus on objects in Cather's fiction prompt a rethinking of her call, in her most famous manifesto, for a novel stripped bare of all but characters and passions, a "Novel Démeublé," an "unfurnished novel." As Mary Ann O'Farrell writes in the collection's afterword, "Cather's novel démeublé is readable less as a room unfurnished than as a room sparsely furnished and in which if a *thing* is there to be found, it is there to work hard—to mean and to mean hard—as an object in the shadow of a character." Few will doubt, after reading this volume, that things in Cather's narratives do indeed work hard—and mean hard. Telephones and stores, for example, emerge as significant centers of meanings in Honor McKittrick Wallace's analysis of "commodity culture" in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*. Santos figurines and spiritual relics become "sites of cultural meditation" in Sarah Wilson's reading of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. And Myra Henshaw's miserly hoard of ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces—worth approximately a quarter of a million dollars in today's currency!—takes on unprecedented

thematic resonance in Robert Miller's discussion (in the collection's finest essay) of gift-cycle violations in *My Mortal Enemy*.

No less persuasive are the essays that situate Cather within a world of things—and market considerations. Ann Romines, for instance, approaches Cather's aesthetics through the family quilts the novelist handled and studied. Jennifer L. Bradley provides fresh information on the advertising content and editorial posture of *Home Monthly*, the Pittsburgh-based magazine Cather edited in the late 1890s. Park Bucker examines the initial appearance of "Neighbour Rosicky" in *Woman's Home Companion* and the extent to which Cather's treatment of domesticity lines up with the mission of that particular periodical. And Michael Schueth spotlights Cather's vicarious role in the marketing of a Hollywood product she hated.

All the essays I have highlighted are written with a clarity and directness that Cather would appreciate. So too are those that space prevents me from mentioning. The volume's only weakness: a shortage of illustrations in what is, after all, a study of material culture. It would be welcome, for example, to *see* the telephone advertisements that McKittrick Wallace mentions or, for that matter, the promotional materials that Schueth considers in his discussion of the film version of *A Lost Lady*. One suspects, however, that this minor defect reflects commercial realities that were part of the volume's own basis in material culture.

STEVEN TROUT
Department of English
Fort Hays State University