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Review of Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction

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Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction. By Carol Fairbanks. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986. Illustrations, bibliography, index, xi + 300 pp. \$22.00.

In *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction*, Carol Fairbanks has taken materials suitable for a fine annotated bibliography, then, disappointingly, presented them in the guise of critical interpretation.

The most exciting aspect of *Prairie Women* is the vast array of texts Fairbanks has assembled—over 120 books by and about women of Canadian and American plains and prairies, from the frontier era to the present, plus criticism and scholarship relevant to that broad subject. The disappointment results from Fairbanks' apparent uncertainty about what to do with these texts (or with "structures of signification," as she calls them), other than to describe and classify their attitudes and subjects.

As a result, *Prairie Women* promises more than it delivers. Fairbanks announces that "The small facts of women's versions of experience, when analyzed and interpreted as structures of signification, lead to a new vision of women's roles in the cultures of Canada and the United States" (32); yet this book falls short of any "new vision." Part of the problem may lie with an overall organization that is inadequate to its material. Fairbanks groups fictional "images" according to historical stages of women's first encountering, then settling, the prairie landscapes. It is an admirably straightforward plan, yet one that too often groups dizzyingly disparate writers, characters, and critics, with only cursory acknowledgment of differences in their regions, cultures, classes, politics, literary traditions, and intended readers. In her chapter on "The Prairie Town," for example, Fairbanks uses Laura Ingalls Wilder as representative of American ambivalence about town and country, then contrasts her to Nellie McClung as representative of Canadian women's tendency to take sides for the country or the town, intermingles reminiscences of Kansas women taken from Joanna Stratton (explaining that she is adding "voices of 'real' women to those of fiction" to provide "a foundation for analyzing prairie towns in women's fiction"), and includes various critics who have commented upon the town and country in fiction. Perhaps not surprisingly, Fairbanks' conclusion to this assemblage of materials is a rather bland one, "there was more to town life than silly teas and mediocre culture."

As if quailing before her sprawling subject, Fairbanks takes refuge in descriptions and classifications. The texts upon which Fairbanks draws demand to be interpreted, yet they seem to elude any but the most banal generalizations: "Women's letters, diaries, and reminiscences remind us that many women did not want to emigrate" (p. 85), and "When writers choose the frontier years for their subject, they have a wide range of options in plotting their stories and developing their characters" (p. 119). Sweeping questions ("why

do some women accept the town or express ambivalence toward it while others reject it?" are followed by similarly sweeping responses ("Prairie fiction gives us some astonishingly different perspectives. Some works show characters defending the town; other characters criticize the town") (p. 190). Through it all there is a troubling tendency to treat fiction as thinly disguised fact, and imaginative literature as adjunct history.

In the end, *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* may be most provocative because it is disappointing, for it demonstrates anew the challenge of its subject.

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