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THE LONG WINTER

AN INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN WOMANHOOD

ANN ROMINES

In many ways, *The Long Winter* is the central volume in Laura Ingalls Wilder's extraordinary sequence of seven Little House books.¹ It is the most intense and dangerous of the novels, and it covers the shortest span of time, a single legendary seven-month winter. The Ingalls family has made its fullest commitment yet to one spot on the Dakota prairie. Although Pa yearns to start again in Oregon, Ma insists that they settle so the daughters can "get some schooling." Laura, the autobiographical protagonist, is approaching adulthood. This book, darkest of the series, does indeed provide her with powerful "schooling"—it is a sober and disquieting crash course in what it can mean to live out a female life on the Western prairie.

All the Little House books chronicle the education and maturation of Laura and her sisters,

and with the onset of Laura's adolescence the powerful role of gender in establishing parameters of possibility becomes more apparent. Ma looms larger as influence and model, and Laura's relationship with her becomes more problematic. Ma urges her daughters to perpetuate traditional women's culture wherever they find themselves. Yet the exigencies of Western life push the girls into positions and tasks that are traditionally male; for example, Laura shares Pa's work and finds it more to her taste than housework or teaching. Lillian Schlissel, studying Western women's diaries, found that, under the stresses of the frontier, women typically clung to gendered culture for security, as does Ma. Thus a gynocritics like that described by Elaine Showalter, which studies women's culture as a sustaining and ambivalent phenomenon, is particularly appropriate to Wilder's series, allowing us to read the Little House books as something more complex than a euphoric romance of prairie childhood.²

The Long Winter especially lends itself to such a reading; its brief span presents the crux of Laura's adolescence. She is forced by violent weather to live a life of confinement and housework as circumscribed as her mother's and to contemplate the very different possibilities open

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to a young man through the exploits of Almanzo Wilder, whom she will someday marry. Almanzo and Ma are the heroes of this book because they successfully enact traditional plots of gendered culture. Almanzo triumphs with a daring journey across the frozen prairie and Ma triumphs by staying home and contriving to feed her family. Laura's growing awareness of her own limits and duties as a woman brings new weight and sobriety to the Little House series in *The Long Winter*, which can be made apparent by a feminist reading grounded in an understanding of women's culture.

Laura Ingalls Wilder's own adult life was not so exclusively devoted to housekeeping as that of Ma in *The Long Winter*. In addition to her domestic work, Wilder shared farm work with her husband, organized farm women, served as administrator of a farm loan program, and had a long part-time career as a journalist before beginning the Little House series in her sixties. But she remained very attentive to the boundaries and traditions of women's culture.³ Thus, in her early seventies, writing *The Long Winter*, Wilder was still engaged with young Laura's gender dilemma, and issues concerning the perpetuation of women's culture came to dominate the last three Little House books. Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, serving as her mother's editor and literary mentor, reinforced these concerns. Although she was an independent novelist and a pioneer woman journalist, Lane was deeply interested in housekeeping and women's culture, both personally and professionally: she crocheted lace, quilted, cooked, and preserved, as taught by her mother and maternal grandmother, and wrote an early study of American women's needlework.⁴ For Wilder and Lane, the survival of gendered culture was a continuing project and problem of their lives, and that fact adds urgency and immediacy to *The Long Winter*.

The previous volume in the series, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, is very different.⁵ In it, Laura first becomes aware of her newly adult status. When Pa goes ahead of the women to claim a new job and Laura's watchdog Jack dies, the shelter of male protection no longer sur-

rounds her, and she is now Ma's collaborator, not her charge. Then, "Laura knew that she was not a little girl any more. Now she was alone: she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up" (14). This assumption of solitary independence is one that would have been explicitly urged on a boy, not a girl, in the nineteenth-century West; it is Pa who treks across the prairie alone, while Ma is almost always depicted surrounded by daughters. Laura tests her new sense of independence in various "unfeminine" ways. With a tomboyish new girl friend, of whom Ma does not approve, she sings and laughs and rides bareback across the prairie. Gangs of men—railroaders and homesteaders and preachers—troop through the Ingalls house, which briefly becomes a hotel. And Laura is now interested in the work men do. She is especially caught up in the practical romance of railroad building; it spurs her to think about completion and achievement and "what makes things happen." She asks Pa,

"Are there railroads because people think of them first when they weren't there?

. . . "That's right," [Pa] said. "Yes, that's what makes things happen, people think of them first. If enough people think of a thing, and work hard enough at it, I guess it's pretty nearly bound to happen, wind and weather permitting." (106)

Pa's assumptions here about collaboration and progress are typical of popular male culture in the nineteenth century. Such ideas could be expressed in traditional linear plot in which conflict and complication advance toward resolution and completion. (The only limitations on such resolution that Pa mentions, as an afterthought, are the natural forces of "wind and weather.") In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, in a Darwinian brawl of competing claimants, Pa files for a homestead. William Holtz sees this novel as pivotal because of the claim, made possible by the 1862 Homestead Act. Now Pa's "private quest finds official sanction in the government's offer of a homestead."⁶ And he enlists

his wife and daughters in this classic pioneering plot, to be completed in five years. He sees it as a wager between men: "'Well, girls, I've bet Uncle Sam fourteen dollars against a hundred and sixty acres of land, that we can make out to live on the claim for five years. Going to help me win the bet?'" (237)

More than any of the others, this novel seems to be shaped overtly by male values. The book is sprawling and linear. Pa loves to move, and the family moves five times in a single year. Laura is outdoors much of the time, and the boundlessness and beauty of the still unsettled prairie are emphasized. Annis Pratt has observed that the fictions of female adolescence are often marked by the young woman's special attraction to the natural world: "taking possession of nature, she possesses herself." In *By the Shores of Silver Lake* and the first chapters of *The Long Winter*, Laura has exhilarating moments in such a supportive natural world, which Pratt calls "the green-world archetype." Within this archetype, however, the girl's "appreciation of nature" is typically "retrospective, a look backwards over her shoulder as she confronts . . . her future submission within a male culture."⁷ Laura confronts such a situation in the ending of *Silver Lake*. As Pa supervises the planting of the first trees on the Ingalls homestead, signaling the co-opting of nature, as well as his wife and daughters, in the male-oriented project of homesteading, the youngest daughter, Grace, disappears. After a terrifying search, Laura empathetically finds her sister in an enchanting hollow filled with wild violets. To Laura the hollow seems a "fairy ring," but Pa explains that it is an abandoned buffalo wallow. As a little girl, Grace can enter a green-world retreat, but pubescent Laura can only admire the womblike sanctuary with a backward look, as she says, "'Come Grace. . . . We must go home'" (281). The novel ends with Laura's thoughts of the enchanting, unsettled prairie. But her conclusion emphasizes historical progression and the superseding of the green world—and of the boundless possibilities of her own adolescence—by claims, agriculture, towns, and civilization, with its male prerogatives and its gender

prescriptions. "'The buffalo are gone,' Laura thought. 'And now we're homesteaders'" (285).

Laura's reflections indicate her new maturity, which will develop in the next book. *The Long Winter* typifies the novel of female adolescence as described by Pratt: it foregrounds "the hidden agenda of gender norms" by which, for a girl, being

'adult' means learning to be dependent, submissive, or 'nonadult.' As a result of this conflict, an imagery of entrapment or fear of psychological invasion introduces a nightmare element into texts that also, at the opposite extreme, manifest yearnings for an integration of childhood hopes with adult social possibilities.⁸

The Long Winter plays images of a protracted series of debilitating storms against images of preservative housekeeping in which gender roles are strictly observed. Both sets of imagery are charged with the nightmarish potential Pratt describes, as Laura is forced to acknowledge that her place, as a woman, will be in the house.

If *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is dominated by linear male aspirations, *The Long Winter* is shaped by female realities. Although Pa's bet with Uncle Sam is still on, the "plot" of this next book is a very different matter, simply the routines and strategies by which the Ingalls family keeps alive through seven months of blizzards during which they leave their claim for the safety of the town. In his earlier explanation to Laura of "how things happen," Pa dismissed weather as a breezy afterthought. But in the following book, it is a central, relentless fact that no plot can circumvent. And the book's concerns become those of the most traditional female culture: food, clothing, shelter. The rhythms are those that dominate housework, the repetitive tasks of maintenance and waiting. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi describes "women's housebound time" as "typically characterized by amorphousness or circularity or both, and a content frequently imperceptible within the structures of dominant male culture; above all, it is static."⁹ More than any of the other Little House books,

The Long Winter expresses this aesthetic of housework, and it slams Laura against what her life as a Western woman is likely to be.

The Long Winter is dominated by women's work. But the book begins, as a summer ends on the prairie, with Laura's intuitions about how arbitrary the distinctions between men's and women's tasks are. At fourteen, she feels newly large and powerful, ready to reject conventional myths. When she has carried water to Pa in the hayfield, she sits in the fragrant grass and encounters a little garter snake, which deflects its path to flow around her. "Laura felt suddenly as big as a mountain when the snake curved up its head and stared at the high wall of her calico skirt" (3). In this grassy Eden, the snake is no wily tempter but a gentle companion, and it makes Laura aware of her own potential strength. Now she has a new idea: since no man is available to assist Pa, she will help with the haying herself. Despite Ma's reservations, Laura has her way and learns to put up hay that will become fuel during the long winter. By doing a man's work, she helps to insure the family's survival. Although she does women's work regularly—cooking, cleaning, sewing—she expresses no satisfaction in those chores. But her haying, although painfully strenuous, is deeply gratifying: "Laura was proud. . . . [S]he liked to see the stacks that she helped to make" (9). Like the railroad builders, she is making a mark on the land.

When Pa sends Laura on her first solo errand in town, with younger sister Carrie for company, Laura has an exhilarating sense of her own capabilities and options. In a sunny world outside their parents' governance, she and Carrie feel "free and independent and comfortable together" (19). But Laura must realize that their utopia of independence is an illusion, for they are soon lost in the tall slough grass, and the "green world" turns against them. At last they come upon a strange man and boy making hay. The boy, high on the wagon, can see Pa in the distance and he politely gives Laura directions—this is her first glimpse of Almanzo Wilder. Miserably, Laura confronts the limits of her powers. The boy can see far, because he is doing

a man's work. She imagines herself, in his eyes, as a shy, helpless rabbit. Laura must ask for male help; she cannot manage on the prairie alone. Her fantasy of being "free and independent" with Carrie is destroyed, and she feels frustrated and gallingly dependent.

The ideal of being "free and independent" is not only an adolescent girl's aspiration; it is also a central aim of the (male) Western pioneer experience as presented to Laura by Pa. When the two are haying, they find a mud muskrat house with extra thick walls, which is their first evidence that the coming winter will be unusually severe. "God tells" the muskrats of coming extremity, Pa says.

"Then why doesn't God tell us?" Laura wanted to know.

"Because," said Pa, "we're not animals. We're humans, and, like it says in the Declaration of Independence, God created us free. That means we got to take care of ourselves."

Laura said faintly, "I thought God takes care of us."

For Laura the ideal of independence is as frightening as it is exhilarating. Pa tries to explain free will to his perplexed daughter: "'Look at that muskrat house. Muskrats have to build that kind of house. . . . But a man can build any kind of house he can think of. So if his house don't keep out the weather, that's his look-out; he's free and independent'" (13). Although the discussion began in terms of "us humans," as it ends Pa has switched to male pronouns, speaking of "a man" building "his house." And Laura is still perplexed. Is she included in or excluded from the state of being "free and independent"? The tar-paper shanty Pa has built is not nearly so snug as the warm muskrat house, built by natives of the prairie. Silently, soberly, Laura compares the two—and wonders. As an adolescent, she must find her place in the prevailing culture. To succeed as a Westerner, she must live an active, inventive, pioneering life. But just as she begins to feel the new strength and energy that could launch such an independent

life, she is pushed to confine and to efface herself by assuming a feminine role.

The brief period when the girls can attend school in town illustrates Laura's growing worry and confusion, as inescapable pressures of gender bear down on her life. On her first day of school, a boy on the playground tosses her a ball. Vigorous from the summer's haying, Laura unthinkingly leaps to catch it. "A great shout went up from the other boys. 'Hey. . . . Girls don't play ball!'" (78) Acting according to her healthy body's strengths and impulses, Laura has broken a powerful taboo. Once she *thinks* about what she has done, she is "ashamed, fearful." Timidly, she takes her place with the other girls, who watch primly: "Those girls would not play with boys, of course" (78).

Once the hay is in, the weather turns unseasonably cold, and early October brings the first blizzard. During these weeks, Laura's parents seem to vie with each other to demonstrate their mastery of traditionally gendered skills, showing their growing daughters how a man and a woman can act out a Western life. Pa brings in the meager first-year harvest; Ma, with her girls' help, transforms it into pickles and preserves. Even inedibles—such as the green tomatoes—are made edible. Ma, usually conventionally modest, boasts uncharacteristically and triumphantly. "'That's almost two quarts of green tomato pickle. Even if it's only our first garden on the sod and nothing could grow well, these pickles will be a treat with baked beans this winter,' Ma gloated" (29-30). It is such domestic feats in which she takes greatest pride, and she teaches her girls to admire and emulate them.

During a rainy spell, Pa goes *out*, alone, to hunt meat. He prefers to live "free and independent" in a new country where game is plentiful. But he never invites a daughter to hunt with him, and he never teaches his girls to shoot. When he is hunting, he ignores the regular mealtimes Ma enforces and comes and goes as he pleases. Alone in a world storied in male mythology, he can ignore the civilizing domesticity that his wife's housekeeping upholds.¹⁰

Left behind, Laura must stay *in* with her

mother and sisters, all of whom are knitting or sewing. Laura itches with frustration at her confinement. While Pa is stalking on the boundless prairie, she is stuck making sheets, stitching together two breadths of cloth.

Sewing made Laura feel like flying to pieces. She wanted to scream. The back of her neck ached and the thread twisted and knotted. She had to pick out almost as many stitches as she put in.

"Blankets are wide enough to cover a bed," she said fretfully. "Why can't sheets be made wide enough?"

"Because sheets are muslin," said Mary. "And muslin isn't wide enough for a sheet." (33)

With her needle and otherwise, Laura must deal with confined spaces, predictable tasks. Mary, always a model girl, is content within these limits; in some ways, her cruel blindness (caused by a case of scarlet fever at the onset of adolescence) seems emblematic of the cultural blinders that she has always worn as willingly as she wore her sunbonnet as a proper little girl. According to Mary, muslin will always be the same width, so Laura will always have to sew sheets. Yet this is the same century in which, by brains, work, and cooperation, the railroad is being invented and put into place. Laura, less acquiescent than her sister, longs for an invention that will change her domestic work, and in fact, the next two novels in the series, *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years*, do show the importance of the sewing machine as a labor-saving invention for women.

On this same day, Ma chooses to show her girls how women can invent: in the kitchen. She concocts a never-before-made pie from slices of green pumpkin. Laura says, doubtfully, "I never heard of such a thing, Ma." And Ma replies, "Neither did I. . . . But we wouldn't do much if we didn't do things that nobody ever heard of before" (32). Pa returns home empty-handed; he could find no game. But Ma's pie is a delicious success. Her invention creates its own climate in the shanty, transforming con-

finement to content: "That was such a happy supper that Laura wanted it never to end" (36).

In *Shadows on the Rock*, Willa Cather's romance of housekeeping in frontier Quebec, the adolescent protagonist comes to love her housekeeping, for by means of it, "one made a climate within a climate; one made the days,—the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life."¹¹ Ma seems to share this belief in the transformative powers of housekeeping. For her, life is not simply a matter of acceding to the outer weather. Instead, like Cather's protagonist, she invents her own domestic weather, creating the atmosphere in which her family lives. On the first day Laura works in the hay with Pa, for example, Ma flavors their drinking water with ginger. "Such a treat made that ordinary day into a special day, the first day that Laura helped in the haying" (8). By her kitchen magic, Ma controls the life of her family and reminds them of domestic priorities, even when a daughter has temporarily entered a male world. Ma's housekeeping is an enormous and life-enhancing power, yet its cost is the confinement and circumscription of her own life.

In the first blizzard, the most horrifying occurrence, for Laura, is seeing a herd of motionless cattle "terribly still," with great white heads, frozen to the ground. "She felt that somehow, in the wild night and storm, the stillness that was underneath all sounds on the prairie had seized the cattle" (50). The image of the cattle touches her own deepest fears—fears of being stilled, immobilized, silenced. These fears go beyond the hardships of the storm and extend to Laura's future as a woman. Pa breaks the cattle free, and the Ingalls family moves into town, to wait out the winter months in a tighter shelter. But as the months proceed, the Ingalls women must battle with increasing determination against deadly stillness. At first, the girls attend school in town, and supplementary supplies are available from stores. But coal and food run out, and the railroad unexpectedly shuts down until spring. School closes, and the life of the family shrinks to one room, where they huddle near the stove, eating only two meals

each short, dark day.

Pa must go out every day, to feed the stock; he also hauls hay from the claim and visits with other men in the town stores. But the girls and Ma must stay in, day after relentless day. And Ma is most confined of all; in their seven months in town, she is only shown outdoors once, hanging out laundry. The extremity of her confinement, as well as the pressures of necessity, push her to create a life-preserving "climate within a climate" through control of the smallest details of housekeeping. When the kerosene gives out, she contrives a "button lamp" from a rag, axle grease, and a button—"only a little light, but it makes all the difference." Pa says, "You're a wonder, Caroline" (197).

Pa himself is attentive to nature, and he usually heeds its signs. The thick muskrat house, early animal hibernations, and the warnings of an old Indian spur him to accelerate winter preparations. But he repeatedly praises Ma in terms of something that flouts the usual rules of nature: she is "a wonder." The word is appropriate, for Ma resists nature. Although she sends her girls out for fresh air, she stays inside, and she counters the erratic weather with prediction, denial, routine, and domestic magic. She teaches her girls how to manage time, encouraging them to ration their small pleasures and to observe daily routine even when they are totally isolated in the frozen village. Schlissel, studying diaries of Oregon-bound pioneer women, concludes that Ma's impulses were near universal among Western women; they "tried to weave a fabric of accustomed design, a semblance of their usual domestic circle. . . . The women created and held onto some order and routine."¹²

Although Western culture has traditionally equated woman with nature and man with culture, Pa's designation of Ma as "a wonder" identifies her with the forces of civilization that combat unbridled nature. As housekeeper, former schoolteacher, and enforcer of the standards of literacy within her family, Ma assumes a female role so common in the American West that it has become stereotypical—that of the "reluctant pioneer," who, as Elizabeth Jameson

says, longed for "amenities of eastern culture" and "civilized the West." Ma also resembles another stereotype described by Jameson: "the helpmate, who performed endless, oppressive labor as she 'stood by her man.'" Wilder's portrayal of Ma, based closely on her mother, Caroline Quiner Ingalls, acknowledges these stereotypes and goes beyond them, as well. Ma is not "unfit for the rigors of Western life," as Jameson says the "reluctant pioneer" often was. Nor does she always unquestioningly "stand by her man"; on crucial occasions Ma can effectively impose her will over Pa's. The real "wonder" of Ma Ingalls is that, despite the special stringencies of her situation as a woman in the rigorous weather of the West, which Wilder makes apparent, she can still function as an effective individual. As novelist and daughter, Laura Ingalls Wilder faced one of her largest challenges as she crafted her portrayal of Ma as Western woman.¹³

Ma's civilizing powers are brought into play when her daughters fall into torpor and "moping" during the blizzards. She contrives an entertainment for them, with the girls reciting "pieces" from their schoolbooks. Thus words and the stirring history of human civilization are pitted against the inhuman howl of storm, and the girls are rescued from awful stillness. But the words that most fire their imaginations and stir them to excitement are about warlike men: "The Speech of Regulus," "Old Tubal Cain," "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." There are no such active, stirring images of women. Instead, Laura and Carrie "repeat, in concert . . . 'Little Ellie sits alone. . . .'" (231). The girls only know stories and examples of immobilized women. During the winter they see no women but Ma. Even their friend, young Mrs. Boast, wintering on a homestead outside town, does not accompany her husband when he walks to town on a rare clear day; she stays at home to do laundry. Wherever she looks, Laura encounters an apparently unsurmountable fact: men go out, women stay in.

In the schoolroom, Laura has been taught to honor the authority of the young female teacher, a surrogate for Ma. When a storm hits,

she must acknowledge how frail and untrustworthy that authority is. Although she manages the lessons well, "Teacher" knows nothing of weather. She, like her other pupils, has "never seen a prairie blizzard. But Laura and Carrie knew what it was." Seeing Teacher's perplexity, Laura thinks, "'I ought to tell her what to do.' . . . But she could not think what to do. It was not safe to leave the schoolhouse and it was not safe to stay there" (85-86). A man arrives—masculine authority to the rescue. But the man is a prairie novice too; disoriented by the swirling storm, he leads the children toward death on the open prairie. Laura's intuition rebels; she "felt that they were going in the wrong direction." But "Teacher had told them to follow. . . . There was nothing to go by—no sun, no sky, no direction" (89-90). Laura's situation is a paradigm of what she fears she will find when she ventures outside the sheltering walls of Ma's kitchen: a nightmare of obliterating storm, where all signs and all authority are swallowed up and her only protection is her own intuition, which she fears to trust. No wonder that, when she is reinstated by the family stove, drinking Ma's ginger tea, Laura feels that she is in heaven, with all the household gods.

But the heaven of the close room seems more and more hellish as the storms continue. Laura has enjoyed the sense of mastery and accomplishment school offered her. Since Mary was blinded, teaching has been the family's plan for Laura: she will follow in Ma's footsteps, and her income will help Mary to attend a college for the blind. If she is to find a way out of the domestic round, Laura must go to school, pursuing the only nondomestic career sanctioned for a woman. But both weather and gender seem to argue against Laura's becoming a teacher. When yet another blizzard shuts the school again, Laura wails, "'Oh Ma! How can I ever teach school and help send Mary to college? How can I ever amount to anything when I can only get one day of school at a time?'" (139) Inside the house, Laura is entirely confined to domestic routine, which is static and circular in the ways Rabuzzi describes. Stymied, she cannot accomplish her plot.

More than the other Little House books, *The Long Winter* makes occasional forays into male consciousness, especially that of young Almanzo Wilder. His wider options throw Laura's confinement into sharper relief. Almanzo is wintering comfortably in town. When the townspeople run out of supplies, he is pressured to surrender his seed wheat for food. He must mediate between two kinds of plot: the immediate domestic imperatives of "daily bread" and the future-oriented project of spring planting. So he and another bachelor set out on a forty-mile trek toward a rumored source of wheat. Almanzo makes the unmarked, frozen prairie into a route and a destination and comes back with the life-saving grain, barely beating the next storm.

Pa would have liked to attempt the journey for the wheat. It is just the sort of Western gamble that stirs his imagination, a chance to wrest a goal and a plot out of the blizzard's oblivion. But when he speculates about the possibility, Ma responds with unprecedented vehemence.

"No!" said Ma. . . . "I say, No. You don't take such a chance. . . . Your hauling hay is bad enough. . . . *You don't go hunting for that wheat.* . . . This time I put my foot down."

"All right, that settles it," Pa agreed.

Laura and Carrie . . . felt as if thunder and lightning had come down on them suddenly, and suddenly gone. Ma poured the tea with a trembling hand. (244-45)

Ma has spoken out against a masculine plot, speaking for the round of domestic continuance, which is the security she knows. She puts her foot down, and she pours the tea. To her daughters, Ma's outburst seems as inevitable and unstoppable as the prairie weather. Although their mother may be individually frail—her hand trembles—her defense of domestic culture is a powerful force; no member of her family dares to contradict it. Pa's commitment to his female household draws him into their confinement; unlike the unmarried Almanzo, he is no longer

free to choose risks and distances.

Ma tells Laura that the family will not starve; if Pa has to, he will kill their cow and calf. Laura protests, "Oh, no! No!" To kill the stock would be to kill the future, to obliterate everything but the day-to-day continuance of meals and routine. When Almanzo felt the same threat to his future crop, he acted in response, setting out on a journey to save his seed wheat from being eaten. But Laura cannot act to save the cow and calf. When Pa goes out to learn if the young men made it home with more wheat, Laura remains by the fire with the other women. "They all sat still in the dark and, as if in a dream, they heard Pa's steps coming heavily the length of the front room, and the kitchen door opening. . . . 'The boys got back!' he said, breathing hard. 'Here's some of the wheat they brought, Caroline!'" (308)

Such passive, dreamlike helplessness and stasis is, for Laura, the nightmare of the long winter. In the last terrible months, domestic routine is reduced to its lowest common denominator, and all the family members work constantly at the most basic maintenance tasks: grinding wheat in the little coffee mill for bread, twisting hay into sticks to feed the fire. Wilder's style conveys the stark rhythms of this minimal life. Finally, the description of the blizzard reaches the book's most terrifying pitch:

The coffee mill's handle ground round and round, it must not stop. It seemed to make her part of the whirling winds driving the snow round and round over the earth and in the air, whirling and beating at Pa on his way to the stable, whirling and shrieking at the lonely houses, whirling the snow between them and up to the sky and far away, whirling forever on the endless prairie. (254)

The peculiar horror of this passage is that the howling whirl of the storm is not distinguishable from the saving sound of the domestic routine, the grinding mill. The wind has got inside the house and inside Laura's stronghold of self, and there is no safety. Here the nightmare imagery described by Annis Pratt, signaling the gender

dilemma of the adolescent female protagonist, reaches a peak of intensity.

In the previous book, Laura thought that being "grown up" was a matter of taking care of herself; *The Long Winter* has brought her to the realization that she is responsible for the care of others, as well, and that no matter how hard she works, her efforts against the opposing forces of weather and contingency may not be enough. Thus, she has been inducted into the traditionally female culture that Josephine Donovan says might characterize a "women's poetics." These values include confinement to a "domestic or private sphere" and to domestic labor, which is "non-progressive, repetitive, and static," and thus at odds with Aristotelian, "progressive" plot patterns. The traditional female task of childrearing gives rise to "preservative" "maternal thinking" and to a "realization that much is beyond one's control."¹⁴ In the description I have just quoted, it must seem to Laura that there is no way out. The hostile wind and the saving mill speak in the same voice, and thus both may appear her adversaries. As she does her domestic task, turning the mill's handle, Laura seems to become "a part of the whirling winds" that attack the house. Within her female self, Laura is both the defender of the house and its foe.

The Ingallses have their occasional triumphs during the long winter, most engineered by Ma. For example, on 25 December they manage to celebrate Christmas. Christmas is a lodestar of the Little House books; by the yearly celebration, the family honors its own history and survival and its links to an enduring, continuing culture.¹⁵ This year there are no trains, no money, and almost no food. The family's celebration is minimal but, as always, happy—and much of that happiness is of Laura's patient making. The lace and embroidery that she had intended for herself become gifts for her mother and sisters, and her bit of money goes toward Pa's gift. With her parents, Laura has joined the caretakers.

The Ingallses' survival is finally possible because they are able to manage without the inventions of the nineteenth century. Laura's

knitted lace, Ma's sourdough bread, Pa's twisted hay—all rely on primitive, pre-industrial skills: *hand-work*. When times are at their worst, Pa and Ma both rail against the linear, nineteenth-century progress plot: "These times are too progressive. Everything has changed too fast. Railroads and telegraph and kerosene and coal stoves—they're good things to have but the trouble is, folks get to depend on 'em'" (192-93).

It is the railroad in particular that lets the homesteaders down. When the tracks were blocked with mountains of packed snow, the Eastern superintendent gave orders to keep the trains going; "Snowstorms don't stop us from running trains in the East," he said (218). Full speed ahead, the train collided with an impenetrable wall of ice. When these linear efforts failed, and progress was blocked by weather, the superintendent gave up and went back East. Telling this news to the girls, Pa and Ma transform it into a parable of the failure of Easterners, linear progress, and modern inventions to deal with the exigencies of Western life:

"You see girls," Pa said, "the trouble is, he didn't have enough patience."

"Nor perseverance," said Ma.

"Nor perseverance," Pa agreed. "Just because he couldn't get through with shovels or snowplows, he figured he couldn't get through at all and he quit trying. Well, he's an Easterner. It takes patience and perseverance to contend with things out here in the West." (222-23)

By such lessons, the greatest of which is the Long Winter itself, the Ingalls daughters are taught to plot a Western life. They have learned to survive by a female plot, much older than railroads. Hearthbound, they labor at primitive domestic tasks of maintenance. And they wait, for the end of winter and the coming of trains. Although they cannot change the weather, they have learned to read its signs. One night Laura is awakened by the relentless wind—a usual sound. But the sound is different somehow, and when she realizes that this is the Chinook, a

warm wind, she wakes the household with glad cries that spring has come.

With the Chinook comes warm weather, and trains soon arrive, with ample supplies, even the long-promised Christmas barrel, full of gifts. The prize gift, a fine silk shawl, goes by acclamation to Ma, whose domestic survival skills have been the saving "wonder" of the long winter. In earlier books, Laura identified with Pa, longing to share his male adventure. But in this book, Pa is weakened by frustration and malnutrition and is stripped of much of his earlier glamour in his daughter's eyes. Here, as she admires Ma's shawl, Laura's accolade is for her mother, and she frames it in terms of weaving, a skill long associated with women's culture: "Such a beautiful shawl was for Ma, of course. . . . it was like her, so soft and yet firm and well-wearing, with the fine, bright colors in it." Ma reminds her daughters that the shawl is their heritage too; she says, "We will all take turns wearing it" (324).

The winter and the novel end in May, when the Ingallses roast the turkey from their barrel and, with friends, "celebrate the springtime with a Christmas dinner" (236). This is Ma's idea and her project, executed with the help of her girls. With replenished supplies, she runs through the repertoire of her domestic magic, and "when night came the cupboard held large brown-crustured loaves of white bread, a sugar-frosted loaf of cake, three crisp-crustured pies, and the jellied cranberries"—far more than the family could need. This is a ritual demonstration. Indeed, Ma's preparations are a form of civilizing art, and when she sets the glass bowl of "glowing cranberry jelly" in the center of a white cloth, "they all admired the effect" (329).

After the winter's lessons, Laura is far more aware of the fragility of Ma's powers and of the sheer effort involved in their execution. Laura's description of the banquet emphasizes Ma's constant, unspoken direction of the meal: "Ma looked at Pa and every head bowed. . . . Ma poured the coffee and Pa's tea. She passed the bread and the butter and reminded Pa to refill the plates" (332). Laura now has a far more acute and anxious awareness of how a woman

must keep things going, especially this most basic life-giving activity, the serving of food, and of the cost of such control. At the table, she is Ma's chief assistant. The winter has taught her that this gendered role is something, like Ma's shawl, that she too must wear.

Celebrating Christmas in the springtime, these Westerners are reminded of the triumphs of civilization—their traditional calendar is restored (at Ma's prompting) and they are celebrating their festival properly, at last. But Laura is also giddy with disorientation, for now she knows that the human, domestic calendar must bend to the prairie's absolutes, obeying the dictates of Western weather. To end the celebration, Pa plays his fiddle, and they all sing a new song, which ends the book:

"Then what is the use of repining,
For where there's a will, there's a way,
And tomorrow the sun may be shining,
Although it is cloudy today."

And as they sang, the fear and the suffering of the long winter seemed to rise like a dark cloud and float away on the music. Spring had come. The sun was shining warm, the winds were soft, and the green grass growing. (335)

Elizabeth Hampsten suggests that, while Wilder "has the details right," the *Little House* books soften the facts of Great Plains pioneer life, compared to "private accounts," and William Holtz says that Wilder was finally unable, in her series, to get beyond a sentimental myth of Western possibilities. But I contend that *The Long Winter*, which may be the best novel of the series, is neither softened nor sentimental.¹⁶ In this book, with its cyclical household rhythms counterpointing the erratic heaves of storm, Wilder wrote out of a domestic aesthetic allied with some of the oldest traditions of women's art, and she provided a telling critique of the linear plot of Western progress that dominated many male Americans' imaginations in the nineteenth century.

Elementary school teachers report that *The Long Winter* is a special favorite of school chil-

dren, and I must admit that, as a schoolgirl, I read the book at least a dozen times. The novel is a probing examination of questions that matter deeply to young people. It offers another answer to Laura's earlier question about what "makes things happen"—and this ambivalent answer comes out of the cyclical traditions of women's culture. As readers of whatever age, we respond profoundly to the archetypal power of Laura's situation as a female adolescent in Dakota territory.¹⁷ Because of the exigencies of Western life, she has an especially urgent stake in preserving the domestic world, keeping the bread rising and the fire burning. For the Ingallses, these are matters of life and death. But Laura's very consciousness, the spark of her selfhood, is threatened by this necessary routine. As a girl, faced by the twin pressures of gender and weather, where can she go? What can she do?

The book's ending provides no answers to these pressing questions. Pa's homiletic ditty first celebrates human powers: "Where there's a will, there's a way." But then it admits that the weather is finally in charge: "Tomorrow the sun may be shining . . ." At last, all Wilder can do is to honor the human ordeal of the winter by naming it: "the fear and the suffering of the long winter." The suffering has stopped, at least briefly, because spring has come. But the weather is still in control. *The Long Winter* explores what that inexorable fact can mean to a spirited girl, eager to invent herself a life in the nineteenth-century West. As the central volume of Wilder's enduring series, this novel is a powerful introduction to the myths, the art, and the realities of women's culture on the American frontier.

NOTES

1. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (1940; rpt. New York: Harper, 1953). Quotations from this work are cited in the text.

2. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 85; Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," *Feminist Criticism: Essays in Women, Literature and Theory*,

Elaine Showalter, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 125-43.

3. The best account of Wilder's negotiation of her roles as writer, business-woman, and domestic woman is provided by William T. Anderson's biographical commentary interspersed throughout *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, A Little House Sampler*, William T. Anderson, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

4. Rose Wilder Lane, *Woman's Day Book of American Needlework* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

5. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939; rpt. New York: Harper, 1953). Quotations from this work are cited in the text.

6. William Holtz, "Closing the Circle: The American Optimism of Laura Ingalls Wilder," *Great Plains Quarterly* 4 (Spring 1984): 83.

7. Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 16-17.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

9. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework* (New York: Seabury, 1982), p. 146.

10. Wilder's initial aim in writing the *Little House* series was to preserve her father's stories. His typically male tales of wilderness exploits and escapes dominate the first book of the series, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932; rpt. New York: Harper, 1953). For Wilder's comments on her commitment to her father's male stories, see Wilder and Lane, *A Little House Sampler*, p. 215.

11. Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Knopf, 1931), p. 198.

12. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, pp. 15-16.

13. For a feminist explication of the nature-culture division, see Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," *Feminist Studies* 1 (Fall 1972): 5-31; Elizabeth Jameson, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," Mary Dodge Woodward, *The Checkered Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary 1884-88* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), pp. ix-x. On these stereotypes of Western women, see also Beverly Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed: The Image of the Frontier Woman," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (January-March 1975): 27-31; Janet Spaeth offers an interesting discussion of Ma as a Western woman in *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), pp. 36-46.

14. Josephine Donovan, "Toward a Women's Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3 (Spring/Fall 1984): 102-04.

15. For a brief survey of Wilder's treatment of Christmas, see Marcia Dalphin, "Christmas in the *Little House* Books," *The Horn Book's Laura Ingalls*

Wilder, William Anderson, ed. (Boston: The Horn Book, 1987), pp. 41-45.

16. Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women* (Bloomington: University Press of Indiana, 1982), p. 38; Holtz, "Closing the Circle": 88-89. Wilder's original choice of title, "The Hard Winter," was rejected by her publishers, who found it too pessimistic for a children's novel (see *A Little House Sampler*, 224-26). The most thorough account of Wilder's own intentions for the series is provided by *A Little House Sampler*, especially in Wilder's comment in her "Book Fair Speech" that she "wanted the children now [1930s] to understand more about the beginnings of things, to know what is behind the things

they see" (217). Rosa Ann Moore's two articles on Wilder's development as writer are also pertinent: "Laura Ingalls Wilder's Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books," *Children's Literature* 4 (1975): 105-119, and "The Little House Books: Rose-Colored Classics," *Children's Literature* 7 (1978): 7-16.

17. Wilder considered the books appropriate for both child and adult readers; when a friend told her that she had not read them because "They're children's books, aren't they?" Wilder's reply was simply, "You read them" (Connie Farrow, "Museum Honors Guardian of 'Mrs. Wilder's' Heritage," *Springfield (Missouri) News Leader*, 11 June 1988).