

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1989

Review of Willa Cather: A Literary Life

Karen Vierendeis

Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Vierendeis, Karen, "Review of Willa Cather: A Literary Life" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 546.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/546>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Willa Cather: A Literary Life. By James Woodress. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Photographs, bibliography, index, preface, notes. xx + 583 pp. \$35.00.

James Woodress wanted to create a life-size portrait of Willa Cather. But his own assessment of the work sums up its limitation. "[His] present view of Cather does not change in any basic way the image of her contained in [his] earlier book." Since then, he may have read Cather's letters to Louise Pound, the new interpretations of Sharon O'Brien, Doris Grumbach, and Susan Rosowski, and Bernice Slote's copious materials to which he had access. But none of this new information teased his imagination.

He has altered his view of *One of Ours* and *The Professor's House*, but otherwise his literary interpretations remain intact. The fully researched stories of Cather's apprenticeship as a journalist in Lincoln and Pittsburgh, her years as a teacher in Pittsburgh, the financial struggle of the 1920s, and her decision to switch publishers, from Ferris Greenslet of Houghton Mifflin to the young Alfred Knopf, are engaging. Despite the richness of the details, Woodress' new biography is essentially a reworking of his earlier work.

Had he digested his reading of the feminist critics, Woodress could not so easily cling to

the stereotypical view of Cather as celibate and would not overlook the importance of her mother, Edith Lewis, and the numerous women artists in her life. Nor would he have missed the significance that the female literary tradition had upon her work. In his desire to ensure her greatness, Woodress draws several unconvincing and strained comparisons with Fitzgerald, T.S. Eliot, and other major literary figures of the 1920s. Despite his obvious appreciation of her artistry, he conceives of her story as that of a "single artist, married to her art." Woodress also perpetuates the claim that Cather's central flaw was "[her] inability to write heterosexual passion." Although he acknowledges Cather's preference for female relationships and her passionate attachment to Isabelle McClung, even after the latter's marriage, Woodress dismisses the claim that Cather's passionate love letters to Louise Pound present evidence that she considered herself a lesbian. He raises the issue only to dismiss it. But for those critics who have read O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987), his assertion appears curiously old-fashioned and lacking in any other unifying principle that would explain the choices Cather made in her life.

For the scholar interested in Willa Cather, this biography offers valuable new details that give a fuller picture of the artist. But for the literate reader who hoped for what Cather called "the gift of sympathy," this work is a disappointment.

KAREN VIERNEISEL
Chicago