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Review of *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* by Ann Romines

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Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. By Ann Romines. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. Photographs, notes, works cited, index. xi + 287 pp. \$55.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Linking her own experiences with those of the fictional and historical Laura Ingalls Wilders, Ann Romines advances several issues she considers central to a fuller understanding of Wilder's well-known "Little House" books. Her five chapters (plus a conclusion) take up the books in chronological order, from *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) to the posthumously published *The First Four Years* (1971), exploring the personal, cultural, and literary processes at work in each.

The first chapter considers father-daughter relationships and the "patriarchal constraints" that Wilder and her daughter, journalist Rose Wilder Lane, overcome through their writings. The second takes up the evolving portrayal of racial and ethnic contacts and the increasing disengagement of the fictional Laura. In the third, Romines talks of the Wilder girls' education in material culture as they move from a handicraft economy to a full-blown mercantile one. The fourth chapter examines gender roles and the choices forced upon the girls by their milieu, while the fifth looks at the efforts the historical Laura and her daughter make to reconcile their expanded view of womanhood and women's roles with their commitments to the patriarchal culture from which they came. The concluding chapter takes up recent "cultural spin-offs" (dolls, a television series, and so on) of the "Little House" books, considering the implications of ending the series and what such an ending may imply for readers young and old, female and male.

The study throughout makes extensive use of primary materials—manuscript and published versions of the "Little House" books, the Wilder-Lane correspondence, and other documents—as well as the most recent Wilder scholarship. If it has any weaknesses, they reside in Romines's tendency to embrace too

readily the shibboleths of theory and confessional readings of the Jane Tompkins sort. Her arguments at times depend more upon whether one accepts the ideology behind them (for example, that Charles Ingalls moves from masculine hunter to feminine observer when he “lays down his phallic gun and his aggressive hunter’s role to become a passive . . . observer” of forest animals, or that Laura’s hankering for an Indian baby is driven by “incestuous as well as interracial desire”) than upon verifiable, empirical evidence. Nonetheless, when the evidence is present it is used effectively, so that *Constructing the Little House* at its best becomes an informative, provocative, and substantial contribution to Wilder studies—and to children’s literature scholarship generally.

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