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## Review of *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend* by John E. Miller

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*Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend.* By John E. Miller. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. Illustrations, notes, index. xiii + 306 pp. \$29.95.

Since Laura Ingalls Wilder's fictionalized biography, as the Little House series, has become one of the long-running hits of US popular culture, it is surprising for most readers to realize that the actual woman is a little-known figure. Reticent, determined, and deeply committed to propriety, Wilder had many friends in the small town where she lived for the last fifty-some years of her life, but few intimates beyond her husband and one daughter. Thus John E. Miller's scrupulous new biography of Wilder is a valuable and absorbing book. Miller's aim was to write "a biography describing and explaining the lived life," and he has largely succeeded.

Miller's skills as a historian serve the book admirably. Local newspapers and other docu-

ments help him describe the milieu of Wilder's girlhood in Wisconsin, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota, and then, most successfully, to place her in the small Ozark town, Mansfield, where the Wilders emigrated in 1894, and to evoke the world of farming, business, clubs, politics, and religion in which she spent her adulthood. He traces Wilder's emergence as a writer in her *Missouri Ruralist* essays and gives a full, evenhanded account of her controversial, publicly unacknowledged collaboration with her writer-daughter Rose Wilder Lane on the Little House series.

Still, Rose Wilder Lane is in many ways the book's problem. Passionate, flamboyant, quixotic, self-centered, and depressive, Lane left a complex and engrossing account (in diaries, letters, and other documents) of her volatile, sometimes angry, exasperated, but always loving relations with her mother. Wilder left no such account of her inner life—except, perhaps, in the Little House portrait of Laura. Thus, wherever she appears in this book (and in the last two thirds she is a dominant figure), Lane upstages her mother.

Miller's account is responsible and illuminating; I recommend it. But its emphasis on the discernible record of "the lived life" leaves out an important part of Laura Ingalls Wilder's biography: the durable, palpable magic of the Little House books, as epitomized in the character of Laura. Perhaps that problematic magic is better left to the literary and cultural critics (undiscussed by Miller) who are beginning, at last, to turn to Wilder's texts. They will find John Miller's biography a useful resource for their tasks.

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