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Review of *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet* By John E. Miller

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ence: the "fiction" is raised toward "history" and hence toward "truth" by conflating the stories of long ago into the settings and artifacts that survive into the present. In its most sophisticated form, such a pilgrimage results in the scholarship that attempts to recover the historical context out of which great stories arise—and, in the reflex of this impulse, the attempt to discriminate between the story and the history out of which it has grown.

John E. Miller has undertaken both tasks. As a historian, he has recovered much of the social history of DeSmet, South Dakota (the Little Town of the later books); he has made thoughtful connections between Laura Ingalls Wilder and her contemporary, the painter Harvey Dunn; and he has summarized what is known of Wilder's life and of how the books came to be written. Many readers will be grateful to him for enlarging the range of reference these books have to their historical setting. To the complementary task of understanding how the demands of fiction alter, select, and shape historical materials, thus creating a factitious "history," he has brought some traditional, common-sense observations that will gather most readers' assent. More critical students of literature, however, might find these observations by and large parenthetical to Miller's larger concern for the historical "truth-telling" function of these books and object that the verbal artifact has been too easily subsumed to the historical document.

This objection connects with the vexing problem of authorship in these books, for as long as the text is seen primarily as mimetic (i.e., as autobiography), the authorship of Wilder remains unproblematical, the Laura of the stories collapses into Mrs. A. J. Wilder of Rocky Ridge Farm, and the contributions of her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, remain largely editorial and ornamental. To the extent that the literary work is autonomous, internally referential, however, the primary question becomes a matter of the art by which the book separates itself from literal reality. In this case, Laura is a fictional character distinct from the historical Mrs. A. J. Wilder,

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet. By John E. Miller. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994. Introduction, photographs, notes, index. xii + 208 pp. \$24.95.

The Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder have many devoted readers, and the TV program based loosely on the books has generated many more enthusiasts who have never even read the books. One measure of such fans' interest has been their pilgrimages to the sites and settings of the books, and around these locations has grown up a considerable tourist industry of museums, pageants, and historical reconstruction. Here the faithful or the merely curious can find a certain kind of ratification of their fictional experi-

and the contribution of her daughter to the art of the books is constitutive rather than incidental.

Simply put, no one would be interested in this particular history if it were not so well written, and Wilder lacked the the skill to write it well: the case can be made that the history is hers, but the literature her daughter's. In this meeting of history and literature, Miller has served the muse of history well; the muse of literature might well feel that the book properly acknowledging her has yet to be written.

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