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## Review of *A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather* By John March

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*A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather.* By John March. Edited by Marilyn Arnold with Debra Lynn Thornton. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993. Preface, introduction, author's and editors' biographies. xxix + 880 pages. \$99.50.

Literary archaeologists of the future may be able to reconstruct the outlines and many of the details of Cather's fiction just from this comprehensive and readable guide. John March spent nearly forty years compiling the materials, while editors Arnold and Thornton and their team spent nearly six more editing, verifying, and documenting. Easily obtained information is generally omitted; what remains, as Arnold's introduction emphasizes, is March's personal selection, and the length and emphasis of most of the notes reflect his interpretations.

The editors used Indexetc (Wordcruncher) to verify references and add a few not found in visual searches. This enables the reader to see immediately how often Cather used a name or

an allusion and to trace connections among very different works.

Although this volume will deservedly become a standard reference, the editors warn that the entries should be considered as starting points; their documentation provides guides for further research. Some entries apparently proved undocumentable. March offers a number of new, but often undocumented, identifications of prototypes from Webster County people; most Cather readers do not have ready access to the Webster County newspapers, census records, and other local materials, to enable them to pursue their own researches. Some of the prototypes named (either flatly or with a cautious "in part") seem to have little relationship to the character with whom they are identified or even with Cather herself. (See the entries for Pommeroy, Harry Gordon, Haycock, or the Widow Steavens.) Presumably March's local sources, who remembered the Webster County of Cather's childhood but who are now dead, suggested the prototypes, but we have no way of knowing on what grounds. Other people, not named by March, but documented in local public records, share names with or have clearer connections to Cather's characters. The sources of the deep well of Cather's childhood memories have not all been traced.

March assumed readers would move from the fiction to his handbook; the editors believe, rightly, that this companion will be read on its own. It serves admirably to illuminate the range of Cather's allusions, to increase the reader's understanding of the cultures of which she writes, and to bring the reader back to the texts with a deeper understanding.

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