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Review of *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* By Deborah Carlin

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Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading. By Deborah Carlin. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. Notes, index. 208 pp. \$25.00.

In *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading*, Deborah Carlin turns her attention to Willa Cather's most overlooked work: her fiction after 1922. She argues that in her later fiction, particularly *My Mortal Enemy*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather became more experimental with narrative form, relying on vignettes and multiple levels of storytelling in an attempt to steer clear of the deadening conventions of the novel, especially the romantic novel. This shift in strategies confounded Cather's (primarily male) contemporaries, who dismissed her late novels as a falling-off from the pinnacle of *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* Invariably, Carlin points out, male critics made two rhetorical moves in their denunciations of

Cather's later novels: first, they equated the author with her work; and second, they allegorized Cather's supposed failures as failures of femininity—a plummet into “sentimentality” or “petulance.”

Strikingly, though, Carlin points out that Cather's late novels have also confounded a generation of feminist critics who regret the disappearance of “strong heroines” from the work. What difficulty, then, can explain the disappointment these late novels provoke in such a variety of readers?

Carlin's answer is a classically deconstructive one. The later Cather, she argues, is not only playing with narrative *conventions*—the romance, the *bildungsroman*—but also with the *conditions* of narrative: especially the reader's desire for a single tale, for a recognizable ending, for a story at once clearly fictional and deeply linked to historical “truths” about America. Again and again, Carlin shows, the late novels withhold these forms of satisfaction and offer something more difficult. In her reading of *Lucy Gayheart*, for instance, which she calls “the Cather novel critics love to hate,” Carlin points out that Cather leaves young Lucy teetering between the traditions of the presumptively male novel of *bildung* or self-realization, and the typically female novel of “awakening,” or merely incipient self-discovery. “Though perceived to be Cather's most failed novel,” Carlin writes, “it is, in the end, too good at capturing life” (149). For Carlin, this resistance to conventions and the awkward admixture of them produce different, more rewarding *conditions* for reading; they invite, in short, a reading that incorporates a sense of Cather's deep ambivalence about the relationship of women to storytelling. In this reading, then, *Lucy Gayheart* is not a failed attempt to negotiate competing male and female storytelling traditions; it is “a bleak look at the failure inherent in fictions of female development” (149). Traditional, non-feminist critics will not find their romantic fantasies fulfilled in these novels; feminists looking for women with whom to identify unambiguously will also be thwarted. But the

reader, presumably feminist, who accepts the challenge to hear more than one voice from Cather's mouth, to hear her ambivalence, will walk away with a richer sense of the novels.

There are moments when Carlin simply gives the novels too much credit for the *value* of their ambivalence, especially when concluding her chapters: on more than one occasion her final claim seems to be that Cather's late work was simply too complex and metafictional for earlier critics. Moreover, her feminism is more nuanced than her deconstructive technique: although extremely attentive to the complicated ways in which white women make use of black women in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, for instance, Carlin valorizes the way characters in *Shadows on the Rock* tell small stories in the midst of the novel's larger flow as if this shift in registers by itself powerfully blurs the line between history and fiction. Most often, though, Carlin's particular blend of feminist and deconstructive reading leads to excellent analysis, engaged analysis—and ultimately to one of the most acute books of Cather criticism available.

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