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Review of "Cather Studies 7: Willa Cather as Cultural Icon," Edited by Guy Reynolds

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Cather Studies 7: Willa Cather as Cultural Icon. Edited by Guy Reynolds. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xi + 354 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$35.00 paper.

Since its founding in 1990, *Cather Studies* has offered seven occasions for the publication of a volume devoted to Willa Cather scholarship. Of late, the series's editors have focused on a theme; in volume 7, editor Guy Reynolds, director of the Cather Project at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, offers an introduction and twenty essays by both established Cather scholars and relative newcomers relating directly or indirectly to the matter of Willa Cather as cultural icon.

Several essayists provide provocative definitions of what it means to have reached the status of icon. For Elsa Nettels, "Writers become icons when they come to embody or are recognized as literary creators of an era, a region, a city, a culture, or a way of life that we recognize as an essential part of a nation's history and character." For John Millington and Joseph Urgo, iconic status has more to do with the nature and quality of the reader's engagement with the writer's works: "the writer whom we acknowledge as iconic," Urgo claims, "we also acknowledge as having, to an extent we seek to realize, produced the way we think." Other contributors (Jonathon Gross and Richard Harris) focus on iconic writers who may have influenced Cather, on iconic texts that may have inspired her work (Jessica Rabin and Timothy Blackburn), or on iconic characters Cather herself created (Joshua Dolezal). In a brief opening essay, Robert Pinsky reveals that he drew upon Walt Whitman and Cather in writing his own celebrated book-length poem, *Explanation of America*.

The authors of several essays suggest that Cather was much involved in the creation and management of her literary identity. Despite her seeming ambivalence about claiming a public literary life, she moved from Houghton Mifflin to Knopf, a publisher who would market her books with a deeper concern for their literary value (Erika Hamilton); devoted time

to securing an appreciative readership for her novels (Janis Stout); allowed her books to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club (Mark Madigan); and permitted the publication of photographic portraits that appropriately registered the weight of her literary authority (Michael Schueth).

This volume, aimed primarily at Cather scholars, is yet another contribution to the booming Cather industry. What emerges from it most strongly is that the boom won't be over any time soon, for we have not yet come to grips with Willa Cather: her iconic presence and impact remain tantalizingly enigmatic.

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