

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2008

Review of *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner* By Merrill Maguire Skaggs

Ed Folsom
University of Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Folsom, Ed, "Review of *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner* By Merrill Maguire Skaggs" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1305.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1305>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner. By Merrill Maguire Skaggs. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xvii + 202 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$40.00

Merrill Skaggs explains in her introduction that we are to hear her provocative title, *Axes*, in at least two ways: as the intersecting axes of these two writers' very different careers (as when Joseph R. Urgo termed Cather and Faulkner as "the horizontal and vertical axes of American literature"), but also as actual weapons, "battle-axes." Skaggs reads these authors' novels and stories as word-weapons they wielded at one another, hoping to wound. They may ultimately have judged each other worthy opponents, but they never laid down their arms, remaining combative until Cather's death and even after (her posthumously published story "Before Breakfast," in Skaggs's reading, is a final slap at Faulkner, who gets in the last word and final blow with *The Reivers*, even though Cather wasn't there to receive it).

Cather and Faulkner made surprisingly few comments about each other. In the handful of known references, Faulkner seems generally respectful of the older and revered Cather, and

Cather seems generally oblivious to her emerging challenger, mentioning him in print only once. These two writers, born a generation apart, are both regionalists whose works transcend regionalism, but otherwise they seem as different in style and thematic concerns as two contemporary authors can be. Faulkner's fractured and vast-syntaxed narrations have seemed for many as embedded in Southern Gothic traditions as Cather's pellucid prose has seemed reflective of Great Plains vistas. But readers of Skaggs's book need to prepare themselves for entry into an alternative universe where, far from ignoring or warily avoiding each other, Cather and Faulkner were obsessed with each other and spent a good part of their careers sending coded messages back and forth in the form of stories and novels—more like letter bombs—that scolded, mocked, secretly acknowledged, and even occasionally offered a grudging compliment to the other writer. No one cracked the code, Skaggs insists, until Skaggs. To enter this Bizarro world, we must, as Skaggs warns us, wander into "an intricate labyrinth, holding tight to a thread."

That thread often gets thin and easy to lose. Skaggs knows the work of these two authors inside out, and her ability to retrieve from one author's work details that echo or pun on or resonate with details from the other's is impressive, though usually not very convincing. The oft-noted Bundren/Burden echo is but the beginning of what becomes a bewildering cascade of "similarities," what Skaggs at one point admits are "comparisons [that] can become dizzying, as in a hall of mirrors." A reader may soon be thinking more of a house of cards than a hall of mirrors, since many of the claimed similarities seem circumstantial, accidental, commonplace, or forced. This is a critical methodology that flattens out distinctions between the Plains and the South in order to insist, for example, that Cather is strategically turning her midwestern small-town street into an echo of Faulkner's southern town in order to teach him a lesson.

If, however, you want to enter a world where *Soldier's Pay* is an homage to *My Ántonia* and

A *Lost Lady*, where Victor Morse in *One of Ours* is actually Faulkner in thin disguise (Skaggs conjures a meeting between the two writers in Greenwich Village in 1921, where Faulkner “may have vividly told his current stories to Willa Cather,” who promptly stole them and “folded them and him into her new novel”), where *Mosquitoes* is a riposte to *The Professor’s House*, and where “Before Breakfast” is Cather’s resultant reprimand, where even “Tom Outland’s Story” in *The Professor’s House* is Cather’s mocking of Phil Stone’s preface to Faulkner’s book of poems *The Marble Faun*, and so on and so on, you will need to grab hold of the disappearing thread and hang on very tight.

Skaggs has some intriguing comparative readings of Faulkner and Cather here, but she loads them into the very minds and motivations of the authors, claiming to be the first critic to divine what they were actually thinking and plotting, instead of being satisfied to work out more controlled and compelling comparative readings of some of America’s best early-twentieth-century novels.

ED FOLSOM
Department of English
University of Iowa