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Review of *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* Edited by John J. Murphy

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Critical Essays on Willa Cather. Edited by John J. Murphy. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984. Index. viii + 310 pp. \$35.00.

John J. Murphy's volume in G. K. Hall's series *Critical Essays on American Literature* is a significant contribution to Cather studies. In a substantial introduction, Murphy, who presently

contributes the annual bibliographical essay "Fiction: 1900-1930" to *American Literary Scholarship*, has collaborated with Kevin Synnott in surveying Cather scholarship over the years. Both negative and positive reviews as well as important articles and books are chronologically presented and succinctly characterized. Murphy and Synnott give considerably more attention to the reviews than did Bernice Slote's fine bibliographical contribution to *Sixteen Modern American Authors* (1973); in so doing, they call attention to a vast amount of material not readily available and, except for a few of the more famous reviews, not generally cited by Cather scholars.

After a section of "General Essays," including two original pieces prepared for the volume, Murphy devotes at least two essays, always beginning with what he considers a significant review, to each of the novels from *Alexander's Bridge* through *Shadows on the Rock*. The books thereafter are represented by only one review each and by David Stouck's well-known article, "Willa Cather's Last Four Books."

Whereas James Schroeter's *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (1967), the only other such compilation of secondary material, seemed to seek out well-known critics who often presented general commentaries on Cather's work, Murphy seems to have sought out in his thirty-five selections those essays he considers most significant and/or influential in elucidating specific works. His task, I suspect, was formidable, and no doubt every Cather devotee will find a favorite essay (or perhaps even one's own!) regrettably omitted. Indeed, I would personally have preferred Murphy's own essay on *Shadows* over his piece on *O Pioneers!* specifically written for this volume. Then, too, it is a bit disconcerting to see four articles on *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and only two on *My Ántonia* (the same number devoted to *Alexander's Bridge* and *Shadows on the Rock*).

Such minor quibbles aside, what is included are substantial contributions to Cather scholarship, including original essays by David Stouck, Paul Comeau, and James Woodress, who treats with his usual good sense the presently volatile

subject of Cather's sexual orientation. What is more, the book itself is handsome: quality paper and binding, attractive layout, clear typography. In short, Murphy's book has been done with care and integrity, those very values that Cather herself so much admired.

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