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Review of *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* By Phyllis C. Robinson

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Willa: The Life of Willa Cather. By Phyllis C. Robinson. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 321 pp. \$17.95.

"I dwell in possibility," one of Emily Dickinson's memorable first lines, would be an appropriate epigraph for this biographical study, which titillates the reader with suppositions about Cather's attachments to other women. For example, Louise Pound was an early "infatuation" for two years, until Cather attacked brother Roscoe Pound because "he must have hurt her in a way she could not forgive. . . . Had he found himself attracted to her and been rebuffed? Had he lashed out and bullied her for preferring his sister to himself? Perhaps he made fun of her attachment to Louise? Perhaps he did more than laugh at her. With his greater sophistication and knowledge of the world did he say ugly things about her to Louise? Perhaps he called the friendship unnatural and his sister's friend perverse. He may even have used the term 'lesbian' to describe her. We do not know." I quote this passage at length because it is typical of Robinson's method of admitting ignorance or lack of facts after engaging in damaging speculation.

The Cather gospel according to Robinson is that Cather gave up on Isabelle McClung (whom responsible biographer James Woodress acknowledges as the romance of Cather's life) because Isabelle was more or less forbidden fruit, and the "lusty, earthy side to Willa and her passionate nature would have required a physical relationship that went beyond . . . playful tenderness. . . . Willa undoubtedly

needed sexual fulfillment as well as intellectual and social stimulation." So Cather took up with Edith Lewis, although she somewhat feared Elizabeth Sergeant's jealousy. Of course, Cather was also "much taken with" Miss Gayhardt of Blue Hill, drawn also to playwright Zöe Akins, and liked to have Dorothy Canfield cuddled on the divan awaiting her return from the office. With all those affairs it is a wonder, really, that Cather had time to take up the pen! But she did—and her poem "Grandmither, think not I forget" probably responded to the Louise Pound difficulty, and the wife of the hero of her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, is probably a portrait of her beautiful and beloved Isabelle, and in the relationship of the two priests in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather probably captured her "marriage" to Edith.

I recommend two recent studies to anyone reading this biography. The first, Sharon O'Brien's "Mothers, Daughters, and the 'Art Necessity,'" in *American Novelists Revisited*, ed. Fleischmann (Hall, 1982), is a serious attempt to approach Cather's struggle to combine identities of woman and artist while analyzing her relationship to her mother "and the other women whom she loved." The second is Helen C. Southwick's "Willa Cather's Early Career: Origins of a Legend," *Western Pennsylvania History Magazine* 65 (April 1982): 85-98, which advises restraint in conclusions about lesbianism, noting that much of the evidence is from a 1950 memoir *These Too Were Here* by Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken, who recalled the facts when in her eighties. Although opposed in prenotions regarding the lesbian issue, both scholars are responsible. O'Brien demonstrates the restraint urged by Southwick, Cather's niece; however, Robinson does not, and she cannot resist quoting items like Truman Capote's speculation and conclusion when he saw Cather at a New York library: "'A lesbian?' he remembered asking himself. 'Well, yes,' he had decided." Surely this comes close to the *National Enquirer*.

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