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Review of *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* Edited by John N. Swift and Joseph R. Ungo

Guy Reynolds

University of Kent, greynolds2@unl.edu

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Willa Cather and the American Southwest. Edited by John N. Swift and Joseph R. Ugo. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. vi+ 172 pp. Illustrations, works cited, index. \$40.00.

Cather criticism has come a long way since Sharon O'Brien's 1987 biography, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. O'Brien had a singular take on Cather's trip to the Southwest in 1912, viewing this journey as a moment of psychological transformation, a tipping point when Cather became a creative rather than a merely professional writer. O'Brien emerged from a distinctive 1970s literary feminism, which placed the life-story of neglected writers within a psychoanalytical context. This new collection is, in contrast, a kaleidoscopic array of varied approaches to "Cather's Southwest."

A number of the essays are close readings of specific episodes, motifs, or characters: John Swift's piece on metaphors of wrapping/unwrapping in *The Professor's House*; Marilee Lindemann's essay on the "queer mesa" and male desire. Others lock a particular interdisciplinary body of contextual information onto the Southwestern novels. John Murphy writes on the interplay between science and religion; Matthias Schubnell explores German archaeology's impact on American readings of the "primitive." What these pieces point to is a widening-out of criticism from its roots in biography and its focus on Cather as "woman writer." There is real diversity here; but there is scepticism too. Cather's *oeuvre* has increasingly become a battleground for critics debating questions of gender, race, nationality. Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America* (1995), with its decoding of the political unconscious of US modernism, serves as a touchstone for a number of commentators. Ann Fisher-Wirth, writing on "Anasazi Cannibalism," voices doubts about Michaels's readings, while Lindemann seeks to offset his critique of homosociality in "Tom Outland's Story." Joseph Ugo's elegant "Multiculturalism as Nostalgia" maintains Michaels's scepticism, but

pushes Cather into a fresh, suggestive juxtaposition with Faulkner. What we see here is a certain maturity in Cather criticism. The work is critiqued; but, in turn, the critic becomes part of an ongoing debate within the academy.

Yet there remains a refreshing sense of outreach within the Cather community, well-illustrated by this volume. David Harrell's *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House* (1992) was a pioneering study of Cather's engagement with the region's archaeology and anthropology. In a heterodox but welcome move, the editors asked Harrell, who left academe to work for New Mexico state government, to provide an afterword to the collection. His graceful and incisive overview is as practical an illustration of the broad church of Cather criticism as I can think of.

GUY REYNOLDS
School of English
University of Kent