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Review of *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination* Edited by Susan J. Rosowski

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BOOK REVIEWS

Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination. Edited by Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xiv + 327 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliographical references, index. \$35.00 paper.

In "A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism with Excursions to Catherland," one of the many fine essays contained in this new volume of *Cather Studies*, Cheryl Glotfelty remarks, "If the last decade of Cather [scholarship] has been the 'gender and sexuality' period, the new millennium may well begin with a fruitful ecocritical decade." It is ironic, given this prediction, that not all of the sixteen essays presented in *Cather Studies 5* fall within the emerging field of ecocriticism. Indeed, the most impressive piece in the collection, Charles Johanningsmeier's "Unmasking Willa Cather's 'Mortal Enemy,'" is a tour de force of old-fashioned prototype-hunting that has nothing to do with Cather's "ecological imagination." Nevertheless, those essays that *do* grapple with Cather's complex and frequently contradictory vision of the natural world suggest that Glotfelty may be right. As a critical approach—or, rather, as a set of approaches used to explore a specific literary theme (the relationship between the human and the non-human)—ecocriticism seems made for Cather, a writer intensely aware of *place* and its power over the imagination.

Sharply contrasting portraits of Cather's environmental sensibility emerge from this collection, thereby suggesting the protean nature of eco-interpretation and its promise for future Cather scholars. For example, while Joseph W. Meeker reads Cather as a straightforward celebrant of land-development and laments the novelist's "disinterest in her ecological context," Thomas J. Lyon praises Cather as a life-long learner whose ever-expanding consciousness enabled her to "see and feel the environment in a participative, intimate way." Drawing upon the philosophy of Aldo Leopold, Patrick K. Dooley demonstrates that Cather was in many

ways inconsistent in her environmental thinking: in some places her fiction espouses the homocentric values of "wise-use conservation"; in others it celebrates wilderness for its own sake, calling for "hands-off preservation." For Dooley, the only constant in Cather's treatment of environmental themes is her sense of human beings as custodians or "stewards" of land they never really own. In contrast, Susan J. Rosowski sets aside the issue of Cather's environmental ethics and focuses instead on the "comic form" of her oeuvre, with its anti-tragic emphasis on natural processes of rebirth and renewal—processes that tie her characters to the natural world.

Other noteworthy essays in this exciting collection include Janis P. Stout's portrait of Cather as a meticulous observer of flora and fauna, Joseph Urgo's discussion of the National Parks Movement as an ideological context for *My Ántonia*, Guy Reynolds's comparison of Cather with other place-sensitive modernists such as Frank Lloyd Wright, and Ann Romines's meditation (not ecocriticism, but welcome nonetheless) on the centrality of Cather's Virginia experience in her life and art. Carefully edited and refreshingly free of jargon, *Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination* is perhaps the best volume yet in a series that continues to offer fresh perspectives on one of the twentieth-century's greatest novelist.

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