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Review of *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* By John E. Miller

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Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture. By John E. Miller. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. x + 263 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

In his third book on Laura Ingalls Wilder, John E. Miller presents another fascinating study of this most cherished writer and her times. Miller weighs in on a number of the continuing controversies surrounding Wilder's books, foremost among them the question of how the Little House books were authored. He also enters into the continuing debate on the racial politics of Wilder's writing, especially in *Little House on the Prairie*, that has become the focus of many newer studies of Wilder's work. Miller presents Wilder and daughter Rose Wilder Lane as products of their respective times, showing how during the Great Depression both Wilder and, especially, Lane positioned themselves in opposition to FDR's New Deal with their increasingly libertarian politics. In composing these essays, Miller draws from a number of primary and secondary source materials, including letters exchanged between mother and daughter, Lane's letters to friends, Lane's journal, Wilder's farm journalism, and a considerable body of Wilder-Lane scholarship. Admirable here is the depth of Miller's research and a writing style that will engage both an academic audience and Wilder aficionados.

While almost all of the chapters offer something insightful and interesting, perhaps those on authorship, racial politics, and the writings of Rose Wilder Lane stand out as the most significant. After an introductory chapter that gets somewhat bogged down discussing the work of a historian, Miller focuses on the question of the authorship of the Little House

books and the role played by daughter Lane. He positions himself largely in opposition to William Holtz's *The Ghost in the Little House* (1993), which claims Lane should be considered the ghostwriter of the Little House books for the enormity of her contribution. Miller finds support in Caroline Fraser, William Anderson, Rosa Ann Moore, Fred Erisman, Ann Romines, Anita Claire Fellman, Julia Erhardt, and Pamela Smith Hill, each of whom argues in some fashion, as does Miller, for understanding the Wilder-Lane relationship as a collaboration that differed in scope for each book.

The debate presented on the racial politics to be found in Wilder's books, especially *Little House on the Prairie*, is likewise engagingly presented. Miller seeks to clarify how Wilder's racial politics, learned in part from her mother, were nothing too surprising for a white, rural-living woman of her period. He argues that Wilder was open-minded, but reminds readers that in the Ozarks "she could hardly have avoided imbibing some of the frequently crude and unenlightened prejudices of her time and place." As Miller notes with a frontier pun, it seems unfair that critics have "trained their guns at Laura Ingalls Wilder and what they understand to be her retrograde attitudes and beliefs about Native Americans." What is "remarkable," he concludes, "was the degree to which she transcended the standard prejudices and attitudes of the time."

Understanding Rose Wilder Lane, Miller suggests, seems likewise implicated in place, time, and culture. Miller paints Lane as the frustrated author of several notable but not famous novels that included *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Free Land* (1938). He explains how her novels represented an anti-New Deal, right-wing, conservative ideology that emphasized, especially in *Free Land*, that "government was not a solution for people's problems." He traces the tenor of her conservative philosophy found in her creative works through a career-culminating, libertarian tract, *The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle against Authority* (1943). One of the more fascinating aspects

about Lane that Miller discusses is her writing of a failed, largely unknown and unpublished book on the history of Missouri during the same period of time that Thomas Hart Benton painted *A Social History of the State of Missouri*. Miller characterizes these years in the mid-thirties as ones in which Lane solidified her right-wing conservatism. In contrast to Lane's belief in the "rugged individualists," Benton "hoped for a reinvigorated democratic community, helped along by New Deal-type reforms." Ultimately, Benton succeeds in his mural history where Lane fails; a fiction writer by trade, she is ultimately unable to master the approach of a historian.

The debates within Wilder scholarship will continue, but Miller has made a number of reasonable and engaging arguments that will surely garner future consideration. Miller casts Lane as an accomplished writer and editor, and an influential political thinker; however, Lane's work will always be overshadowed by the children's novels largely attributed to her mother despite the daughter's close guidance. Readers will come away from this study with a deeper understanding of Wilder, Lane, their relationship, and how time, place, and culture deeply shaped their writing and many shared philosophies.

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