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## Review of *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*. Edited by Joseph R. Uργο and Merrill Maguire Skaggs

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*Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*. Edited by Joseph R. Urgo and Merrill Maguire Skaggs. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 320 pp. Illustrations, works cited, index. \$61.50.

This compilation of twenty-three essays proves that contemporary scholarship has moved beyond trite debates about Cather's alleged propensity to romanticize violence. Accordingly, the volume's editors have assembled a series of nuanced readings that reconsider Willa Cather's artistic uses of violence as well as her appropriations of various art forms before the backdrop of World War I, modernist aesthetics, Nativism, and 1920s feminism. Approaching their subject through the lenses of biographical, historical, aesthetic, psychoanalytical, and gender criticism, the contributors paint Cather as a sometimes generous, sometimes severe critic of American culture, whose insistence on the inescapability of violence is attended by a heightened awareness of the preciousness of life. Joseph R. Urgo makes this point explicitly in his introduction, arguing that Cather's works embody an "existential terror" and "display the ways in which intimate knowledge of sudden death may enrich our lives."

Part 1 consists of eleven essays that explore the sources and functions of violence in Cather's oeuvre by focusing on representations of war, family life, child abuse, suicide, and the settlement of the West. Among this section's more noteworthy pieces is Richard C. Harris's "Over There from Over Here," which considers Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning World War I novel, *One of Ours*, from the perspectives of both the "authorial" and the "actual audience," concluding that the names of places themselves sufficed to conjure up images of terror in the minds of a postwar readership. In "Violence in Cather's *Picture of the West*," another valuable contribution, Janis P. Stout reads novels such as *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as revisionist histories of the Great Plains and the Southwest that foreground natural violence at the expense of depicting Anglo violence.

And in a revisionist move of her own, Geneva M. Gano challenges perceptions of Cather as a “fundamentally nostalgic and nationalist” writer by reading Tom Outland in *The Professor’s House* as an outsider, whose associations with New Mexico and France undermine his putative Americanness.

The eleven essays in part 2 examine the ways in which Cather’s writings have been informed and transformed by her close engagement with the arts—ranging from opera, ballet, and modernist paintings to folk dance, popular art, and works on Christian prophecy and healing. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is Marilee Lindemann’s “Cather’s ‘Elastigirls’: Reckoning with Sex/Gender Violence in Woman Artist Stories.” Taking a cultural studies approach, Lindemann situates Cather’s stories of woman artists in the context of the modernist body cult and “New Woman” feminism, arguing that Cather’s depictions of female artists highlight the possibilities and dangers an early twentieth-century culture of consumption posed to women.

Readers not steeped in Cather’s work and life may easily feel lost amidst the essays’ myriad references to titles, characters, plot lines, and biographical events. The collection’s least successful essays are those that seek to interpret Cather’s writings all too narrowly through her personal biography. Fortunately, most offer rich critical frameworks for understanding the interplay between violence and art in Cather’s works by illuminating the cultural and sociopolitical contexts within which they were produced, received, and acted upon.

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