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## Review of *Willa Cather and Modern Cultures* Edited by Melissa J. Homestead and Guy J. Reynolds

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*Willa Cather and Modern Cultures*. Edited by Melissa J. Homestead and Guy J. Reynolds. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xx + 306 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$40.00 paper.

For Cather, the aphorism “he laughs well who laughs / the last laugh,” which concludes *Falstaff*, a Verdi opera she admired, was a prophecy of sorts. She continues to have the last laugh because of her work’s stubborn refusal to be categorized. After a century of scholarship, she still resists labels as much as she did when alive, as Janis Stout notes in one of the many insightful essays in this latest collection of Cather scholarship. Stout maintains that “we err when, in the effort to define a Catherian aesthetic, we try to place her in one and only one category.” The ninth volume of Cather Studies transcends the usual tendency to classify Cather as modern here and antimodern there, more interestingly highlighting tensions with modernism itself.

For a woman who supposedly despised Freud, was uncomfortable with Cubist art, refused to ride in a car, and called the modern novel a “menace to human culture,” the label “modernist” seems an awkward fit at best. Discussions of her modernism have typically been confined to her stylistic experimentation, as in the narrative play of *My Ántonia* or the inset story that disrupts *The Professor’s House*. *Willa Cather and Modern Cultures*, however, emerges from the premise that modernism is not confined to stylistic innovation. The collection instead turns its focus to the modern content of Cather’s works, whether railroads, urban settings, women in the workplace, or visual and musical art. A host of original, refined topics raise tensions at the heart of Cather’s aesthetic, beginning with John Swift’s fascinating parallels between Cather and Zane Grey, and concluding with John Flannigan’s intriguing contextualization of Cather’s praise for Verdi’s much-maligned *Falstaff*. Such contributors reveal a gentler Cather who, for all her unapologetic outspokenness, was not above laughing at herself.

If any fault can be found with the volume, it is only that it leaves the reader wanting more, as the heft of its literary criticism rests on *The*

*Song of the Lark* and *The Professor’s House*. Moving from the West to Chicago, however, provides some material of particular interest to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly*. For instance, Sarah Clere contrasts modernist attitudes toward Indians of the Southwest and the Great Plains, arguing that Thea’s “Indian play” reflects a broader impulse to recover domestic peace in the face of modernist anxiety. Kelsey Squire posits Cather as a “modern regionalist” (an apparently oxymoronic term, the definition of which Squire complicates) through her complex treatment of place.

Cather eventually pronounced that “Art is too terribly human to be very ‘great.’” This collection leaves one musing, perhaps, that the very humanness of Cather’s art—its ability to encompass tradition and innovation, the grotesque and the sublime, snobbishness and down-to-earthness—is what lends it such greatness. Perhaps it is this humanness that makes Cather an enduring literary and cultural icon, one who, now and then, even lets some scholars in on the joke.

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