



Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“The heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death.” –O’ Pioneers!

IN 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that a seemingly endless Western frontier and a plentiful supply of land for immigrants to settle had shaped the democratic and innovative American character. A mélange of European institutions and cultural mores had broken the bonds of custom and created unique, self-reliant communities. But by the 1890s, Turner argued, this advancing line of settlement had closed, thus ending a crucial epoch in America’s short history.

As the United States started to transition from a primarily rural society into a mechanized, industrialized, and urban one, the existence of “free” land no longer provided a safety valve for immigrants or urban workers seeking new beginnings. Many writers responded to what they saw as the newly alienated individual by creating stories that idealized America’s frontier past and the opportunities this life had provided. One such writer was Willa Cather, an American novelist renowned for her elegant, plainspoken novels—*O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (1927), among others—that often portrayed strong, courageous, and even visionary female pioneers who struggled to build lives for themselves and their families on the Midwestern plains. Cather’s contemporaries heralded her as a new kind of writer, one who responded to the American experience with a distinctly new voice and who captured, from firsthand experience, the settling of the West and the vast power of the land.

In the 1880s, more than one million people, most of them European immigrants but many from the thickly settled eastern states, moved to America’s Midwestern plains. Cather, born in 1873 on her grandmother’s sheep farm in Virginia, moved to Nebraska, then considered the frontier, in 1883 with her family. This environment—the homesteads populated by sod houses; the vast expanses of sky and the windswept, empty prairies; and the mixing of

various cultures and Bohemian and Scandinavian families—inspired Cather’s novels and short stories. Although Cather lived for much of her later life in New York City (where she lived with her companion, Edith Lewis) and never returned to live in the West for any extended period, the prairie landscape—its hardships, challenges, mystical qualities, and opportunities—produced some of Cather’s, and American literature’s, most enduring fiction.

Selected Major Works

O Pioneers! (1913)

In a 1921 interview for *Bookman* magazine, Willa Cather said, “I decided not to ‘write’ at all,—simply to give myself up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory people and places I’d forgotten.” Although written, in part, when Cather was living in New York and Pittsburgh with socialite Isabelle McClung (throughout her life, Cather’s most significant relationships were with women, and she never married), the novel, the first in the Prairie Trilogy (followed by *The Song of the Lark* [1915] and *My Ántonia* [1918]), contains fictionalized memories of Cather’s childhood: the uneasy relationship between the individual and society; the social isolation and loneliness; the promise and perils of the land; and the obstacles faced by immigrant families.

THE STORY: In 1880s Hanover, Nebraska, John Bergson, a Swedish immigrant who has struggled to carve out a home in the unforgiving prairie, leaves the family farm to his intelligent and strong-willed daughter, Alexandra, and entrusts her with the care of her three brothers. Over the next few years, Alexandra, despite drought and depression, devotes her life to keeping the farm. Sixteen years later, Alexandra is a prosperous farmer and landowner, but her

happiness comes at a dear price. Her brother falls tragically in love with the unhappily married Marie Shabata, a Bohemian immigrant, and Alexandra must decide whether to pursue love at the cost of her devotion to the land.

"O Pioneers! is perceived as an example of the American frontier myth. ... [It] is considered much more than a regional tale, as the themes of the novel are ... classic and universal." IN *TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM*, ED. LINDA PAVLOVSKI, VOL. 152, 2004.

My *Ántonia* (1918)

Cather considered *My Ántonia*, the third in the Prairie Trilogy, her best novel, and today it remains a staple of high school and college curricula. Cather incorporated many biographical elements into the story—she based the protagonist on a childhood Nebraska friend as well as the more tomboyish aspects of herself. Set in Nebraska in the late 19th century, the novel celebrates the possibilities of the prairie and the plains as it explores the immigrant pioneers' hardscrabble lives, especially those of women. It is also a coming-of-age tale and immigrant story that portrays America as a mixture of many heritages. The book consists of the memories of Jim Burden, who nostalgically recalls his own farm upbringing, his friendship with *Ántonia* Shimerda, and the influence of her family on his life.

THE STORY: "I first heard of *Ántonia* on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America," recalls Jim Burden. "I was ten years old then; I had lost both my father and mother within a year, and my Virginia relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska." Writing a loose memoir of his youth, Jim views *Ántonia* Shimerda, a free-spirited Bohemian immigrant whose family also settles in Black Hawk, Nebraska, through romantic eyes. Jim, who soon befriends her, relates her struggles and triumphs. The five "books" of the novel correspond to the stages of *Ántonia's* life—from Jim's family's initial aid to the Shimerdas through her marriage and motherhood—as she pursues her quest for happiness.

"I find it significant that Cather's Nebraska masterpiece has such a friendship at the heart of it, a remarkable friendship between a man and a woman of different cultures and classes, a childhood affection that helps the adult *Ántonia* and Jim reconcile themselves to Nebraska, to the past, and to life itself." KATHLEEN NORRIS, PBS.ORG, 9/7/2005.

One of Ours (1922)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

One of Ours, an award-winning classic written about the Great War, diverges from Cather's Nebraska novels but is no less evocative of a young adult—a grandchild of the original pioneers—coming of age on a "frontier." This frontier, however, is not that of America but that of the Western front during World War I, where a young Midwestern man

seeks to escape a conventional, unfulfilling life. Cather's visit to France in 1920 to visit the grave of her first cousin, who died in the war, inspired the novel. Like Cather's prairie books, it laments the passing of a more innocent age. Despite general acclaim, it garnered some criticism for its sentimentality and allegedly whimsical depiction of war.

THE STORY: Around the turn of the 20th century, Nebraska native Claude Wheeler, the romantic and idealistic son of a successful Midwestern farmer and a religious mother, struggles to find his place in life. At the University of Nebraska, he is exposed to arts and culture, but he reluctantly leaves school to help his father operate the expanded family farm. His marriage to a childhood friend further disappoints him. When the United States enters World War I, Claude, once again trying to find a "splendid" purpose in life, enlists in the army. On the battlefields of 1918 France, he finds the meaning he has been searching for—even in death.

"Like Conrad, whose modernist fictions generate more questions than answers, Cather demonstrates that the 'truth' about war is more elusive than we think, its motivations and satisfactions more deeply rooted in the American psyche than we would care to admit. ... In a paradox of the kind that abounds in *One of Ours*, the ugly 'catastrophe' of war inspired some of Cather's most beautiful, if unsettling, art." IN STEPHEN

TROUT, *MEMORIAL FICTIONS: WILLA CATHER AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR*, 2002.

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)

Cather, inspired by an interest in the Episcopalian Church, based this historical novel on the lives of Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy and his vicar Father Joseph Machebeauf, who organized the new Roman Catholic diocese of New Mexico. Set against the United States's acquisition of New Mexico territory and the forced removal of the Navajo Tribe in the 1860s, this tale of struggle, revelation, love, cruelty, triumph, and the role of religion in shaping the American experience remains one of Cather's most beloved works.

THE STORY: In 1851, the gentle French Bishop Jean Marie Latour, dispatched from Rome to revitalize the Catholic Church, travels from Ohio to take charge of a newly established diocese in the recently acquired territory of New Mexico. Father Joseph Vaillant, a well-meaning childhood friend from Europe, assists him in "civilizing" the frontier. Over the next 40 years, they encounter entrenched Spanish-Mexican clergy; convert infidels and make enemies; and experience great adventures and hardships, loneliness and friendship, as they struggle to bring Catholicism to a wild, desolate land. The novel ends with Latour's death—not from illness or catastrophe but "from having lived" a full, rewarding life.

"[S]ome of the most exquisite pages ever written in American fiction." JAMES WOOD, *HOW FICTION WORKS*, 2008 ■