

Willa Cather

NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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For really bad weather I wear knickerbockers *Then really I like the work, grind though it is* In addition to painting the bathroom and doing the house work and trying to write a novel, I have been becoming rather “famous” lately *Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories* As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places *Special Edition* *I have some white canvas shoes with red rubber soles that I got in Boston, and they are fine for rock climbing* When I am old and can't run about the desert anymore, it will always be here in this book for me *Is it possible that it took one man thirty working days to make my corrections?* I think daughters understand and love their mothers so much more as they grow older themselves *The novel will have to be called “Claude”* I tried to get over all that by a long apprenticeship to Henry James and Mrs. Wharton *The Letters* *She is the embodiment of all my feelings about those early emigrants in the prairie country* Requests like yours take a great deal of my time *Everything you packed carried wonderfully—not a wrinkle* Deal in this case as Father would have done *I used to watch out of the front windows, hoping to see Mrs. Anderson coming down the road* And then was the time when things were very hard at home in Red Cloud *My nieces have outlived those things, but I will never outlive them*

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CONTENTS: Favorites from Cather's Letters

- 2** Editors' Note
Editing the Cather Letters
Janis Stout and Andrew Jewell
- 8** Mariel Gere: August 1, 1893
Performing "Spooniness": Cather to Gere on Pound
Marilee Lindemann
- 11** Mariel Gere: August 4, 1896
Beginning Again: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh
Kari Ronning
- 13** Sarah Orne Jewett: December 19 [1908]
Seeking the "Quiet Centre of Life":
Cather Replies to Sarah Orne Jewett
Steven B. Shively
- 16** Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: May 21 [1912]
The Arizona Letters
Ann Moseley
- 18** Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: April 22 [1913]
A World in Miniature
Guy Reynolds
- 20** Ferris Greenslet: March 28, 1915
"On the Spot": Willa Cather's Remarkable
Quotation Marks
John Plotz
- 22** Ferris Greenslet: May 19 [1919]
Heading to Knopf
Robert Thacker
- 24** Mary Virginia Boak Cather: December 6 [1919]
"Becoming Rather 'Famous'"
Matthew Lavin
- 28** Alfred A. Knopf: August 26 [1921]
On the Title for *One of Ours*
Richard C. Harris
- 30** Henry Louis Mencken: February 6 [1922]
In Confidence
David Stouck
- 32** Louise Guerber Burroughs: October 15 [1926]
1926: Blue Eyes on the Platte Enters Gayheartedly
David Porter
- 33** Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Sunday [June 14?, 1931]
Sheltering Shadows
John J. Murphy
- 35** Carrie Miner Sherwood: January 27, 1934
A Picture of a Memory
Susan Naramore Maher
- 37** James Cather: July 12 [1934?]
"Luck and Success Are Very Different Things":
Lessons from the Bank Vault
Charmion Gustke
- 38** József Reményi: October 12 [1934]
The Allure of Newfoundland
Mark Madigan
- 39** Edith Lewis: Sunday 4:30 P.M. [October 5, 1936]
Two Solitudes
Thomas Reese Gallagher
- 41** Roscoe Cather: June 29, 1938
Cather's Family Values
Sarah Clere
- 44** Elsie Cather: May 26, 1939
"Goodbye, Dear House"
James Southwick
- 46** Rose Ackroyd: May 16, 1941
Virginia Memories "Awakened":
The Ackroyd-Cather Letters
Ann Romines
- 48** Meta Schaper Cather: [1942?]
Short Letter, Big Meaning
Melissa Homestead
- 50** Virginia, Margaret, and Elizabeth Cather:
September 10, 1945
"Be a Little Prouder": Willa Cather on the Business World
John Cather Ickis
- 52** Meta Schaper Cather: January 16, 1947
Willa and Meta: Two Friends
Trish Schreiber
- 53** Bibliography



Letter from the Executive Director

Leslie C. Levy

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome Tom Gallagher as the Foundation's new president. I have it on good authority (his family) that Tom has been very excited about the upcoming presidency position for years. And, we are too!

When we read Cather for the first time, we are changed forever, and Tom was no different. According to his sister Pam, Tom's introduction to Willa Cather was in high school in Kearney, Nebraska, when he first read *My Antonia*. I wonder if Tom could have imagined where that first introduction would lead him. A few years after, Tom encouraged Pam—then in her second year of teaching—to read Cather. Pam remembered that she so enjoyed Cather that she would wake at 5:30 a.m. just to read *Shadows on the Rock* before her day began.

Tom brings this long-standing devotion to Cather, coupled with boundless enthusiasm and energy, to the presidency. He is a whirlwind. I have yet to hear him tell someone that he cannot help them with a

project; rather, Tom will gladly assist or even spearhead an endeavor, and fit it nicely into his already congested to-do list. This is nothing new for Tom. Tom has always been a goal-setter and has done the work necessary to achieve his dreams. In fact, Tom received his high school diploma in 1971; his bachelor's degree in 1973 and one year later had finished all of the course work for his master's degree! Today Tom lives in New York City, where he is a consultant specializing in organizational communications.

Anyone who has worked with Tom knows he is a perfectionist by nature. For example, if you admire the elegant design and imagery in this issue and recent issues of the Newsletter & Review, credit goes to Tom's expert creative direction (as implemented and realized by the brilliant Bunny Zaruba).

Over 20 years ago, the mother of a dear Gallagher family friend gave Tom a membership to the Willa Cather Foundation as a gift. All of us are so fortunate that gift has had such a wonderful, sustained impact. (Thanks for this gift are due to Virginia Tingle, a loyal Foundation supporter to this day.) On behalf of the staff, and the Board of Governors, we are looking forward to Tom's term as president and the wonderful influence he will have on all of us!



Letter from the President

Thomas Reese Gallagher

Just under one hundred years ago—on June 28, 1913—Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* was published. This was the second of her two "first" novels, as she famously put it, consigning the earlier *Alexander's Bridge* to apprenticeship. With *O Pioneers!*, however, she achieved an ease and mastery that she likened to "taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding." It was surely not as effortless as all that, and one is inclined just to nod agreeably at Cather's assertion that "there was no arranging or 'inventing'; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right or wrong." But generations of readers have eagerly explored that familiar and somber country; we make return visits as well.

The Willa Cather Foundation will be noting this anniversary with events in our own programming calendar and will also participate with pleasure in other observances, such as the "One Book One Nebraska" program's selection of *O Pioneers!* as their official state book for 2013. With the publication of the long-awaited *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* as well as the new *April Twilights and Other Poems*, we have much to celebrate this year.

Another anniversary: Fifty years ago, the Fall 1963 newsletter of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial noted that a young scholar then affiliated with St. Teresa's College in Minnesota had requested educational slides for use in lectures devoted to Willa Cather. This was the first appearance in these pages of John J. Murphy, whose

continuing service to Cather scholarship and to this organization are of incalculable value. A Foundation board member for nearly thirty years, John has an essay in this special issue dedicated to Cather's letters and is also a co-director of this year's International Willa Cather Seminar in Flagstaff, Arizona.

One of John's new colleagues on the Foundation board, Martha "Max" Despain, wasn't born when he started his career and was just a youngster when he joined the board. (Max's uncanny resemblance to one's *beau ideal* of Thea Kronborg from *The Song of the Lark* was not one of the reasons she was invited to join our board in 2012, but I can't say it didn't come up.) In addition to a love of Cather, Max brings to our organization a remarkable combination of leadership qualities arising from her dual career paths: Air Force Academy grad, Air Force officer, literature PhD., English professor. These paths are intertwined—Max did graduate studies while on her first duty assignment, memorizing "Lycidas" while editing the base newspaper; traveled to Paris for course work while stationed in Turkey; taught in the Department of English and Fine Arts at the Air Force Academy, with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Along both of her paths—two paths, one career—Max has advanced through the normal promotion process.

In April of this year, just a week after participating in a Cather panel at the American Women Writers National Museum in Washington, DC, Max is off to a year's deployment in Kyrgyzstan, where she will be the public affairs officer for the Transit Center at Manas. We wish her well and look forward to her safe return. And I want to hear what it's like to read Cather and see two pictures; the one on the page and the one behind that, of the mountains of Kyrgyzstan.



Editors' Note

This special issue of the *Newsletter & Review* commemorates a special and long-awaited moment in Cather studies: the April 2013 publication by Cather's chosen publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, of a volume of her letters, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. Although thousands of Cather letters are now known to exist in archives all over the world, their publication has been prohibited, until now, by legal restrictions. As everyone who has previously made the considerable effort needed to read some of these letters knows, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* is a cause for celebration. As Jewell and Stout say, Willa Cather was a great writer, and she wrote great letters. These letters expand our understanding of her work and her life; they amuse, delight, inform, move, surprise, and engage readers, revealing new and important dimensions of Cather's life as a writer.

The Willa Cather Foundation has long supported the publication of these letters, and as a part of the Willa Cather Trust, which controls the intellectual property rights to Cather's work, we granted permission for publication of this beautifully edited volume. In their "Acknowledgements," Jewell and Stout thank the Willa Cather Foundation "for the support given to this project and to Cather scholarship

generally. The foundation's work during its nearly sixty years of existence has resulted in a greater understanding and appreciation of Cather."

In this issue, Janis Stout and Andrew Jewell tell the intimate story of their work on this new book and share their personal favorites among the letters they chose for publication. In addition, we have invited a varied group of persons who have been closely familiar with Cather's letters, including Cather family members, scholars, and Foundation representatives, to choose a favorite Cather letter and then to tell us, in a brief essay, why they found that letter particularly revealing and important. We have added photographs of the recipients of Cather's letters, whenever possible, and sometimes of significant people mentioned in letters; have indicated the archives where they are held, and have included occasional headnotes and other explanatory information from the book. Together, the choices and commentary of our twenty-four contributors offer a tantalizing and delicious sampling of Cather's letters. We hope they will whet your appetite for the riches that await us all in this important new book, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*.

—Ann Romines, Issue Editor, and Thomas Reese Gallagher,
Managing Editor

Editing the Cather Letters

Janis Stout and Andrew Jewell

We have worked together on Willa Cather's letters for a long time now—the operative word here being *together*. It has been a very close, very interactive collaboration, to which we have brought all of the professional, scholarly expertise we could muster. But as we thought about this piece for the *Newsletter & Review*, and imagined all sorts of ways to go about it, we each, separately but then together, came to two realizations: we wanted to speak personally on this occasion and we wanted to speak individually, separately, as well as together. So here goes. In accordance with gendered rules of courtesy prevalent in Cather's day, Janis will go first.

JS:

For me, the editing of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* has been both a privilege and a culmination. It is an effort that goes back a long way. Really, it has been three projects in one.

The first project, or first stage, was the biographical study of Willa Cather that I was invited to write for the University Press of Virginia. My earlier, similar book on Katherine Anne Porter had taught me both the necessity and the value of delving into letters. But for Cather, how? Where? At that time it was still being said that most, if not all, of Cather's letters had been destroyed. I knew this wasn't literally true because scholars like James Woodress and Sharon O'Brien cited letters, and their references provided indications of where letters could be found. So I started there. I ordered Xeroxes when libraries would permit and made trips and

transcribed letters (sometimes on computer, sometimes by hand, in pencil, for later computer entry) when I had to, and I followed my nose, sniffing along the trail from one archive to the next. I even sent out a whole batch of letters of inquiry to places I had no real reason to think might have Cather papers, just in case, and some of them actually paid off.

So that was the first stage. The second was of course the *Calendar of Letters*. And for that too I am greatly indebted to colleagues. Shortly before *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* was to come out, I made a presentation to a research seminar at Texas A&M and mentioned that in the course of working on the book I had collected over seventeen hundred letters and had in fact been approached by a press to do an edition of "the complete letters," in multiple volumes if need be, but that because of Cather's own legal restrictions plus the Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, the letters couldn't be published until at least 2018. After the seminar, one of my fellow faculty members in attendance, the well-known philosophy professor John McDermott, stopped by to offer a suggestion: Why didn't I consider doing a calendar of letters? I had to ask, what's that? Graciously, John supplied not only an explanation but, the next day, an example—a copy of his own calendar of the letters of William James.

Stages one and two taught me, in case I had ever doubted it, that none of us in this profession, certainly none of us in Cather studies, works alone. Stage three was to make that fact more fully and experientially real to me than I yet knew, because stage three brought my collaboration with Andrew Jewell.



The Selected Letters of WILLA CATHER

EDITED BY ANDREW JEWELL AND JANIS STOUT



At this point the seemingly extraneous fact of age becomes pertinent. After the publication of *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* by the University of Nebraska Press, I continued to think about, and wish for, publication of the letters themselves. Yet the legal barriers remained no less real and formidable than before. To test them, in fact, I'd had a telephone interaction with Charles Cather in which I requested permission to quote something like five words and he refused. I knew that by 2018, when the letters went into public domain, I was going to be really old, if I was still alive at all, and wouldn't be up to undertaking a massive editing project. But Andy is a lot younger than I am, with lots of years ahead of him. I had interacted with Andy Jewell at Cather seminars and knew his abilities and personal qualities. So I arranged to meet Andy at an ALA conference and offered him my collection—all those seventeen-hundred-plus letters in my computer plus hard copies of many of them—on two conditions: that he would undertake to edit the letters when conditions made that possible and

when he did, he would show me as co-editor even if that meant posthumously. He promised. And with that, stage three began.

I will not go into the changes in the legal environment that made our work possible. What I want to emphasize, instead, is the joy of the work itself. We started with the online calendar, but we knew we were working toward a published volume, and from the beginning I wanted Knopf, Cather's own chosen publisher, to do it. I kept pressing for that, with Andy, even when Knopf's commitment seemed slow in developing. But once it did, it has been unwavering. We were very fortunate in finding Ann Close for our editor there. It was a joyful moment indeed when I signed that contract, and working with Knopf has been a consistently fine experience.

Working with Andy has been even finer. As I look back, I am unable to recall even one instance when either of us became more than maybe the least bit testy with the other. And that's out of several years now of very, very frequent e-mail interactions, including revision of each other's drafts—a kind of interaction that for most scholars is heavily laden with the potential for strife. Andy and I simply always got along, and when we occasionally (rarely) saw matters differently, we were able to work out those differences amicably. We remain friends—better friends now than when we began.

Then there's the joy of the letters themselves. Working first with Porter's and now with Cather's letters has convinced me of the unique value of letters in enriching one's knowledge of a writer. Moving back and forth from one letter to another, exploring them by way of key word searches (an advantage our colleagues of only a few years ago didn't have), reading all the letters to one particular person as a group—none of that eliminates the need to read the works themselves, over and over and learn more and more about them and interpret what we read, but drawing on the letters enables us to form interpretations in a far more richly informed way. The letters have also shown me *so many* facets of Willa Cather, some of them complementary to what her work had already told me, but some of them totally unexpected.

And now I get to join other contributors to this special issue by mentioning some favorite, or most interesting, letters. After living with these thousands of letters for so many years, it is a very hard thing to choose just one or two. They flood in on me by the thousands, clamoring for recognition: the entire Roscoe Cather set, so personal but also so revelatory of Cather the artist; the Dorothy Canfield Fisher set, again, so personal but so literary as well, so illuminating of Canfield's work as well as Cather's; the Zoë Akins set, so lively and once again, so reflective of both professional and personal matters; the ones to Ferris Greenslet and R. L. Scaife at Houghton Mifflin about the Benda illustrations to *My Antonia*. How to choose?





Zoë Akins, 1921

One letter that always comes back to me as a prime candidate for the designation “favorite,” because of how it reflects how the personal and the professional, the serious and the humorous, are intertwined in these letters, is one to Zoë Akins. It’s at the Huntington Library:

September 7 [probably 1924]
Whale Cove Cottage, Grand Manan Island

Dear Zoë

I started to write you a birch bark letter, kid-fashion, but my pen is too stiff for it. We’ve had every kind of weather but heat; sun and and [sic] wind and splendid stunning fogs, and the tempest that beat the “Arabic” up so heavy carried our whole island out to sea. I’ve enjoyed every day of it and have been working hard and with great zest. Also walking lots, and cruising round among lighthouse and bell-buoys. Miss Lewis and I have a lovely little cottage all to ourselves—the house at which we eat not far away. I have literally lived in the tan-colored hunters suit you gave me two years ago, as it sheds the water from grass and trunk better than anything else I have. For really bad weather I wear knickerbockers. There are no roads or very few—mostly trails through the woods and along the cliffs.

Love and greetings to you, dear Zoë, and I’ll have a few interesting things to show you when I get back about October 15.

Devotedly
W.S.C.

And then, would you believe it, there’s the actual piece of birch bark:

Dear Zoë:

Here I am in wild woods and wild weather. I’ve been working awfully hard on a quite new novel [*The Professor’s House*], and have got nearly half way through the first writing of it. It’s not very sweet or “appealing”—any diabetic patient could take it with safety! But it is, to me, fascinating in form—not intensely satisfying, but I can’t get away from it, and so I’ll have to see it through.

I’ve often thought with delight of the romantic costume with which you honored me that day you came to see me on Bank Street. It is really lovely for you.

This letter, or pair of letters, epitomizes, for me, the combination of humanness with literary seriousness that we so often see in Cather’s letters. For sheer playfulness (albeit of a somewhat insensitive kind) I would have to reach outside our choice for *Selected Letters* to another letter to Zoë, dated December 1 (1940), where Cather professes to adopt a “Red Indian idiom” in writing, “Why you never come in November like you say? Many Menuhins come, four nieces come, Chicago friends come—but no Zoë!” Then the explanation of why she is writing in this stereotyping terse way: her right hand is incapacitated, making the writing of a letter difficult. Difficult, we see, but not impossible, when she was determined. And she was often very determined indeed.

But I must beg space for one more. This reaches back to stage one of my long engagement with Cather’s letters, and it stands out in my memory because it was so utterly unexpected a discovery of so utterly important a letter. In 1998, while visiting the campus of Texas Woman’s University to present an invited lecture, I was given a brief tour of the library. It had never occurred to me to look to TWU for Cather holdings. Yet there before me, nicely laid out on the library table, was a letter from Cather to her mother, dated March 2 (1925?). Cather scholars have long debated whether Cather’s post-adolescent relations with her mother were consistently loving and dutiful or troubled by jealousy and conflict. This letter seems to settle it:

My Dearest Mother;

Now what can I possibly have done to upset you so? I have not written to Bess or Auntie since I came back to New York, nor sent them anything, but a book,—and a very poor one it was. I told you when I was at home that I had sent Auntie my old wadded dressing gown, it was in rags and I thought they could patch it up for her. Oh, yes, I sent Auntie some paper flowers for a valentine,—you always told me to send her such little things, and I haven’t sent her anything for years. Why, Elsie scolded me, and sent her something at Thanksgiving for me and paid for it, she was so ashamed of me.

I haven’t written you since I got back because I knew Douglass was with you and you would not be lonely, and I have been so terribly busy. I wrote Elsie once and thought she would send you the letter.





Mary Virginia Cather, ca. 1920

As for making trouble between you and father, I've certainly not tried to do that. Really, it's very unjust to accuse me of it. You must know, Mother, without my telling you, that all that newspaper publicity about Margie was harder on me than on any of the rest of you, and it was needless. If you hadn't been so foolish about never letting anyone see her, there would have been no "mystery." But that is past and gone. I wasn't angry about it. I thought you had been unwise, and the result of your mistaken judgement made a good deal of ugly talk about me. But I never felt in the least angry toward you, and I took my medicine and kept quiet about it. I wouldn't speak of it now, if you didn't come at me so. How foolish, Mother, for us to quarrel! I can't quarrel, because I have not a particle of hard feeling. I couldn't be angry with you now if I tried. I think one of the consolations of growing older is that one comes to understand one's parents better. I am too much like you in many ways to criticise you; I sometimes get impatient, just as I lose patience with myself, but I have never felt cross toward you, even for a moment, for years and years. I think the last time was about poor Mrs. Garber; and you see now, don't you, that I understood her better than you thought I did, and that though I admired certain things, I was never taken in by her.

Now you and I have been growing closer together for many years, don't let us spoil it. If I have done anything amiss, I am eager to make it right. But if I have done anything, it was through stupidity. I certainly did not go home to make trouble, but because I love you very tenderly

and am happy in your company. Surely, you can't be seriously annoyed at my sending a few old things to the Andrews. Elsie is always telling me that I am not very nice to Auntie.

I had meant to write you today to ask you if you want me to send you a small check for your birthday so that you can send it on to Jack, as Roscoe did. It is my hope that father will let me buy the house as I proposed, and use the money to pay Elsie a salary and let her come home to make the place a bright and happy home for both of you. I believe she would put her whole heart into it, and that you would take more comfort in being there than you ever have before. I know that Retta [Ayres Miner] has been kind, but you can hardly go on living that way.

With my dearest love to you, dear mother
Willa

How greatly these two letters—and of course many others as well—enrich our understanding of Cather the artist and the person, and also our understanding of her works!

AJ:

I can point to a fairly precise moment in my life when I started to become someone who studied Cather seriously. It was the early summer of 2000, I knew I was going to start graduate school at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in the fall, and I was registered to attend the International Willa Cather Seminar in Nebraska City. I decided I'd better know something about Cather before I went to the Seminar, something beyond the handful of novels and stories I had then read, and so I burned through all of Cather's novels and James Woodress's biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. The Woodress biography—combined with all of the conversation and presentations I heard at the Seminar—brought into focus a real and surprising need in the world of Cather scholarship: the need for good access to her letters. It was clear to me from the very beginning that this was the most significant hurdle in Cather studies. Not only were the letters unpublished, no one really even knew how many there were, or where they were. Apparently, Cather had tossed most of her letters into the fire. It was all so frustrating and also vaguely mysterious: why did she forbid the publication of the letters, and why did her decree still control scholarly practice decades after her death? Knowing that I was just getting started in Cather scholarship, I thought, "Well, *there* is a fine project that I hope to see happen one day: an edition Cather's letters. I wonder who will do it?"

I feel so fortunate, so pleased to have been able to work on this edition of Cather's letters. Looking back at that same Seminar, where I clung close to other students and behaved mostly like a scared, wet kitten, I find it remarkable that the one senior scholar I had courage to actually speak to after her plenary was Janis Stout. In so many ways, I have Janis to thank for the opportunity to be a part of this project. We first started working together on the expanded, digital edition of *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* in 2005 or thereabouts, and from the beginning I felt we were a good team. (Well, I did have to learn the art of paraphrasing without directly quoting, but Janis taught that



to me quickly.) And, when, a few years later, Janis sat with me over a glass of wine at the American Literature Association conference in Boston and offered to give her transcriptions to me in exchange for a promise that she be the named co-editor of any edition I might produce, I agreed immediately. What I hoped and believed at the time that we were agreeing to, and what turned out to be precisely what we were agreeing to, was that we would collaborate on an edition of Cather's letters. Though at that time—it was 2008—the ban on publication was very much in force, Janis and I had begun to suspect that the legal situation was on the verge of changing. We were appropriately careful in our conversation in Boston, which was pitched to the unknown future, but I, at least, believed that the time for an edition was coming.

What I will confess next may sound obnoxious to some, but I share it because it is, to me, a crucial moment in my history with this project. I remember feeling, on the plane ride home from Boston, shortly after my conversation with Janis, an entirely pleasant but difficult-to-describe emotion. It was a kind of internal soaring, an ebullient gratefulness. Though we were years away from actually creating a book of Cather's letters, I felt the future stirring on that plane. I knew we were going to make this book, I could almost picture the volume in my head, and I was overwhelmed by having such an opportunity (and still am now, frankly). I still felt like that kid at the Nebraska City seminar who observed the Cather scholars doing the big projects from a distance. But I knew after that Boston conversation with Janis that some part of that distance had been erased. Thank you, Janis. Thank you so much for that conversation, and for all that has come since.

Throughout the five years between the Boston conversation and the publication of the book, I have tried to keep my emotional focus on the profound gratitude I feel for being a part of this book, but I have also thought a lot about responsibility. Our vision from the very beginning was to design a book not just for Cather scholars (though of course we dearly hoped our colleagues would like it), but for readers everywhere. Cather's will removed her letters—and, with them, aspects of her personality and character—from the public eye. For many years, only the very few with resources and wherewithal to read in archives had the chance to experience the pleasure of her letters. This was a very real loss to the reading public. As Leon Edel noted sixty years ago, the ban on publication of the letters “may be regarded, in a very real sense, as a loss to the corpus of her writings, for Miss Cather gave freely of herself in her correspondence, and her letters are touched with the cadence, as with the radiance, of her style; they reflect also, as letters can, the directness and generosity and charm of the personality, its courage and steadfastness.”¹ Such a statement about the power of Cather's letters is even more remarkable when one considers that Edel only knew about a fraction of the letters we have today, and he did not have access to many of the letters Janis and I agree are among the most powerful and revealing of Cather's life, such as those written to her brother Roscoe.

I believe if we have been successful as editors of this book, readers will hardly notice that it has been edited. Instead, they will be overwhelmed by Cather's voice and be carried along by the narrative of her extraordinary life. Our responsibility has been to make a large, scattered group of documents

into a book. We have tried to make good, representative selections from the whole (the volume contains about 19% of the known letters) so people will have a new and enjoyable Willa Cather reading experience. Such a responsibility is daunting, but my confidence in the project has been sustained throughout by one thought: Cather's letters are so damn good that there is hardly anything we could do to screw them up.

One of the strengths of the letters is what Edel called “directness” and what we, in our introduction, called “frankness or self-possession.” That is, Willa Cather is always Willa Cather; she is remarkably and indefatigably herself. That is an incredibly attractive quality in a person. Though Cather did, like any one, have times of self-doubt and pain, at her core she was a confident person who lived her life according to her own standards. For the past several years of my life, I've been in almost daily contact with Cather's personal writings, and I think it is this frank quality of Cather's that has made that contact energizing and sustaining rather than dull and wearisome. In January 1947, in the last months of her life, Cather wrote a letter to E. K. Brown reflecting on some of the extraordinary people she had known: “We learn a great deal from great people,” she wrote, “The mere information doesn't matter much---but they somehow strike out the foolish platitudes that we have been taught to respect devoutly, and give us courage to be honest and free. Free to rely on what we really feel and really love---and that only.” Being immersed in Cather's letters has had something of that effect on me, and I'm sure I won't be the only one.

I want to end by sharing a letter that is one of my personal favorites, a letter that reflects Cather's emotional openness and, I think, offers some language that ought to be considered next to “The Novel D meuble” when discussing Cather's approach to literature. It is also, wonderfully, a letter that mixes up the mundane with the profound, that features sentences of beauty next to the rough grammar of quickly written prose. It is a raw, intimate letter to her brother Roscoe, a little high-flung, but powerfully present:

November 6 [1938]

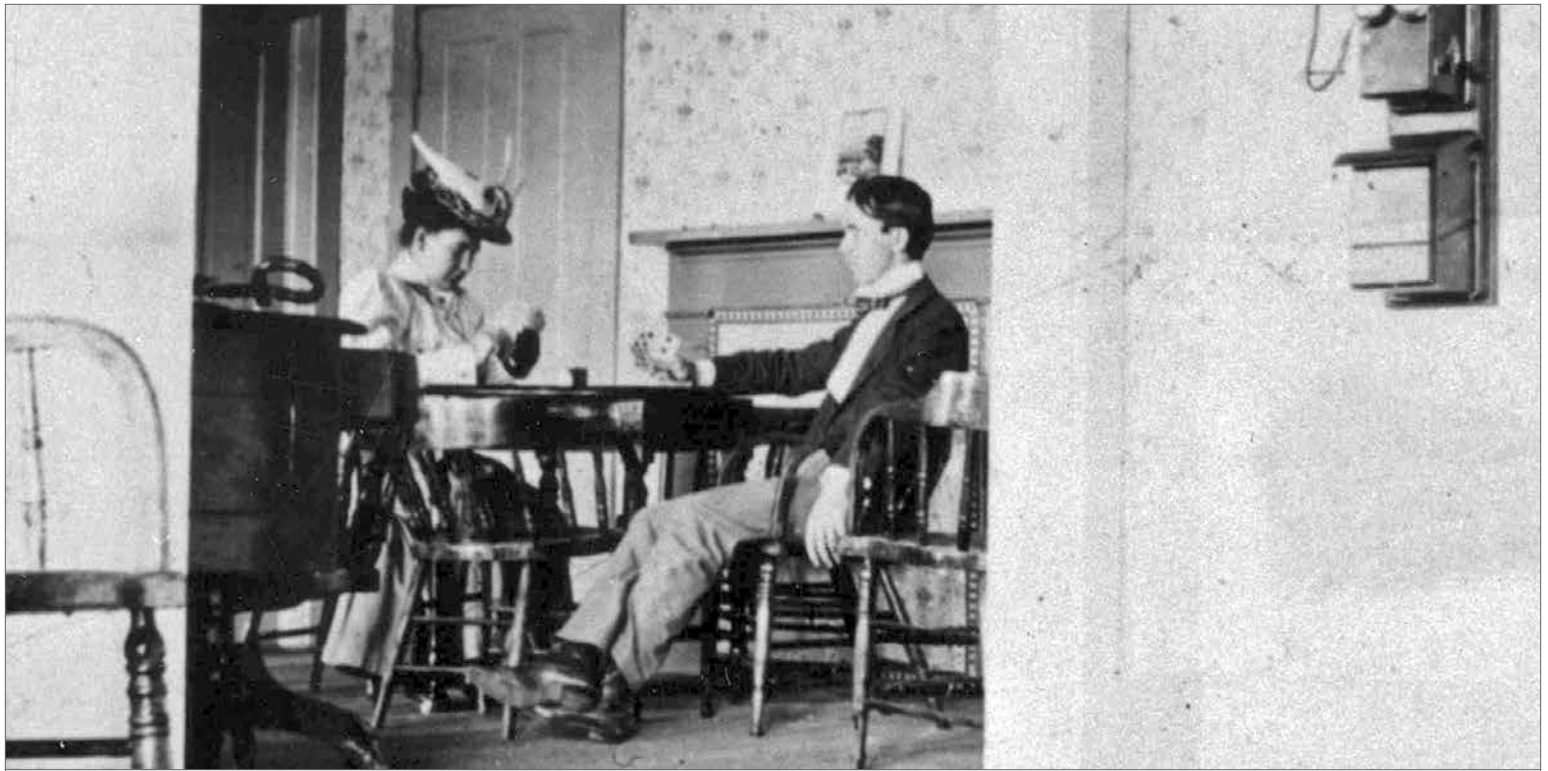
Shattuck Inn, Jaffrey, New Hampshire

My Dear Brother;

How can I help worrying when you let yourself be carved up by a smooth talking insurance man? The surgeon whom I consulted in N.Y. said quietly that your hemorrhages were the result of bad technique or bad judgment, probably both, on the part of your doctor. You would have saved time in the end, and much vitality, if you had gone to the Mayo Clinic where thousands of similar operations have taught the men to guard against possible consequences, and where the surgeons aren't looking for operations but looking toward the long afterwards. I have a hard appendix, but they refused to operate because it would take too much out of my vitality and working power. For the same reason they refused to remove Dorothy Canfield's very disfiguring goitre.

Your one fault, my dear boy, (the only one I know of) is that you have always been too willing to trust people—you think too well of them. It's an engaging fault. I don't mind when it concerns your mind and estate, but for heaven's sake don't let the persuasive talkers practice on your body. You have but one, you know. You are trusting the ability





Willa Cather and Roscoe Cather in Cheyenne, Wyoming, ca. 1905

of your two well-meaning brothers much too far, I think. But that concerns only money losses, it doesn't endanger your life.

I am up here alone at this hotel in the woods where I have done most of my best work and where the proprietors are so kind to me. I finished "Antonia" here, finished "A Lost Lady" and began the "Archbishop". The best part of all the better books was written here. It was Isabelle who first brought me here. You cannot imagine what her death means to me. It came just four months after Douglass' death, before I had got my nerves steady again. No other living person cared as much about my work, through thirty-eight years, as she did. As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end. I feel as if I couldn't go another step. People say I have a "classic style". A few of them know it's the heat under the simple words that counts. I early learned that if you loved your theme enough you could be as mild as a May morning and still make other people care—people in countries who read it in the strangest languages—Hungarian and Roumanian are the latest. Some day you must come and see my whole bookcase full of translations. It's the one thing that simple really caring for an old Margie, an old cat, an old anything. I never cultivated it, from the age of twenty on I did all I could to repress it, and that effort of mind did, after years, give me a fairly good "style"—style being merely the writer, no the person himself; what he was born with and what he has done for himself. Isabelle watched me every step of the way. But the source of supply seems to be getting low. I work a little every day (1½ hrs.) to save my reason, to escape from myself. But the sentences don't come sharp and clear as they used to—the pictures are a little blurred. Perhaps it's fatigue only—I hope so. This book has been twice interrupted by death, and twice by illness. I keep it up not for the book itself, but for the peace it brings me to follow old activities that used

to be so happy—so rapid and so absolutely absorbing.

Goodbye dear. I've not written so long a letter in a long time—except to Isabelle's poor devoted and now desolate husband.

W.

JS and AJ:

This is the place for a unified, collaborative closing word. Instead, we will just leave it to you to decide to what extent our accounts agree or at any rate point to common themes. We do dearly hope our colleagues like the *Selected Letters*.

NOTE

1. Edel, Leon. "Editor's Foreword" in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, by E. K. Brown and completed by Leon Edel. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1953. xxiii. Print.

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TO MARIEL GERE

August 1, 1893

Red Cloud

My Dear Mariel,

I have not written to you before because I have been away. After Louise left I was lonesome and weary of life so I went westward and sojourned some days in the country.

Well, I will begin at the beginning. The day before Louise came I bribed James for the sum of two nickles and a bottle of pop to go out in the country and stay in order that he might not bother the young lady. I was determined that she should not suffer what you girls had endured. James, being greatly in need of funds, went, but I, alas, forgot to specify how long he must remain away, and the very next evening he ran away from Papa and begged a ride of a farmer who was coming to town and dashed in on the newly arrived. They got on much better than I expected, but you know Jim is disposed to be affectionate, and the young lady is not used to children and used to positively blush under his caresses. He made brakes (or is it breaks?) as usual. Imagine my horror when one morning at breakfast he coolly said, "I say, Louise, they've got some mighty nice chocolate drops downtown, suppose you set 'em up to me, Ned did." So she set 'em up. He liked her pretty well, but he struck the same ice that I have been three years getting through. He declares that "Louise is not as good as Ned's little finger." Tell Ned I have a lasting grudge against that little finger, though I am tremendously fond of the rest of her. For me the visit was all too short, just enough to make me feel the need again and then lose her.

I wish you could have been out in the country with Roscoe and myself. When you come down next summer we will drive you all up to Bladen [Nebraska] for we find that the drive can be made in one day though it is somewhat tedious. We will treat you to Bladen ice cream and if you survive that you will be good fellows.

We spent several days at my uncle's [George Cather], who lives in a small colony of Virginians who came out here overland ages ago about the time of the creation. They are a clannish set and hang together. They have the usual country "Literary" on a somewhat better scale than it is usually carried on. My aunt [Frances Smith Cather, or Franc], who is a graduate of Smith's and Mt. Holyoak is at the head of it and surely does her share in distributing manna in the wilderness. Roscoe and I went to one of their meetings and it was really quite endurable, except a great deal of singing by a young lady who could not sing. You see the meeting was at the fair damsel's house, so it was her great and only chance to go on the programme as often as she wished, and she sang twelve times not counting encores. Yes, positively she sang a song or rather warbled after every number on the programme. All the while that file-like voice grated on her mother stood in the doorway gazing on her with fond pride. The twelfth song had a refrain beginning "Pray does this music charm thy heart?" which, considering the universal disgust was a somewhat delicate question. The programmes were all printed in the paper and the fond mother bought fifty papers and sent them to all her friends "back east" to let them know what a talented daughter she possessed. The author under discussion that night was [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, and I think the hayseeds understand transcendentalism about as well as most university students, some of them better. By the way I must tell you about that aunt of mine some time, she is one of the ugliest, smartest, and most eccentric of human kind,—they say I am like her in ugliness and eccentricity.

One of our favorite amusements out there was sitting on top of the fifty foot wind mill tower at night. It was great on calm evenings. We could see for miles and miles, see "right off the edge of the world" as Ross said. The red harvest moon, swollen with plenty, rose over the lagoons and wheat fields, not very clear at first, but fleecy and cloud girt, as though timid of her own richness and fullness. But in an hour or so, when she felt the full zest of her race and the strength of her serenity, she left the vapors behind her. As soon as she was up, the little ponds all over the country began to glimmer, and the corn tassels in all those forests of corn looked white as silver. We could see the windmills and groves of cottonwoods all over the country as plainly as in day light. Moonlight has a peculiar effect on a country; it obliterates what is ugly, softens what is harsh,—and what is beautiful it raises almost to the divine and supernatural.

But the greatest thing we saw from that mill tower was the coming of a storm. The moon did not show herself at all, there was a long black bank of clouds in the west, and the lightening kept playing along it as steady as the fire of a battery. The world seemed to get ready for a storm; the cattle all huddled together in one end of

the corall, the corn leaves got restless and began to toss their long blades up as if to reach for rain. In a moment the big wind struck us, just such a wind as struck Roscoe and the girls out by the brick kiln, and we fifty feet up in the air on a four-foot platform! Roscoe howled, "Off with your skirts, Willie or we'll never get down" you bet I peeled them off, all but a little light one. The descent was something awful, the tower shook and we shook, the wind hummed and sang and whirled all about us, if it had not been for Rosses grip on me I believe I should have fallen. My hands are still blistered from the way I hung to the rounds of the ladder.

Roscoe is out on the farm making hay now. When he comes in he and I are going to have a pull up the river and brave the horror of that accursed island again, "Ora pro nobis!" ["Pray for us!"] Poor Jack has been awfully sick. All the babies around here have been dying and Mamma has been pretty badly scared about him.

The world goes on as usual here. The elephant, Lora, still jumps the fence, "Winning Card" still paces the side walk attended by master and mistress, "Chew Spear Head Plug" still burns before us in letters of living light as a guide to our youth and innocence. We were deprived of cream for some days after you left, using it all to anoint Roscoe's back which was one large blister as a result of an unfortunate swimming expedition. The poor lad lay for two days on his stomach reading Ebar's [Georg Ebers] "Egyptian Princess" in sore travail of back and spirit.

Mother sends her regards and says she was very much pleased to get your letter, but she is too busy with Jaques to answer it at present. Roscoe sends his regards also, and James his "affectionate regards." Neddins is the one Jim singled out upon whom to bestow his worthless and oppressive affections, though he feels that he must show proper regard for Frances because of certain mysteries connected with his beehive bank.

I am afraid I must spend the rest of the summer at home and in the country. I want to get some more air and level, and write a little nonsense. I hope I can get up awhile before school begins, and if convenient I should like very much to spend part of that time with you. Give my love to all your folks, and if you meet a certain blond haired maiden gaze on her tenderly for my sake. I am eager to be back to my work, you see there has been a whole summer of DePue and it has left its mark. But DePue will marry this winter, and you know what that means, it means victory! I have won the ground from under her inch by inch, and that marriage of hers will be my coronation. You see when she is gone I will be first, and I will keep my place, if honor and watchfullness can keep it. Heaven help the Greek and Latin in this year's warfare; you see it is a fight in which so much time must be spent in doing nothing gracefully and patiently.

I am pretty well now, save for sundry bruises received in driving a certain fair maid over the country with one hand, sometimes, indeed, with no hand at all. But she did not seem to mind my method of driving, even when we went off banks and over hay stacks, and as for me—I drive with one hand all night in my sleep.

You can read all of this letter to Ned and Frances except the last part, as I dont wish to corrupt them by spooniness. This is a very silly epistle on the whole, what Louise would call "soulfull," she has broken me of writing this kind but once and awhile old tricks creep out.

Yours
Cather

Original letter held by the Willa Cather Foundation.

Performing "Spooniness": Cather to Gere on Pound

Marilee Lindemann

Scholarship, like nature, abhors a vacuum, which perhaps explains why Cather's letters to and about Louise Pound in the 1890s have played such a crucial role in discussions of the writer's sexuality and gender identity. Because the epistolary record of her later relationships with Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis is so thin, the Pound documents—the six letters to Pound housed at Duke University and several letters to Lincoln friend Mariel Gere in the Willa Cather Foundation Archives that detail the highs and lows of Cather's passionate collegiate attachment—have been the focus of attention and controversy among biographers and critics.

Of those documents, one that has always struck me as singularly important is a lengthy epistle to Gere that Cather wrote in Red Cloud on August 1, 1893. In it, Cather recounts what she has been doing to distract herself from feeling "lonesome and weary of life" after a recent visit from Louise. The letter is fascinating for the glimpses it offers of Cather's relationships with her siblings and the restlessness she felt during the summers of her college years. It also shows Cather writing in different registers about her home area for her Lincoln-raised schoolmate. In describing a visit to a meeting of a country literary group, she mocks the singing of a "fair damsel" whose "file-like voice grated



on” through twelve songs, “not counting encores.” On the other hand, she writes eloquently and affectionately of the natural beauty of the area, especially of the view from a windmill tower at night: “Moonlight has a peculiar effect on a country; it obliterates what is ugly, softens what is harsh,—and what is beautiful it raises almost to the divine and supernatural.” That mixture of ambivalence toward the socio-cultural world of rural Nebraska and appreciation for the beauties of the landscape will be familiar to readers of Cather’s short stories and early novels.

This letter is particularly notable, however, for the frankness with which the writer speaks to a third party of her attraction to another woman. Gere clearly played the role of Cather’s romantic confidante throughout the rocky course of her relationship with Pound. Cather casually refers to the three years she has spent trying to get through Louise’s icy exterior and triumphantly mentions that one of her rivals for Pound’s affections (Minnie DePue) is to be married in the coming winter, which “means victory!” for her. In the letter’s penultimate paragraph, Cather brags to Gere about her exploits with Louise during her visit and their aftermath: “I am pretty well now, save for sundry bruises received in driving a certain fair maid over the country with one hand, sometimes, indeed, with no hand at all. But she did not seem to mind my method of driving, even when we went off banks and over hay stacks, and as for me—I drive with one hand all night in my sleep.” The letter closes with a bit of a swagger, as Cather signs off with a confident, “Yours[,] Cather.”

Cather’s letters to Gere from this period are histrionic and self-absorbed, as records of adolescent romantic thralldom tend to be. Still, the unabashed eroticism of this passage, with its cheeky references to “driving” with no hands or with one hand “all night in my sleep,” is significant because it conveys a conscious and unashamed awareness on Cather’s part of the physical dimension of her desire for Pound, a desire she is eager to display to her trusted friend. Those qualities make this letter unique among Cather documents that have so far come to light. As a broader range of



Louise Pound and Willa Cather

readers finally gains access to Cather’s private voice and exact words, I look forward to learning from what others will see and hear in these brave, anxious, exuberant, and tender performances of same-sex attraction, performances that have been compelling me since I first encountered them during pilgrimages to Red Cloud and Durham in the 1980s.

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Willa Cather on the University of Nebraska campus, ca. 1894



*In the late nineteenth century, “Bohemianism” became a popular catchword for an impoverished, idealistic, unconventional, and artistic way of life following the publication of Henri Murger’s novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* and many subsequent dramatizations, the most famous of which is Puccini’s *La Bohème*. Cather had already distanced herself from Bohemianism in an article in the *Nebraska State Journal* months before writing the following letter: “For the business of an artist’s life is not Bohemianism for or against, but ceaseless and unremitting labor.” The phrase “a desert country by the sea,” which she quotes below, is Shakespeare’s description of Bohemia in *A Winter’s Tale*.*

TO MARIEL GERE

August 4, 1896
Pittsburgh

[Written in the top margin:] Home Monthly, East End, Pittsburgh
My Dear Mariel;

Your letter dated July 10 has just reached me after almost a month’s delay because you forgot to put the sacred words East End on the envelope. This is the tony part of the town and the people who are so happy as to dwell here have to be particularized.

Now I am just back from an excellent rendition of *Fra Diavolo* [opera by Daniel Auber]—went with a little Chicago chap—and I feel the spirit of battle. Tomorrow I will write you a lot of pleasant things, but tonight I am going to scrap with you a bit. Now Mariel, did you ever think I meditated a solid course of Bohemia in all its degrees? If you did you do me rather an injustice. Of course one may think of it at times, but I used to actually think about slapping Tude Pound, yet I certainly never would have done it. Really, I never for a moment seriously contemplated becoming a citizen of that “desert country by the sea.” If I have’nt any regard for myself I have just a little for my family. I may go to New York sometime, but not for the express purpose of going to the bow-wows, and certainly not until I get some money ahead. I can most effectually surprise my friends and pain my enemies by living a most conventional existence, and I intend to do it. As to T. [university classmate Tom] Wing’s words, Heaven how much or how little did I tell you on that night of much morphine and little Morpheus? The less I care about T. Wing and his “words” the better, thats one reason I was so awfully glad to get away from Lincoln. I am going to quit writing to that gentleman pretty soon and then forget all about that conversation. Only yesterday I wrote him that I had never forgiven it and never could. He has one creed and I another. They are creeds that never meet in this world. There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; thats my creed and I’ll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh if need be. Its not an affectation, its my whole self, not that I think I can do anything myself, but the worship of it. That is about all that life has given me: it is enough. I dont ask anything more. I think I get as much good out of it as most people do out of their religions. I love it well enough to be a failure in it myself, well enough to be unhappy. It has felt this way from the time I could like anything, and it only grows stronger as I grow older.

Just now I find it very easy to be “conventional,” I never worked half so hard before. The only form of excitement I indulge in is racing with the electric cars on my bicycle. I may get killed at that, but certainly nothing more. And as to writing, it is not likely that I will treat more delicate subjects than “The Care of Children’s Teeth” for some years to come.

Then really I like the work, grind though it is. I really like it immensely. Its a great boon just to be of some absolute use somewhere, to be at the head of something and have work that you must do. It does away with the tedium of life. Then the town and the river and the hills would compensate for almost anything. And I meet so many different kinds of people. I have met a lot of New York dramatic critics, [popular novelist] Amelia E. Barr paid me a business call last week as she went through Pittsburgh, and I have talked 46 minutes with Rudyard Kipling, which alone was worth coming here for. Then my head is so thumping full of new ideas. I seem for some reason to be able to do better work than ever before. I begin a little serial story “The Count of Crow’s Nest” in the September Monthly which I showed to Harold Dundy one of the mss. readers of the *Cosmopolitan*, and he pronounced it first class stuff, said he could use it and would give me a hundred dollars for it. Of course I was’nt at liberty to sell it as it was needed here. The artist to whom I sent it to be illustrated [Florence Pearl England] also wrote me a charming note about it, though she did’nt know it was mine. Its so



good to be in a country where there is a Caesar to appeal to in these things. Since my work is improving I dont feel that I am wasting time here. O if I can only make it some day and triumph over T. Wing and the rest! I doubt if I ever do anything very good, though. I seem to lack the one thing.

I enjoy the manuscript reading and the proof reading dont bother me as I feared it would. They are very considerate of me at the office, and let me off a day to write whenever I want it. Indeed, I do pretty much as I please, I am rather at the head of things so long as I follow their policy.

I cant tell you how nice Mr. [George] Gerwig has been to me. He is my devoted slave and I can call on him for anything. I have met a lot of charming people and already belong to the “swell” Woman’s Club of the town. That dont look very Bohemian, does it?

Well, I have written you a long tirade about my work. Pretty soon I will get time to tell you about the picnics and boat rides and excursions and things. I have a good deal of that sort of thing and enjoy it immensely.

Please dont forget to thank your mother—or yourself—for those photographs.

In Haste and with much love to all
Willa

P.S. I have a real live stenographer of my own, she is a dandy too. I dictate all my business letters.

W.C.

Original letter held by the Willa Cather Foundation.

Beginning Again: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh

Kari Ronning

Cather said in her 1932 preface to *The Song of the Lark* that “the life of a successful artist . . . is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl ‘fighting her way’ . . . Success is never so interesting as struggle” (617). This letter illuminates the complex of emotions underlying the plain biographical fact of Cather’s move to Pittsburgh.



Mariel Gere; from the 1895 University of Nebraska yearbook, The Sombrero

Here Cather, the magisterial reviewer and columnist, struggles with doubts, her own and others’. Her repeated, sometimes slangy, sometimes light-hearted, defense against accusations of Bohemianism shows how

she cared about the opinions of others even as she tried to stay true to her own artistic creed. What did Mariel Gere think a “Bohemian” Cather was likely to do; does the allusion to the night of “much morphine and little Morpheus” relate to this? Still, Cather admits the temptation of Bohemianism, jokingly comparing it to the temptation to slap Tude (Louise) Pound.

Without this letter we would know nothing of Cather’s arguments with T. Wing, Thomas E. Wing, an 1893 University of Nebraska graduate and a cousin of Edith Lewis, became a Wall Street lawyer and married Cather’s friend, Katherine Weston. He evidently had very different views about art and life than Cather did: the mystery is why she cared, why she couldn’t forgive him—and why she was going to stop writing to him, “pretty soon.” (Wouldn’t we like to have those letters!) Talking of Wing brings out the emotional heart of this letter, her conviction that “There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer.”

Convinced as Cather is of the religion of Art, she doubts her own possibilities: “I doubt if I ever do anything very good, though. I seem to lack the one thing.” Yet that is only one of the moods this letter reveals. Despite her low opinion of the *Home Monthly* and its demands for articles about children’s dental care, she is pleased to be able to tell Mariel of the good reception her story, “The Count of Crow’s Nest,”



Thomas Wing; from the 1897 University of Nebraska Law School yearbook, The Digest



had received from impartial readers. Most of all, she is stimulated by the responsibilities of her job after her aimless post-graduation year, by hills and trees, and especially by all the people she has met, from novelist Amelia E. Barr to Rudyard Kipling. Feeling that her work was improving, she could look forward to someday triumphing over “T. Wing and the rest!” Cather still had a struggle ahead of her when she wrote this letter, but she surely succeeded.

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A gathering of Cather and Geres and Miners; back row, left to right: Hugh Miner, Willa Cather, Margaret Miner, Mary Miner, Roscoe Cather, Douglass Cather; center: Frances Gere, Ellen Gere; front: Mariel Gere, Elsie Cather

one has a right to live and reflect and feel a little

Cather had a brief but significant correspondence with the New England writer Sarah Orne Jewett, whom she met in Boston while working for McClure’s Magazine on its series of articles on Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. In a remarkable letter of December 13, 1908, full of sincere concern and good wishes, Jewett gave Cather important advice that would permanently influence her writing: “your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society, all Bohemia; the city, the country—in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up. Otherwise what might be strength in a writer is only crudeness, and what might be insight is only observation; sentiment falls to sentimentality—you can write about life, but never write life itself. And to write and work on this level, we must live on it—we must at least recognize it and defer to it at every step. We must be ourselves, but we must be our best selves.” Cather’s response follows.

TO SARAH ORNE JEWETT

Saturday, December 19 [1908]

New York City

My Dear, Dear Miss Jewett;

Such a kind and earnest and friendly letter as you sent me! I have read it over many times. I have been in deep perplexity these last few years, and troubles that concern only one’s habits of mind are such personal things that they are hard to talk about. You see I was not made to have to do with affairs—what Mr. McClure calls “men and measures.” If I get on at that kind of work it is by going at it with the sort of energy most people have to exert only on rare occasions. Consequently I live just about as much during the day as a trapeze performer does when he is on the bars—it’s catch the right bar at the right minute, or into the net you go. I feel all the time so dispossessed and bereft of myself. My mind is off doing trapeze work all day long and only comes back to me when it is dog tired and wants to creep into my body and sleep. I really do stand and look at it sometimes and threaten not to take it in at all—I get to hating it so for not being any more good to me. Then reading so much poorly written matter as I have to read has a kind of deadening effect on me somehow. I know that many great and wise people have been able to do that, but I am neither large enough nor wise enough to do it without getting a kind of dread of everything that is made out of words. I feel diluted and weakened by it all the time—relaxed, as if I had lived in a tepid bath until I shrink from either heat or cold.

I have often thought of trying to get three or four months of freedom a year, but you see when the planning of articles is pretty much in one person’s head it is difficult to hand these many little details over to another person. Your mind becomes a card-catalogue of notes that are meaningless except as related to their proper subject. What Mr. McClure wants is to make me into as good an imitation of Miss Tarbell as he can. He wants me to write articles on popular science, so called, (and other things) for half of each week, and attend to the office work in the other half.



That combination would be quite possible—and, I fear perfectly deadening. He wants, above all things, good, clear-cut journalism. The which I do not despise, but I get nothing to breathe out of it and no satisfaction.

Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories, that I am a good executive and I had better let it go at that. I sometimes, indeed I very often think that he is right. If I have been going forward at all in the last five years, [i]t has been progress of the head and not of the hand. At thirty-four [actually, she had just turned thirty-five] one ought to have some sureness in their pen point and some facility in turning out a story. In other matters—things about the office—I can usually do what I set out to do and I can learn by experience, but when it comes to writing I'm a new-born baby every time—always come into it naked and shivery and without any bones. I never learn anything about it at all. I sometimes wonder whether one can possibly be meant to do the thing at which they are more blind and inept and blundering than at anything else in the world.

But the question of work aside, one has a right to live and reflect and feel a little. When I was teaching I did. I learned more or less all the time. But now I have the feeling of standing still except for a certain kind of facility in getting the sort of material Mr. McClure wants. It's stiff mental exercise, but it is about as much food to live by as elaborate mental arithmetic would be.—Of course there are interesting people and interesting things in the day's work, but it's all like going round the world in a railway train and never getting off to see anything closer. I have not a reportorial mind—I can't get things in fleeting glimpses and I can't get any pleasure out of them. And the excitement of it doesn't stimulate me, it only wears me out.

Now the kind of life that makes one feel empty and shallow and superficial, that makes one dread to read and dread to think, can't be good for one, can it? It can't be the kind of life one was meant to live. I do think that kind of excitement does to my brain exactly what I have seen alcohol do to men's. It seems to spread one's very brain cells apart so that they don't touch. Everything leaks out as the power does in a broken circuit.

So whether or not the chief is right about my never doing much writing, I think one's immortal soul is to be considered a little. He thrives on this perpetual debauch, but five years more of it will make me a fat, sour, ill-tempered lady—and fussy, worst of all! And assertive; all people who do feats on the flying trapeze and never think are as cocky as terriers after rats, you know.

I have to lend a hand at home now and then, and a good salary is a good thing. Still, if I stopped working next summer I would have money enough to live very simply for three or four years. That would give me time to pull myself together. I doubt whether I would ever write very much—though that is hard to tell about for sure; since I was fifteen I have not had a patch of leisure six months long. When I was on a newspaper I had one month vacation a year, and when I was teaching I had two. Still, I don't think that my pen would ever travel very fast, even along smooth roads. But I would write a little—“and save the soul besides [from Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*].” It's so foolish to live (which is always trouble enough) and not to save your soul. It's so foolish to lose your real pleasures for the supposed pleasures of the chase—or of the stock exchange. You remember poor [Oliver] Goldsmith [from “The Deserted Village”]

“And as an hare whom horns and hounds pursue,
Pants for the place from which at first she flew”

It is really like that. I do feel like such a rabbit most of the time. I don't mean that I get panic-stricken. I believe I am still called “executive” at the office. But inside I feel like that. Isn't there a new disease, beloved by psychologists, called “split personality”?

Of all these things and many others I long to talk to you. In lieu of so doing I have been reading again this evening [Jewett's story] “Martha's Lady.” I do think it is almost the saddest and loveliest of stories. It humbles and desolates me every time I read it—and somehow makes me willing to begin all over and try to be good; like a whipping used to do when I was little. Perhaps after Christmas I can slip up to Boston for a day. Until then a world of love to you and all the well wishes of this season, an hundred fold warmer and more heartfelt than they are wont to be. I shall think of you and of Mrs. Fields often on Christmas Day.

Devotedly
Willa

[written in the top margin of the last page:] As I pick up the sheets of this letter I am horrified—but I claim indulgence because I have left wide margins.

Original letter held by Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Seeking the “Quiet Centre of Life”: Cather Replies to Sarah Orne Jewett

Steven B. Shively



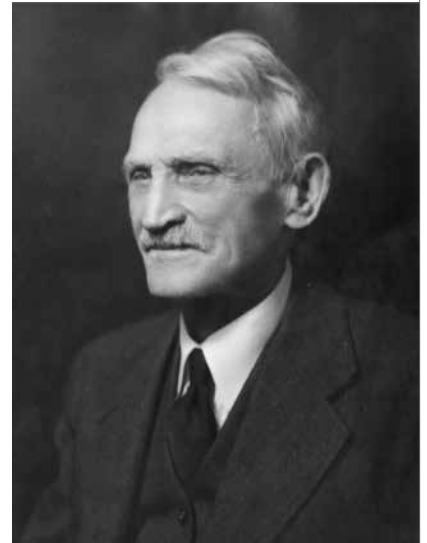
Sarah Orne Jewett, ca. 1894

My favorite Cather letter (at least today) is her letter to Sarah Orne Jewett on 18 December 1908. Cather’s lengthy reply to Jewett’s well-known and influential letter advising Cather to give up her magazine work so that she could write from her “own quiet centre of life” came on the heels of her thirty-fifth birthday (she claims to be thirty-four in the letter) and reflects her concerns with aging and her dissatisfaction with her professional life. The letter is profoundly human in its mix of honesty, anxiety, and humor.

I enjoy Cather’s wonderful images, especially the way she extends them. She lives “as a trapeze performer does when he is on the bar—it’s catch the right bar at the right minute, or into the net you go.” She complains that under the press of editorial work “your mind becomes a card-catalogue of notes. . . .” She makes fresh the potentially trite comparison of writing a story to being born: coming into her task “naked and shivery and without any bones.” Working is like riding a train and never getting off, and it does to her brain what alcohol does to

others. Part of this letter’s charm lies in its wordiness, its repetitiveness, its over-written comparisons, qualities that so rarely appear in Cather’s polished prose. This is not the letter *démeublé*!

Cather is wonderfully direct as she pulls no punches. For *McClure’s* she must read “so much poorly written matter.” McClure himself tells her she’ll never “be able to do much at writing stories.” The intoxicating parts of her job “spread [her] very brain cells apart” so that “everything leaks out as the power does in a broken circuit.” She is living life foolishly. Her openness becomes wryly humorous as she describes McClure living a “perpetual debauch” and her fears she will become “a fat, sour, ill-tempered lady. . . .”



S. S. McClure; photo by Conway Studios, New York, NY

Cather offers few bows to Jewett’s stature, nor does she beg for help. Only near the end is there a hint of subservience in Cather’s praise for Jewett’s story “Martha’s Lady,” and this may simply be good manners. Cather seems sincere in her appreciation and devotion.

Cather reminds herself of two truths that may well nudge all of us to self-contemplation: “one has a right to live and reflect and feel a little” and “It’s so foolish to live . . . and not to save your soul.”

Steven B. Shively is associate professor of English at Utah State University and co-editor of Teaching the Works of Willa Cather and Teaching Cather. He is a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation.



TO ELIZABETH SHEPLEY SERGEANT

May 21 [1912]

Grand Canyon, Arizona

[Written in the top margin above a letterhead illustration of the El Tovar Hotel, at the rim of the Grand Canyon:]

I've been walking with such nice English people here—went down to the Half Way House—an awful pull!

My Dear Elsie:

For the first two weeks nothing happened to me. Then things began to happen so fast that I've had no time to write letters and I wanted to write to you too much to send postcards. I wrote you about the trip with the Priest over to his Indian missions? The[n] came Julio—pronounce Hulio, please—and he came and came, too beautiful to be true and so different from anyone else in the world. He is the handsome one who sings; from Vera Cruz; knows such wonderful Mexican and Spanish songs: But there, if I began on Julio you would have to like me very much to be patient, and I don't wish to put you to any such test as yet. But he is won-der-ful!

Then came three days in the upper Canyons—Clear Creek, Jack's Canyon, and Chevelin. It had all the advantages of a camping trip and yet we got home every night and had hot baths and beds to sleep in. We started every morning at day light, light wagon and light camp outfit, canteens, coffee, bacon, fruit, cream etc. Tooker is a different man in the Hills. All his miserable information, the encrustation of a wash of millions of magazines, drops away, just as a boy drops his clothes when he goes swimming, and there emerged the real Tooker, the man the sheep camps and the hills made, a very decent sort, strong and active and lots of nerve. We did some really good stunts in climbing. Went down one cliff 150 feet by hand-holds, and it was no joke. I have some white canvas shoes with red rubber soles that I got in Boston, and they are fine for rock climbing; you can walk right up a slant of 45 degrees on sandstone or granite. And Tooker told me lots of stories; he's a perfect mine of them when you get through the sediment deposited by magazine articles.

Then came a day in the Painted Desert with Julio. It took several days to get over that; and I have already been five days at the Grand Canyon. It is really the most attractive place I have found in this country. Wonderful walking and riding. The whole place is interesting aside from the "wonder", which, indeed is wonderful enough. Of course a "wonder" that has only a geological history can be interesting for only a limited space of time. But the place is so "let alone". Not one shop, you can't buy an orange, even; Not one amusement. Two hotels—one magnificent and the other excellent—set down in an immense pine forest; these, and silence and the "wonder", nothing else.

I don't know what to tell you about New Mexico. It's all so big and bright and consuming. And it's expensive everywhere. The old Bright Angel Camp house where I am staying is comfortable but very simple. It costs me three dollars a day and is the very cheapest place I have found. Then all the places most worth seeing are off the railway, and you pay about \$2.50 a day for a riding horse and five dollars for a team and open wagon. Then it takes time and strength to find ways and routes. Then you would certainly pick up a Mexican sweetheart—don't laugh scornfully, for you couldn't help it, and he certainly couldn't—and wouldn't; and he would take just as much time and strength as you would give, and he would be so attractive that you wouldn't be tight-fisted, and so it would go.

I have a feeling that about Albuquerque and Old Santa Fe things are closer together, simpler, cheaper, and I'll certainly let you know. I meet my brother in Flagstaff Friday to find some Cliff Dwellers along the Little Colorado. Then I shall be in Winslow a few days, for I have to go to a Mexican dance I've been asked to; and then if I can really sever Julio's strong Egyptian fetters, I am going to Albuquerque with my brother and from there trail about over pretty much all of New Mexico. Write to me at Winslow, please, the faithful Tooker will forward all mail. But will you go to Mexico with me some day? My brother and Julio have told me of such splendid places to go as soon as the fighting is over—buried cities and Aztec ruins and gold mines—perfect Arabian Nights stories. Julio knows one such lovely story about an Aztec Cleopatra, and it is called "The Forty Lovers of the Queen" and I am going to write it when I can go to the place where it happened. There are some very sharply cut figures in it, not at all the type-figures. Prescott has a dim account of it, I remember, but Julio's version is much more alive. He's never read anything but the prayer-book, so he has no stale ideas—not many ideas at all, indeed, but a good many fancies and feelings, and a grace of expression that simply catches you up. It's like hearing a new language spoken, because he speaks so directly. He will drive any number of miles to see flowers or running water, but Cliff Dwellers bore him awfully. "Why," he says raising his brows "do you care for Los Muertos? We are living." For him, as for Mrs. Bell, there are only the quick and the dead; it is fitting to say masses for the dead, but that ends

our business with them; any further attention is a waste of time. It annoys him to be pressed about certain dim details connected with the “forty lovers”. “No me importa. They die so long ago. Pobrecitos! (poor fellows).”

Well, I broke into Julio after all! I was afraid I would, and that’s the real reason I have not written before. Next to “travel” letters, I hate to get letters that rave about the beauty of untutored youths of Latin extraction. People always do one to death with such letters when they go to Italy. But Julio is not soft and sunny. He’s indifferent and opaque and has the long strong upper lip that is so conspicuous in the Aztec sculpture, and somber eyes with lots of old trouble in them, and his skin is the pale, bright yellow of very old gold and old races. I really think I must get him to New York. He’d make an easy living as an artist’s model. They’d fight for him. Pardon!

W.S.C.

Cather used the story Julio shared, “The Forty Lovers of the Queen,” in her 1920 short story “Coming, Aphrodite.”

Original letter held by the J. P. Morgan Library, New York, New York.

The Arizona Letters

Ann Moseley

Willa Cather’s letters to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant from May 1912 through 1914 are crucial to an understanding of the conception and composition of *The Song of the Lark*. The 1913 and 1914 letters focus on Cather’s developing relationship with Olive Fremstad, the Wagnerian opera singer who was the major prototype for Thea Kronborg as diva, and on the actual composition of the book, but an important group of three letters from Winslow, Arizona, and the Grand Canyon shed light on her southwestern sources—on the trip that most critics agree was a pivotal experience in her growth as an artist. The central—and most significant—of these three letters is the one she wrote on May 21 (1912) from the Grand Canyon.

From this canyon’s grand vistas she could look back to gauge the importance of her two weeks visiting her brother Douglass in Winslow, along with his railroad roommate H. L. Tooker, and forward to her visit to Walnut Canyon. In this letter she discusses the sources for at least two important characters in *The Song of the Lark*. In contrast to the portrait of Tooker she had painted in her previous letter as a too “well-informed” and noble admirer of Emerson (April 26, 1912), she now praises his practical knowledge in leading camping trips into nearby canyons and stories he tells about his mining and shepherding jobs: “he’s a perfect mine of them when you get through the sediment deposited by magazine articles.” In *The Song of the Lark* the “aggressive idealist” (640) Ray Kennedy takes Thea and her brothers on a “camping trip” to the Turquoise Hills a few miles from Moonstone (640), during which he relates stories about the Bridal Chamber mine (643), and on an all-day train ride to Denver, in which he describes herding sheep in Wyoming (669). Kennedy, like Tooker, is a soft-hearted gentleman, and it is his life insurance money that gives Thea her chance for success.

The May 21 letter also introduces Julio, with whom she rode over the Little Painted Desert (probably the inspiration for the Turquoise Hills). After attending a dance and being serenaded by him, she describes him on June 15 (1912) as “without beginning and without end.” In her novel, she applies her description of Julio’s skin—“the pale, bright yellow of very old gold and old races”—to both Spanish Johnny and the Ramas cousins. Perhaps the most important elements of this



Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (center) at the American Hospital of Paris, 1918

letter are how Cather’s obvious infatuation with Julio complicates the view of Cather’s sexuality and how her plan to go see “some Cliff Dwellers along the Little Colorado” foreshadows the artistic awakening she apparently experiences in Walnut Canyon between May 23–25, 1912 before bequeathing it to Thea Kronborg in Panther Canyon.

Ann Moseley is a professor emerita of literature and languages at Texas A&M University–Commerce. She is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of The Song of the Lark.



In the opening paragraph of the following letter, Cather is trying to help her friend negotiate with Outlook magazine, which had published an article of Sergeant's in October 1912.

TO ELIZABETH SHEPLEY SERGEANT

April 22 [1913]

My Dear Elsie:

The Outlook people simply say that they do not know when they can publish the second article. I told them that I wanted to know to arrange for book rights, but they replied coldly that they were sorry, but they could give me no date. You should certainly write to whoever said the articles would be published in successive numbers. If this was said in a letter from the Outlook, so much the better. I would not write in wrath, but I would speak firmly. They have not behaved well and they ought to explain their conduct. I know no one on the staff there, so my conversation with them was by telephone from our office. They would be more likely to tell the truth to another publishing house, and the interest of one publishing house always stimulates another. But these people are a dead lot.

I cabled you to send the story along to Harrison because I thought he could get an idea of it even with one page gone, and since the book is to come out early in the fall there would be no chance of his running it except in the summer numbers. I shall write to him at once explaining this, and telling him that I will send a postal note for the postage. That will be simple. I'll be forever grateful to you if you corrected the French. I tried to use the queer sort they speak out there, but I felt that I was unsuccessful, so it will be better to have it simply correct. I wrote it down by ear, so to speak, phrases I heard out there last summer. They are inconsistent—always spell the church "Sainte Anne", the town "Saint Anne." etc.

I feel such a sense of relief that you do like it [*O Pioneers!*]. You put your finger exactly on the weak spot when you say that the skeleton does not stand out enough. The modelling is not bold. But the country itself has no skeleton—no rocks or ridges. It's a fluid black soil that runs through your fingers, composed not by the decay of big vegetation but of the light ashes of grass. It's all soft, and somehow that influences the mood in which one writes of it—and so the very structure of the story. Oh I would like to do one with nice sharp lines, like the mountains you now have behind you! That I would!

Mr. Greenslet rose to the occasion like a gentleman. He was delightfully enthusiastic about the story, and they are rushing it into type without delay. He is very strong for Marie, like the other gentlemen. I believe Frank satisfies me more than any of the people in it. Just now I'm in the trough of the wave about it. Having got it through and arranged for, I can be honest with myself and admit that I really want to do a very different sort of thing. I went up to see Fremstad last week and ever since I've been choked by things unutterable. If one could write all that that battered Swede makes one know, that would be worth while. Lord, but she is like the women on the Divide! The suspicious, defiant, far-seeing pioneer eyes. Yesterday, after she sang Kundry in the Good Friday "Parsifal," I ran into her as she was getting into her motor. I wanted to shout "Pretty good for you, Mrs. Ericson!" But instead I bowed to her charming secretary. Fremstad's eyes were empty glass. She had spent her charge. Hurrah for Mrs. Ericson!

And Oh, Elsie Sergeant, her apartment is just like Alexandra's house! The mixture of "mission" and gold legs, and the chairs! The poor thing's ideas of comfort have never had a chance to develop. I learned from her secretary that she had had some twenty "sets" of furniture sent up before she selected the agonizing objects I saw about me.

Miss McClung has been with me for three weeks. She says please remember her in that land where you now are. I've been thinking of you there with a kind of mournful pleasure. It won't be very long until you come now, will it? That will be good indeed! Thank you for everything: for reading the story and for liking it and for wanting to like it—this last most of all. It gives me great pleasure to please you; but more pleasure to feel that you care about the whole thing,—aside from stories, aside from me or yourself or anybody else. As I've told you, I don't know as many as six people who know or care anything about writing. You've read Mérimée's "Lettres a une Inconnue"? If not, do! I love that dry, proud old chap! I like his pride, and his contemptuousness. Thank you, and thank you.

Goodbye
W.

Original letter held by the J. P. Morgan Library, New York, New York.



One of the particular joys of Cather's letters is their ability to pack a whole range of typical Cather themes and even obsessions into the smallest space, the slightest of formats. Once you've read a number of Cather novels, and added one of the excellent biographies, you can start to read the letters as miniature keys to her imagination. Even on the tiniest piece of ivory, Cather traced a multitude of topics. In a way, her theory of "The Novel D meubl " (1922), the unfurnished novel, owed as much to her experience as a letter-writer as it did to her "proper" writing as a novelist. Letter-writing was a form that trained Cather in getting to the point quickly, compressing, and not wasting time on accumulation of excessive detail.



Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, 1913

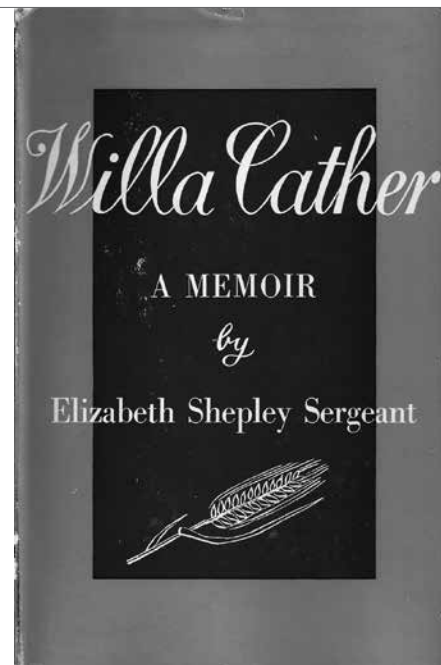
A short letter of April 22 (1913) to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant contains a universe in miniaturized form. Cather tells Sergeant she has not got *Outlook* magazine to commit to a publication date for her article. She asks Sergeant to edit the French in *O Pioneers!* (Cather signed the contract in March, and it was published in June.) A brief comment shows that Sergeant wanted a more shaped structure to the novel (Cather said it wouldn't fit the setting). Then—tellingly—

Cather says she would like to write about the opera singer Olive Fremstad. She mentions seeing Fremstad play the major female role of Kundry in Wagner's *Parsifal*, then signs off with a mention of Isabelle McClung.

The letter touches deftly on issues that shaped Cather's early career. It's a letter about the business of publishing, translation, novelistic form, and about the potential of opera as subject for fiction. Cather is open, but she is also decisive, telling Sergeant—effectively—that she is

wrong about the form of *O Pioneers!* It is also a letter about the circle of friendship around Cather, and shows how decisive the circulation of ideas was to Cather, as she bounced emergent motifs for fiction off her closest friends. Elizabeth Sergeant, Isabelle McClung and Olive Fremstad are all players in this friendship circle. The letter tells us much about where Cather was in early 1913, as an experienced writer conscious of deadlines, fact-checking and editorial process. But it is also expansive and exploratory—Cather had seen that the figure of the diva could become the centerpiece of fiction. From this letter we can trace the genesis of the two great Kitty Ayrshire stories, "Scandal" and "A Gold Slipper," not to mention *The Song of the Lark*.

Guy Reynolds is professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and general editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. He is a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation.



Dust jacket for Sergeant's memoir of Cather, 1953



TO FERRIS GREENSLET

March 28, 1915
New York City

Dear Mr. Greenslet;

I am sending you by far the greater part of the novel. The remainder, which is nearly all done, will not run more than twenty thousand words. I think so well of this book that I had probably better not confide to you my own opinion of it. I will say, however, that I don't believe you publish a story like this every day. I beg you to put it by for a reading until you can take it up with some sense of leisure, for I am hoping that, although you have to read so much, you will have a good time with this manuscript. The manuscript is untidy, but the story is not. I have not had it copied by a stenographer because I did not want to take the time to go over it again and correct the copyist's mistakes, but I apologize for sending you such messy pages.

My old friend Mr. [Burton] Hendrick, who is now with Doubleday, came to see me several weeks ago and told me such attractive things about their book-selling methods that I feel rather wistful. They are getting such astonishing results from even "high-brow" slow sellers---a lot that they took over from McClure's, of which I know the history.

I was well satisfied with the advertising you gave "O Pioneers!," but I think this book ought to be pushed a good deal harder, because I think it has more momentum in it and will go further. I want to sell a good many copies. The next novel will be a New York story, will be long and hard to do. I don't think it will be as fine as this is at its best; certainly not so lyrical. But if I can write it under good conditions it ought to be very interesting. I shall need money and time, and after I once get it under way, I do not want to stop to write articles and short stories to replenish my bank account. I did not expect a large sale for "O Pioneers!," but I think this one ought to go thirty thousand. As to length, it will run something over two hundred thousand words, but not much over, I think; say two hundred and ten thousand. It has been a long job, and I am eager to know what you think of the result. I have never had such a good time with any piece of work before. Goodness knows this ought to be cheerful enough for you, happy ending and all! It seems, as I go over it this last time, better than cheerful to me. It seems to have a lot of the kind of warmth and kindness that can't be made to order, and that you can only get into a story when the places and the people lie near your heart; when you write of things that, under all the thousand things you like or think you like, have the most persistent and unquenchable reality. The death of the noble brakeman was the original germ of the story, I suppose. It happened when I was about thirteen, and I was "on the spot" as the Red Cloud paper used to say. Ever since then this story has been in the back of my head in one form or another. It has gone through many incarnations, but the germ of it, the feeling of it, has never changed. Long before I knew any singers except the kind described in Bowers' studio in Chicago, the heroine was a singer. Unless you had lived all over the West, I don't believe you could possibly know how much of the West this story has in it. I can't work over it so much that I ever blunt the "My country, 'tis of thee" feeling that it always gives me. When I am old and can't run about the desert anymore, it will always be here in this book for me; I'll only have to lift the lid.

Did you ever hear me talk like a travelling salesman about my own works before? I tell you I've got it, this time!

Faithfully
Willa Cather

Original letter held by Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.





Ferris Greenslet

Ferris Greenslet, ca. 1908

This letter opened my eyes to Willa Cather’s remarkable quotation marks. “My country ’tis of thee” and “on the spot” illustrate Cather’s taste in patriotic songs and her love of the journalistic catchphrases of her youth. But those quotation marks also show a Cather who turned talk into tale, song into not-quite-retrievable feeling.

By quoting in this way, Cather creates plausible distance from clichéd lyrics or small-town newspaper headline. Yet Cather is not simply satirizing journalistic cant. These remain her own words—everyday phrases caught like flies in amber and held up for apologetic, slightly amused inspection.

But why caught, and why held up for inspection in just this way? I can think of two answers. “On the spot” illuminates the way Cather likes to spin a phrase until the reader is not quite sure whether to claim it or shove it away. Early in *A Lost Lady* (1923), for instance, Cather notes “the homesteaders and the hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentlemen ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money and to ‘develop our great West’ as they used to tell us.” In Frank Norris, in Zola, even in Balzac, separating out the phrase “develop our great West” would send an easily legible signal: readers beware. Rather than simply resenting what *they* had to tell (or sell) to us, however, Niel Herbert strives to torque the phrase’s significance, to will into being a West that can belong to the silent Blum brothers as much as the rapacious Ivy Peters.

The reference to a “my country ’tis of thee” feeling” heads a different way. In *The Song of the Lark*, music’s power is signaled by the way Thea Kronborg’s responses are occasioned but not ultimately defined by resonant songs. When Spanish Johnny sings “Ultimo Amor,” “Fluvia de Oro,” and “Noches de Algeria,” Thea recollects “a ridge up in the hills called Laramie Plain, where the wagon-trails of the Forty-Niners and the Mormons were still visible. . . . a score; deep furrows, cut in the earth by the heavy wagon wheels, and now grown over with dry, whitish grass.” Later, hearing Dvořák, she recollects the same scene. What music really brings into her mind is memories of prairie traces that the quoted lyrics or titles can only gesture at indirectly: Greenslet knew nothing more about the actual images called into Cather’s mind by that “my country ’tis of thee” feeling” than we do now, gazing back over the decades.

Cather’s “The Novel Dêmeublé” describes the ideal novel as a resonant empty room: its meaning lies in what’s left out. The quotation marks in this letter reiterate the idea. The significance of what they quote lies in the space between the overt meaning of the quoted words and the actual image they call into being for their writer—or their reader. One kind of fiction feigns *really being there*; Cather, instead, likes the idea of putting her readers “on the spot.”

John Plotz is professor of English at Brandeis University. He is the author of Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move (2008) and a regular contributor to Slate.

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TO FERRIS GREENSLET

May 19 [1919]
New York City

Dear Mr. Greenslet;

I have waited to answer your letter because there are several things I want to take up seriously with you, and yet I do not exactly want to risk a talk with you, because you can frequently persuade me against my own judgement.—

While you were away MacMillan's sent for me to see whether I would let them have a Western story to go in a series of American novels they are bringing out. I said, unwisely, that I was not free to do so. During the last few years I have met several propositions from other publishers in the same way. I hate the bother of changes, and business transactions are never a pleasure to me. I have avoided talking to publishers because it made me restless and discontented, and because my relations with you, personally have always been so pleasant, even in business. But this bill for proof corrections has brought things to a head with me. I do not think it a just charge. I kept duplicate proofs, with the corrections, until after your first statement came in; then, as there was no charge entered, I threw them away. I do not think it is the custom of publishers to make these charges in the case of painstaking writers in whom the publisher, so to speak, "believes". I have just seen some of Mr. [Theodore] Dreiser's proofs; his books are practically re-written in proof, and he is never charged a cent for corrections. Do not Houghton Mifflin make this charge as a sort of luxury tax on a carefully written book? I don't mean I doubt that there is some charge from the printer, but it seems that a publisher usually pays this charge for a book he wants and is glad to handle.

MacMillans, whose books are well printed, tell me that the cost of composition on a long novel at the present time, is about \$600.00, and that author's proof corrections cost about a dollar an hour. If my book cost \$500.00 for composition, then by the 20% quoted in the contract, you would give me a hundred dollars' worth of proof corrections without charge, would you not? Add to that the amount you take out of my royalties, and we have author's corrections amounting to \$244.00. Is it possible that it took one man thirty working days to make my corrections? You may tell me that the Riverside compositors charge more per hour, but why, after all, should your authors be charged more than MacMillans'?

Within the last few weeks, three New York publishers have made me definite propositions for my next book, offering better terms than my present publishers make me; in addition to increase in royalties and \$1000.00 to \$1500.00 cash advance on delivery of copy, they offer to give the book and me much better advertising than I have hitherto had. One firm has outlined an advertising scheme which seems to me excellent. They believe that the aim of advertising is not so much to sell one particular book, or to be careful to come out even on one book, as to give the author a certain standing which would insure his future and interest in his future books. Houghton Mifflin's policy may work out well for them as a business policy, but I do not think it works out well for me. I think the recognition of the public and reviewers has outstripped that of my publishers. This has been borne in upon me by a hundred little and big things until it has become a conviction. The publishers have made no use of this growing appreciation, and take no account of any evidence of it except the evidence of sales, which, with work like mine, is not indicative of the real interest.

I want to say a word about reviews. I know it is your theory that reviews do not sell a book. But some publishers do make them sell books. Several men have told me here that they believed the review of "Java Head" [by Joseph Hergesheimer] in the New Republic sold several thousand copies of the book. I know a number of people who bought the book after reading that review,—I did so, at once,—and they are all people who help to make opinion. I believe the New Republic never received copy of my last book, and Mr. [Francis] Hackett protests, not to me but to people to whom he would speak more frankly than to me, that his attention was never called to it by the publishers as being an unusual book. You remember that after writing you twice, asking you to send a copy to the editor of the Globe, I had to take a copy to Mr. [N. P.] Dawson's house myself.

One of the cleverest reviewers in New York telephoned me not long ago to discuss [H. L.] Mencken's review, and remarked that nobody had been afraid to come out and say that this book was unique in American fiction, except the publishers! That is certainly true; glance, if you will, at the jacket on that book; if ever there was a timid, perfunctory endorsement! "We unhesitatingly recommend etc"! No use has been made of the very unusual reviews the book has had. One of the best was lost in a special publication, The Dial; but couldn't the publishers of the book

have got that notice to the part of the public who would be interested? MacMillans thought so, and the same notice was a roast of their book. That excellent appreciation of Brunius, instead of being quoted in some advertisement devoted to the best foreign and American notices of my books, was printed in *The Piper* (!) with the strongest sentences of commendation and such expressions as “a new and great writer” carefully omitted. Now I don’t want Houghton Mifflin to call me a “great writer”, but why are they so shy about quoting anything of that sort when other people say it? If it were from a delicate literary conscience, I would admire the firm for it, but they do not feel this timidity in advertising frankly meretricious work.

I think “Java Head” has been splendidly advertised, with real enthusiasm and fire. You may tell me that it has not done a great deal for the sale of this particular book, but I know it has done a great deal for Hergesheimer.

This brings me to the real point of my dissatisfaction about advertising. My present publishers print my books and give them a formal introduction to the public. At least one of the publishers with whom I have been talking here believes in my books, and he wants my kind of work enough to spend money in pushing it, to lose money for the first year or two in pushing it. You know that has to be done to place an author of any marked originality. You know that even Conrad was a man absolutely recognized but almost unsold until Doubleday, urged by Kipling, took some real interest and pride in selling his books.

I know that you like to publish my books, but I am not assured that the other members of your firm do. If they do not, they will never do more than print them (the books) and let them take care of themselves. You know the real temper of your colleagues. This is not a business letter, but an appeal to you for personal advice, which will be absolutely confidential.

Do Houghton Mifflin want to publish me enough to put some money into my books, and to give my next novel as many inches of advertising as have been given to “Java Head”, for instance. That book is still being advertised, by the way, while *Antonia* was long ago dropped out of Houghton Mifflin’s ads.

Is not the Houghton Mifflin mind and heart entirely fixed upon a different sort of novel?

Frankly, I despair of any future with them. I see they have now on hand eight copies of “*The Song of the Lark*” and four of “*O Pioneers*”. That seems to me indicative of the cautious spirit in which they have always handled my work. They don’t believe they can make much on me, but they will be very careful not to lose much.

Books like mine require a special kind of publicity work. The New York publisher with whom I have talked most will give them that, and he will let me cooperate with his publicity department. I must give him his answer very soon.

I don’t like to have my books come out in two groups, from two publishers; and I suppose if I go to another publisher Houghton Mifflin won’t keep even four copies of any of my books on hand! But as it is, they never take advantage of the fact that every review of *Antonia* was a review of my three novels and discussed them all as things forming a group by themselves. The three books are never advertised together as a presentation of special features of American life, as Knopf advertises all of Hergesheimer’s books, even those that are out of print. I don’t care about the cash advance and that sort of thing, but I know I can work better for a firm that can give me some of its ingenuity and enthusiasm.

Faithfully yours,
Willa Cather

Though Cather’s language above rather vaguely refers to “New York publishers” throughout most of the letter, she was thinking, as she reveals at the end, of Alfred A. Knopf.

Original letter held by Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Heading to Knopf

Robert Thacker

When Willa Cather wrote to Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin, on May 19, 1919, she was exasperated. She had just seen a charge of \$244 for author’s corrections to *My Ántonia* and that fact, in concert with the various issues that had arisen with her publishers during its production and advertising, pushed her over the edge.

There had been the dispute over the arrangements for and placement of the Benda illustrations in *My Ántonia*, certainly, but more than any one incident there was what might well be called “the great fact” that Cather was no longer confident that Houghton Mifflin should continue to be her publisher. She had every confidence in Greenslet

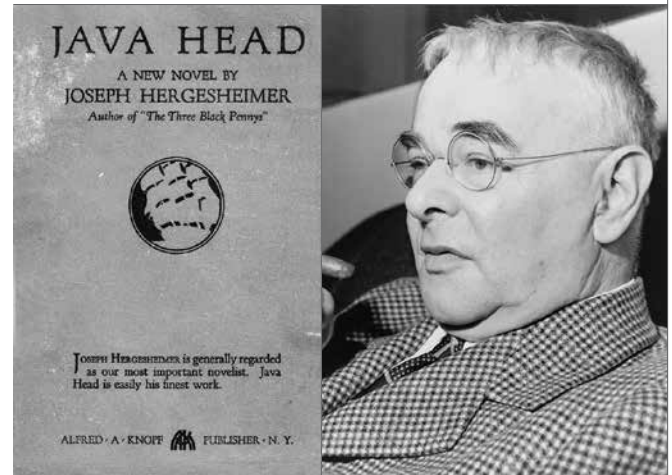




Ferris Greenslet, 1921

as her editor—almost ten years before she had referred to him in a letter to Norman Foerster as “an old and dear friend of mine” (July 20, 1910)—but she knew that his colleagues in Boston did not really share his enthusiasm for her works as a going concern. For some time she had been talking to Alfred A. Knopf in New York and this letter, along with its sharp critique of Houghton Mifflin’s methods, reveals a Cather both succumbing to his blandishments and also citing Knopf’s handling of Joseph Hergesheimer’s *Java Head* (1918) as object contrast. She did not finally decide to move to Knopf until January 1921, but the case she made against Houghton Mifflin in this five-page letter stood, despite Greenslet’s best efforts to refute it. Knopf continued to woo Cather through *Youth and Bright Medusa* (1920) and he published *One of Ours* (1922). That novel, of course, won the Pulitzer Prize.

Apart from Cather’s assessment of Houghton Mifflin, this letter tells us many other things besides. That she did not wish to meet with Greenslet face-to-face confirms both that they did much of their business in person—Greenslet was a frequent visitor to Bank Street—and that his persuasion was such that she feared he might have talked her out of her resolve. It shows Cather an author deeply aware of and attending to every detail of the publication process—advances, setting costs, editors and reviewers, specific instances of each review; it even has her delivering review copies of *My Antonia* herself. Beyond Knopf she claims here to have been talking to Macmillan and other publishers. And just how, one wonders, was Cather able to see some of Theodore Dreiser’s proof sheets and learn that “his books are practically re-written in proof and he is never charged a cent for corrections”? Altogether, this is a remarkable letter that reveals a critical crux.



“I know it has done a great deal for Hergesheimer”: Joseph Hergesheimer and *Java Head*

Robert Thacker is Charles A. Dana Professor of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. He is editor of the new *April Twilights and Other Poems in the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series from Knopf.*

Miss Cather had gone to Atlantic City for a rest

TO MARY VIRGINIA BOAK CATHER

December 6 [1919]

My Dearest Mother;

I know I’ve not written for a long time, but I did not mean to be neglectful. I thought Daddy would tell you about me and about how torn up my apartment was. It has taken so much work to get it even a little in order and the way I want it. You know I have no maid this year, and as Edith is away from eight-thirty in the morning until six-thirty at night, most of the housekeeping falls on me. Father will tell you how we are boarding out for our dinners,



and you know I don't like that. Josephine now gets \$80 a month; any good maid would now cost us \$60 a month, and we would have to send the washing out! With eggs at \$1.00 a dozen, and butter \$1.04 a pound, we simply can't afford to entertain any more, and what a servant would eat would be a very considerable item. Mrs. Winn, that noble widow, of whom father will tell you, comes three half-days a week and keeps us clean, but there are so many, many other things to do, and I have been far from well.

I am ashamed not to have written Elsie, when she wrote me such a nice letter, and sent me Marguerite's letter, too. But I have simply been too tired, Bobby,—the rush of the world has been too hard. But I am coming home this winter, in February or March. I have waited to write until I could tell you that. You see the expense of the trip is something one has to think about, when the cost of living has increased here so enormously, and when I have to go to France in the spring in order to finish my book at all. I expect, Mother, that I have a brother or two who would xxxxxxxxxxxx There, I had a burst of temper at the bottom of the page, but I've cut it out. It seems extravagant for me to go abroad now, but you know, Mother, that I always have known what was necessary for my work, and that I have been right not to take advice or reprimand from any source about that.

I have thought you were doing pleasant things with Douglass, and would not need letters so much as last winter, and I didn't want to write Elsie until I could write her a long letter, and tell her how much I rejoice to hear of Marguerite's [Richardson] interesting life in California. She deserved it, and I'm so glad she has it. Dear Bobbie, I don't see how you did get on when you were teaching and cooking and taking care of Margie [Anderson]. Lord, my child, it's a blessing I DID NOT go home then, for you'd simply have had another Margie on your hands.

In addition to painting the bathroom and doing the house work and trying to write a novel, I have been becoming rather "famous" lately, and that is an added care. In other years, when I was living like a lady, with an impressive French maid, I could have been famous quite conveniently, but then I had only to receive a few high-brows. Now the man in the street seems to have "got onto" me, and it's very inconvenient. The enclosed, on the editorial page of the Tribune, is only one of a dozen articles that have come out in all the New York papers in the last two weeks. People write furious letters to the Sun to ask why their editor has not stated that I am the "greatest living American author"; the Sun editor replies, give him time, maybe he will say that. I have had nothing to do with this little whirlwind of publicity, God knows! My publishers have had nothing to do with it. They are the most astonished people you ever saw. One of them came racing down from Boston to see me, and he kept holding his head and saying, "but why should this book, this one catch on? Anybody would have said it could never be a popular book." You see they advertised it hardly at all, and I didn't urge them. I thought it was a book for the very few. And now they are quite stunned.

I'm like Roscoe when he said, if only his twins had waited till next year to come. This is such an awkward time to be famous; the stage is not set for it. Reporters come running to the house all the time and [keep] finding me doing housework. They demand new photographs, and I have no new clothes and no time to get any. Yesterday, when I was washing dishes at the sink with one of Mother's long gingham aprons tied round my neck—I've never had time to shorten it—I heard a knock at the front door and didn't stir. Then a knock at the kitchen door; such a very dapper young man asked if Miss Cather the Author lived here that I hesitated. He said, "Tell her I'm from the N.Y. Sun, and want to see her on very important business." I told him that Miss Cather had gone to Atlantic City for a rest! I simply couldn't live up to the part, do you see? He left saying there was to be a big article about her on Sunday.

Now, at least, Elsie, you don't have to wash dishes and be famous at the same time. Now, in other years, Josephine and I with our haughty French, thrown lightly back and forth when a visitor was brought in, could have made a great impression on reporters. We made a great impression last winter on the editor of the Chicago [Daily] News [Henry Blackman Sell], who has been my passionate press agent ever since.

By the way, Elsie, you must write the Chicago News for translations of the Swedish review. They are fine. The new Swedish edition of "O Pioneers" is one of the handsomest books I have ever seen. I have ordered several from Stockholm, and when they come I will send Mother one. The Swedish looks so funny to me, Mother; like the Petersons' newspapers I used to bring home from Mr. Cowley's in a flour sack, on horseback. You remember? A very fine French translation is being made of Antonia, some of the chapters have been sent over to me for suggestions, and it is simply beautiful French, clear as Latin. Miss Herbek [probably Šárka B. Hrbková] was here for dinner last week—I got the dinner—to see about getting the rights for translation into Bohemian. You see the tide seems to be coming in for me pretty strong. It won't make me any richer, but it makes me a great deal happier, dear Mother.



We have not been able to have our dear Fridays at home yet, but will begin next week, and on our cards we have written that it is only December and January that we will be at home. That is because I want to go West later,—I mean home, of course. The reason I could not go home for Christmas was that my Publisher came up to Jaffrey to see me and begged me to get as far along with the novel as I could before I broke off, for he is going to England in March, and if he can take about one-half or two thirds of the story in its final shape, he hopes to be able to make good terms for it there. You see Hugh Walpole, author of “The Dark Forest”, is lecturing in this country now, and he talks about my books everywhere he goes, even at dinner parties, “raves” about them the newspaper men tell me, and he says the younger men in England are getting very much stirred up about me. So my publishers think this is the time to try for good contracts in England. I have got about two-thirds of my book written through for the first time; next week I begin to write it through from the first again. Some of it will have to be done over four or five, or even six times, but there is good life and movement through it. I hope I will be at home when it comes out, for it was almost the greatest pleasure I ever had to be at home when Antonia came out, and you and Father were reading it, both of you at once, and I could see how much you really did enjoy it. Yes, I think that was about the most satisfactory experience I ever had. It made me happy the way I used to be when I was a little girl and felt that you were both pleased with me.

I was at home when “The Song of the Lark” came out, too, but you and father were in Lander, and Douglass was at home, and he was cross about the laundry bill and the book, and sore at Mr. Cotting because he put the book in his window. That was an awful time, and I cried every day and was afraid to meet people. And, anyhow, I had paid the laundry bill!

Evening

Why, Mother, your letter has just come, and I had completely forgotten that tomorrow is my birthday! You were so nice to write me. Please thank father for the interest check he sent me.

Mother, I am so sorry, so sorry, to hear about your eye. Do, do, be careful of the other one! Oh, I am sure it's come from reading lying down so much,—and I do just the same thing. Don't do that any more. Don't read much; get Father to read to you. Don't fret about being a care to people. The last two summers I have had at home with you and Father, were among the happiest I ever had in my life. I wouldn't give them up for anything. And I'll always be glad to come and be with you. You ought to believe that, after the good times we had last summer. I will come in February or March to see you, and then I'll come again as soon as I get back from France, and I will always be glad to come. Of course, I almost have to have a place here, and if you have a place you have responsibilities, and must keep up to them, but I will always be glad to go home to be with you, and then Elsie can go away for a change. For didn't we get on nicely last summer, when we had nobody else to help us? It seems to me I can't remember a single unpleasant moment, except when I got cross about Mrs. Bradbrooks pan! You tell her for me, that I'll never forget her pan again.

Dear Mother, I send you such heaps of love. I think daughters understand and love their mothers so much more as they grow older themselves. I find myself loving to do things with you now, just as I did when I was a little girl, and I used to ride up to Aunt Rhuie's on the horse behind you and feel so proud that I had such a handsome young mother. Oh, I don't forget those things! They are all there, deep down in my mind, and the older I grow, the more they come to light. Of course, there was a time when I was “All for books” as Mrs. Grice says, and didn't think much about people. I suppose that had to be; but, thank God, I got over it!

Oh mother, I would do anything if I could help your dear eye! If you'll only be good to the other one I'll come and help you any time.

So lovingly,

Willie

Dear Mother, if you love your daughter, send her some of Margie's dish towels for Christmas, and a WHITE APRON to meet reporters in!

I can't send any presents to anyone this year, but I will try to find something nice for you. I have no time at all, and not nearly strength enough to keep all my engagements. You see, while this little flurry of excitement about my books is on, I must see a great many people, and I must answer their nice letters. I wish, sure enough, that it had waited, like the twins!

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*





Cather's parents, Mary Virginia Cather and Charles Cather, ca. middle 1920s

On the eve of her birthday in 1919, Willa Cather wrote a long letter to her mother Mary Virginia and her sister Elsie. Her most direct purpose seems to be explaining why she had not written in so long. She cites her lack of a maid to do housework, the demands of publicity associated with *My Ántonia*, and her struggles to finish her latest book. In doing so, she appears to allude to disputes that led Cather to change publishers, circa 1920-21. Dwelling on Houghton Mifflin's shock at the popular success of *My Ántonia*, she calls her publishers “the most astonished people you ever saw.” She explains her absence at Christmas by recounting her publisher's coming to Jaffrey, where he “begged me to get as far along with the novel as I could before I

broke off.” (*One of Ours*, of course, was not published for another three years.) Scholars have cited dissatisfaction with publicity and pressure to finish work as two of Cather's motives for changing publishers.

I find myself compelled by the way Cather questions the meaning of her newfound celebrity. “In addition to painting the bathroom and doing the house work and trying to write a novel,” she says, “I have been becoming rather ‘famous’ lately, and that is an added care.” For her, fame appears to be a function of national attention from reporters, global attention measured by translations, and her local celebrity among the townspeople of Red Cloud. She tells of a reporter coming to her house to find “Miss Cather the Author” and mistaking her for a maid. She replied that Miss Cather had gone to Atlantic City, explaining to Elsie, “I simply couldn't live up to the part.” In describing her celebrity status to her family, Cather simultaneously urges them to think of her as a celebrity.



Cather's sister Elsie, ca. 1910s

The idea of Cather trying (and failing) to live up to the part is deeply suggestive to me, and not merely in terms of her public image. Cather indicates tension among her various obligations, including household, family, reputation, and work. “The rush of the world has been too hard,” she says, touching on a topic—exhaustion—that would increasingly recur in her letters to friends and family. The letter conveys both a sense of her public persona and a sense of her letter-writing persona in addressing her mother and sister. She conveys sorrow at neglecting her family but expresses determination to maintain her other commitments. According to the postscript, she had become so absorbed in work that she forgot her birthday. She attempts to reunite seemingly disparate selves by imagining herself as writer in Red Cloud, visiting her childhood home at a moment that coincided with the release of one of her novels.

Matthew Lavin is a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he was a Woodress Visiting Scholar in 2012.



TO ALFRED A. KNOPF

August 26 [1921]

Toronto

[Card attached to top:] It may help you in selection of type to know that the novel will run just about one hundred and fifty thousand words. W.S.C.

Dear Mr. Knopf:

Greetings to you and your lady, and welcome home.

Miss Lewis will see you today, and will deliver a bunch of manuscript to you with explanations. I am hoping that by throwing the first part of the story into type you can manage to get serial publication for it.

I have been able to finish this story much better than I dared to hope. The latter part is now quite as close-knit and as personal as the first part. In other words, I have at last brought it across. I have stayed here and boned away at it all summer, but now it is done.

The press this summer has been extremely good. I hope your people have saved the clippings for you, including the well-placed Nation article.

Now, a sad blow for you. The novel will have to be called “Claude”. I did the best I could by the other title—I lived with it for months,—and I hate it vehemently. It sounds like an Alice Brown title—an evasion, an apology. “Claude” is the only title for this story—any other title would spoil the book for me, and this book is a present I am making to myself. I won’t have it spoiled. Trust me, this story will make its own title. No title could have seemed more unpromising than “Antonia” seemed at first. Scaife said bitterly, “Couldn’t you manage to call it something that people could at least pronounce?” Yet the story has made the title go. This title won’t offend so many people as you think.

1. For low-brows “Claude” is as good a name as any.
2. The high-brows ought to give me the benefit of the doubt.

If Mr. [Joseph] Hergesheimer, for instance, called a story “Myrtle” or “Elaine”, I should of course know he had a reason for doing so. Nobody has objected to “Sir Claude” in “What Maisie Knew”—in fact, it is one of H. James’ most successful names. If he had called the book “Sir Claude”, that would have been nothing against it. It is not a sissy name like “Reggie”—it is clumsily romantic—and that is just what this boy is.

“Claude” is the title, and by that we must sink or swim.

I am leaving for Red Cloud, Nebraska on Tuesday the 30th. I must get to work at once on an article on “Nebraska” the Nation has asked me to do for their Portraits-of-the-States series. On October 29 I will lecture for the Omaha Society of Fine Arts. I hate lecturing, but they made their case very strong, and this lecture opens their season.

Faithfully
Willa Cather

P.S.

1. I have decided to let you use two names (Willa Cather) for me on this novel, and to drop out the “Sibert” for good,—except in signing checks.

2. Since “Claude” is to be the title, perhaps you would like me to name each of the several parts of the story, and thus give variety to the title of right-hand pages. If so, you may use the following:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Book I | Lovely Creek |
| Book II | Old Falsehoods |
| Book III | Sunrise on the Prairie |
| Book IV | The Voyage of the Anchises |
| Book V | “Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On.” |

W.S.C.

Original letter held by the Barbara Dobkin Collection, New York, New York.

The summer of 1921 found Willa Cather comfortably settled in with her new publishing company, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. *Youth and the Bright Medusa* had been published in September 1920, and Alfred Knopf and Cather were already discussing a new edition of *April Twilights*. More important for Cather, however, was the near completion of her new novel, which she constantly referred to as “Claude.” In an August 26, 1921, letter to Knopf, Cather informs him that the story has turned out much better than she had dared to hope, but she also notes that she has some “sad news” for him: “The novel will have to be called ‘Claude.’”



Alfred A. Knopf in Chicago, 1922

I did the best I could by the other title—I lived with it for months,—and I hate it vehemently.” She notes that “My Antonia” had seemed “unpromising” to some, but that title had been fine. She also notes that “for low-brows ‘Claude’ is “as good a name as any,” and that “high-brows ought to give [her] the benefit of the doubt.” Moreover, Henry James had named a character in *What Maisie Knew* “Sir Claude” (he might, in fact, have titled the novel “Sir Claude”), and “Claude,” after all, wasn’t “a sissy name” like “Reggie.” Finally, Cather tells Knopf, “‘Claude’ is the title, and by that we must sink or swim.” Case closed.



“Greetings to you and your lady”: Blanche Knopf and Alfred A. Knopf, 1932; photo by Carl Van Vechten

A week later, on September 1, Cather again wrote to Knopf about the title for the novel. In this letter she mentions having talked with Fanny Butcher, who has convinced her that while “Claude” may be the right title, it would not be a wise title. Cather’s letter to Knopf accepting “One of Ours” as the title suggests several important points about her and her relationship to Knopf. Cather was, obviously, strong-minded and absolutely certain she was right about what to call her new novel. At the same time, however, in the September 1 letter she demonstrates a willingness to listen and to change her mind in the face of advice. She also indicates her respect for the opinions of both Butcher and her new publisher. And finally, in her explanation of why she is “quite satisfied” with “One of Ours,” Cather again reveals another seldom noted aspect of her personality—her sense of humor. “One of Ours” will be fine, she decides, because it has a lot of O’s, it is “euphonious,” it has a mystical quality, and it is easy to pronounce. Fanny Butcher was no doubt pleased, Alfred Knopf was relieved, and Willa Cather had taken a positive first step in what would become a remarkable quarter-century relationship with her new publisher.

Richard C. Harris is John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities at Webb Institute and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. He is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of One of Ours.



By explaining One of Ours to the critic and fellow writer H. L. Mencken, Cather was trying to influence one of the most important reviewers of the book.

TO HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN

February 6 [1922]

Dear Mr. Mencken;

The article in the Sun on "Our National Letters" gave me much joy. That's just it, when we're at all true to facts and existing conditions, when we get away from "Old Chester Tales" and Booth Tarkington platitudes, we seem foreign! I've often had a deep inner toothache of the soul, wondering whether I was unconsciously copying some "foreign" writer. When "O Pioneers" was written, it was a terrible lonesome book; I couldn't find any other that left out our usual story machinery. I wondered then, and still sometimes wonder, whether my mind had got a kink put in it by the four shorter novels of Tolstoi, "Anna Karenina", "The Cossacks", "Ivan Ilyitch", and "The Kreutzer Sonata", which, in paper bindings and indifferent English, fell into my hands when I was fourteen. For about three years I read them all the time, backward and forward; and I used to wonder whether they had so "marked" me that I could not see the American scene as it looked to other Americans----as it, presumably, really was. I tried to get over all that by a long apprenticeship to Henry James and Mrs. Wharton, and to make an entrance in good society (I mean in, not into) in good company, with ["]Alexander's Bridge". "The Bohemian Girl" and the first draft of "O Pioneers", the nucleus from which it was made, were written before that first artificial novel, but I did not even send them, or show them to a publisher. Because their pattern was different, I thought they must be the artificial ones—real only to me, because I had a romantic and lyric attachment for the country about which they were written. I thought Alexander'[s] Bridge the natural and un-exaggerated book, because it used all the conventional machinery in the conventional way, and so, with pride, I published it. This lengthy confession is apropos of your article, but you may put it in your graveyard as handy for an explanatory obituary.

May I ask you to read a copy of the new novel in June or July, an advance copy? It's so very different from the others that I'd like to know what you think of it. I might be hit by a taxi-cab or something before you got round to reading it in the regular course of things. It may be a complete mistake, and you would be a good man to smell out falsity, if it's there, for you are just a little prejudiced against the subject matter, and against the sentiment on which the latter part of it is built---or, rather, the sentiment by which it moves and draws the next breath. If Claude's emotion seems real to you,—scoffer that you are!—if his release makes something expand the least bit behind your ribs or under your larynx; then, I shall know that in spite of the damnable nature of the material I've got to port before the perishable cargo spoiled. Remember: this one boy's feeling is true. This one boy I knew as one can only know one's own blood. I knew the ugliness of his life and the beauty—to him—of his release. He can't help what went over this country, any more than you or I can. His own feeling was fine; and by an utter miracle one so disinherited of hope, so hopelessly at odds with all his life could ever be,---such an one found his kingdom; found conditions, activities, thoughts that made him glad he had lived. You see I absolutely know this; some of him still lives in me, and some of me is buried in France with him.----But the presentation, of course, can make any truth false as Hell, as Mr. Othello said; and the pity of a true knowledge and a true desire is always that it should be so at the mercy [of] the feeble hand,—the hand that very fullness of truth makes unsteady.

But presentation is always a gamble; the road is so rutted with old tracks, we can't go as we would.

Please save this lengthy epistle and read it over when you read the book. I may be guilty of special pleading, but I want to give this boy every chance with you. And if I've done a sickly, sentimental, old-maid job on him, tell me so loudly, like a man, rub it in, pound it down; I'll deserve it and I'll need it for my soul's salvation.

Faithfully yours
Willa Cather

Original letter held by the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland.

Reading her mid-career letter to H. L. Mencken unlocked a way of thinking and writing about Cather that had been stirring in me from the time I first read her fiction. I too had immersed myself in Russian novels in my teens, but assumed when I read about Nebraska's wheat fields and immigrants I was transferring my experiences as a reader to her fiction. I knew Cather greatly admired Tolstoy: in "The Novel D meubl " she identified his writing as supreme for its richness of feeling. But her reference is not to the Russian steppes, but to his old Moscow houses where the material furnishings—the descriptions of clothes, food, and interiors—are always part of the emotions of the people. So my book *Willa Cather's Imagination* makes no references to Russian writers.

But after reading the first revelatory paragraph in this letter to Mencken I was able to explore that connection in detail in "Willa Cather and the Russians." This letter also informed the historical essay I provided for the scholarly edition of *O Pioneers!* Cather refers to her letter as a "confession," but her debt to the Russians, especially Tolstoy and Turgenev, is surely more than "copying," as she puts it, or of influence, but one of affinity in subject matter, style, and moral vision.

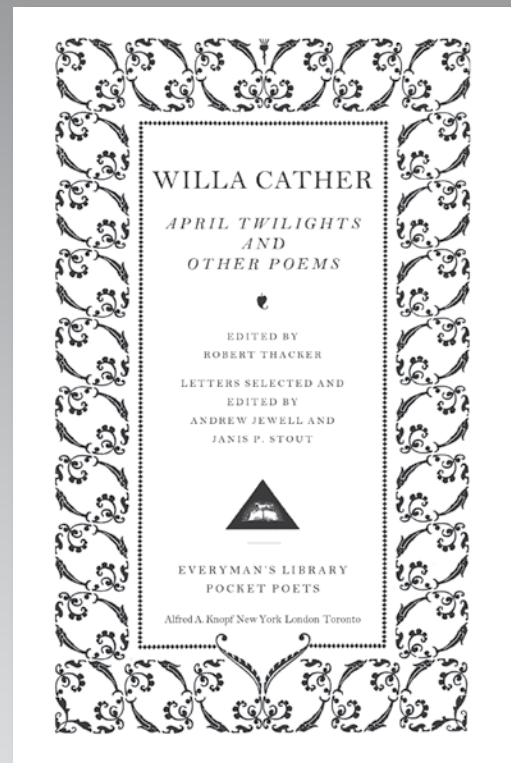


H. L. Mencken, 1917

This letter raises other questions. She tells about her struggle to find her own material and, referring to Tarkington, James and Wharton, describes the writer's path as rutted with old tracks—the "conventional machinery" she used in her first novel. But in what way (she doesn't say) is the "machinery" of her subsequent novels unique? She expresses her fear of falsity and, referring to *One of Ours*, pledges truth to her new hero's emotions. But what does truthfulness in art mean? Does Cather think that strong feeling is enough?

We might ask here about her relationship to Mencken. Seven years Cather's junior, this influential critic had praised her work highly and she had much to gain from his support. But he was a satirist—a "scoffer" as she puts it—and did she not risk derision? Perhaps she felt comfortable with his Republican politics, but what did she think of his sympathy for Germany both during and after the war? He did not like *One of Ours* and publicly stated so, but they remained correspondents. This letter is indeed full of confidences, but is also rich in unanswered questions.

David Stouck is professor emeritus of English at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of O Pioneers! and co-editor of Shadows on the Rock.



Also Newly Available from Alfred A. Knopf

Just published in the Pocket Poets series from Everyman's Library, *April Twilights and Other Poems* brings together all the poems from Cather's 1903 *April Twilights* and her significantly altered 1923 *April Twilights and Other Poems*, as well as uncollected and previously unpublished poems. Edited by Cather Foundation boardmember Robert Thacker, this handsome new volume also includes a selection of the newly published letters.

You can support the Cather Foundation by buying your copy from the Foundation's bookstore.



TO LOUISE GUERBER BURROUGHS

October 15 [1926]

The Shattuck Inn, Jaffrey, New Hampshire

My Dear Louise;

I won't be back in town before November 4th or 5th, probably. I'm flirting a little with a story that's been knocking round in my head for sometime. Title "Blue Eyes on the Platte"—PLATTE, not plate. Rather frivolous and decidedly sentimental, love's-young-dream sort of thing. The natural result of a year of celibacy with the Archbishop. Yes, he's done and gone—at his head a copyreader's smirch, at his feet a stone.

Now how did I prejudice you against Rebecca West? Am I that sort of [person] who manages to give someone a black eye while pretending to praise them?

Oh tell me this name, the Chinese or Japanese name of that wonderful candy Bauer makes, which is butterscotch, chocolate and almond flakes, all in little squares. Almond what? I want to order some. It's lovely here now—everyone gone, weather wild and tragic with brilliant intervals. I have the hotel and the mountain to myself.

Yours
W.S.C.

*Original letter held by Drew University Library,
Special Collections and Archives, Madison, New Jersey.*

1926: Blue Eyes on the Platte Enters Gayheartedly

David Porter

"To approach the stranger is to invite the unexpected, release a new force, or let the genie out of the bottle" writes T. S. Eliot (306), words that capture how I feel when I first meet even a hasty Cather note like this one.

For one thing, it introduces us to Louise Guerber, a young librarian whom Cather had met in Denver just the year before and who would remain a beloved friend throughout Cather's life—a "stranger" whom we scarcely knew until 2005, when a trove of Guerber materials came to Drew University. The note also captures the tone of this friendship

—warm, jaunty, sardonic, word-happy: the unintentional "black-eye" to Rebecca West, Cather's exaggerated ecstasy over the candy, the sudden shift to Jaffrey in mid-October—"weather wild and tragic."

The same qualities color Cather's astonishing mention—in 1926!—of the "story that's been knocking round in my head for sometime. Title 'Blue Eyes on the Platte'—PLATTE, not plate," the story that will in 1935 emerge as *Lucy Gayheart* but which we now learn had been teasing Cather's mind for many years. The self-deprecating irreverence continues as Cather describes this story as "[r]ather frivolous and decidedly sentimental, love's-young-dream sort of thing" and contrasts it with the "year of celibacy with the Archbishop." This reference confirms Edith Lewis's remark that "several years before" beginning *Lucy Gayheart* in 1933, Cather "talked of writing a story of a girl like Lucy. She was going to call it *Blue Eyes on the Platte*" (173-74).

What follows, "Yes, he's done and gone—at his head a copyreader's smirch," deftly brings in Cather's addressee, for Guerber had recently been proofreading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for Cather, and materials at Drew show that it was during this period that the two women became close.

Like so many Cather letters, this one both provides new information and piques new curiosities, raising questions Merrill Maguire Skaggs had begun to ponder in an essay on *Lucy Gayheart* left unfinished at her death. Cather's mention of *Archbishop* alludes



Inscribed photo from Cather to Louise Guerber, 1926

to Guerber's association with this novel; may her mention of "Blue Eyes on the Platte" mask a similar connection? By this time in 1926 Louise Guerber was deeply into a "love's-young-dream" romance with the artist Bryson Burroughs, whom she would marry in 1928 (after a period in which she served as his model). Did Louise, whose gaiety of spirit Cather clearly relished, somehow help catalyze Cather's portrayal of Lucy Gayheart? Did her relationship with an artist thirty-one years her senior similarly feed into that of Lucy and Clement Sebastian in the novel? Perhaps most intriguing, what was the process of gestation—what Cather termed "the voyage perilous" in an 1896 piece for the *Nebraska State Journal* (*Kingdom of Art* 417)—that led from a "frivolous" and "sentimental" story knocking around in Cather's head in 1926 to one of her darkest works of fiction, a 1935 novel where romantic dreams fall prey to mortal imperfection and to the cruelty of a universe that cares naught for human aspiration?

How many genies await us here!

W.S.C.

Happy New year! I don't use this one for "publicity".
W.S.C.

"I don't use this one for 'publicity': the note that accompanied the photograph on the previous page

David Porter is Tisch Family Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts at Skidmore College and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. He is the author of *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* and editor of the *Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Lucy Gayheart*.

Such a faithful, loving little heart

TO DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

Sunday [June 14?, 1931]
New York City

Dear Dorothy;

I got back a few days ago and go down to Princeton tonight for another of those degrees you are always joking me about. (How avoid 'em is the question? By sailing in May—but I can't sail every year.) Your letter reached me last night and makes me very happy. About this book I have no feeling at all—except the kind of gratitude you feel toward an old fur coat that has kept you warm through a long cold Atlantic crossing. It has been like a little tapestry tent that I could unfold in hotels and sanitariums and strange places and forget the bleakness about me. Quebec always gives me that sense of loyalty, of being faithful to something.

To recapture that feeling, and to get the sense of the North, was all I tried for. Every little detail of the way they lived is from some old book or letter. The search for all those little things helped me to hold my life together. How much it can mean to people who don't know the history of the period at all, I don't know. Jacques is the little nephew [Charles E. Cather?] I love the best. I had him all that beautiful winter before Father died—he was only five (5) then. I stopped in Nebraska to see him for a day last week. He's just the same—remembers everything we did together. "I guess I liked when you used to pull me up the hill on my sled the best of all," he said softly. Such a faithful, loving little heart! Those late afternoon sled-rides were dear to me, too.

I'll be here for about 12 days (business matters) then Grand Manan!

Lovingly
Willa

Original letter held by the University of Vermont, Bailey-Howe Library, Burlington, Vermont.

Sheltering Shadows

John J. Murphy

This June 1931 letter is the last and most important of a remarkable trio of letters—the others dated April 3 (1928) and May 1 (1931)—that Willa Cather wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher revealing the inspiration and essence of *Shadows on the Rock*. After sharing with

Fisher her fondness for her father in the first letter and in the second the almost therapeutic refuge effect provided by writing the novel during her mother's long and debilitating fatal illness, Cather makes her most comprehensive statement in the June letter. She compares





Dorothy Canfield, ca. 1900

the refuge effect to the warmth of an old fur coat and then to the portable shelter of a tapestry tent, one obviously depicting the details she got from the old books and letters that fleshed out her story. She also credits Quebec, the novel's setting, with bestowing on her a sense of commitment.

At the heart of *Shadows*, when Cécile lies sick with a cold in her father's bed, there is a paragraph that could arguably be conceived as the novel's climax, as the epitome of refuge. The tapestry analogy becomes quite evident as Cécile savors the warmth of the bed, observing daylight fade into the firelight glowing on the furniture in the room she has so meticulously preserved according to her mother's domestic instructions. She reflects on the activities going on in the cold wintery town surrounding her refuge, details doubtlessly gleaned not only from old books and letters but from Cather's personal observations as well: "All these things seemed to [Cécile] like layers and layers of shelter, with this one flickering, shadowy room at the core" (183).

The tapestry analogy has further ramifications. We know from Edith Lewis that while working on the novel at the Grosvenor Hotel in New York, Cather bought copies of *The Lady with the Unicorn* (*La dame à la licorne*) tapestries, which she had seen at the Cluny Museum in Paris, and hung them on the wall facing her bed (158).

This explains Cécile's fascination with the tapestries on the walls of Count Frontenac's residence representing garden scenes: "One could study them for hours without seeing all the flowers and figures" (72). Cristina Giorcelli has perceptively explored the connection between the weaving of such tapestry panels and the structure of *Shadows*. She also observes correspondences between the novel and the Cluny tapestries in content and theme: historical and fictional characters are surrounded by a profusion of flowers, fruits, trees, and animals; and emphasis on the renunciation of worldly pleasures is depicted in the sixth tapestry panel, *À mon seul désir*, which is climaxed in Cather's novel in the story of Jeanne Le Ber.

For understanding *Shadows*, these three letters, especially this June one, certainly deserve consideration equal to that given Cather's famous October 1931 letter to Wilbur Cross, in which she comments on Quebec's "narrow but definite" culture as "an old song incomplete but uncorrupted" and her novel as its "sympathetic musical setting" (*Willa Cather on Writing* 15). Taken together, the letters provide the key to the novel's structure, to the father-daughter relationship at its core, to Cather's nephew as the prototype for Jacques, and to the themes of loyalty and refuge. Judging from my own experience as a reader of Cather, I suspect that, to a degree, most of us approach her fiction for the kind of rescue she experienced during the years she researched and wrote *Shadows on the Rock*.



The renunciation of worldly pleasures: the last of the six La dame à la licorne tapestries (detail)

John J. Murphy is professor emeritus at Brigham Young University and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. He is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Death Comes for the Archbishop and co-editor of Shadows on the Rock.

TO CARRIE MINER SHERWOOD

January 27, 1934

My dear Carrie:

Mr. Cyril Clemens, son of Mark Twain, is President of the International Mark Twain Society, to which men of letters in all countries belong. The Society recently held a contest to decide what is the most memorable and representative American novel in the last thirty-five years, the writer of this novel to be awarded a silver medal by the Mark Twain Society. The majority votes were for Antonia, and the medal is waiting for me in St. Louis whenever I have time to go and get it.

Out of a number of reports on Antonia which were sent to the Society, there is one which I think you might like to have (chiefly because it is so well written) to keep in your copy of Antonia. Now, don't show it to the town cats or put it in the paper, or do anything to make [blacked out] and [blacked out] want to scratch my eyes out any worse than they do. Of course, I want you to show it to Mary, and you might show it to Helen Mac. [McNeny] some time, because I know neither of them wants to murder me. I want you to have it because it particularly takes notice of the fact that, though there have been many imitations of Antonia and some of them good, I really was the one who first broke the ground.

Oh yes, there is another reason why I don't want you to show this article about; a lot of our fellow townsmen would go chasing out to look poor Annie [Pavelka] over and would agree as to what a liar I am. You never can get it through peoples heads that a story is made out of an emotion or an excitement, and is not made out of the legs and arms and faces of one's friends or acquaintances. Two Friends, for instance, was not really made out of your father [James L. Miner] and Mr. [William Newman] Richardson; it was made out of an effect they produced on a little girl who used to hang about them. The story, as I told you, is a picture; but it is not the picture of two men, but of a memory. Many things about both men are left out of this sketch because they made no impression on me as a child; other things are exaggerated because they seemed just like that to me then.

As for Antonia, she is really just a figure upon which other things hang. She is the embodiment of all my feelings about those early emigrants in the prairie country. The first thing I heard of when I got to Nebraska at the age of eight was old Mr. Sadalaak's [Francis Sadilek] suicide, which had happened some years before. It made a great impression on me. People never stopped telling the details. I suppose from that time I was destined to write Antonia if I ever wrote anything at all.

Now I don't often write, even to my dearest friends, about my own work, but you just tuck this away where you can read it and when people puzzle you, or come at you and say that I idealize everything and exaggerate everything, you can turn to this letter and comfort yourself. The one and sole reason that my "exaggerations" get across, get across a long way (Antonia has now been translated into eight languages), is that these things were not exaggerations to me. I felt just like that about all those early people. If I had exaggerated my real feeling or stretched it one inch, the whole book would have fallen as flat as a pancake, and would have been a little ridiculous. There is just one thing you cannot fake or counterfeit in this world, my dear Carrie, and that is real feeling, feeling in people who try to govern their hearts with their heads.

I did not start out to write you a long lecture, but some day I might get bumped off by an automobile, and then you'd be glad to have a statement which is just as true as I have the power to make it.

My heart to you always,
Willie

P.S. I had a wonderful afternoon with Irene when she was here, and I am so happy that she and Mr. Weisz are going to escape from this troubled part of the world. Isn't he a good sport?

Original letter held by the Willa Cather Foundation.

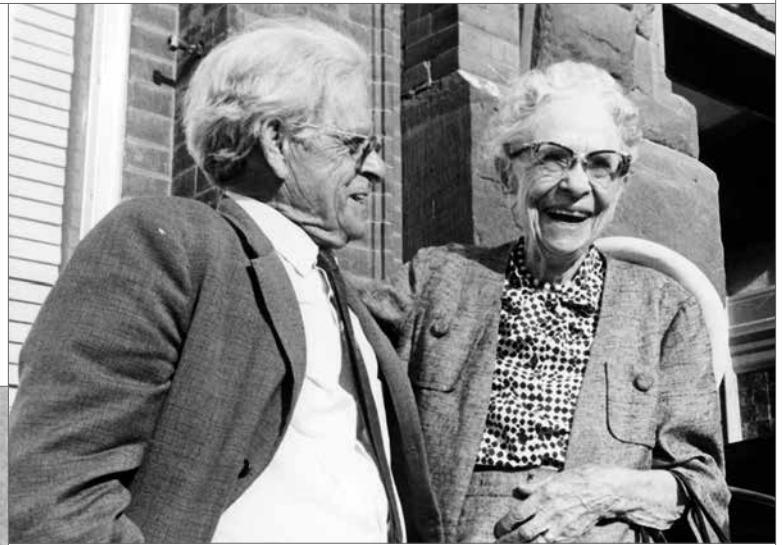


Memory is a trickster entity. A memory can be false; it can be faded, imperfect, or slippery. Memory can trip us up. Who hasn't experienced the embarrassment of having cherished memories challenged, refuted, or laughed at by friends or family? I have had crystalline, sharp memories evaporate under the heat of a sibling's insistent, counter narrative. Who hasn't asked, "is that memory true? Have I remembered things right?" Yet memories are among the few avenues for immortality. We all aspire to "live in memory," to have our mortal beings burn on just a while longer in stored remembrances and family lore. We call memory precious for a reason.



Carrie Miner, ca. 1890

Writing to her dear friend Carrie Miner Sherwood in their "home town" of Red Cloud during the winter of 1934, Willa Cather grapples with memory. As a writer, she understands that memory is foundational to art. Without "an emotion or excitement," she explains to Carrie, without the "effect" of memory, her art would founder



Carrie Miner Sherwood with John G. Neihardt, at the dedication of the "Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Museum" in 1962

under a true literal recreation or an "exaggeration" of known details. *My Ántonia*, honored with a silver medal at an International Mark Twain Society meeting, came to be through memory. Ántonia anchors those memories. In Cather's words, "She is the embodiment of all my feelings about those early emigrants in the prairie country." One senses Cather's deep pride in this enduring story. The feelings and impressions kept alive in her memory guide the structure of "the most memorable and representative American novel in the last thirty-five years." At the same time, she acknowledges her debt to others' memories, to local lore: "People never stopped telling the details."

Cather consciously attempts in this letter to control competing memories and malicious misreadings. She is cognizant of legacy. A car did not bump her off, as she humorously projects. Time did. Cather, all too aware of death's inevitability, wants to leave a record of *My Ántonia's* origins. She trusts her friend Carrie to keep this letter—to keep its inscribed memory—as a defense against her critics, particularly her Red Cloud critics. While Cather presents these local critics comically—those who will scratch out eyes or murder—one senses a serious purpose in her words. The memories that guided her to brilliant narrative are neither "fake" nor "counterfeit." *My Ántonia* endures because its remembered layers preserve the true and the real—at least, like her letter, an expression "just as true as I have the power to make it." Nearly eighty years later, we can verify the instincts of the International Mark Twain Society and sympathize with a great writer attempting to nullify those who can only see "the legs and arms and faces of one's friends or acquaintances." The stirrings of memory under her expert direction found expression and immortality in this great novel.

Susan Naramore Maher is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota–Duluth and past president of the Willa Cather Foundation.

TO JAMES CATHER

July 12 [1934?]

Dear Brother;

I write this note in the Bank Vault where I am finishing up business affairs just before starting for Canada.

One thing I want to tell you, dear boy. If you wrote me tomorrow that you had struck a big paying well, I would be glad on your account but I would not think one bit more of you.

To me, luck and success are very different things. To hold a job and bring up your family is to be successful in these times. Roscoe has not done more than that, and I feel that he is successful. Gold-and-oil-and-stockmarket-success is Luck. It's picturesque and dramatic and sometimes it is fun. But to me the only real success is prosperity that comes from working very hard or skillfully—usually skill and persistence go together.

I'm not preaching, I write this only because you say if you had a success you'd be glad to tell me of it.

Dear boy, in these times to hold a job, keep your health, and bring up your children constitutes success. If your children are any good at all (and they seemed to me lovely children when I saw them last) they would not think a bit more of you if you struck a gusher tomorrow—nor would I.

In California pure Luck is worshipped like a god—don't be fooled by such a transparent sham, and tell Helen Louise and Charles Edwin that if they once begin to judge people by their clothes and cars and luck instead of by just themselves and how kind or useful or helpful they are in the world-----why then I won't love them any more! That threat is half in play; and yet, in a way, I mean it.

God bless you all, and my dearest love to my brother Jim from

Willie

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

“Luck and Success Are Very Different Things”: Lessons from the Bank Vault

Charmion Gustke

Cather's letters to her family are often concerned with financial matters and reveal her keen awareness and loving support of their monetary needs. But Cather's relationship with James is unusual, distant, and seems to lack the deep affection that Cather shares with her brothers Roscoe and Douglass or the nettling worry that marks her letters to Elsie. Focused on lecturing Jim about the dangerous lures of luck, this letter reveals Cather's burden of responsibility as an older sister, an involved aunt and a successful writer. Written in approximately 1934 and composed in the cool seclusion of a New York bank vault, this letter also offers a glimpse into Cather's understanding of the financial crisis plaguing the nation in “these times” after the shock of the stock-market crash in 1929 and in the midst of one of the worst droughts in American history.

The prairie lands experienced little to no rain in the summers of 1931 and 1933, followed by an extremely dry summer in 1934. This continuous drought, felt severely in the Nebraska region, greatly affected the lives and resources of Cather's people back home in Red Cloud. Unemployment reached 21.7% in 1934, and many Americans migrated west to California in search of untapped resources,

agricultural work and investment opportunities. James, drawn by the magic of “a big paying well” and a better life for his family, was part of a California exodus seeking refuge from the harsh realities of American life in the Midwest. Early in the Great Depression, California advertised that the state offered a perfect climate and an abundance of work. But by the mid-1930's, things had changed, as described by Timothy Egan in *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those*



James Cather



Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl. With over 7,000 new migrants a month, billboards were posted on Highway 66 warning those fleeing the Dust Bowl to stay away: “NO JOBS IN CALIFORNIA/IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR WORK — KEEP OUT” (288).

One gets the impression from this letter that Cather was aware of the tensions surrounding California, where “luck is worshipped like a god” and families were suffering under the “transparent sham” of get-rich-quick schemes. With the repetition of “dear boy” Cather affirms her authority and insists that success, as Roscoe has demonstrated in his life, is the “prosperity” that comes from working hard, holding a job, and bringing up your children. She is unimpressed with James’s “picturesque” and “dramatic” pursuits, fearing that Helen Louise and Charles Edwin will begin to “judge people” by clothes, cars and luck, an ethical shortcoming for which Cather will love them no more. This threat is typical Willie—playful, yet serious, always with an eye on the youngsters and their lives as “kind or useful or helpful” citizens in the world.

Cather is never so fiercely protective as she is when she is “preaching” to a family member and this letter to James is no different. While I was immediately drawn to the letter because of its setting in a bank vault, confirming that in many ways Cather was sheltered from the financial woes devastating the rest of the country, I chose it as one of my favorites because of the lesson it teaches us about Cather’s sense of moral duty. “Finishing” her business affairs thus includes a last-minute admonition to her brother with a warning of the trickery of luck’s lure. The urgency of this letter reminds us that Cather is not simply lecturing her “dear boy,” but anxiously fearing for the future of the children in these uncertain times.

Charmion Gustke is instructor of English at Belmont University in Nashville. She was a Woodress Visiting Scholar at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2012.

Requests like yours take a great deal of my time

TO JÓZSEF REMÉNYI

October 12 [1934]

Dear Mr. Remenyi:

I never take the time to write to my secretary—I telegraph her. She has no key to my apartment. She has an office of her own. Therefore I cannot tell her to hunt for a photograph. Requests like yours take a great deal of my time—so much of it that I have to get out of the world, to New Foundland, for example, to get any work done.

I find in my manuscript case a passport photograph taken eight (8) years ago. I have no wish to appear in your book as younger than I am, but this is the only photograph I can lay my hands on at present. You see, my dear sir, if I had allowed my secretary’s first reply to you to stand, I would have saved myself a good deal of trouble!

Very cordially yours
Willa Cather

Original letter held by the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

The Allure of Newfoundland

Mark Madigan

In 1934, Willa Cather wrote three letters to the Hungarian-American literary scholar József Reményi (1892-1956) concerning his request to publish one of her stories in his anthology *Mai Amerikai Dekameron* (*Modern American Fiction*). Reményi was a scholar of distinguished international reputation, who both promulgated American literature in Hungary and broadened knowledge of Hungarian literature in the United States. Born in Pozsony, Hungary, he emigrated to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1914 to work as an editorial writer for the city’s Hungarian-language newspaper. He went on to become a professor of comparative literature at Western Reserve University’s Cleveland College (later Case Western Reserve University).

The first letter, dated October 10 (1934) from Jaffrey, New Hampshire, grants him permission to use either “Paul’s Case” or “The Sculptor’s Funeral” in his anthology. Cather maintains that “Paul’s Case” is “much the better story,” but suggests the shorter story, “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” may be more suitable if length restrictions are an issue. She also addresses his request for a biographical sketch and photograph, saying she will have her secretary attend to the former and she will look for the latter when she returns to New York.

Cather’s second letter, written two days later and transcribed here, deals mainly with the purported difficulty of obtaining a suitable photograph. This is a bravura performance of imperious attitude, a side



of her personality Cather did not publicly reveal. Her claim that she did not wish to appear younger than her actual age by using an eight-year-old passport photograph is ironic considering that she “revised” her birth date in 1920 to cut three years from her age (Woodress 516). Her complaint that requests like Reményi’s took so much of her time that she had to “go out of the world, to New Foundland [sic], for example, to get any work done” is a querulous bit of exaggeration, too. According to biographer James Woodress, “There is no evidence that Cather did any writing during the summer and fall of 1934” (456). Nor is there any evidence that she ever set foot in Newfoundland, although she did spend August of that year vacationing on Grand Manan Island, which is located in the Bay of Fundy in the Canadian province of New Brunswick. Contrasted with the irritated tone of her letter, Cather’s valediction, “very cordially yours,” seems humorous—although Reményi may not have found it so.

Mai Amerikai Dekameron was published by Nyugat-Kiadás in Budapest in early 1935. “Paul’s Case,” translated by Cs. László Szabó, appeared beside the work of Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos,

William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. Cather’s passport photograph and biographical sketch were included as well. In her final letter to Reményi, dated March 19, 1935, she acknowledges receiving a copy of the anthology and thanks him for it, but regrets that the book leaves her “none the wiser” because, as she writes, “before this language I stand deaf and dumb.”

During her lifetime, Cather’s novels and stories were translated into sixteen different languages. That number now stands at forty, including four titles in Hungarian (*A Lost Lady* in 1934, “Paul’s Case” in 1935, *Shadows on the Rock* in 1936 and *My Ántonia* in 1968) (German). While her correspondence shows that she took an active interest in both the creative and financial details of those translations, I know of no other letter on the topic that is quite so spirited as the one she wrote to József Reményi on October 12, 1934.

Mark Madigan is professor of English at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. He is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Youth and the Bright Medusa.

And now I must dress to receive the Planets, dear

TO EDITH LEWIS

Sunday 4:30 P.M. [October 5, 1936]
Shattuck Inn, Jaffrey, New Hampshire

My Darling Edith;

I am sitting in your room, looking out on the woods you know so well. So far everything delights me. I am ashamed of my appetite for food, and as for sleep—I had forgotten that sleeping can be an active and very strong physical pleasure. It can! It has been for all of three nights. I wake up now and then, saturated with the pleasure of breathing clear mountain air (not cold, just chill air) of being up high with all the woods below me sleeping, too, in still white moonlight. It’s a grand feeling.

One hour from now, out of your window, I shall see a sight unparalleled—Jupiter and Venus both shining in the golden-rosy sky and both in the West; she not very far above the horizon, and he about mid-way between the zenith and the silvery lady planet. From 5:30 to 6:30 they are of a superb splendor—deepening in color every second, in a still-daylight-sky guiltless of other stars, the moon not up and the sun gone down behind Gap-mountain; those two alone in the whole vault of heaven. It lasts so about an hour (did last night). Then the Lady, so silvery still, slips down into the clear rose colored glow to be near the departed sun, and imperial Jupiter hangs there alone. He goes down about 8:30. Surely it reminds one of Dante’s “eternal wheels”. I can’t but believe that all that majesty and all that beauty, those fated and unfailing appearances and exits, are something more than mathematics and horrible temperatures. If they are not, then we are the only wonderful things—because we can wonder.

I have worn my white silk suit almost constantly with no white hat, which is very awkward. By next week it will probably be colder. Everything you packed carried wonderfully—not a wrinkle.

And now I must dress to receive the Planets, dear, as I won’t wish to take the time after they appear—and they will not wait for anybody.

Lovingly
W.

I don’t know when I have enjoyed Jupiter so much as this summer.

Original letter held by the Willa Cather Foundation.



It is the only known surviving letter from Cather to Edith Lewis, her companion of nearly forty years. Its rarity demands notice, but its rarity is only a small part of the spell it casts. Read it through once—and then again, as you’ll be compelled to do—and its very considerable charm overtakes you. And then its beauty does as well.

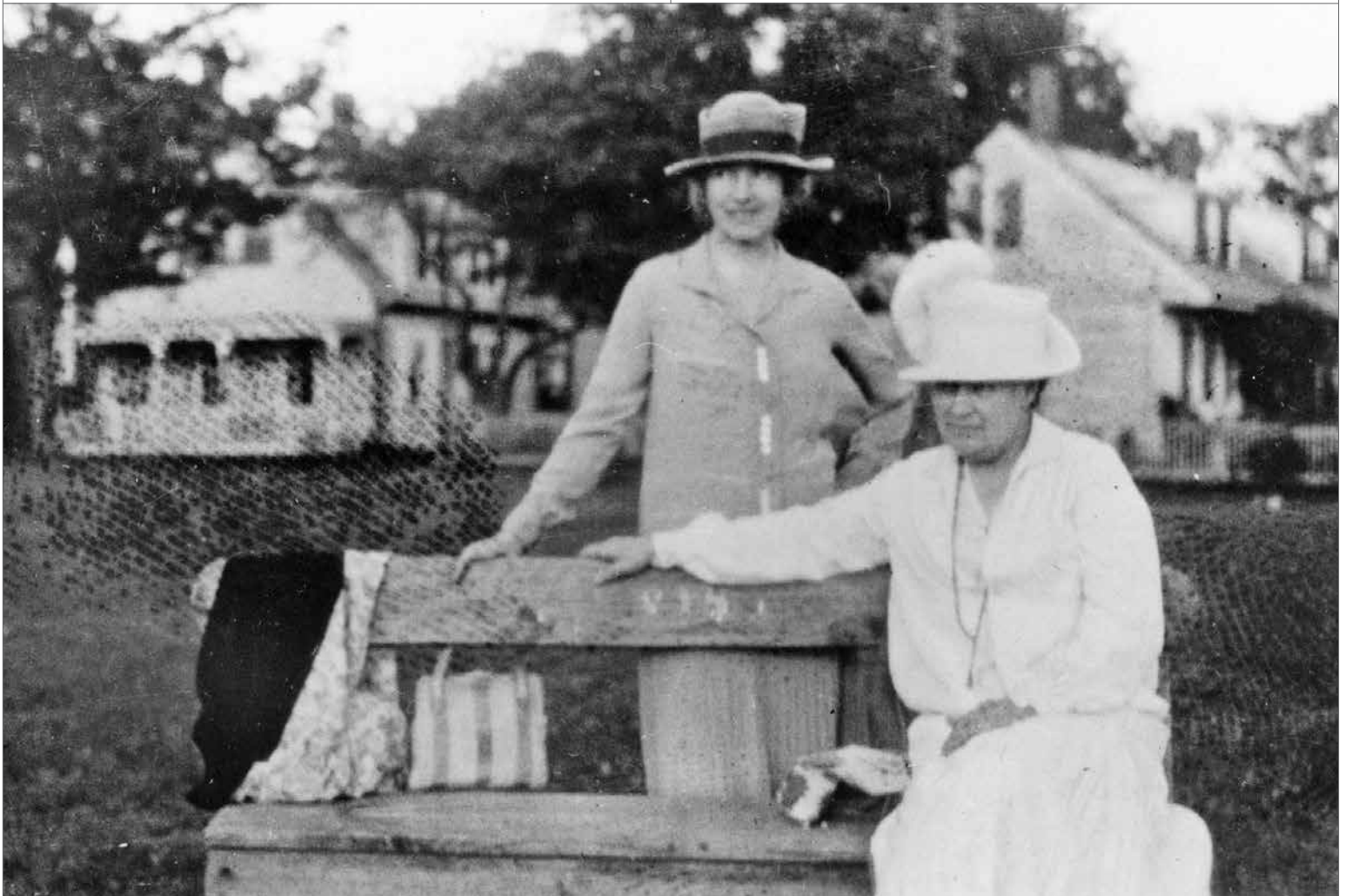
Cather and Lewis had spent some weeks during the summer on Grand Manan before returning to New York City; Lewis, who was a copywriter for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, remained in the City when Cather went to Jaffrey for the month of October. There, in radiant language perfectly suited to her subject, she provides for Lewis a lovingly detailed glimpse of the movements of Jupiter and Venus in the “golden-rosy” western sky.

It is an almost too perfect model of what Cather’s friend Stephen Tennant, in his introduction to *Willa Cather On Writing*, called “The Room Beyond”: “Willa Cather’s art is essentially one of gazing beyond the immediate scene to a timeless sky or a timeless room, in which the future and the past, the unspoken and the unknown, forever beckon the happy reader.”

Evoked for “My Darling Edith” from Edith’s own room, that timeless sky is a reminder of “Dante’s ‘eternal wheels,’” a vision of universal order almost beyond imagining. But it is beheld in the here and now, in this room they both know well, and it is recorded for Edith’s sole benefit. And whether this is an experience of Dante’s godlike illumination or simply “mathematics and horrible temperatures,” one really ought to be appropriately dressed.

The letter’s easy shift in tone from rapture to the everyday provides its own amusing enchantment, as can be experienced in so many of Cather’s letters. But on rereading this one, the shift seems to disappear; the eternal wheels of the heavens and the white silk suit occupy the same world, where the well-packed suitcase is also in its way a wonderful thing, and the white hat has mysteriously gone missing. The intimacy that Cather has with her life companion, as we catch glimpses of it here, feels like Rilke’s ideal of love, “the love that consists in this: that two solitudes meet and protect and greet each other.”

Thomas Reese Gallagher is the president of the Willa Cather Foundation and managing editor of the Willa Cather Newsletter & Review.



Edith Lewis (left) with Willa Cather in Jaffrey, 1926

TO ROSCOE CATHER

June 29, 1938

My dear Roscoe:

I can be of little help to you, but I think there are some things which I should confide to you.

1. I am enclosing a letter from Mary Virginia [Auld Mellen]. Please read marked passage. Neither Edith nor I can remember that Douglass said anything about a will on that occasion. The three of us were laughing and talking here together, and it is very possible that he may have said something that neither Edith nor I caught. Mary Virginia must have heard him make some such statement—she would not lie, but neither Edith nor I heard it. He might have said some such thing merely as a figure of speech—to illustrate the fact that he had been really worried. But in quoting a man who can no longer speak for himself, I must state exactly what I remember hearing him say and what I do not remember.

2. Douglass asked me to go down with him to Tiffany's to select a present for Miss Rogers—he had already been there himself. He took me to a show case full of bracelets, but they all happened to be extraordinarily ugly. There really was not a very pretty bracelet in the place. I noticed, however, a case full of really beautiful rings—not the awfully expensive kind—prettily blended stones and lovely settings. I said quite innocently, "Why not get a ring?"—I really was not pumping him; I am a poor detective. But he shut one eye and screwed up his face a little and said, "No, no, that's a little too, too pointed." I laughed and said, "Oh, you mean decisive." "That's it," he replied, and I laughed and said, "same old fox," which seemed rather to please him. For the two summers when I saw a good deal of Miss Rogers at the sanitarium, I honestly saw nothing objectionable about her. She was competent at her job, not stupid, had good manners and was more attractive than Douglass' other girls. (Wait till you see the Edith to whom he made a bequest!) Douglass was rushing Miss Rogers pretty hard, and she admired him very much. His lovely way with his mother was enough to win any woman's heart. He told me, when he said good-bye to me the spring before Mother died, that he thought he might marry Miss Rogers, and I told him I could see nothing against it.

Now, six or seven years of courtship is pretty hard on any young woman who has to make her own living. I think she lost her position at Las Encinas because there was "talk", owing to Douglass. When I knew her I certainly believe that she was no "gold digger", but she was like any other girl who has found the man she wants (I should say loves, not "wants") and tries to make him believe she can make him happy. In the six or seven years which have elapsed since I first knew her and used to take long trips with the two of them, she may have deteriorated very much. That constant demand for sympathy and affection—which-gets-nowhere, is very hard on a young woman. Her position now is certainly much worse in every way than when she first knew Douglass. She has lost several positions, has been "talked about", has passed from the twenties into the thirties, which is against her professionally and matrimonially. I hope he was very generous to her during his lifetime, for the bequest in his will seems to me insufficient recognition. During the years when Jessica and Elsie were giving him lots of perplexity (these seem to be the two persons most offended), Miss Rogers was giving him the kind of companionship and sympathy he liked. If Douglass was very generous to her, I am glad. She did more than any of us to make him comfortable. I think we ought to look at the matter as human beings. How would you like one of your daughters to be played with like that, always expecting to be married next year? I am enclosing a letter from Elsie which needs no comment. When I knew Miss Rogers, she was a nice, straight girl, and she believed altogether in Douglass' affection—which was undoubtedly real affection,—though it led nowhere for her.

3. Now there is something I hate to tell you, and yet I feel I ought to. In every letter that Jim has written me since he left Kearney and joined Douglass, there has been a strong taint of disloyalty—except in the last letter, written after Douglass was dead. At first and for years after, he was always complaining that Douglass had given him a few hundred dollars to throw sand in his eyes and cheat him out of his share of FATHER'S ESTATE—which he seemed to think very large indeed! I wrote trying to reassure him, telling him I would



give Douglass the management of my own savings at any moment. Secondly, all his later letters—there were not many, he wrote about twice a year—were full of complaints of his being held down and made a mere hired man, when he knew as much about the oil business as anybody. He said repeatedly that the oil business required no knowledge, no intelligence of any kind. It was pure luck, and he intended to play around with the little fellows, the under-dogs who had not had the luck of Douglass and his partners.

I know, Roscoe, these letters from Jim would have great influence with you if I had only saved them, but that little taint of ingratitude and disloyalty was like an ugly smell to me. I would keep the letters for a few days, try to answer them, then tear them up. There are many good qualities about Jim. When I am with him, I always feel a peculiar and special tenderness for him. But he tremendously overrates his own ability, and he is continuously nagged on by a wife [Ethel Garber Cather] who is full of petty ambitions, and who has developed a much more venomous nature than ever her old mother had. Ethel was patient with Jim for a long time, I know; but when she turned, she turned not to vinegar but to hydrochloric acid. I am not judging her, but it is up to you, your father's son, to see that these furious and self-seeking women do not attack Miss Rogers tooth and nail and do her more harm than our family has already done her. Father would not have dealt fiercely with her. If she has another will tucked away somewhere, properly executed, as an honorable man you will have to see justice done. I am almost sure she hasn't. Elsie's hypothesis, that she encouraged him to drink these last five or six months, is so absurd. We know now that he knew he had a bad heart and the game might be up any time. One sort of man would lie in bed and read and eat toast. He wasn't that sort. When he had drunk a few cocktails or a bottle of champagne, that dark shadow withdrew to a distance—did not seem so close, and he could talk to Miss Rogers about his rosy plans for the future and how he meant to go abroad on the *Queen Mary*. I think it was to get rid of that fear that he has been using himself up for the last year or so.

4. Now Roscoe, usually I keep peoples' secrets, especially when they are secrets I am ashamed to read. But I think you ought to know how vacillating and unappreciative of favors and how weak Jim is—under his queer kind of conceit. I hope you will not try to give either him or Jack much authority, but will trust rather to the experience and to the possible, even probable, integrity of Douglass' partners—whom he trusted so much. Jack is a dear fellow but—feels no responsibility, happy-go-lucky. You can't make men over after they are thirty-five. Don't put Jim up against any important men—Roy Oatman, Russell Amack, etc., etc. were always his kind. I know Doug's partners are not exactly Harvard men, but they know their business, have proved it. Jim says there is nothing whatever about the business to know.

This is the last letter I shall write you on this subject. As soon as I am well enough, I will get off to Grand Manan, where I have no typewriter and nobody who can take dictation from me. But when you talk about "developing" Jim and Jack, I think I ought to ask you to sit down and consider awhile, and I feel that I ought to give you this important sidelight on Jim; that he is not loyal, and never while Douglass was living did he write a nice letter about him—only fault finding and distrustful ones.

Jim is sweet with his children, poor lad, but I don't believe he is much fonder of them than Douglass was. Doug's face used to glow and his voice was just full of feeling whenever he spoke of those children.

When I knew her Miss Rogers was not looking about for a man—most of the young men at the sanatorium disliked her. She was extremely good at her job, and wanted to make a real career of it. When I went off on a three day trip down to Caliente she never said or did anything that made me feel that she was a cheap sort. She was then a frank, fresh, rather intelligent Western girl; I never saw her throw a soft look at Douglass, or hold his hand in the car, or languish. She behaved like a well brought up girl. I am (oh this pen!) I am sorry if her life has been spoiled. Deal in this case as Father would have done.

Lovingly
Willie

Destroy Elsie's letter after you have read it

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*





Roscoe Cather, ca. 1900–1910

Willa Cather wrote this letter to her brother Roscoe after the death of their brother Douglass in 1938. The aspect of the letter that most interests me is the concern it demonstrates for Miss Rogers, Douglass's woman friend. Cather initially describes going shopping at Tiffany's with Douglass to pick out a present for Miss Rogers and gives her characteristically frank aesthetic judgment: the bracelets were "extraordinarily ugly," but some of the rings were "really beautiful . . . prettily blended stones and lovely settings." Depictions of gems provide some of the most satisfying descriptive moments in Cather's fiction. I think immediately of Oswald Henshawe's beautiful topaz sleeve-buttons in *My Mortal Enemy* and the likening of Marie Tovesky's brown eyes to "that Colorado mineral called tiger-eye" in *O Pioneers!*. Cather tells Roscoe that when she innocently suggested that Douglass buy Miss Rogers a ring, Douglass replied, "No, no, that's a little too, too pointed." Cather's shopping anecdote clearly illustrates the undefined nature of Douglass's relationship with Miss Rogers.

Having quoted Douglass as unwilling to endorse the level of public commitment that a ring would signify, we might expect Cather to begin

downplaying Miss Rogers's connection with her brother and dismissing any monetary claim to Douglass's estate she might have. Instead, she argues strongly for the legitimacy of their relationship, claiming that Douglass should have left Miss Rogers more in his will than he apparently did. Speculating about what her close association with Douglass may have cost Miss Rogers in terms of career, reputation, and future marital prospects, she finally tells Roscoe, "I hope he was very generous to her during his lifetime, for the bequest in his will seemed to me insufficient recognition." It is impossible for me to read this letter without thinking of Cather's own relationship with Edith Lewis, which also lacked the societal legitimacy conveyed by marriage. In arguing for the validity of her brother's relationship with his long-term girlfriend and her right to have an acknowledged and monetarily compensated place in his life, Cather could well be alluding to her own partnership with Edith Lewis. When she says, "I think we ought to look at the matter as human beings," Cather displays the remarkable understanding and compassion her fiction so often demonstrates. She closes her letter with the lines, "I am sorry if her life has been spoiled. Deal in this case as Father would have done." Invoking her beloved father indicates her view of Miss Rogers as a member of the Cather family who is entitled to

their support. This letter demonstrates Cather's belief that even without a marriage contract, obligations arising from a committed relationship should be honored.

Sarah Clere is visiting assistant professor of English at The Citadel. She was a Woodress Visiting Scholar at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2011.



Douglass Cather and Mary Virginia Cather, ca. 1928



TO ELSIE CATHER

May 26, 1939

My dear Sister:

In the first place I want to thank you for the dear letter you wrote me about your Easter in Red Cloud. That letter, like so many of your previous letters, brought the whole scene before me, and I felt a renewed contact with our old friends there, almost as if I had seen them.

Now as to the second part of your letter. I took it up into the Catskills with me, to think it over in a quiet place, and I have come to a complete face-about with regard to the house in Red Cloud. When I came back to New York I found a long letter from Roscoe, explaining to me why he thought it much better for you to move to Lincoln and forego the house. But I had come to my own decision before I got his letter. Your long last letter convinced me that you really found no more pleasure at all in the house, and that it is merely a burden to you. Since you want to live in Lincoln and to move your effects there, you certainly ought to do so.

Hitherto my letters to you on this subject have been written under the apprehension that in a low moment you might destroy something for which you had a real affection, and then be sorry for it afterward. You see, my mind has not kept pace with the changes in Red Cloud and in your own feelings. When I last saw you, you were very enthusiastic about your plans for making the house just as you wanted it. You were then in a possessive frame of mind and seemed a little afraid that someone else might try to put an oar in. A summer or two later, when you were painting the house, pulling down the barn, etc., you wrote me at Grand Manan about the changes you were making, and wrote enthusiastically. You seemed to enjoy making the place more and more just as you wanted it. When the drought came on you wrote me about your fight to save the trees, as if you enjoyed that, too. I was further influenced by a letter in which you deplored Mrs. Frank Smith's leaving her own house and renting rooms in Lincoln. All these things made me feel that, in spite of temporary discouragements, you really had a deep fondness for the place and would regret it if you gave it up.

In the four days I had in the country, I tried to realize how much the town itself has changed and how much your own circle of friends there has narrowed. And the climate itself seems to have changed—though I doubt if the climate in Lincoln will be a great improvement.

I think it unreasonable and unjust that you should be expected to be the caretaker of a house which you do not wish to live in, merely because Douglass and I had a strong feeling about it. Roscoe was never there enough to feel strongly about the place, and he saw very little of his parents there in their gentle and mellow old age. It was different with Douglass and me, and I am so thankful that the house was still there on Douglass' last visit. He talked to me with such satisfaction about it—urged me to go out there soon, and said it was not much changed—"not to hurt". For him it will always be there: so I think you will be glad, on his account, that you kept it as long as you did.

As long as the house is standing on the ground, unsold and unrented, I will certainly send you the \$250 a year I promised for taxes, etc. But I shall certainly not try to influence your disposal of it in any way. And if you can get any money out of it, I think it would be right for you to do so. You have certainly put up a valiant struggle to keep the place as a reminder of Father and Mother to their old friends,—but so many of their old friends are now dead. I can see how the changes in the town and climate have been against you. Don't let the place be any further worry or care to you, Elsie. Slide out of it as easily as you can. If I were ten years younger I would buy it from you in a minute, though I have even fewer friends there than you. I wish I could advise you as to how to get rid of it. I am afraid that will be painful, whatever way you do it. Perhaps you will decide to truck the furniture to your place in Lincoln and let the old shell of the house stand. Tramps and a fire might end the difficulties. It really seems to me that might be the easiest way out. It is all a painful business, but remember the place was there for Douglass to see when he went back. That ought to be a lot of comfort to you.

Affectionately
Willia

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*



Elsie Cather, ca. 1930s

In giving her reluctant blessing to Elsie’s plan to leave their parents’ home and move to Lincoln, Cather makes it clear how much the house meant to her and especially to Douglass. “I am so thankful that the house was still there on Douglass’ last visit. He talked to me with such satisfaction about it—urged me to go out there soon, and said it was not

much changed—‘not to hurt’. For him it will always be there. . . .”

My mother, Helen Cather Southwick, shared Cather’s affection for the house. In her last years, as Alzheimer’s disease destroyed her memory for more recent events, childhood recollections of serving tea to “Aunt Willa” in her grandparents’ home became more vivid. Fortunately, Cather’s gloomy scenario, “Tramps and a fire might end the difficulties” was avoided, if only just; there was an attic fire, but the house survived. So, just as it was there for Douglass on his last visit, it was there for my mother on hers (thanks especially to Doug and Charlene Hoschouer). And for my mother, too, “it will always be there. . . .”

Editor’s note: Helen Cather Southwick’s detailed and affectionate memories of her grandparents’ house in Red Cloud are recounted by Charlene and Doug Hoschouer in *The House According to Helen*, their booklet about their careful restoration of the Cather Second Home beginning in 1998. In her last years, Mrs. Southwick shared family artifacts, recalled stories of even the most obscure corners of the house, and generously helped the Hoschouers to bring it back to life yet again.

In a letter written to Elsie and Helen in the summer of 1939, Willa Cather fondly recalled her niece’s childhood love for this family house:



Helen Cather Southwick, age 12 or 13. Written on the back at an unknown time: “Willa and I were experimenting with indoor photography and this is a result.”

Once when you were a little girl, Helen Louise[,] and were leaving to go back to Kearney after staying with us, as you ran down the front stairs you called out joyfully, “Goodbye, dear house!” You knew you were coming back, so you were



Cather with her grand niece Helen Cather Southwick, 1924

not sad. I can so well remember your young, happy voice, with love for the old house in it. This time, when you leave for California, please say that again: “Goodbye, dear house.”

Obviously, Helen Cather Southwick’s lifelong love for this “dear house” was passed on to her son James Southwick and his wife Angela. A generous gift from them made it possible for the Willa Cather Foundation to purchase this handsome and hospitable dwelling, the site of so much Cather family history. The doors of the Cather Second Home are once again open to guests.

James Southwick, a retired physician, is a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. His grandfather, James Cather, was Willa Cather’s brother.



TO ROSE ACKROYD

May 16, 1941

My dear Mrs. Ackroyd:

Your letter has awakened many pleasant memories. Your grandmother, Mary Ann Anderson, was a very special favorite of mine when I was a little girl of five to eight years old and lived at Willow Shade on the Northwestern Turnpike. When I was shut up in the house with colds, I used to watch out of the front windows, hoping to see Mrs. Anderson coming down the road. My family usually sent some word to her when I was sick, because she was so tactful and understanding with a child.

Years after we moved West, when I graduated from college, I went immediately back to visit my great-aunt, Mrs. [Sidney] Gore. At that time I had several happy meetings with Mary Ann Anderson. She came down to Auntie Gore's to see me, and I several times walked up that beautiful Hollow Road, up to Timber Ridge, to see her in her little house where she lived all alone, and where she was as happy as the day was long. She had a most unusual interest, you understand, in following the story of peoples' lives and knowing everything that happened to them. She got great pleasure out of other peoples' good luck, and was deeply sympathetic when they had bad luck. At this time I was twenty-one years old, but of course I remembered all the people I knew in my childhood. Mary Ann and I talked for hours at a time, and she would tell me all about what became of the people whom I remembered—how they lived, if they were still alive, and how the older people had ended their days.

Your Aunt Marjorie [Anderson] and your Uncle Enoch [Anderson] both went to Nebraska with us. Enoch was with us for two years and then, when my father decided to leave the farm, he and two boys from Winchester went to California to hunt work in the big wheat fields there. He once sent us a picture of himself driving a big threshing machine, but after that we never heard of him. Your Aunt Marjorie died in 1928. She was in our family continuously after we left Virginia until the day of her death. She was greatly beloved by all of us,—children and grandchildren. Her love of children was one of her outstanding qualities. I have lived in New York for thirty years, but while my parents were living I went home for long visits, at least every other summer. I used always to spend many happy hours with Marjorie in the big sunny kitchen or on the shady back porch. She liked to talk about old times in Virginia, and my father always told her the news that came in the weekly Winchester paper. I shall always remember those hours with Marjorie on the shady back porch or in the sunny kitchen with especial pleasure. She died from a short illness in the autumn of 1928, when I was in New England. She is buried in our family lot in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

I have had many pleasant letters since the publication of "Sapphira and the Slave Girl", but few of them have called up so many happy memories as yours, which brought once more my dear Mary Ann Anderson to my mind. How glad I would be to have the croup again, if I could watch out of one of those windows at Willow Shade and see Mrs. Anderson coming briskly around the turn of the road! Here is a photograph lately taken of all that is left of the once beautiful Willow Shade, and I have marked a circle around the window where I used to sit to watch for my dear Mrs. Anderson coming down the road.

Very cordially yours,
Willa Cather

P.S. The real name of the woman who wove our carpets was Mrs. Kearns, but there may have been a Mrs. Cowper also.

[Included is this appended note:] Miss Cather asks me to explain that the signature affixed to this letter is genuine but unlike her natural signature. Because of an accident to her right hand. It is still in splints and she can make only a very poor attempt with her left hand.

S. J. Bloom, Secretary

*Original letter held by the Alderman Library,
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.*



The photograph of Willow Shade enclosed in Cather’s letter

When I began working on the Scholarly Edition of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, treasures were flooding into the UN-L Archives from Willa Cather’s niece, Helen Cather Southwick. This was back when we still believed that Willa Cather burned her letters—so it was especially thrilling to discover, among the Southwick papers, a cache of fan letters that Cather received after *Sapphira* was published, from readers who also had connections to Cather’s childhood home in the Shenandoah Valley. One was Rose Ackroyd, in New Jersey, who wrote: “when I was a child from probably 3 to 8 years old I played and ran about those pathways that you portray in your story. . . . After reading your book and being so thrilled . . . I all at once remembered. Grandmother Anderson had worked for Charlie Cathers . . . my Uncle Enoch and Aunt Marjorie went west with the Cather family.” At 68, Ackroyd was almost exactly Willa Cather’s age—but these two little girls, growing up just a few miles apart, never met.

Cather replied promptly, with this affectionate letter that demonstrates how deeply Virginia memories and connections still mattered to her—and to her fiction. Mary Ann Anderson, Ackroyd’s grandmother, was dear to Cather’s childhood and a gifted storyteller, probably one of Cather’s earliest storytelling models. Edith Lewis recalls Cather describing Anderson’s talk as “full of fire and wit . . . many of these stories Willa Cather remembered all her life” (11). On her first return visit to Virginia, the twenty-something Willa “walked up that beautiful Hollow Road [one of the oldest surviving roads in Virginia], up to Timber Ridge,” to visit Anderson “in her little house”; this is the same walk that Rachel makes in *Sapphira* to visit Mrs. Ringer, the mountain storyteller who was “born interested” and is surely modeled on Mary Ann Anderson.

Ackroyd asked what had become of her “Aunt Marjorie” Anderson, and Cather gladly filled her in on this “greatly beloved” servant’s life (and death) with the Cather family in Red Cloud. Her fond account of happy, sunny hours with Marjorie, talking over “old times in Virginia,” confirms that the Anderson tradition of Virginia storytelling continued in

Nebraska. From this letter that I learned that Cather’s father subscribed to a Winchester newspaper, so that news from Virginia kept coming into the Cather house in Red Cloud, every week. Marjorie also found her way into Cather’s fiction, as Mandy in “Old Mrs. Harris” and Mahailey in *One of Ours*. And Cather’s account of Marjorie’s brother, Enoch, who also came with the Cathers to Nebraska, strongly suggests he is the prototype for the hired man Jake, in *My Ántonia*.

Although Cather had to dictate this letter because of an injured hand, her Virginia memories still spilled onto the page in a postscript, remembering the name of the woman who “wove our carpets” for the Cathers—just as carpets were locally woven for Sapphira, in the novel. Later, she followed up with a second letter to Ackroyd, thanking her for a photograph of Mary Ann Anderson in old age, still with the “old fire” in her eyes.

The picture moved Cather to tears, she said. Eventually both Cather’s letters to Ackroyd were acquired by the University of Virginia, along with two photographs that accompanied them: one “lately taken” (probably on Cather’s last visit to Virginia in 1938) of Willow Shade, and another of a young woman and a doll-like child, labeled “Aunt Marjorie and Cather child,” that I realized must depict Marjorie Anderson and Willa’s younger sister, Elsie. This is the only known



Marjorie Anderson and Elsie Cather, ca. 1894

photograph of Marjorie, such an important presence in Cather’s life and work. When Rose Ackroyd decided to write to Willa Cather, she opened up a treasure chest of Virginia memories that are written into Cather’s fiction, and especially into *Sapphira*. Now, with the letters more fully accessible to us, we can track such memories deeper and deeper, into the texture of Willa Cather’s art.

Ann Romines is professor of English at The George Washington University and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. She is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Sapphira and the Slave Girl.



TO META SCHAPER CATHER

[1942?]

Dear Meta:

This [is] the kind of advertising work Edith does. The text and sketch are both hers. It's very interesting work and requires a great knowledge of types and printing—and of the dullness of the average human mind.

W.

I thought you might like to know what kind of advertising. Formerly she worked on the Eastman Kodak account, but Eastman is shut off by the War.

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

Short Letter, Big Meaning

Melissa Homestead

The relative paucity of currently known correspondence between Willa Cather and Edith Lewis—one letter and one postcard from Cather to Lewis and no letters from Lewis to Cather—has made recovering their relationship challenging. One must hunt for clues elsewhere. When this letter first arrived at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln as part of the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection, I did a happy dance. For most researchers, this undated letter—consisting of two sentences with a two sentence postscript—might look unpromising. To me, however, it communicated something exciting: that Willa Cather closely followed Edith Lewis's work as an advertising copywriter at the J. Walter Thompson Co.

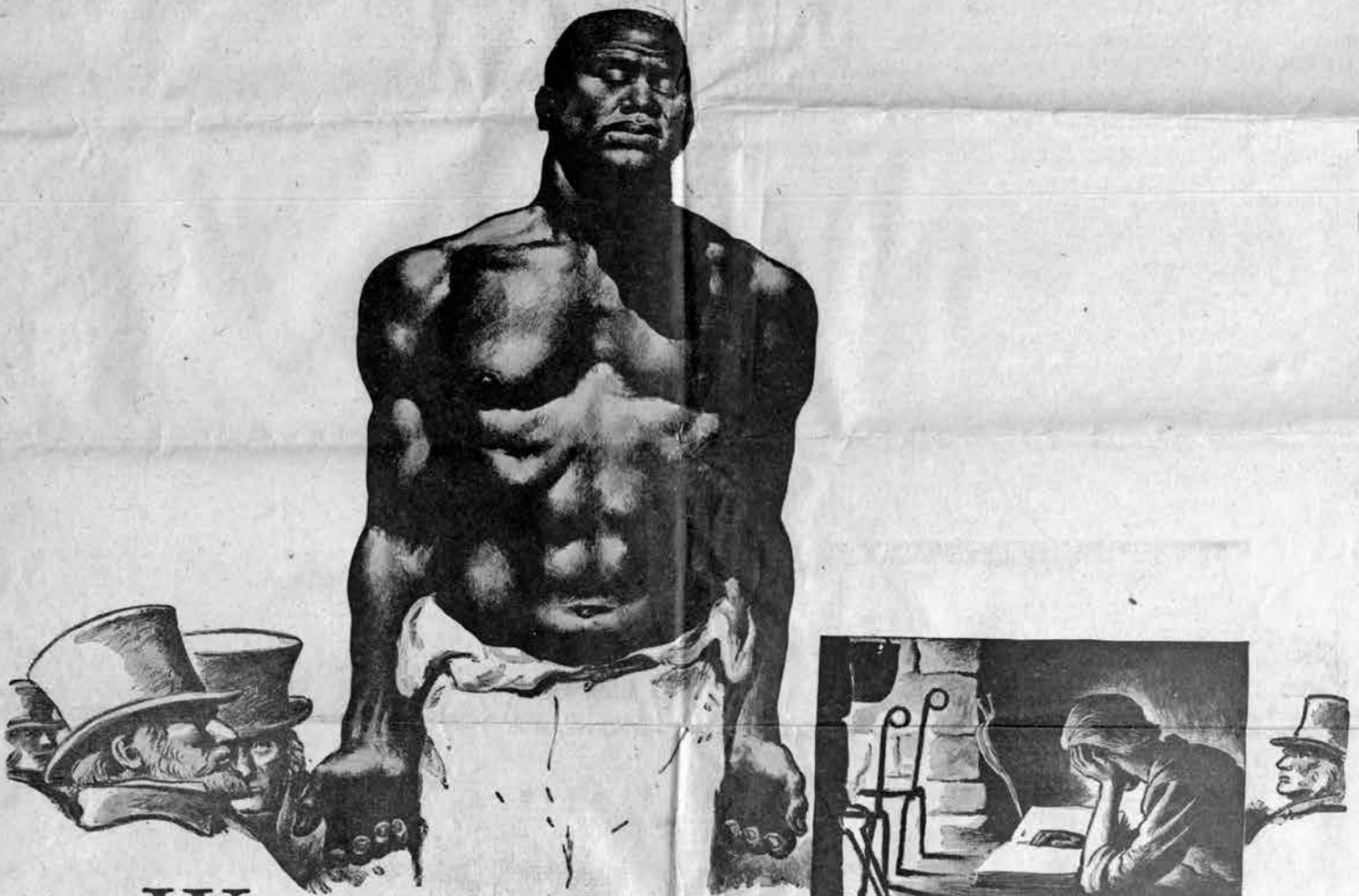
The enclosure, an advertisement for *The American Weekly* magazine run in the *New York Herald Tribune* on February 16, 1942, dates the letter, which begins in mid-thought, with no clear referent in a preceding letter. Even though Willa Cather and her family still wrote each other many letters in the 1940s, I suspect that the missing referent is a phone call between Willa and Meta, after which Willa cut the page out of the newspaper and dashed off a note enclosing it. At the height of American involvement in World War II, the offices at JWT were short-staffed, and I imagine Willa complaining to Meta about the long hours Edith Lewis was working. The letter thus let Meta know just what kind of copywriting was keeping Lewis late at the office in the middle of the war. In a subsequent, even shorter letter, Willa sent Meta a Fanny Farmer Candy Shoppes ad promoting the sale of war bonds, proclaiming it “one of the best of Edith's advertisements.”

By the time this letter became available, I had already researched Lewis's advertising career in the J. Walter Thompson Archive, held by Duke University, recovering in surprising detail the work she did in the

1920s and early 1930s. However, after the early 1930s, the archival trail went cold. Willa Cather's two letters to Meta Cather enclosing samples of Lewis's work thus also provided crucial information: the names of three accounts. Armed with this information, I returned to the JWT Archive and was able to find traces of Lewis's creative work in the second half of her advertising career. *The American Weekly* ad turned out to be one of a prize-winning series about how reading spurred great advancements in science, discovery, and politics. The Fanny Farmer ad proved to be a particular puzzle—it was undated and printed on glossy paper, and I could find no clipping of the ad as run. Searching digitized newspapers, I finally found that the ad had run in the *New York Times* in April 1943. I then realized that Edith Lewis had brought home to Park Avenue a pre-publication proof of the advertisement, which is what Willa Cather sent to her sister-in-law. It should hardly be surprising that Lewis brought her work home, but confirmation of this practice came, in a roundabout way, from Willa's brief letters to Meta.

Melissa Homestead is the Susan J. Rosowski Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She is the co-editor, with Pamela Washington, of the recently published E.D.E.N. Southworth: Recovering a Nineteenth-Century Popular Novelist.





Where did he get his ideas about *SLAVERY*?

THE neighbors all said he read too much.

He was an industrious boy—a hard worker in the field. It was a pity, they said, he wasted so much time over books.

He would read late into the night, any book he could lay hold of. Who knows what thoughts galloped through his mind? Or from what page, in his midnight reading before the dying fire, came the first inspiration for those words:

"A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free."

READING was the whole of Abraham Lincoln's education. All the schooling he ever had amounted to not more than a year.

Today, no less than in Lincoln's time, the habit of reading is democracy's greatest, most powerful ally.

On a vaster scale than any other publication in America—**THE AMERICAN WEEKLY**, the magazine distributed from coast to coast through 20 great Sunday newspapers, has fostered and encouraged and fixed this habit of reading among the people.

It has done this by developing an editorial technique more far-reaching in its influence than many inventions that have been patented.

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TO VIRGINIA, MARGARET, AND ELIZABETH CATHER

September 10, 1945

Asticou Inn, Northeast Harbor, Maine

Dear Virginia, Margaret, and Elizabeth:

I write you because I knew your father so much longer than you knew him, so much longer than even your mother knew him. We were close together in years and close together in sympathy from the beginning. There was a time when I first graduated from the University of Nebraska (and a poor school it was!) when Roscoe and I were put in a hard position for young people. You have heard, probably, that in the year 1893 all the crops in the state were burned up. My father had a big farm under cultivation. Fortunately he gave up operating it, for this drought continued for nearly ten years. And then was the time when things were very hard at home in Red Cloud. Your grandfather took an office position with the Security Investment Company in Lincoln. Your grandmother spent a good deal of time up there with him. I got my first newspaper job in Pittsburgh and sent home as much of my salary as I could. Your father stayed on in Red Cloud as Principal of the South Ward School. He was practically the father and protector of the younger children. I am quite sure your Aunt Elsie and your Uncle Jim and Uncle Jack can never forget his protecting kindness.

While I was working in Pittsburgh, the newspaper people always managed to get my transportation back to Lincoln in the summer so that I always had a few weeks at home in the summer time and Roscoe was always there. We shared our responsibilities and talked over the prospects for the younger ones and wondered how we were to get along through the world at all. Things looked very dark but we were always so happy to be together that we carried the troubles rather lightly.

When I had any free time I was always writing a little, simply because it interested me more than any other form of recreation—I wrote just as people who are really fond of music love to strum on the piano. Your father was always then and ever afterward my soundest and best critic. I used to think he knew the inside of my head better than I did. We always met at home every summer until your father married and went to Wyoming. Then there were several years when we were separated,—but only by distance. I went to England and to France working my way along by newspaper correspondence. By this time I had a fairly good position in the Pittsburgh High School as head of the English Department.

Roscoe and I were not much together again until some years after his marriage although we wrote to each other very very often and never in the least felt apart. I was not able to spend any long time with him until I went for that never-to-be-forgotten visit at Lander when the twins were just one year old. That was a long visit and it was one of the happiest chapters of my life. I do not think I have ever been in a house anywhere which seemed quite so attractive as the home Roscoe and your mother built for themselves in Lander, with the Wind River Mountains against the sky, and the little River flowing in the backyard—if I had ever settled in a place like that, I could never have left it. Your mother and father and I made wonderful trips up into the Wind River mountains which were then unspoiled by automobile roads and traffic. We went to a great many places on horseback and I remember how your father's critical eye was upon me to see whether I would flinch when a horse swam with me for the first time. Those were glorious days and I shall always remember them with pleasure and gratitude.

But what I remember best, and value most, is that your father was always such a fine gentleman toward every member of his father's family and in his own family. He simply couldn't be anything else.

His early business career was in a free world, and there was something joyful and romantic about it. The whole setting at Lander had something of the Old West. But though he lived on into times when business had become more systematized and had hardened into "high pressure salesmanship" he never became in any sense a salesman. The dirt of it never touched his finger tips. He never tried to put anything through or put anything over. He let "business" come to him; he didn't go after it. His father was just like that, and his grandfather. This inheritance ought to make you always a little prouder than many of the people with whom you will be thrown, and a little more careful to keep yourselves up to that level.

I am afraid this is a queer kind of letter of condolence but it is the only consolation that I can find, now that my comradeship with your father is cut off. I had just written him a long letter and signed it, when the telegram

came from your mother. And when I wrote her, I sent also the letter which I had written to him.

Good-bye, my dears, you will, I am sure, always remember your father's gentleness—and gentility.

I am cutting my stay here short and will go down to New York in about ten days from now. I'll have to stay over for a few days in Boston.

I am sending all three letters to you, dear Margaret, because I am not so sure of the address of either of your sisters. Please forward them for me.

Lovingly to you all, always
your aunt Willie

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

“Be a Little Prouder”: Willa Cather on the Business World

John Cather Ickis

The letter I have chosen has very special meaning for me because it provides a glimpse into my mother's early years in Lander, Wyoming, and offers rare insight into Aunt Willie's view of business. The letter was written to my mother, Elizabeth Cather Ickis, her twin Margaret, and her older sister Virginia in the fall of 1945, shortly after Willa received a telegram from my grandmother Meta with the news that her oldest brother Roscoe had died. The letter gives testimony to the special relationship between them: “we were close together in years and close together in sympathy” and he was “my soundest and best critic,” as she put it.

After Grandfather Roscoe married and moved from Red Cloud to Wyoming, he and Willa were separated by distance but not by sentiment or spirit. In the letter she describes her long visit to their Lander home as “one of the happiest chapters of my life.” When my sister Margaret and I read the part about her crossing the Wind River on horseback, we could not restrain our laughter. Imagine the cosmopolitan Willa Cather swimming for the first time with a horse in the wild west.

As a graduate of the Harvard Business School, I am especially interested in her seemingly contradictory views of the business world, as revealed in the letter. Willa herself was an early businesswoman at *McClure's*, and when I was at Harvard I would sometimes pass by the apartment that she rented on Charles Street when she was working on the unauthorized biography of Mary Baker Eddy, one of her first assignments with the magazine. She was by all accounts an effective manager, yet she despised modern, “systematized” business and was proud that the “dirt of it” never touched Roscoe, who at the time was president of the Wyoming bankers' association.

But it was Willa's praise of her father and grandfather and her exhortation to “be a little prouder” and “a little more careful to keep yourselves up to that level” that has most stayed with me. When my cousin Richard died unexpectedly, I recalled those passages of the letter and read them at his memorial service. “Aunt Willie had a way with words,” I said, which brought a few smiles through the tears in the audience. Richard, a student of Greek classics and later president of a family petroleum company, kept himself up to that level of his grandfather Roscoe and of his great- and great-great grandfathers. I strive to do the same.



Cather with nieces Virginia and the twins Margaret and Elizabeth, July 1924

John Cather Ickis is Dean of the Faculty at INCAE Business School in Alajuela, Costa Rica. His grandfather, Roscoe Cather, was Willa Cather's oldest brother.



This two-page letter has been cut by scissors into four pieces, excising some text from the middle of both pages. In this transcription, the remaining fragments appear in proper order with “[. . .]” inserted at the points where text is missing.

TO META SCHAPER CATHER

January 16, 1947

My dear Meta:

This year I was literally buried under Christmas cards—I suppose as a result of Professor [E. K.] Brown’s kind article in *The Yale Review*—but I can truthfully say that of all these cards of greeting, yours was the one that I kept in sight on my dresser. Not for the quotation from a would-be poet, but because the card itself is so simple and cheerful and I know it is just the kind of Christmas greeting that Roscoe would have loved. I had welcome Christmas greetings from both Elizabeth and Margaret.

[. . .]

Well, dear Meta, no matter what happens in the future, I will have the memory of those two summers when Elizabeth and Margaret visited me at Grand Manan. Everything was lovely then; they enjoyed and appreciated the spots which I most loved on that remote little island which I fear I shall never see again. Often in the wakeful hours of the night I think of Margaret and Elizabeth just as they were then, when we used to have gay little dinners, with champagne, down in our funny little cottage on Sunday nights. Youngsters grow up and become totally absorbed in lives of their own, and the amusements of their childhood mean very little to them. But to older people those memories remain important. In showing Margaret and Elizabeth my favorite spots on that lovely island, I re-lived all the excitement of my early explorations on Grand Manan. My nieces have outlived those things, but I will never outlive them, because at my time of life one lives backward rather than forward—in personal relations and affections that is especially true.

[. . .]

Lovingly yours,
Willie

P.S. This is a secret, but I am hoping to get to the West Coast this next summer and meet you in secret somewhere, for a visit.

*Original letter held by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries,
Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

Willa and Meta: Two Friends

Trish Schreiber

My name is Trish Schreiber. My mother, Margaret Cather Shannon, was one of the twin daughters of Willa Cather’s beloved brother Roscoe. I am honored to be part of this special issue of *The Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*.

Willa Cather’s close relationship with her brother Roscoe has been well documented throughout the years. One of the reasons I chose this letter is that it shows she also had a deep and important friendship with Roscoe’s wife, Meta.

I am fortunate to have had my grandmother, Meta Cather, in my life. When I was growing up, she lived in Denver and was part of all our Shannon family gatherings and holidays. She was a woman of great intellect, who could recite countless poems from memory in English and in German. She entered the University of Nebraska in 1899 and



Margaret and Elizabeth, twin daughters of Roscoe and Meta Cather, with their mother and their Aunt Willa, 1916

was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in her senior year. This was quite an accomplishment for a young woman at that time. I'm glad that Meta's legacy will be kept alive through the publication of Willa Cather's letters. I'm also happy that the warm relationship these two women shared will come to light.

The other reason I picked this letter is the fond memories Willa Cather describes of the two summers she spent at her summer house on Grand Manan Island with her twin nieces. Since one of those twins was my mother, Margaret, the letter is very dear to me. While I was growing up, my mother never talked too much about her famous Aunt Willie. I'm not sure why Mom didn't tell more stories about her beloved aunt. I feel it might have been because she wanted to respect Willa Cather's desire for privacy. My mother certainly never used her relationship with her distinguished relative to promote herself.

On the few occasions that she did talk about Willa Cather, Mom would recount the two summers in 1936 and 1937, when she and her twin sister, Elizabeth, traveled to Grand Manan. She called them "the best times" and they were some of her most treasured memories. In this letter, Willa Cather ponders, "My nieces have outlived those things." But she was wrong. Those wonderful times were never forgotten.

Trish Schreiber is the granddaughter of Willa Cather's oldest brother, Roscoe, and a generous friend of the Willa Cather Foundation.



Meta Schaper Cather, ca. 1900

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Plan your own stay in the Cather Second Home

Visitors to Red Cloud will find gracious accommodations in the spacious Victorian house that the Cather family acquired in 1903, when they left behind the small rented house they had occupied when Willa Cather was growing up. The Cather Second Home features six guest rooms, including the room that was always Cather's own on her return visits. You may also rent the entire home for special occasions, family get-togethers, and other gatherings.

For information about availability and rates, call the Foundation at 402-746-2653 or visit us at www.WillaCather.org.



Willa Cather: Canyon, Rock & Mesa Country

The International Willa Cather Seminar 2013

June 16–22, 2013

Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, Arizona

Set in the locale of Cather's pivotal 1912 visit to the Southwest, the 14th International Willa Cather Seminar will highlight the places that inspired Cather—like her protagonist Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*—to develop a new understanding and expression of her art.

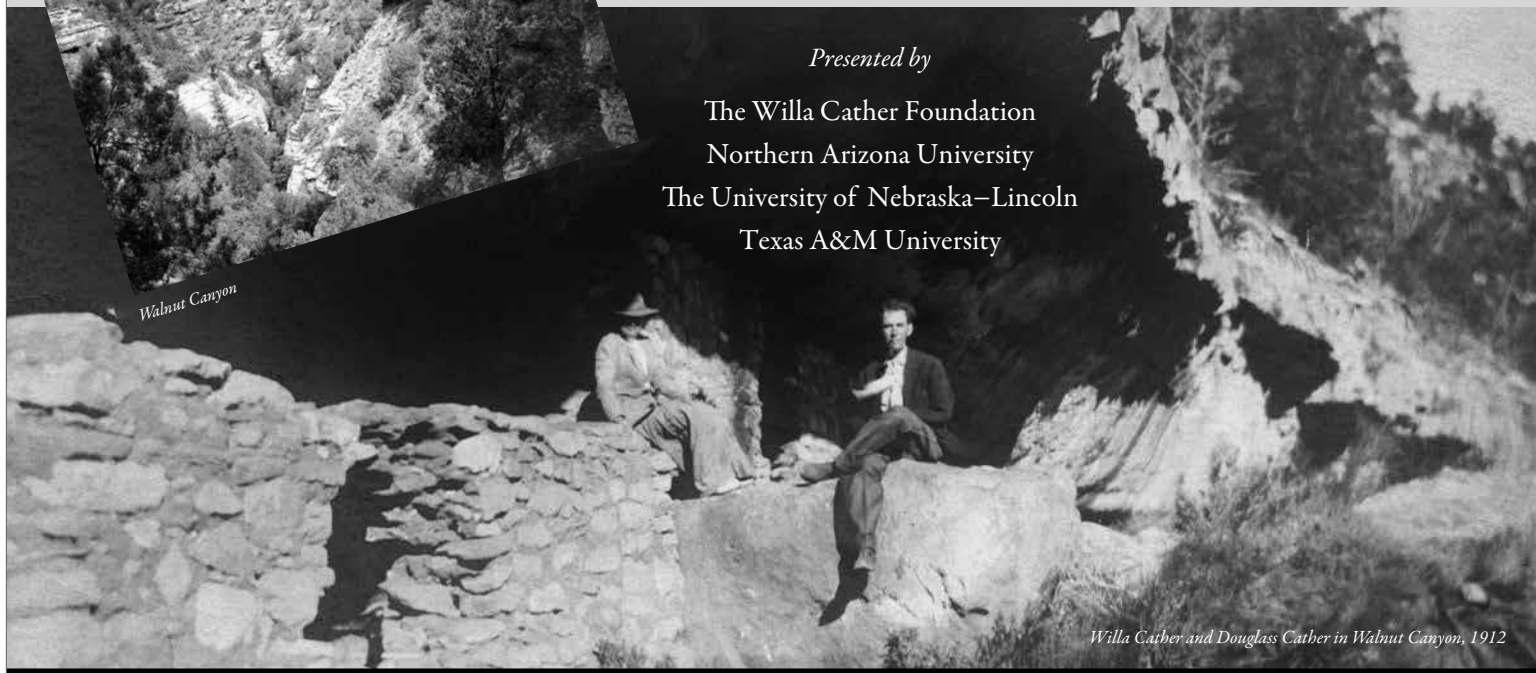
The seminar will include excursions to Walnut Canyon (Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark*), the Little Painted Desert, and nearby Winslow.

For additional seminar information or to register, visit www.WillaCather.org.



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New Virtual Tour

Willa Cather's Red Cloud . . . and Red Cloud's Willa Cather

The Cather Foundation has recently launched *Willa Cather's Red Cloud*, a content-rich virtual tour of the sites that inspired the young Cather as she first began to find her voice.

Produced by Cather Foundation board member Joel Geyer, the new site draws upon archival materials, video, vintage photographs, and Cather's own words to bring to life the settings that contributed to Cather's emergence as a writer—settings that she featured over and over again in her work.

We're grateful to the Sherwood family for endowing this exciting effort and also acknowledge assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities, NET Television, American Masters, and the Nebraska State Historical Society.



www.VirtualCather.org



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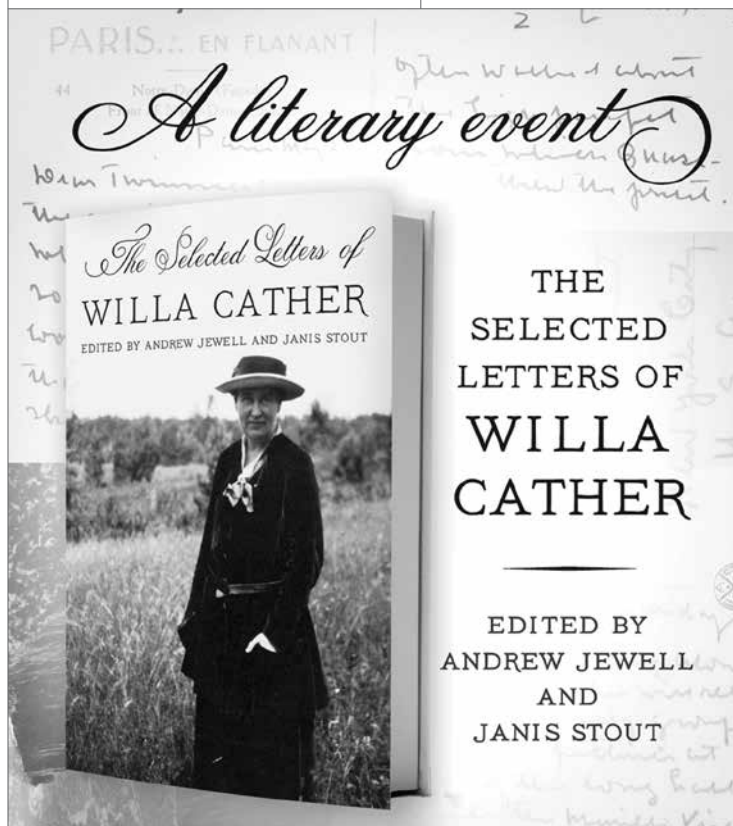
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Fortunate Country

O Pioneers! and the Prairie Homestead Legacy

58TH ANNUAL
WILLA CATHER SPRING CONFERENCE
RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

MAY 30 – JUNE 1, 2013

*“We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it
and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.”*

These words ring as true today as they did when Cather wrote them, one hundred years ago. This year’s conference will mark the centennial of Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and explore her emergence as a major novelist. We will delve into the transformation of the American prairies by European settlers and consider the prairie pioneers’ complicated legacy.

For conference information and to register, visit www.WillaCather.org.



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