Willa Cather REVIEW

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CATHER AND OTHERS

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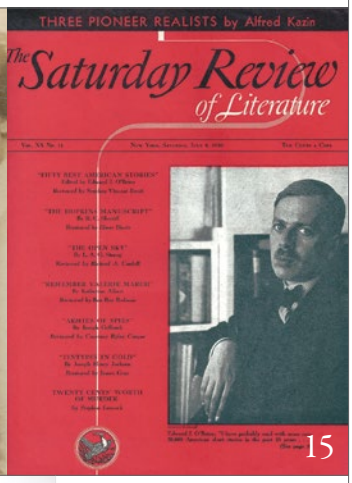
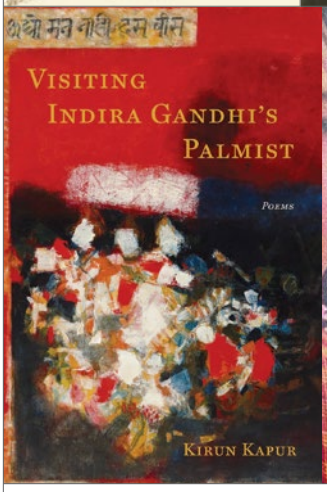
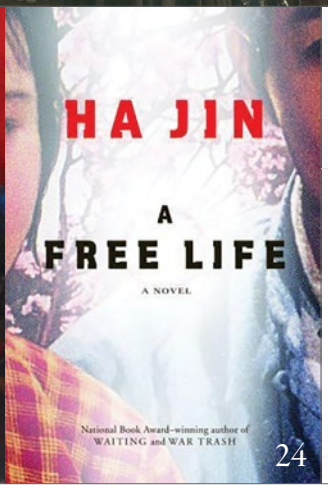
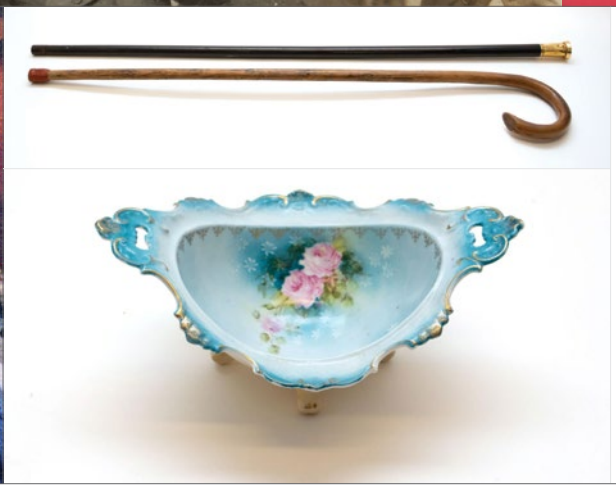
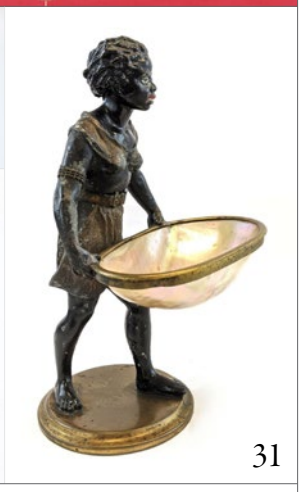
The National Willa Cather Center











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Front cover: Candid photograph of Cather believed to have been taken on the occasion of her 1925 lecture at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine.

Letter from the Executive Director

Ashley Olson

While I don't often experience difficulty crafting this letter, somehow I have found myself struggling to focus on the task at hand. There are so many important and worthy initiatives currently underway that it was hard to find a quiet moment to determine where to begin. For starters, it seems fitting to recognize that as I write these words, it was this very month one hundred years ago that Willa Cather was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. She was overseas visiting Isabelle and Jan Hambourg in France when the award was announced, and she delighted in "a rain of pleasant cablegrams" that arrived to express congratulations.

Without doubt 1923 was a pivotal year for Cather. On the cusp of age fifty, her literature had finally been recognized with a prestigious award. The road that led to this achievement was long, and Cather's career had taken a number of twists and turns before she hit her stride as a writer. Had Cather not taught high school, written newspaper columns, or edited magazines, she may not have become the writer we celebrate today. Each of these experiences later provided subject matter for her writing.

After freeing herself from "magazine work" over a decade earlier to focus on her own writing, Cather's work had garnered both praise and judgment from critics and inspired adoring letters from her readers.

She had distinguished herself from other writers by becoming a representative voice for the settler experience on the Plains. *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* had helped shape this identity, and a reflective essay, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" would soon be published in the *Nation* as part of its "Portraits of the States" series. By the time 1923 had ended, *A Lost Lady* was published and Cather would soon begin to introduce new places and themes in her writing. Among other subjects, she would publish novels about a middle-aged professor's struggles to confront change, the efforts of Catholic priests to establish a diocese in New Mexico, the lives of an apothecary and his daughter in seventeenth century Quebec, and antebellum-era enslavement in her Virginia birthplace.

Cather's ability to create a sense of place and to evoke reflection about the past has long been celebrated. The portrayal of her characters at their best, worst, and most vulnerable is part of what makes her writing endure. One hundred and fifty years after Cather's birth and a century after some of her most well-known novels were published, the National Willa Cather continues our work to ensure that her literature will reach new readers, inspire new artists, and enrich lives.

What's new? This summer marks our second Teacher Institute, an immersive professional development opportunity that brings high school educators together for five days of literature and history study. The program culminates with the development of an educational asset for classroom application, consequently introducing students to Cather and assisting other educators who wish to do the same. In the fall, we look forward to providing a small cohort of writers the opportunity to reside and create in Red Cloud with our inaugural Willa Cather Residency program. Through this residency, we will foster the creation of new literature in a place that had a profound impact on Cather. Finally, an impressive array of events to commemorate Cather's sesquicentennial are already underway. By year's end, these programs will reach audiences from coast to coast.

Here in Red Cloud, restoration of the Willa Cather Childhood Home continues while the rehabilitation of the Potter Block to create Hotel Garber is underway and creating a flurry of activity downtown. A new permanent exhibit is set for installation in the Farmers and Merchants Bank by year's end. Tentatively titled *Making a Place*, the exhibit will highlight rarely seen objects and imagery from our collection; it will also invite our guests to explore a long history of Red Cloud and its intersections with Cather's life and art.

And what comes next? This is precisely the topic we have been discussing in board meetings, with focus groups, and through stakeholder surveys. Having now devoted decades to site preservation and programs that function as a living memorial to Cather in Red Cloud, we agree with so many of you who suggested that we can maintain an indispensable foothold here while we develop a presence elsewhere. The opportunities to advance Cather's legacy through expanded outreach are plentiful if we can collaborate with organizations who share our commitment to education, preservation, and the arts.

One such opportunity has recently presented itself. Willa Cather's birthplace, a rural farmhouse in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, came on the market after decades of deterioration and previously failed acquisition attempts. Through a hurried and coordinated effort with Cather family members, Virginia-based preservation groups, and local stakeholders, the house has been acquired by a preservation-minded collaborator who intends to donate the site to an affiliated nonprofit organization. Thank you to those who donated and advocated for the preservation of this site. Its next chapter, and ours, is only beginning.

Cather and Others

Letter from the President

Robert Thacker

Not too long ago, a friend and longtime colleague approached me wondering if I might be willing to write an essay derived from Cather. He had heard me say on a Zoom gathering that Alice Munro once remarked that "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932) was her favorite of all of Cather's stories, and she acknowledged too that one of her own stories, "The Progress of Love" (1985), shows the marks of its influence. My colleague knew that I had, years ago, published an essay entitled "Alice Munro's Willa Cather" and had been working on both writers for some time. I took him up on his suggestion, so now I have looked at that Munro story through the prism of Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris," a story often cited as one of Cather's best. That certainly seems true to me, although I do think "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) gives it more than a run.

Just now too I have been at work on another essay, one to be presented at this June's International Willa Cather Seminar in New York City. It has had me returning to a line of research I have pursued off and on since the late 1990s, one pioneered by the late Merrill Maguire Skaggs, the author of one of the great critical Cather books: *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* (1990). Pioneering, Merrill really tackled the question of Cather's presence in Cos Cob, Connecticut during the first years of the twentieth century. I followed her lead.

We know what the Cos Cob art colony was then—Susan G. Larkin published a wonderful book on it in 2001, one I enthusiastically recommend to the interested—and we know too that Cather was there; it is pretty clear that she used connections made there to vault from her job as a high-school teacher in Pittsburgh to the staff of *McClure's Magazine* and to New York City in 1906. Yet looking at the extant evidence, there is not a lot that actually ties Cather to Cos Cob during 1902 and the following few years when it really mattered to the trajectory of her career. Certainly she did not say anything much. But she got the job at *McClure's* and was off to New York. Something happened there.

I'm ruminating on these cruxes here because it seems these days that some of the most interesting questions in Cather studies involve her connections to others. Connections involving her own influences on other writers—as with Munro—as well as her literal connections with her contemporaries—the people she met, spent time with, and knew at places like Cos Cob—and also those she knew (or knew of) as other writers, people whom she competed with, or who assessed her writing in its own time.

The four scholarly essays we include in this issue happened together—they comprise a gathering around the idea of "Cather and Others." Stéphanie Durrans, a scholar often writing on Cather from France, considers her relations with an early mentor, Elia Peattie (1862–1935), in revealing ways. John Swift, another longtime presence among us and one of my predecessors as president of the Cather Foundation, examines Cather's career in parallel with that of Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876–1958), a quite popular and prolific author contemporary with Cather, one who lived for a time not very far from her on Park Avenue but one whom she scarcely mentioned. Just like all the people Cather had met at Cos Cob. Timothy W. Bintrim and Scott Riner, frequent researchers into other connections in these pages, then examine the provenance of another singular Cather story, "Double Birthday" (1929), in relation to Edward J. H. O'Brien's long-running Best American Short Stories series. Its presence there brought about its inclusion in John Updike's *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999). Finally, Maria Mackas points to and examines a succession of others—contemporary writers all still writing—who display in their work evidences of Cather's deep and abiding influence on writers from succeeding generations. As with Munro's story, that influence is continuing, and growing. "Cather and Others" in fact.

All of these connections, and others yet to be discovered, vivify Cather's ongoing presence among us one hundred and fifty years after her birth in 1873 near Gore, Virginia. Here at the National Willa Cather Center in her Nebraska hometown that anniversary is being celebrated this year along with the vital centennial outpouring that 1923 saw: *April Twilights and Other Poems*, *A Lost Lady*, and "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." These works will be the focus of this year's Spring Conference, which will have just concluded when this issue hits mailboxes. Each one in its way still asserts the strengths of Cather's vision, the depth of her understandings, and the artistry of her craft as she saw and knew others as she contributed powerfully to her time. And still: Cather keeps contributing to our own time as that work lives on, as the places and people she describes continue to be presences among us.

Elia Peattie and Willa Cather: Influence and Shared Vision

Stéphanie Durrans

Elia W. Peattie. As published in the *Critic*, July 1901.

Willa Cather met Elia Wilkinson Peattie in 1892 or 1893, on the occasion of a dinner organized by Mrs. Flavia Canfield in her Lincoln home after Peattie had given a public lecture at the university (Peattie, *The Star Wagon*). The two women became friends and frequently reviewed each other's work. Peattie had moved to Nebraska in 1888 and was working as a columnist on the *Omaha World-Herald*. She soon realized that the younger Cather was destined for greatness and would carve out a reputation for herself in the literary world. She was full of praise both for Cather as a journalist (whose opinions she described as "original, often dogmatic, frequently charming and piquant" in an 1895 contribution to "A Word with the Women") and as a fledgling writer whose early story "On the Divide" she rated highly in one of her reviews.[1] Cather similarly expressed her admiration for Peattie's work which she had read when she still lived in Red Cloud and continued to read for many years, as testified by her 1899 review of "The Man at the Edge of Things" and a likely mention of Peattie's *The Precipice: A Novel* in a 1914 letter.[2] Both of them held each other in high esteem and valued each other's friendship.[3]

Cather's first reference to "Mrs. Peattie of Omaha, the gifted author of 'A Mountain Woman'" can be found as early as 1896 in an article on Mrs. McKinley and Mrs. Bryan ("Two Women the World is Watching"). But, in Cather's appreciation, it was not until 1899 that Peattie truly came into her own and even rose to greatness with her Western story "The Man at the Edge of Things," praised as "the best western story that I have chanced to read": "Mrs. Peattie has at last arrived, so to speak, for her story 'The Man at the Edge of Things' in the September Atlantic is literature, as good as most modern French things and as elusive and artistic," she claims in a letter to Dorothy Canfield dated October 10, 1899 (*Complete Letters* no. 0058). And she did not hesitate to commend the story to the readers of the *Lincoln Courier* a few weeks later: "it stands out so prominently above all her previous work that one might say it begins a new era with her" ("Passing Show" review of "The Man at the Edge of Things"). Cather was still full of praise for Peattie in February 1905 letter to Kate Cleary. As Susanne George Bloomfield describes in an editorial note in *Impertinences: Selected Writings of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age,* Cather wrote to Cleary of having "read Peattie's stories as a young girl in Red Cloud, almost worshiping Peattie," and that "no other person had been so constant, kind, and influential in her writing career" (Bloomfield in *Impertinences* 214).

As Cather had obviously been exposed to Peattie's writings through the many editorials, newspaper columns, and fictional pieces of the *Omaha Daily Herald* (1879–1889) and *Omaha World-Herald*, any study of Peattie's probable influence on Cather needs to first examine the rich mine of newspaper articles that she produced in the 1890s during her time in Nebraska. Thus we shall thus first take a look at Peattie's journalistic writings before exploring the intertextual connections between *My Ántonia* and two Peattie stories, "The Man at the Edge of Things" and "Jim Lancy's Waterloo," one of the stories collected in *A Mountain Woman* (1896).

Peattie's Journalism

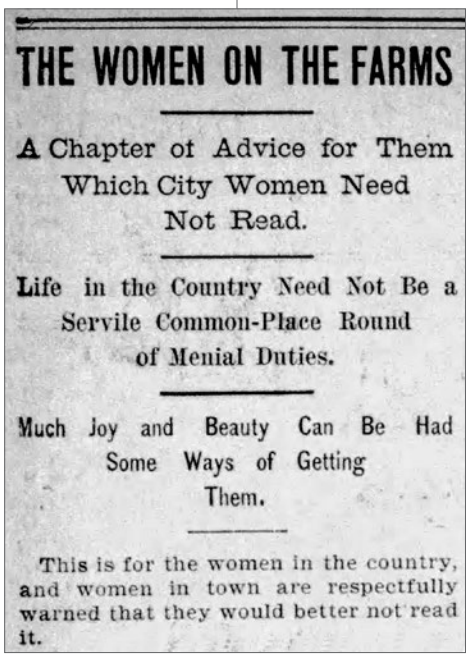
Peattie's journalistic work constitutes a good starting point for a discussion of her influence on Cather's formation.[4] Peattie's articles often provided Western women with models of empowerment which must have struck a resonant chord in the heart and mind of the young Cather. In "The Women on the Farms" (March 24, 1895), for instance, she provided farm women with sound advice as to how to maintain certain standards of civilization by not letting themselves go. Planting flowers around the farmhouse is one of the first steps: "[Flowers] are educators. They continually say: 'Beauty is as much a part of creation as use. Man does not live by meat alone. Perfume, and color, and form, and freshness are a part of the world. Put them in your own life. Enshrine them in your own heart.'" The redemptive power of art, beauty, and creativity in the heart of the wilderness was similarly

highlighted by Cather in much of her work, including in such a dismal tale as "On the Divide" in which Peattie saw a prime example of "what is primitive, simple and vital in art" ("A Word with the Women," January 14, 1896).

In "The Women on the Farms," Peattie reassures women as to their ability to repair fences when the men have no time to spare for it: "Sawing is really quite interesting after one has turned one's attention to it, and the nailing of boards is really a fascinating occupation. It is nonsense to say that a woman cannot do it. She can do it just as well as a man. It requires nothing but practice. And the way to obtain practice is to practice." And she concludes this piece with a paragraph enjoining women to seize the day ("gather your rosebuds before they are withered"), like a sharp reminder of mortality and of the necessity to enjoy the present times while we can: "Do not drudge hopelessly. Work a reasonable amount, as the price you pay for living. But live and laugh between times." Cather would later fashion the complex character of Ántonia Shimerda along similar lines in a beautiful encomium to all these farm women who fought against all odds to help their families through hard times and developed manly skills while preserving an artistic sensitivity of their own.

In 1896, Peattie also contributed a piece on Mrs. Amanda Edwards, a successful businesswoman who had decided to settle on the Nebraska plains and breed Poland China hogs to recoup her husband's financial losses after a business failure ("Some Pigs and a Woman"). Quick-minded, resourceful, and adaptable, Mrs. Edwards soon became a model for local farmers who came to learn from her unusual breeding methods based on care, with her breeds consequently attracting stockmen "from all over the country." "Thus may one conquer—even a woman, with her white brain-matter—," concludes Peattie, "if one tries hard enough and the gods have given her good sense." Cather may have found there some of the seeds that would later germinate and blossom in the character of Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, whose own story of conquest significantly begins when she listens to Ivar's advice about keeping one's pigs clean and providing them with fresh water and good food.

In addition to such articles showing women the way to empowerment and self-assertion, semifictional pieces like "Leda" (originally published in the *Omaha World-Herald* on February 1, 1891) simultaneously warned spirited young women against the dangers of prostitution in a big city like Omaha. Trying to escape the dreariness of life on a Nebraska farm, the young Leda defies her parents' wishes, goes to the city and finds a position in a store. Like Ántonia, she then falls prey to one of the customers, a young man called Harry who seduces her and promises to marry her before running away to New York, leaving the desperate young girl on the verge of madness or suicide as she realizes that she is expecting a child.



THE WOMEN ON THE FARMS

A Chapter of Advice for Them Which City Women Need Not Read.

Life in the Country Need Not Be a Servile Common-Place Round of Menial Duties.

Much Joy and Beauty Can Be Had Some Ways of Getting Them.

This is for the women in the country, and women in town are respectfully warned that they would better not read it.

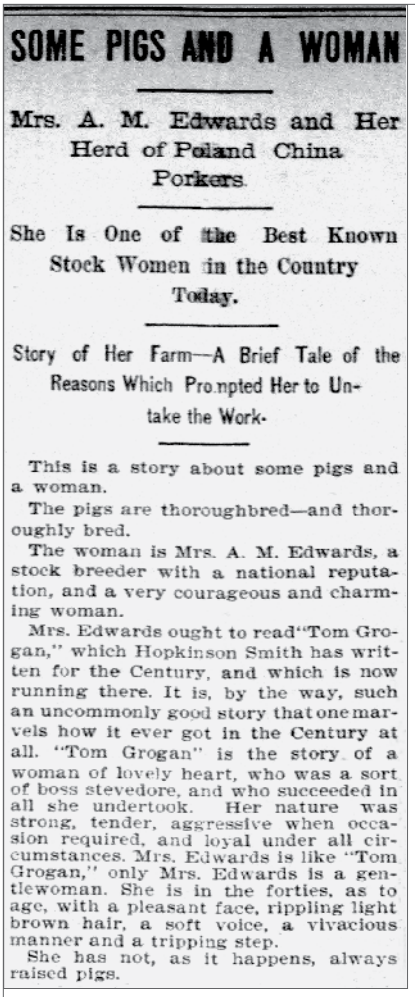
Omaha World-Herald, March 24, 1895.

All these pieces and many others might have helped Cather come to the realization that there lay in Nebraska "a rich mine of life" which was only waiting to be exploited by writers like Peattie and herself (*My Ántonia* 342). Peattie's influence might thus have been instrumental in directing Cather's attention to the creative potential to be found in the immigrant populations of Nebraska. In the 1894 story "A Childless Madonna," for instance, Peattie chose to tell the story of Italian immigrants in Nebraska—a topic which broke new ground and which a lot of contemporary readers would certainly have found just as unappealing as that of Swedes or Bohemians.[5] In this sketch, Peattie focuses on an immigrant child's hunger for beauty and artistic sense in poetic prose which, for instance, foreshadows Cather's later descriptions of Thea Kronborg's awakening to art.

Conversing with Shadows: "Prehistoric Traces" of Influence

We shall now turn to two Peattie stories whose subtle influence appears to have worked its way into Cather's later fiction: "The Man at the Edge of Things," which Cather reviewed in 1899 after its publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and "Jim Lancy's Waterloo," first published in 1894 and later included in the collection of stories *A Mountain Woman*.

"The Man at the Edge of Things" tells the story of Dilling Brown, a young man fresh out of college who decides to try his fortune out West, striking out on his own to the "Edge of Things," in the California desert, where he settles in a small adobe house that was abandoned by its previous owners. Dilling's optimism and determination to succeed falls on hard luck as the months go by and he has to confront the reality of his losses: "But all his resolution could not keep the dead heat of autumn from weighing on him like a curse, nor his eyes from aching at the distance about him, the absolute vacuity of outreaching space." Like Canute Canuteson in Cather's "On the Divide" (published three years



SOME PIGS AND A WOMAN

Mrs. A. M. Edwards and Her Herd of Poland China Porkers.

She Is One of the Best Known Stock Women in the Country Today.

Story of Her Farm—A Brief Tale of the Reasons Which Prompted Her to Undertake the Work.

This is a story about some pigs and a woman.

The pigs are thoroughbred—and thoroughly bred.

The woman is Mrs. A. M. Edwards, a stock breeder with a national reputation, and a very courageous and charming woman.

Mrs. Edwards ought to read "Tom Grogan," which Hopkinson Smith has written for the Century, and which is now running there. It is, by the way, such an uncommonly good story that one marvels how it ever got in the Century at all. "Tom Grogan" is the story of a woman of lovely heart, who was a sort of boss stevedore, and who succeeded in all she undertook. Her nature was strong, tender, aggressive when occasion required, and loyal under all circumstances. Mrs. Edwards is like "Tom Grogan," only Mrs. Edwards is a gentlewoman. She is in the forties, as to age, with a pleasant face, rippling light brown hair, a soft voice, a vivacious manner and a tripping step.

She has not, as it happens, always raised pigs.

Omaha World-Herald, March 9, 1896.

before Peattie's story), Dilling tries to make the inside of his shack more pleasant by using his artistic talents, drawing lizards with red paint on his makeshift door. However, Peattie's harsh realism drains Cather's early story of its saga-like quality. Here there is no young beautiful woman to kidnap, only vague traces of some feminine presence which still play a vital part in supporting the protagonist through his solitude, acting in some indefinite way as the last remnants of civilized life. As Dilling puts it to his friend Tommy toward the close of the story: "I discovered traces of her out there in the solitude, in the silence, Tommy—prehistoric traces, you may say. It has been the study of these which has kept my soul alive."

In her 1899 "Passing Show" review of the story, Cather similarly finds much to praise in "that exaltation of femininity in the desert, that subtile [sic], tantalizing suggestion of a woman's presence conjured up by an old glove and a few yards of white muslin, is one of the most skillful things in that skillful story, and recalls the manner in which Maupassant used to achieve effects of that kind, absolutely impalpable, yet so close and physical that they penetrate one at every pore" (729). The traces mentioned by Dilling take the form of miscellaneous domestic objects (a thimble, a folding mirror, a wicker workbasket, clay jugs, and a blue ribbon) and of a curious handwritten inscription on the wall: "He, watching over Israel, slumbereth not nor sleeps." The absent presence turns out to carry the name of Katherine Cusack, sister to a poor man who was driven insane by the desert and who ended up bleating and eating grass on all fours in the company of his sheep. Hers is "the soul of a woman" with "the spirit of a man," and she becomes the recipient of many letters written in the solitude of his shack, letters which he knows will never reach their addressee since he knows nothing of her whereabouts. The scene in which Dilling produces the carefully wrapped bunch of letters which he has been writing for months to the absent woman he has never met foreshadows the one Cather would later write as an introduction to *My Ántonia*, when Jim Burden arrives at the narrator's apartment with "a bulging legal portfolio sheltered under his fur overcoat" (*My Ántonia* xiii) which contains all his notes about their childhood friend. Likewise, Dilling "drew the great folio from his pocket, and slowly unwrapped the silken oilcloth which enveloped it" in order to protect it from mildew. Cather might also have wanted to pay homage to Peattie when she chose the same name, Cuzak, for Ántonia's married name—the name she bears in the last book of the novel, once she has managed to turn her own desert into a fertile land and orchard through love, care, and unremitting labor. Following Katherine Cusack's motto, Ántonia "slumbereth not nor sleeps": "Many a night after [my husband] was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things," she says to Jim about the trees which were, she says, constantly "on [her] mind like children" (*My Ántonia* 329–30).

"Jim Lancy's Waterloo" (1894) provides us with more fertile terrain for literary correspondences between Peattie's work and Cather's. The story of Jim and Annie (whose names once more recall those Cather would choose for the main characters of *My Ántonia*) appropriately starts on a train taking them across Iowa as they are travelling from Annie's hometown in Illinois to the Nebraska farm where Jim is taking his new bride. Likewise, Cather chose to have Jim Burden's journey start on a train crossing the plains of Iowa. Jim Lancy's visionary insights as he looks at the landscape also prefigure Jim Burden's impressions when contemplating the fields of corn in July, with both descriptions focusing on the wealth of sensory impressions characterizing this experience:

> Jim looked out of the window a long time, at the gentle undulations of the brown Iowa prairie. His eyes *seemed to* pierce beneath the sod, to *the swelling buds of the yet invisible grass*. He noticed how disdainfully the rains of the new year beat down the grasses of the year that was gone. It opened to his mind *a vision of the season's possibilities*. For a moment, even amid the smoke of the car, *he seemed to scent clover, and hear the stiff swishing of the corn* and the dull burring of the bees. ("Jim Lancy's Waterloo," emphasis mine)

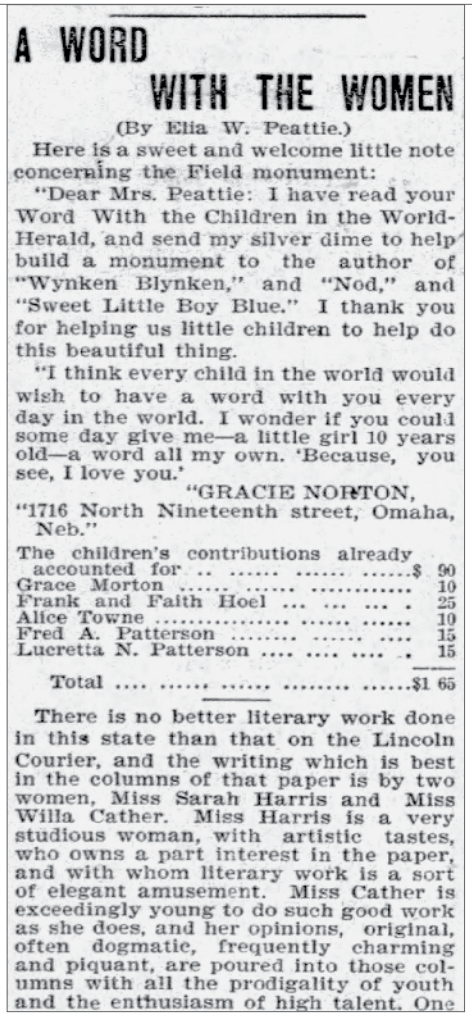
* * * * * * *

> "*It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing* in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, *heavy-odored cornfields* where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green. If all the great plain from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains had been under glass, and the heat regulated by a thermometer, it could not have been better for the yellow

tassels that were ripening and fertilizing the silk day by day. The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's *to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply* until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields." (*My Ántonia* 131–32, emphasis mine)

Similar phrasing is also used by both writers to express their character's fierce attachment to this country: "The corn came up brilliantly, and far as the eye could reach around their home it tossed its broad green leaves with an ocean-like swelling of sibilant sound. Jim loved it with a sort of passion" ("Jim Lancy's Waterloo"). "He loves with a personal *passion* the great country through which his railway runs and branches" (*My Ántonia* xi, emphasis mine).

The character of Mrs. Dundy, in whom Annie sees a frightening reflection of the one she is about to turn into, might also have served as a prototype for Crazy Mary, Ole Benson's wife in *My Ántonia*. Both women are eventually sent to the insane asylum in Lincoln after they lose their minds.



A WORD WITH THE WOMEN

(By Elia W. Peattie.)

Here is a sweet and welcome little note concerning the Field monument:

"Dear Mrs. Peattie: I have read your Word With the Children in the World-Herald, and send my silver dime to help build a monument to the author of "Wynken Blynken," and "Nod," and "Sweet Little Boy Blue." I thank you for helping us little children to help do this beautiful thing.

"I think every child in the world would wish to have a word with you every day in the world. I wonder if you could some day give me—a little girl 10 years old—a word all my own. 'Because, you see, I love you.'

"GRACIE NORTON,
"1716 North Nineteenth street, Omaha, Neb."

The children's contributions already accounted for	$ 90
Grace Morton	10
Frank and Faith Hoel	25
Alice Towne	10
Fred A. Patterson	15
Lucretta N. Patterson	15
Total	$1 65

There is no better literary work done in this state than that on the Lincoln Courier, and the writing which is best in the columns of that paper is by two women, Miss Sarah Harris and Miss Willa Cather. Miss Harris is a very studious woman, with artistic tastes, who owns a part interest in the paper, and with whom literary work is a sort of elegant amusement. Miss Cather is exceedingly young to do such good work as she does, and her opinions, original, often dogmatic, frequently charming and piquant, are poured into those columns with all the prodigality of youth and the enthusiasm of high talent. One

"There is no better literary work done in this state than that on the Lincoln Courier, and the writing which is best in the columns of that paper is by two women, Miss Sarah Harris and Miss Willa Cather." From the *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 28, 1895.

It seems to me, however, that Jim Lancy's tragic tale resonates most hauntingly in the story of the tramp who threw himself into the threshing machine after waving to Ántonia, who stood nearby. In Peattie's story, Jim and Annie grow further apart as he becomes obsessed with his work and she becomes a prey to solitude and despair on their farm. Together with the loss of their baby girl, the terrifying realization that she might soon become like Mrs. Dundy serves as a wake-up call for Annie who confronts Jim with an ultimatum and decides to head back home to Illinois. Jim cannot bring himself to give up the fight, however, but after being once more defeated by circumstances he has no choice but to sell all his property at auction. All he keeps from his former life is a silver thimble that he found during the auction in his wife's wicker work-stand, next to the baby's linen shirt that Annie had left unfinished after their daughter's death. This thimble is the only thing found in Jim's pockets two months later, when a "plain drunk" is taken to Omaha's police station, and it is presented to the matron "with his compliments" by the police officer who arrested Jim, "but she, when no one noticed, went softly to where the man was sleeping, and slipped it back into his pockets, with a sigh. For she knew somehow—as women do know things—that he had not stolen that thimble." Likewise, the identity of the nameless tramp in Ántonia's story is reduced to the few objects that were found in his pockets after the mangled body was extracted from the threshing machine: an "old penknife," "the wishbone of a chicken wrapped up in a piece of paper," and a poem that had been "cut out of a newspaper" and was by then "nearly worn out" (*My Ántonia* 173)—a poem by Samuel Woodworth entitled "The Old Oaken Bucket" in which the speaker nostalgically evokes memories of a happy childhood. Condensing as they do a whole story of lost happiness (the poem), shattered hopes (the wishbone) and possibly crushed creativity (the "old penknife" which might once have been used to express his artistic sensibility, as Canute does in Cather's "On the Divide"), these broken pieces suggest that there is probably more to him than a mere tramp who has reached the end of the line, and the shadows cast by Jim Lancy's own story onto Cather's narrative endow this tramp's life story with an even more tragic dimension.

Besides directing Cather's attention to the potential fertility of Nebraska material, Peattie's influence was most decisive in helping the younger writer discover traces of a woman's life and spirit of resilience in the outermost reaches of Western territories. Peattie's influence possibly extends well beyond *My Ántonia* as traces of that woman's soul can also be found in "Tom Outland's Story." Instead of a solitary French rancher reading Shakespeare (Papin in "The Man at the Edge of Things), Tom Outland finds guidance and support from a Belgian priest, Father Duchene, reading the classics. But in *The Professor's House* Cather skillfully plays on the same contrast between East and West, the same contrast between settled life in a "dull, formal old town" (Cather in her review of "The Man at the Edge of Things") and the spirit of adventure associated with the West that she had praised decades before in her review of "The Man at the Edge of Things." Most importantly, Tom's exploration of the

cliff dwellings leads him to discover the mysterious mummified figure of Mother Eve, a young woman who might have been killed by a jealous husband or left to starve up on the rock after an attack by a hostile tribe, and he similarly tries to reconstruct her story from whatever fragments he might find there, including domestic objects. Excavating women's experience as a first step to retrieving women's memory from the shadows of history is a vital act which energized both Peattie's and Cather's writings. By the same token, giving Peattie the place that she truly deserves as one of Cather's first mentors and bringing to light traces of her "woman's soul" is just as vital in the reconstruction of Cather's formative years as a young writer.

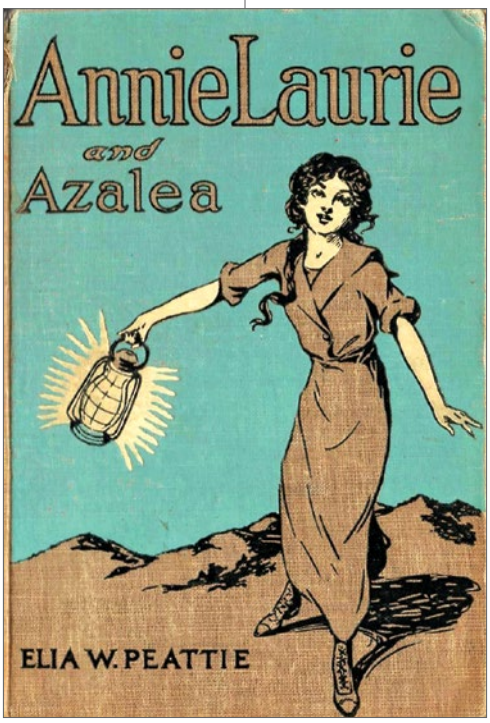
Conclusion

In the light of so many patterns of convergence, one might be at pains to account for Cather's embarrassment at being associated with Peattie, as if she considered the connection to be compromising to her own reputation as a writer. A 1915 letter to Roger Scaife in publicity at Houghton Mifflin expressly urges him not to mention Mrs. Peattie's notice when advertising Cather's latest novel *The Song of the Lark*: "If you advertise in Nebraska," wrote Cather, "be sure not to use that extract about 'unredeemed Nebraska' from Mrs. Peattie's notice.[6] The whole state has been pouting at Mrs. Peattie for twenty years, and they are always saying that I might have made them very happy 'if only you had never come under Mrs. Peattie's influence'" (*Complete Letters* no. 0329). Cather's uneasiness at being put in the company of Peattie might well be accounted for by her awareness of the profound influence the latter played on her development as a writer. Certainly this is so despite Cather's own unwillingness to be associated with a woman writer whose life and work did not live up to the "high standards of artistic achievement and personal conduct" she espoused (Birns 57).

Cather was indeed more inclined to situate herself in the continuity of male writers. During the last years of the nineteenth century Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and George Sand were the only women writers to whom she was willing to accord any artistic value. The rest were minimized with such evaluations as "mawkish sentimentality," "sex consciousness" and "horribly subjective," to borrow Cather's own words from her oft-quoted 1895 *Courier* piece on Ouida. She harps on the same theme in this extract from a lesser-known 1897 article on George Eliot:

> I have not a great deal of faith in women in literature. As a rule, if I see the anouncement [sic] of a new book by a woman, I—well, I take one by a man instead. This may be a very narrow prejudice; I do not defend it. It is merely a personal feeling. I have noticed that the great masters of letters are men, and I prefer to take no chances when I read. ("Old Books and New")

By the time she published *The Song of the Lark*, Cather was far more willing to acknowledge the numinous influence on her work of at least one woman writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who had guided her pen toward the material that she knew best.



One of a series of Peattie's novels for young readers featuring Azalea, a young girl of the Blue Ridge Mountains (Reilly & Britton, 1913).

Thus although some of Cather's writings praise the quality of Peattie's creative work, she was well aware that Jewett and Peattie had not been cut from the same cloth and she ranked the former much more highly in her own pantheon of great writers. If only by virtue of her financial independence, her supportive partnership with Annie Fields and her connections with the literati of New England and beyond, Jewett also was looked up to by Cather as a model on which to fashion her own life. Inversely, Peattie was always very much under pressure to churn out stories by the dozen in order to compensate for the dwindling finances of an ailing husband and provide for their three children as well as for various relatives who had come to depend upon the couple. She consequently could not afford to polish her work as she might have in other circumstances. References to Peattie do not appear in Cather's private correspondence or other writings between 1915 and Peattie's death in 1935. The two old friends appear to have grown further apart, both personally and artistically. Cather was indeed moving into more modernist, experimental terrain, while Peattie "eluded the demands of Modernism by writing more and more for adolescents" ("The Prodigious Peattie"), publishing only a few short plays and miscellaneous poems in the final two decades of her life. As we have seen, however, whatever the reasons that led these two women to part ways, Cather's work provides ample proof that Peattie's early influence possibly played as determining a part in shaping Cather's style and directing her choice of subject matter as did her vaunted connection to Jewett.

NOTES

1. See Peattie's January 14, 1896 contribution to the same column, "A Word with the Women," in the *Omaha World-Herald*.

2. See Cather to Roger Scaife May 2 [1914], *Complete Letters* no. 0592. This letter suggests that Cather probably read Peattie's novel *The Precipice* after the book was sent her by Roger Scaife, who worked in publicity at Houghton Mifflin.

3. In her unpublished memoir, Peattie fondly remembers the young Willa Cather: "Miss Cather has become the foremost woman fictionist of our country. She had then as now, simple and downright manners. She has written about the things that interested her and done it without any manner of affectation. Owing to the vitality of her intellect and the depths of her human sympathy and to her instinctive literary taste, which has kept her from all forms of sentimentality, she has achieved an excellence which wins the respect even of the professional scoffers" ("The Star Wagon").

4. Most of the pieces referenced in this essay can be found in Susanne George Bloomfield's fascinating introduction to Peattie's work *Impertinences: Selected Writings of Elia Peattie, a Journalist in the Gilded Age*. Just as invaluable is the digital archive on Elia Peattie developed under Bloomfield's supervision by the University of Nebraska's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (plainshumanities.unl.edu/peattie/index.html).

5. In her essay "My First Novels [There Were Two]," Cather points out that, when she wrote *O Pioneers!*, she "did not in the least expect that other people would see anything in a slow-moving story . . . a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards,—set in Nebraska, of all places!" and she goes on to underline that "*O Pioneers!* was not only about Nebraska farmers; the farmers were Swedes!" (94).

6. Peattie had obviously seen through the thin disguise of Moonstone, Colorado, and recognized Cather's actual sources of inspiration in Nebraska.

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Puzzle and Passion: The Case of Willa Cather and Mary Roberts Rinehart

John Swift

Prologue: Cather and the *Bookman*, October 1922

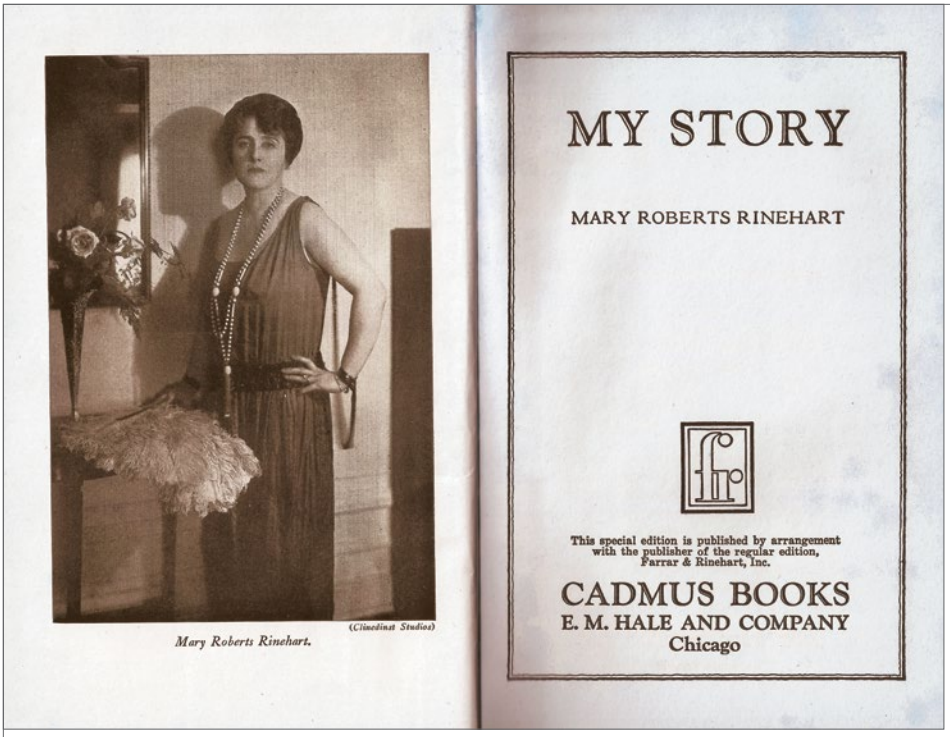
In October 1922, Willa Cather was probably stung by a particularly unkind (and deeply sexist) review of *One of Ours* by Sidney Howard in the *Bookman*, a breezy New York journal dedicated to serving the needs of American bibliophiles. Cather had for years enjoyed its favorable reviews of her early novels, occasionally suggesting them to Houghton Mifflin for promotional use.[1] In May 1921 the *Bookman* had published a substantial appreciative interview presenting her as a remarkable and still-emerging talent, a writer who "has consistently chosen the path of fine work. She is moving unhurriedly toward a richer self-expression" (Carroll 216). And just a month earlier, in the September issue, her name had appeared—alongside those of Sherwood Anderson, Mary Austin, Zona Gale, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and William Allen White—on the advisory Committee on American Fiction to the *Bookman*'s Literary Club Service, an ambitious pet project of the journal's hyperactive young editor-in-chief, John C. Farrar.[2]

Sidney Howard's October 1922 review, "Miss Cather Goes to War," must have tempered considerably her good feelings about the *Bookman*. Like many other reviewers, Howard divided *One of Ours* into two parts, Claude's melancholy Nebraska pastoral and his idealized European epic, and praised the first—reassuringly reminiscent of *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*—while extravagantly disparaging the second. Cather's doughboys he found "tritely sentimental" (though "wholly glorious"); the novel's European settings and battle scenes were "a potpourri of soldier yarns and impressions of Rheims two years after, amalgamated into a 'Saturday Evening Post' version of [John Dos Passos's] 'Three Soldiers' and about as true to the actuality of warfare as propaganda for the bonus" (Howard 218).[3] And, like some other critics (including, in different ways, Heywood Broun and H. L. Mencken), Howard associated this inauthenticity with Cather's sex and her lack of personal experience with the manly realities of modern war.

Mary Roberts Rinehart, 1916. Jacobs Photo Shop. J. Willis Sayre Collection of Theatrical Photographs, University of Washington Special Collections.

The sentence that I've just quoted might have been especially galling to Willa Cather because it appeared to attack the wrong target. Although Cather had declined S. S. McClure's 1915 invitation to go to Europe and interview German leaders for the *New York Evening Mail*, one of her literary competitors *did* go to the front early that year as a special war correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and subsequently published her reports and thoughts—and "soldier yarns"—there and in various other magazines, including *McClure's*, culminating in *The Altar of Freedom*, an impassioned broadside that can fairly be called both "sentimental" and "propaganda," brought out in 1917 by Cather's own publisher, Houghton Mifflin. That competitor was the flamboyant Mary Roberts Rinehart, Cather's colleague on the *Bookman*'s Committee on American Fiction.

Cather might also have remembered that Rinehart's latest novel, *The Breaking Point* (a romance involving amnesia, a long-ago crime, and redemption), had been in September gushingly praised in John Farrar's monthly "The Editor Recommends" column. He found it "written with a sure knowledge of the technique of plot building, an unfailing use of the dramatic, a deft sense of characterization, and a clever interweaving of sentiment . . . one



Frontispiece and title page from a 1931 special edition of Rinehart's autobiography.

of the most exciting problem novels I have ever read" (Farrar 89). And she would have seen, in the October issue that ran "Miss Cather Goes to War," that the *Bookman*'s Literary Club Service was beginning its discussion of contemporary American fiction by identifying seven "outstanding figures" in the practice of "the story written chiefly for story interest [finding] its materials largely in the common life" ("The *Bookman*'s Literary Club Service" 245). Whatever was meant by this category of fiction, Cather would have registered that Rinehart was presented as one of its "outstanding figures," "a masterful story teller, with rare gifts of humor and unusual understanding of the middle class family" (246)—and that she, Willa Cather, was nowhere mentioned.

Considering her own reputation relative to Rinehart's, she might also have reflected, consolingly, that the *New Republic*, which had had the good taste and sense in April to print her critique of realism, "The Novel Démeublé," had in August dismissed *The Breaking Point* as an "old-fashioned novel for old-fashioned readers" (quoted in Cohn 149). She would *not* have known that in its December issue the *Bookman* would print Rinehart's own anti-realism polemic, "The Unreality of Modern Realism," a moralizing call for idealism in literature. Nor could Cather foresee that in January 1923, she would at last arrive as an "outstanding figure" in the Literary Club Service's final category of contemporary American writers: "The Younger Group" (an assignment that no doubt delighted her), in which she appeared in company with Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Zona Gale. In January she would also see *One of Ours* arrive on the Bookman's own "Monthly Score" fiction list (a top ten list derived from lending library data) where, in February, it passed *The Breaking Point,* took third place, and knocked Rinehart back to fifth. And finally, of course, in May 1923 Willa Cather would win the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours,* thereby considerably easing the sting of Howard's review—and demonstrating convincingly her legitimate status as an "outstanding figure" of contemporary American fiction.

Mirrored Lives

Cather and Rinehart are not typically thought of as literary competitors or colleagues, but they were both, although by 1922 their diverging career paths were clear. Mary Roberts Rinehart is remembered today as "the American Agatha Christie," a slightly eccentric lady writer of mystery novels, if she's remembered at all. But in the first half of the twentieth century she was an enormous presence in American popular culture, a rock star among writers. Her brief bio in the section dedicated to "Novels of Story Interest" in "The *Bookman*'s Literary Club Service" presents her as a public celebrity:

> Striking in appearance, with unfailing vitality, she never rests but is riding in the west, fishing in the north, hunting in the south, or attending a rush of social events in Washington where she is now living. (247)

She worked hard at her craft and succeeded. According to Rinehart's biographer, "she wrote more best-selling novels than any other American writer" (Cohn 203). Her preferred genres were mystery, comedy, and romance, or hybrids of the three, and in addition to novels she wrote short stories, poetry, plays, screenplays, travel articles, social criticism, advice columns, editorials, and—twice—her autobiography, *My Story*. In 1939 she wrote that a writer "is a factory" ("Writing Is Work" 81), but in fact she herself appears to have been an entire diversified industry. And she was hugely profitable and lived large.

She was, in short, quite different from the reticent, publicity-shy Willa Cather. Yet their lives often ran parallel and even intersected. Rinehart was less than three years younger than Cather and lived about ten years longer. As girls, both wanted to be doctors; Cather in college made her way to literary studies,

while Rinehart, without funds for college, completed a three-year nurse training program at the Pittsburgh Homeopathic Hospital. On graduation in 1896 she married one of her supervising physicians, retiring immediately from nursing to become a housewife and mother. Cather moved to Pittsburgh in 1896 to edit the *Home Monthly* and, in the spring of 1897, she researched, wrote, and published an article, "Nursing as a Profession for Women," on Rinehart's former program. Did she in her research meet Dr. Stanley Rinehart, or hear the romantic (for some, scandalous) story of his courtship and marriage about a year earlier to the nineteen-year-old nurse trainee Mary Roberts? We don't know; but in the article Cather humorously identifies marriage "to some susceptible physician" as one possible career outcome for a trained nurse. On the other hand, Cather herself was in the spring of 1897 making a life decision exactly opposite to Rinehart's, writing to her college friend Mariel Gere about detaching herself from "the young Doctor who wants me to marry him" (*Complete Letters* no. 0037). Medicine and marriage were on her mind, and she was choosing neither.

Over the next seven or eight years the two young women pursued their different Pittsburgh lives, one a busy housewife and mother, the other a career woman and developing author. According to Rinehart, they met face to face once, probably around 1904, when Cather had begun to teach at Rinehart's alma mater, Allegheny High School. They may have been introduced by their mutual friend George Seibel: according to Kathleen D. Byrne and Richard C. Snyder's *Chrysalis: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh, 1896–1906*, Seibel claimed responsibility for getting Rinehart's first poem printed in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in early 1904 (25), and it would have made sense for him to have introduced her to his editing friend and increasingly successful poet and short story writer, Willa Cather. Cather had some unexciting but solid advice for the novice: slow down and revise your work, she told her. "But I was too young and eager for that," says Rinehart in *My Story*: "Ideas were coming fast and strong" (87).

They continued "fast and strong," and by March 1912, when both writers were among the four hundred guests at William Dean Howells's seventy-fifth birthday party in New York, Rinehart was a rising popular sensation: four successful novels (two of them national bestsellers), scores of short stories and poems, as well as a few plays. Cather, about to publish her first novel, was leaving journalism to work at her art full-time. Over the next decade their stories appeared in some of the same magazines, including *Collier's, Smart Set, Harper's*, and *McClure's*; between 1913 and 1918 Houghton Mifflin published their longer works. When Cather didn't go to the war in 1915, she and Edith Lewis instead toured the relative safety of the newly opened Mesa Verde National Park. When Rinehart returned from Europe that year, she too went west, joining a horseback expedition into the newly opened Glacier National Park. Like Cather, she loved the West and returned for summers on a Wyoming ranch across the next twenty years.

Cather and Lewis spent the 1920s based in Greenwich Village, moving uptown to 570 Park Avenue in 1932. Two and a half years later Rinehart, by then widowed, brought six vans of possessions from Washington, D.C. to an eighteen-room apartment at 630 Park Avenue, a three-minute walk from Cather and Lewis. They lived as neighbors until Cather's death in 1947. Rinehart usually spent her summers in Bar Harbor, Maine, where she bought a vacation estate a few years after arriving in New York City; Cather spent parts of the last four summers of her life fifteen minutes away in Northeast Harbor, on the other side of Mount Desert Island. I doubt that they met again in Manhattan or Maine, or that either was particularly aware of her famous fellow writer's proximity; Rinehart in *My Story* is an unembarrassed name-dropper, and so it is hard to imagine that she would not have described any more face-to-face meetings with Cather.

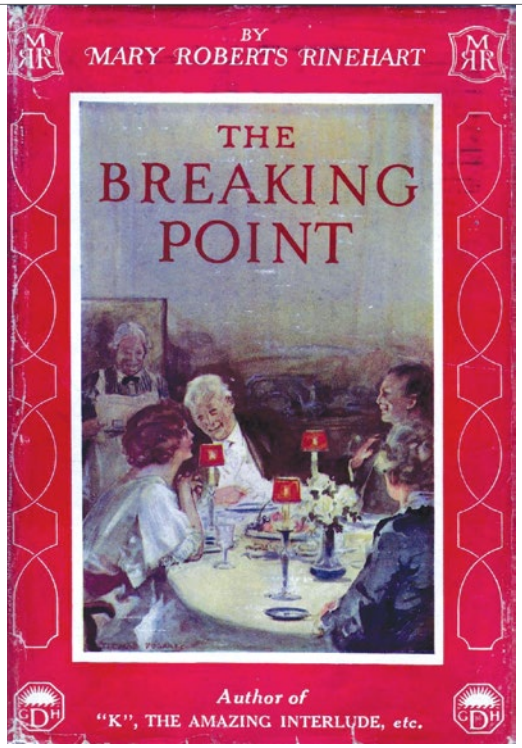
In a last missed encounter, ironically typical of each, Rinehart in July 1947 went public in a *Ladies Home Journal* interview about her breast cancer and mastectomy ten years earlier, urging readers to disregard the "unmentionableness" of the disease: "Don't wait," she said. "Don't hesitate. Don't be afraid or ashamed or over-optimistic. For those are the attitudes that cost women's lives" (Palmer 152). That message came too late for Willa Cather, who had quietly died in April as a result of, among other things, metastatic breast cancer: a very private sickness and death, and one to which the "unmentionable" word—cancer—wouldn't be attached publicly for more than seventy years (see Homestead 294–98).

Puzzle

They knew of each other, certainly. Cather's only published comment about Rinehart that I know of, a May 1923 letter to her publisher Alfred Knopf and his wife Blanche about winning the Pulitzer, hints at a grudging respect for Rinehart's popularity, salesmanship, and financial (if not critical) successes. In it she suggests elliptically that the critic Heywood Broun, who, like Sidney Howard, had accused *One of Ours* of sentimentality, would see in the prize (which was at that time awarded for "best present[ing] the wholesome atmosphere of

American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood") a further confirmation of Cather's artistic failure—as she made her way laughing to the bank:

> I hope the [Pulitzer's] publicity will stimulate sales and will be good for you as well as for me. Those High-Brows, Heywood Brown & Co., will storm worse than ever and say it's but one step more to Mary Rinehart.
>
> I have a gratifying statement from Houghton Mifflin; Antonia sold 3,000 in the last six months and The Song of the Lark 600. (*Complete Letters* no. 2554)



Dustjacket for an early edition of Rinehart's novel *The Breaking Point* (1922).

For her own part, Rinehart recognized Cather as a serious writer and admired her ability to participate decorously in what Rinehart called the "new realism," the postwar fiction that she saw as mainly concerned with disillusionment and sexual frankness. Rinehart was stirred but repelled by its cynical coarseness and decided in the mid-1920s that "in her own small manner of course Willa Cather had been a realist for years. So too had Edith Wharton in *Ethan Frome*" (*My Story* 465). She tried her own hand at disillusionment and sexual frankness in a few novels of the 1920s and 1930s, with at best mixed results. There may even be some echoes of *The Professor's House* in *This Strange Adventure,* which Rinehart says she began in 1927 in an attempt "to follow this new trend" (*My Story* 465). The novel attacks the emptiness of postwar American life, and its plot includes a loveless marriage, alienated families, a boyish inventor and pioneering aviation engineer, an unsuccessful suicide by gas asphyxiation. But the effect of the novel is mainly sentimental and wholly un-Cather-like.

In fact Rinehart could no more write like Cather than Cather could write like Rinehart. In order to understand their fundamental difference, it is useful here to consider their differing attitudes toward the mystery or crime story, the mainstay of Rinehart's fifty-year career. She knew that mysteries were necessarily dominated by their problem-solving plots, and were thus "mechanized" and "artificial" (*My Story* 408). But she also believed that with authorial attention to characterization, to "the atmosphere, the tension" (she appears to intend something like "emotional undercurrents"), "a crime book properly done *is* a novel" (*My Story* 409)—by which she meant real, serious art. But Cather did not share this view; as early as 1896, in a "Passing Show" column for the *Nebraska State Journal*, she warned her readers that they "will not find very many mystery stories" among their good literary memories, because in mysteries "everything depends upon plot; it's the plot first and the truth afterward or never at all." She concluded that they "are read and thrown aside as quickly as a puzzle that is solved . . . they contain none of the elements of lasting satisfaction" (*Kingdom of Art* 335). Or, in the terms with which twenty-six years later she began "The Novel Démeublé," mysteries were not art but merely "amusements," "new things that are quickly threadbare and can be lightly thrown away" (36).

In both the early column and the mature aesthetic manifesto, Cather emphasized the *disposability* of these "amusements," and I will suggest now that that throwaway quality has to do with the crime story's ultimate complete solvability. The end of any mystery story—the identification of the criminal—is known from the outset to its writer, whose narrative task is simply to lead the reader to it through a tangle of clues. That goal achieved, the story has no further function; it is thrown away simply because it's exhausted. Rinehart, like other theorists of detective fiction, understood the genre's self-consuming narrative machinery well.[4] She called attention to it with her typical first-person narrators who speak proleptically from a future in which the crime has been solved—her sometimes ridiculed "Had I but known" style of narration—and with her frequent aligning of romance plots with criminal investigations, so that wedding bells often follow the unmasking of villains. In short, Rinehart's detective fictions are essentially and reassuringly *comic*, and they end conclusively.

Passion

Conclusive endings were at odds, however, with the quality that Willa Cather thought made for literary greatness. In the 1896 column she singled out one mystery that provided "a classic instance that that sort of thing [mystery writing] can be done well" (*Kingdom* 335): that was Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a mystery story insoluble forever because

forever unfinished, Dickens having died before its completion. In fact, art for Cather was memorable or "great" exactly in its *resistance* to quick or full resolution, its paradoxical ability to provide "lasting satisfaction." This phrase is important; I call it paradoxical because satisfaction is generally self-extinguishing and thus ephemeral. Consider her famous 1925 account of Jewett's advice: "*The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature*"—with a capital "L" ("Best Short Stories" 47; emphasis in the original). Great literary art continues to "tease the mind" of its reader by *failing* to solve the mysteries it discovers, by holding the reader's desire for certitude in memorable suspension. Cather's novels are full of puzzles, mysteries, and even criminal acts—but precious few solutions or resolutions.

One might raise objections to that assertion. At the level of literal plot, what about Frank Shabata or Buck Scales, criminals to whom justice is dealt? Or what about Father Latour's beatific final vision of slavery undone and the Navajo returned to their homeland? Aren't these, in quite different ways, self-consciously conclusive narrative structures, tyings-up of loose ends? These questions deserve much fuller answers, but here I will just suggest that Cather in her mature work is a consummate and radical ironist whose own judgments of her characters and their situations remain unknowable. Do the juridical punishments of Frank Shabata and Buck Scales help us to understand love turned murderous, or infanticide? Is Latour's "happy ending" only a pretty curtain pulled across the continuing violent taking of the Southwest from its natives? Cather simply isn't saying. Her silence teases the reader's mind back to re-encounter the work.

I do not want to suggest that crime fiction is an *inferior* form of literature. I don't think Cather would either. She said clearly in "The Novel Démeublé" that "amusements" have their own value and purpose—"One does not wish the egg one eats for breakfast, or the morning paper, to be made of the stuff of immortality" (36)—and there's evidence in her letters that she continued to read mysteries across her entire career.[5] I agree, however, with her identification of the genre's unmemorability. In preparing this essay I read more than a dozen of Mary Roberts Rinehart's mystery novels, most of which I had read at least once before, and several short stories, and I must admit that I forgot their details almost immediately. Probably some of my amnesia has to do with Rinehart's repeated formulae: rambling country houses, bumpings in the dark, faked deaths, elderly narrators. But it is also true, as I have argued, that each novel's structure works to leave me, once its problem is solved, with nothing more to think or wonder about. It seems, then, that sometimes we read in order *not* to think, *not* to remember, *not* to wonder.

Nor do I intend to claim that Cather's general avoidance in her work of affirmations of certainty and of structural closure reflected a personal spiritual crisis of skepticism—something like, say, Godfrey St. Peters's. Rinehart devised cheerful and highly conventional voices for herself and her characters, voices confident of an orderly goodness lying invisible behind this world, a hidden providence that would nonetheless eventually make itself known. As a result, it is easy to discover in her work an occasionally explicit allegory of Christian redemption. (I am thinking, for example, of the "resurrection" [315] experienced by Dick Livingstone in *The Breaking Point*, who fully recovers his lost innocence in church on Christmas Day). And it is similarly tempting to discover redemption's formal *denial* in Cather's ironies, particularly when they lead to a condition of doubt as radical and painful as St. Peters's. But discerning either writer's personal belief system in her work is, I think, like all acts of detection, finally, a project haunted by its own interpretive incompleteness. "The heart of another," says Turgenev, and muses St. Peter (*Professor's House* 93), "is a dark forest, always," and I agree with both.

I suspect, though, that what I earlier called the suspended desire for certitude that Cather associates with great art has something to do with a belief or hope—perhaps her own, perhaps her reader's—that the baffling "clues" of empirical experience point timidly to something bright, lovely, and always just beyond the horizon of language. I am painfully aware of the unsatisfying vagueness of these words, but, as Cather argues most famously toward the end of "The Novel Démeublé," art (as opposed to amusement) evokes the unspoken or ineffable, "whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there" (41). Her own memorable phrases struggle to define this enigmatic absent presence: "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed" (41–42). She concludes the essay with a well-known aesthetic injunction to a descriptive minimalism in which the presence may reveal itself to something other than bodily eyes: art, she says, should be left

> as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended . . . bare for the play of emotions, great and little. . . . The elder Dumas

> enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls. (42–43)[6]

These gorgeously suggestive images bring this essay to an end. The thing not named, whatever sustains us in a still-desirous "lasting satisfaction," is presumably passion itself: the passion of a love too large for containment in the tame conventions of our lives or language, or of divinity speaking through its disciples, in words at once wild and strange, yet intimately familiar. The invisible world trembles, miraculous and ungraspable, at the margins of our ordinary lives, and we can neither understand nor look away from its unfathomable mysteries of love and death.

NOTES

1. See *Complete Letters*, no. 0444 to Roger Scaife (December 8, 1918) and nos. 0348 (May 8, 1918) and 0454 (May 12, 1922) to Ferris Greenslet.

2. I have found no information on how Cather came to be a member of this group, or what her responsibilities to it were, if any. It seems possible that she was invited or nominated by the committee's chair, Mary Austin, who had praised her work in 1919 and 1920, and with whom she corresponded in 1921–22. Nor is it clear how Rinehart was invited, although in subsequent years John Farrar worked with her sons to create the publishing firm of Farrar and Rinehart (later simply Rinehart), which published her work after 1929.

3. "Propaganda for the bonus" presumably refers to the heroic rhetoric and theatrics that accompanied congressional discussion in May 1922 over whether or not the U.S. should pay retroactive bonus pay to soldiers who had served in the recent war.

4. Rinehart was throughout her career an interested student of the mystery story and its structures. She recognized both its essential doubleness—its manifest story of an investigation and its "hidden story" of how the crime occurred (*My Story* 409)—and its narrator's necessary invulnerability (in order that the "hidden story" can eventually be told). In these formulations she anticipated by nearly twenty years Tzvetan Todorov's influential structuralist essay, "The Typology of Detective Fiction."

5. See, for example, her letters to Louise Guerber of October 18, 1927 and September 6, 1944 (*Complete Letters* nos. 2882 and 2931), where she is critical of the work of Eden Philpotts and Dornford Yates respectively.

6. Cather was fascinated by Dumas's "great principle" and referred to it frequently in her published writings between 1896 and 1922. Bernice Slote traces its evolution in her aesthetic thinking in *The Kingdom of Art* (83ff). On the other hand, I can find no other references to the Pentecost (Acts of the Apostles 2) in Cather's writing. Among Cather scholars, only Mathieu Duplay discusses the Pentecostal reference directly, associating it—rightly, I think—with "the imminent but as yet deferred manifestation of the absolute" in *My Mortal Enemy* (250).

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"Long-Cellared Wine": "Double Birthday," Edward J. H. O'Brien, and the Best American Short Stories Series

Timothy W. Bintrim and Scott Riner

For lovers of print books, the publishing world appeared about to break in two in 2010 or thereabouts. In July of that year, Amazon reported that e-book sales had surpassed those of hardcover books; the next year, e-book sales eclipsed those of trade paperbacks (Tweney). Print seemed about to go the way of broadcast radio, the sort of epochal media shift commemorated in the Buggles's "Video Killed the Radio Star." Yet due in part to the social exigencies imposed by Covid, print refused to die. After a few years' infatuation with Kindles and other screen readers, in a course correction Cather herself would have approved of, the people have returned to the old romance of ink-on-paper books.

In a recent symposium on the future of literary publishing, Gary Houston, managing editor of the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, comments on the resurgence of codex (ink-print) publishing:

> It is a very old-fashioned thing, perhaps—to hold in your hands a small repository of thoughts and stories written by diverse individuals at a particular time and in that time collected into a volume, be able to shelve it, be able any time to retrieve it. It is very simple and not long ago something integral to civilized life. Unless we really want to throw it in the garbage, [literary writing] shouldn't be regarded as disposable, like Kleenex or the newspaper that proverbially lines the birdcage floor or, to the point, like internet news. We have moved away from print to the extent that there is an intimidation in the air almost saying you mustn't do it, you mustn't have it, anymore "for we have all moved on." But that assertion is not true, it only asserts it is. (Quoted in Larimer)

If we may echo Houston, readers "overwhelmed by internet news" may understandably seek the solace of brick-and-mortar libraries and bookstores, the substance, heft, and aroma of actual books that, with allowances for human frailty, we may still defend as great—*sans* scare quotes. They may hearken, as did Cather in her late Pittsburgh story "Double Birthday," for an era that was "before the war" (read "before the pandemic"), an era of comparative innocence and affluence when craftmanship mattered, when laypeople (at least those with some money, education, and leisure), could decide what books, textiles, and wines were worth having, and—by scrimping—could acquire, experience, or cherish a limited number of these small, good things.

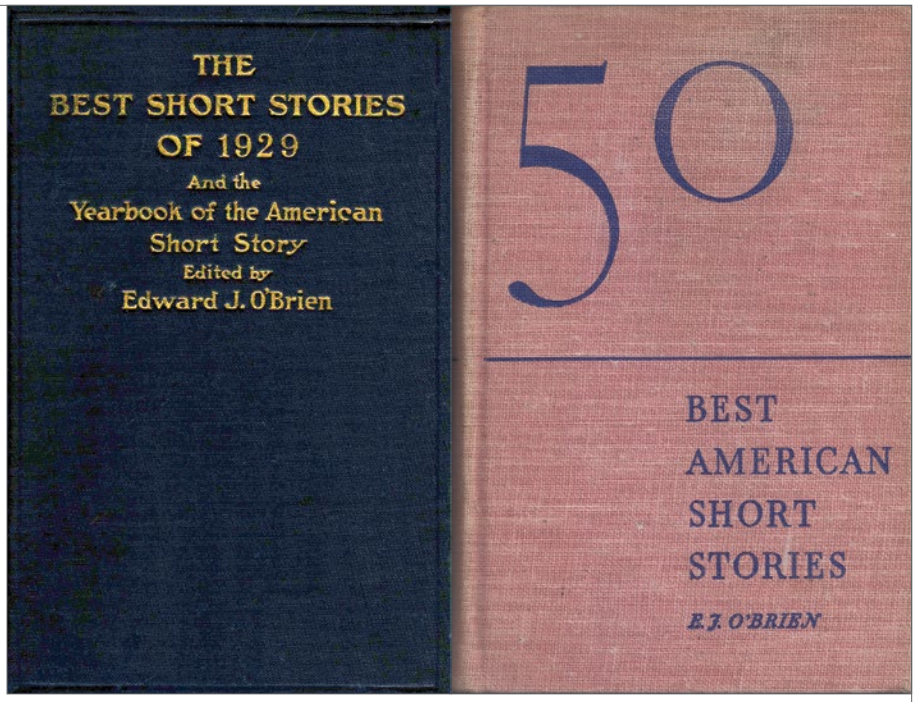
"Double Birthday" is a story replete with gifts—and as we will see, a story itself gifted—a tale of the planned celebration of a shared birthday of "Young Albert" Engelhardt, age fifty-five, and his namesake uncle, Doctor Engelhardt, age eighty. It is a story of friendships fallen into desuetude through vagaries of social status, geography, and physical health. Yet a few friendships survive of a time "more closely woven," and as friendships sometimes do, bloom again from the root.

In the context of "Double Birthday," Young Albert counts among his meaningful acquisitions his "beautiful youth": his trips to New York City during the opera season, the books and art and sheet music he selected with care and discernment, his Italian writing desk, even the table linen he saved from his mother's house that was sold long ago, a social fabric that is, in Cather's opening sentence, a relic of a "past more closely woven" before machines (or machine intelligence) determined quality (62, 41). As the patrician widowed daughter of a powerful and wealthy Pittsburgh judge, Margaret Parmenter could afford more nice things, but she has also suffered losses, not the least the death of young Mr. Parmenter. More than the material accoutrements of wealth such as furs, jewels, and a chauffeured motorcar, she, like Albert, values experiences: vacations at the Allegheny City house of a favorite aunt and summers at Mrs. Sterrett's in Rome, when Young Albert was a gallant youth of thirty and she a girl half his age who liked to be liked by the Engelhardt boys "aesthetically" rather than sexually (57).

Written during 1928 when Cather, like Young Albert, was contemplating her fifty-fifth birthday, "Double Birthday" is also a celebration of Cather's own "beautiful youth" spent in *fin de siècle* Pittsburgh. The Steel City at the turn of the century was a place and time when young aesthetes like the Engelhardt brothers could engage in "fantastic individual enterprises"—even if these pursuits literally cost a fortune ("Double Birthday" 42).

In 1914, Edward Joseph Harrington O'Brien (1890–1941) was another young man in search of a "fantastic individual enterprise" by which to distinguish himself. A Boston-born, British-leaning poet and critic, he had a congenital heart defect which limited him physically but did not impair his intellectual appetites and self-confidence (Lorentzen). Twenty-four-year-old O'Brien,

after just one year at Harvard, decided to conserve the highest quality short stories being published in American magazines. He would save these stories from oblivion by publishing them between hard covers as the "Best" stories of each year, a project that would dominate the rest of his life.



Covers of *Best Short Stories of 1929* (*American* was added to the series title in 1942) and *Fifty Best American Short Stories, 1915–1929*.

O'Brien modeled what would become "The Best American Short Stories"[1] on a similar publication in another genre by his friend and sometimes collaborator, Boston poet and newspaperman William Stanley Braithwaite, who produced an annual *Anthology of Magazine Verse* beginning in 1913.[2] Then literary editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Braithwaite selected one of Cather's poems, "A Likeness," for inclusion in the first annual volume of the series (1914). A few years earlier, on March 7, 1910, Cather had struck a poets' bargain with Braithwaite to exchange a copy of *April Twilights* (1903) for his own most recent volume of verse. She answers what must have been another cordial offer in a letter Braithwaite had written to her: "Indeed, I should be very happy to have any verse of mine included in the anthology which your friend is making up" (*Complete Letters* no. 2965). This unnamed friend may, in fact, been Edward J. O'Brien, just twenty years old, who was then planning an anthology of poetry titled *Poems of the American Renaissance* that unfortunately did not find a publisher (Simmonds 39–40). Nearly two decades later, she must have corresponded with O'Brien and granted him permission to reprint "Double Birthday" in *The Best Short Stories of 1929*. We are interested here in tracing the role that O'Brien and his story anthologies played in keeping "Double Birthday" accessible on library shelves and in college classrooms during the three decades it lapsed from print, between 1940 and 1973.

Unreprinted for three decades, "Double Birthday" was rediscovered by a new generation of readers in 1999 after John Updike and Katrina Kenison included it in Houghton Mifflin's *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. Reviewing this volume in the *New York Times*, Michael Gorra of Smith College proclaimed, "finding wonderful stories that you don't already know is one of this collection's great pleasures." As an Americanist, Gorra thought he knew Cather's oeuvre, so he was surprised that this "marvelous" story went uncollected in her lifetime and remained unknown to him before Updike and Kenison's centennial volume (8).

Gorra describes "Double Birthday" poetically as "a Prohibition story that turns on the gift of some long-cellared wine." This wine is in fact three bottles of champagne that Judge Hammersley and his daughter Marjorie Parmenter select from their "separate lockers" as gifts for the eightieth birthday party of their friend, Doctor Engelhardt, who shares a house and a birthday with his nephew "Young Albert" Engelhart. One of the story's other gifts, among many, is the handwoven table linen that Young Albert plans to give to Elsa Rudder—Uncle Doctor's godchild and downstairs neighbor—for her wedding present. The linen and champagne are reminders of the fine things that Pittsburgh's upper middle class enjoyed before the war, elegant commonplaces that had been displaced by ready-made goods and Prohibition politics by 1928, the story's fictive present. Gorra's multivalent phrase "long-cellared wine" fits "Double Birthday" particularly well: a vintage piece slotted away until it was nearly forgotten, all the while developing grace notes that would appeal to later generations. O'Brien is to be credited with the story's revival because, when editing a centennial edition in 1999, Updike and Kenison had only one Cather story to choose from: the story he had identified as one of the country's Best in 1929 and 1940.

Cather did not agree that "Double Birthday" was anything near her personal best. It was written as a favor for an editor friend during the summer of 1928 while she and Edith Lewis were vacationing at Grand Manan Island. On their way north that summer, Lewis had fallen ill, necessitating a stopover at Quebec City. Cather hired a nurse to attend Lewis, then went exploring. That week she discovered the subject of her next novel, *Shadows on the Rock*, in Quebec's storied history. Although Cather wished to begin research in Quebec immediately, Grand Manan was waiting, a cook and a housekeeper already contracted

for the season. Kari Ronning writes that because Cather could not begin her Quebec novel without further on-site research, she fell back on a memorized landscape—Pittsburgh and its twin city of Allegheny between the 1890s and 1916, the date of her last known visit to western Pennsylvania (203). As is often the case in Cather's fiction, life imitated art. In the story, Judge Hammersley is embarrassed to meet Young Albert Engelhardt on the Allegheny County Courthouse steps. Cather may have been embarrassed by the story's warm reception because she had distilled into "Double Birthday" so many friendships of her Pittsburgh years, some of which, like her relations with George Seibel, the prototype of Young Albert, had cooled by the 1920s. She confided to Louise Guerber Burroughs in August 1931 that she had written "Double Birthday" as a favor for Henry Goddard Leach, editor of the *Forum*, to whom she sold it for a low figure (*Complete Letters* no. 2898). Leach, who before he became a magazine editor had been a celebrated expert on Scandinavian literature, was said by Cather to have been delighted with her gift. "Dr. Leach says it is the best story he ever published," she wrote in a November 1928 letter to her sister Elsie, adding that the story was "really not much." She repeated this opinion in a letter to Ferris Greenslet in May 1930 (*Complete Letters* nos. 2436, 1012).

Despite Cather's conviction that "Double Birthday" was far from her best, she granted O'Brien permission to include it in his annual anthology *The Best Short Stories of 1929*, a distinction that reflected favorably on the *Forum*, as each volume of Best American Short Stories was followed by a "Yearbook of the American Short Story" that ranked the popular magazines by the numbers of "Best" and "Honor Roll" stories they published each year. Later that year, when Greenslet asked her for a piece of fiction to include in a Christmas volume, she responded, "If you decide to use DOUBLE BIRTHDAY in your book of short stories [*A Galaxy of Modern Fiction*, edited by Dale Warren], please don't, for goodness sake, make any remarks to the effect that I have selected it because I think it a particularly good story, for I don't think so. I simply suggested it to you because it is rather recent and there is no string of any kind on it" (*Complete Letters* no. 1012). Her disavowal belies both O'Brien's and Leach's enthusiasm.

The letter just cited hints that the story's second appearance between boards, in *A Galaxy of Modern Fiction*, was an early holiday present to another friend, Greenslet. The *Galaxy* anthology was a Christmas book featuring authors who were currently or had been published by Houghton; novelists who, editor Warren said, "had demonstrated their ability to navigate a full-rigged ship and a catboat with equal dexterity" (ii).

The third appearance of "Double Birthday," in 1940, was again O'Brien's doing. Exercising rights gained a decade before, he selected "Double Birthday" for *Fifty Best American Short Stories 1915–1939*, an omnibus marking twenty-five volumes of his series. As one of the fifty, "Double Birthday" beat out at least 450 other stories O'Brien had selected as among the best over the past quarter century.

Certainly Cather's reputation as a novelist in the twenties and thirties was such that she needed no recognition for short fiction, and her letters suggest she did not care a fig for O'Brien's approval. In a letter of 1940, she asked Greenslet to send her a volume containing "Double Birthday" to satisfy the curiosity of a correspondent, Pittsburgh attorney James McDevitt Magee, whose aunt had been the prototype for one of the story's characters. On December 22, 1940, Cather asked Greenslet for a copy of *A Modern Galaxy* (which Greenslet may have had in the stockroom) rather than requesting O'Brien's *Fifty Best American Short Stories*, published by the Literary Guild of America (a budget press) earlier that same year (*Complete Letters* no. 1520).

Whether O'Brien's anthologies enhanced sales of a novelist at the peak of her powers is hard to determine. O'Brien scholar Jacquelyn S. Spangler advises that "the record of sales [of Best American Short Stories] before Houghton Mifflin's takeover [of the series from Dodd, Mead] in 1934 are not available," but during the Houghton years of the thirties, records show that sales ranged between eleven thousand in 1934 and sixteen thousand in 1937 (20–21). Admittedly, these sales figures were tiny compared with the monthly sales of the major story magazines like *McCall's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, which routinely sold more than a million copies (Spangler 21), but O'Brien's volumes kept the stories cumulatively indexed, chronologically arranged, and tidily bound in cloth on library shelves, rather than scattered throughout files of decomposing magazines (which was O'Brien's point). At least for professors,

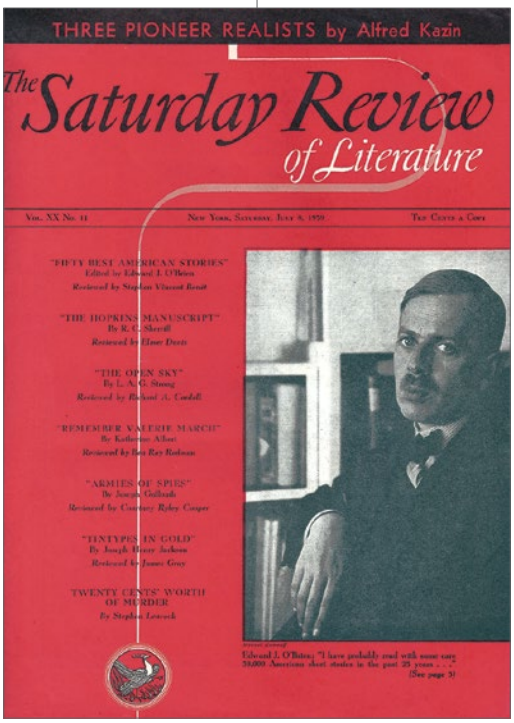
The complete run of Best American Short Stories fills twelve linear feet of shelving.

fiction writers, and other lovers of literature, the Best American Short Stories series became a repository of values that came to dominate university creative writing programs and the little magazines. The series exerted influence whenever it was adopted by college libraries, short fiction courses, and fiction workshops, and through O'Brien's frequent appearances on the lecture circuit, as a book reviewer, and as guest editor of journals such as the *Bookman* (Spangler 2–3). Even today, after digitization and space limits have prompted the culling of many print books, some university and public libraries retain a full run of Best American Short Stories, now numbering more than a hundred volumes. The print run in our university library fills twelve linear feet in an unbroken sequence, remarkable because our collection burned in 1940 and 1958. After the second fire, at least forty-two volumes had to be procured as gifts to the library by librarians. Many of the early volumes carry their donors' bookplates, affording a glimpse into the lives of the original owners.

Edward J. O'Brien at age 30 (center) in Oxford, England, with poet Eric Charles Dickinson (left) and painter Mark Gertler (right). Detail of a 1920 snapshot by Lady Ottoline Morrell. National Portrait Gallery. Photographs Collection, NPG Ax140453.

Who then was Edward O'Brien, the anthologist who thought he was a better judge of her fiction than Cather herself? Robert Whitehand, a writer discovered by O'Brien, described him as a "quiet fellow with clear gray eyes that could be kind and uncompromising at the same time, [a] slight man with . . . [a] small brush of a mustache [and a] bit of hair which kept falling over one eye" (2). Ever an Anglophile, by the twenties, O'Brien had left America, moved to a suburb near Oxford, and married Sheffield novelist and biographer Florence Roma Muir Wilson, who wrote under the pen name Romer Wilson. At the time, some American newspapers considered him the "dean of the short story" (Spangler 11), but others dismissed him "as a testy Englishman who periodically surveys our fiction to decide what is good and bad about it" (Whitehand 5).

Martha Foley, founding editor of *Story* magazine and O'Brien's successor in editing Best American Short Stories,



O'Brien told the *Saturday Review* in 1939, "I have probably read with some care 50,000 American short stories in the past 25 years."

first met Edward O'Brien in 1930, shortly after Romer Wilson's death from tuberculosis. Edward's voice, she recalled, "combined a broad British accent with the flat one of my native Boston," and he spoke fluent German with their housemaid. He was then "a lonely man wandering around Europe trying to ease grief over his wife's death" (*The Story of Story Magazine* 97, 99).

Two years later, O'Brien had remarried, and, as their friendship deepened, Foley came to appreciate "the exquisite consideration" he showed not just to their German housemaid but to the many writers who consulted him about their personal crises and writing problems (146). O'Brien fostered the early careers of dozens of authors who would advance the genre: Sherwood Anderson, Edna Ferber, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Toomer, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, John Cheever, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright are just a few who benefitted from his friendship (Spangler 14–15).

Foley noted some of her friend's eccentricities and passions: he was an enthusiast for nude beaches, he loved gossip, and (like Cather) he "damned all mechanization" in everyday affairs but especially in the production of fiction. He complained in his 1929 book *The Dance of the Machines: The American Short Story and the Industrial Age*, "In a mechanical civilization, to the writer *technique* is a generic term for labor-saving devices to alleviate his own fatigue and that of his readers" (quoted in Foley 147–148; emphasis in the original).

For more than a quarter century, O'Brien's standards—at least as articulated in his introductions to the yearly volumes—remained remarkably consistent. In 1916, the first year that *BASS* appeared in book form, O'Brien introduced two tests—of "substance" and "form." These tests were repeated with only minor changes of wording in the introductions for the rest of his editorial tenure (Spangler 26).

The first test of a short story was that its content be organic; that is, the writer

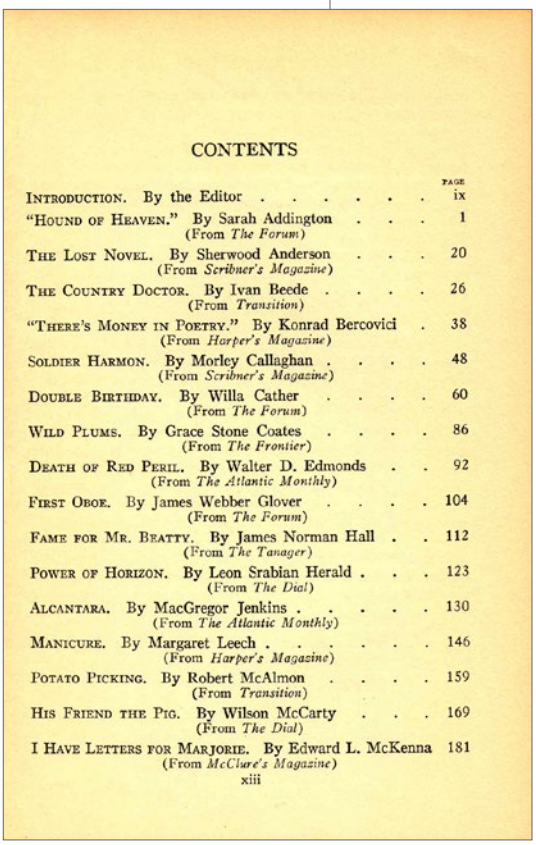
must create a premise in which, as O'Brien declared, "the pulse of life is beating." The best writers had the power of shaping "selected facts or incidents" into "a living truth" (quoted in Spangler 26). His second test—of style—was the ability to "shape this living substance into the most beautiful and satisfying form" (27). These two tests—of content and style—repeated in the annual introductions for more than two decades, influenced several generations of writers to produce literary fiction that appealed to O'Brien's sensibilities. Cather, substantially older than most of these writers except for Anderson and confident in her own values, held ideals sympathetic to those O'Brien espoused. We need only think of her defense of the organic form of *My Ántonia* to appreciate their aesthetic affinity.

As a twenty-four-year-old Harvard dropout, O'Brien was something of a poseur in 1915 when he launched the series. Like many arbiters of taste before and since, he faked it until he made it. However, by reading up to eight thousand stories a year, two thousand of them carefully, he soon accrued experience. By 1939, when he appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, he could say, "I have probably read with some care 50,000 American short stories in the past 25 years."

A typical Best American Short Stories volume of the teens reprinted twenty stories that had appeared in American periodicals the previous year, from popular magazines such as *Scribner's, Collier's*, and the *Forum*, and, increasingly, from the little magazines such as the *Dial, Prairie Schooner*, and *Story*. The "best" stories filled the first 250 pages or so of each volume, as seen in the table of contents from the 1929 issue containing "Double Birthday" (see adjacent image).

The next hundred pages were devoted to "The Yearbook of the American Short Story," in which O'Brien graded the year's short fiction into four groups, using a three-asterisk system. The "meretricious" majority deserved no comment and received no rating. One asterisk was awarded to stories with some distinction in either substance or form. Two asterisks distinguished stories that had passed both tests and merited rereading (1929, xii). Stories with three asterisks, a distinction given "Double Birthday" in 1929 and "Neighbour Rosicky" in 1930, were those that "united genuine substance and artistic form in a closely woven pattern with such sincerity that these stories may fairly claim a position in American literature" (xii). The number of stories so honored varied by year. A banner year was 1929, with 125 stories on the Roll of Honor. Some other three-asterisk stories that year were Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde," Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and William Carlos Williams's "The Venus" (277–286); the following year, Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" joined "Neighbour Rosicky" on O'Brien's Roll of Honor.

But reading and evaluating the monthly output of three dozen American and Canadian story magazines was not enough to absorb O'Brien's abundant energy. In 1921, he launched a series on the British short story, and in 1922, moved permanently to the suburb of Oxford that would become his primary residence for the next two decades. Young writers tended to trust him. O'Brien fancied himself a talent scout and remained committed to "giving precedence to new voices," argues Spangler (14). Famously, he published Ernest Hemingway's "My Old Man," even before it appeared in a magazine (violating his own rule); he arranged publication of Hemingway's first collection, *In Our Time* (1925), and even dedicated the 1923 *BASS* to Hemingway, as he had dedicated an earlier volume to Sherwood Anderson.



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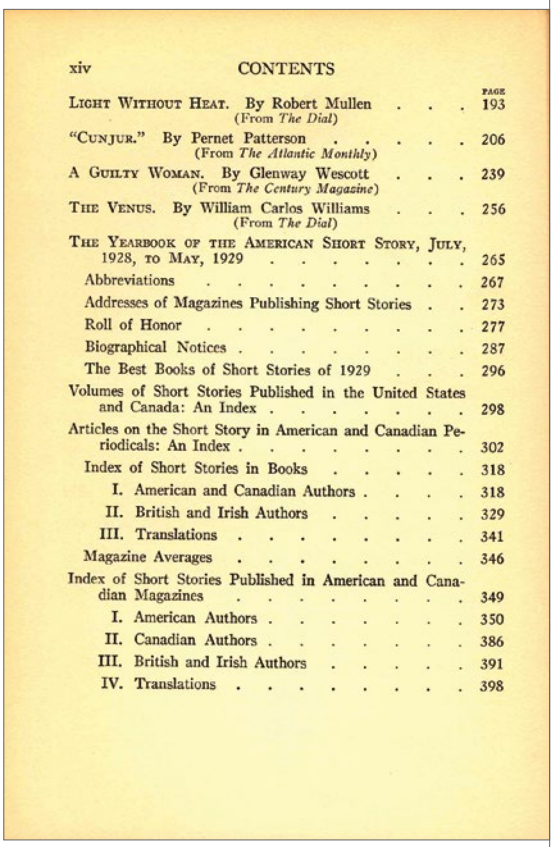
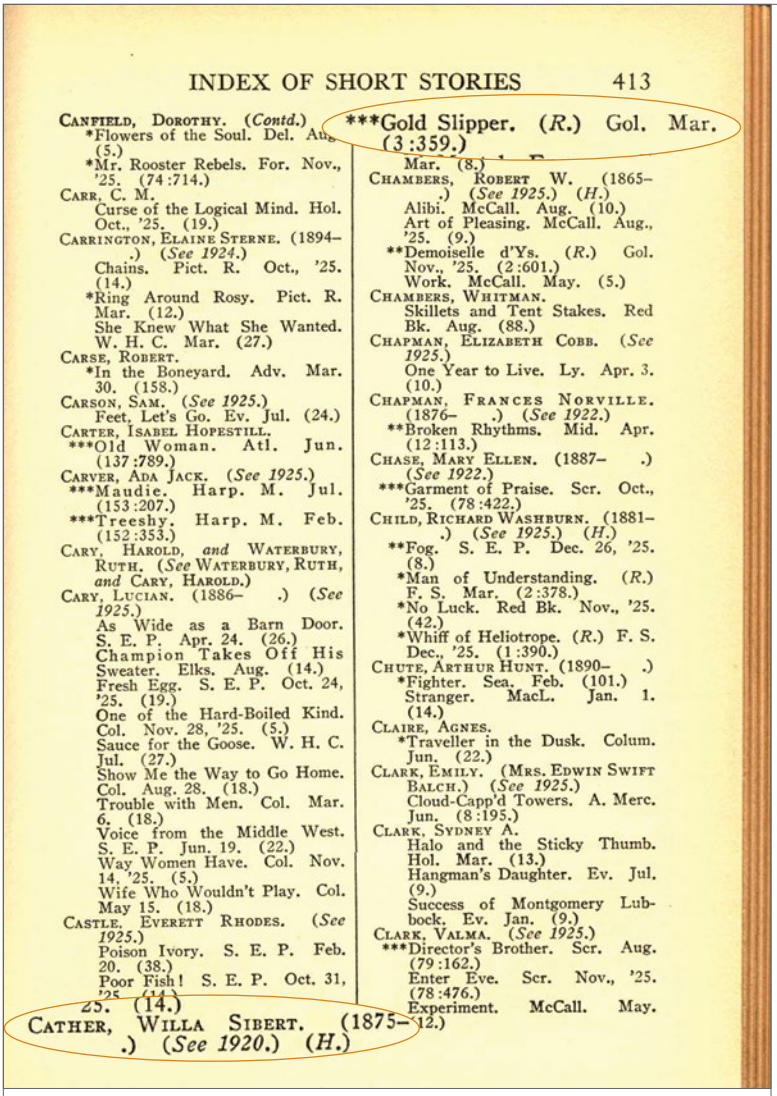


Contents of the 1929 *BASS* with the appended "Yearbook of the American Short Story"



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The Roll of Honor for *BASS* 1925–26 noted the reprinting of "A Gold Slipper" in *Golden Book* and the magazine version of *My Mortal Enemy* in the March 1925 *McCall's*. "Uncle Valentine," from the *Woman's Home Companion*, February and March 1925, was overlooked.

O'Brien liked Cather's fiction as much as he shared her hatred of mechanization and her embrace of craft and organic form. Further, he favored midwestern realism, as reflected in his advocacy of Sherwood Anderson and Edna Ferber and, eventually, his championing of the Iowa Writers' Workshop (Spangler 13). When *Youth and the Bright Medusa* appeared in 1920, O'Brien celebrated it as one of that year's "Ten Best Books of American Short Stories." He was delighted that the new collection revived four of *The Troll Garden stories*—"Paul's Case," "A Wagner Matinée," "The Sculptor's Funeral," and "'A Death in the Desert.'" He astutely observed that "These eight studies [in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*], dealing for the most part with the artistic temperament," showed the influence of Flaubert and Henry James, but possessed an "instinctive reticence of personal attitude which Miss Cather only shares with Sherwood Anderson. . . . She is more assured in the traditional quality of her work than Anderson," he added, "but hardly less astringent." Then with characteristic temerity, he declared, "I regard [*Youth and the Bright Medusa*] as one of the most important contributions to the American short story published during the past year, and personally I consider it more significant than her four admirable novels" (*BASS* 1920, 394). This claim is surprising when we consider that the most recent of those four novels was *My Ántonia*. Although six of the eight stories in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* received three-asterisk Honor Roll status in his 1920 volume ("Coming Aphrodite!" and "The Diamond Mine" joining the four *Troll Garden* stories), O'Brien did not find a "Best" story within the collection, but stood by his own rule that only stories that first appeared that year could be considered; thus, "Coming, Eden Bower!" published in the August 1920 *Smart Set*, was Cather's only contender. The *Smart Set* version received three asterisks, although O'Brien judged that it and Cather's other stories of the teens did not rise to the level of the *Troll Garden* stories. Whether "Coming, Eden Bower!" missed the mark for its racy subject matter, some perceived flaw of execution, or its substantial length—pushing sixteen thousand words—is not clear.

In 1925, when "Uncle Valentine" appeared in the February and March numbers of *Woman's Home Companion*, O'Brien failed to notice it, a lapse of attention that can be blamed on illness rather than neglect or malice. That May, after coming to London from America, he contracted typhoid fever and was hospitalized for several weeks. His wife Romer Wilson helped finish that year's volume (Simmonds 215). Had it not been missed, "Uncle Valentine" may have been discounted for its length (about the same word count as "Coming, Eden Bower!"). But one indication that the O'Briens did not mind lengthy stories, at least in Cather's case, was the selection of *My Mortal Enemy*, a work most of us consider a short novel, for the Honor Roll for 1925–26—the same list that omitted "Uncle Valentine."

Four years later, when O'Brien finally awarded Cather a "Best" recognition, his annual introduction did not explain why. But Cather's prologue to "Double Birthday," resonating with O'Brien's frequent jeremiads against standardization, commercialization, and conformity, suggests this was the story he was waiting for. We don't know how he read "Double Birthday." We don't know if, like reviewer Michael Gorra, he thought of it primarily as a complaint against Prohibition, a grouch against class stratification, or a particularly effective retelling of Aesop's fable of the Grasshopper and the Ant. Yet he stood by the judgment that it was one of the decade's best. Ten years later, when assembling *Fifty Best American Short Stories, 1915–1939* for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the series, he once again chose "Double Birthday" over hundreds of other best stories. In the

anniversary edition's "Biographical Notes," he made some terse observations about Cather's early stories and her style:

> She is one of the most distinguished novelists of our time and a fine poet. She has written few short stories. With the exception of "Double Birthday," the best of these are collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and *Obscure Destinies*. Most of these stories deal with the contrast between the outward appearance and the inner life of individuals, and some of them are preoccupied with the problems of the American artist. In "Double Birthday" it is interesting to observe how the story is observed from several angles and how the author builds up a unity of impression out of several converging strands. (859)

Regarding the test of style, O'Brien appreciated the way Cather organically interwove the perspectives of Judge Hammersley, the two Albert Engelhardts, and Margaret Parmenter while creating a vision of a community repaired to prewar wholeness, of friendships restored despite barriers of fortune, loss, and physical and social geography. As might anyone who had read fifty thousand magazine stories over twenty-five years, O'Brien abhorred ready-made endings, especially resolutions through marriage. "Double Birthday" ends just short of marriage, but that trajectory is suggested not just in the nuptials of Elsa Rudder and Carl Abberbock in Old Allegheny, but also in the rekindled affection between Young Albert and Margaret Parmenter as they resume their mature friendship with overtones of courtship. Appropriately, Cather gives the last word to aged Uncle Doctor: dreamer, connoisseur, and cynic.

The heart condition that barred O'Brien from enlisting for the Great War took his life in February 1941 as he suffered a coronary during a German bombing raid on his London neighborhood (Lorentzen). His death came soon after he had finished *BASS* for 1941, the last to appear under his name. This volume was prefaced by Martha Foley, his longtime friend and editor of *Story* magazine, whom he had named as his successor. Her editorial tenure would be even longer than his: thirty-four years to his twenty-seven. She too devoted herself to the betterment of the American short story until her own death in 1977.

Martha Foley's tenure as Best American Short Stories editor was longer than O'Brien's: thirty-four years to his twenty-seven. Originally published on the dustjacket of *The Story of Story Magazine: A Memoir by Martha Foley*, W. W. Norton, 1980.

A third era of Best American Short Stories commenced in 1978, when the management of Houghton Mifflin decided a series editor should assist a celebrated practitioner of the genre as guest editor each year. This was the arrangement in the late 1990s when Katrina Kenison, then series editor, approached John Updike to create a volume of the best of the best for the millennium: fifty-five stories selected from the first eighty-five years of the series.

While Kenison did the bulk of the work of rereading all eighty-five volumes up to that date, Updike insisted that "certain authors had to be included" (xv), adding, "there had to be a Faulkner, a Hemingway, a Fitzgerald, a Welty, a Katherine Anne Porter, and a Flannery O'Connor" (quoted in Schiff 93). In all, he decided "fifteen or twenty writers" had to be represented on the basis of their achievement; Cather, we trust, was one of the select number (93). As we have seen, O'Brien had left Updike one—and only one—Cather story to choose from. Having been a fiction editor in Pittsburgh and New York, were she alive, Cather may have objected to membership based on name recognition, even if her opinion of her representative story had mellowed over time.

Edward J. O'Brien, Short Story Editor, Boston Native, Dies

Word was received today of the death in London, England, of Edward Joseph O'Brien, 50, famed "Best Short Stories" editor and native of Boston. The Associated Press reported that O'Brien, who was European story editor of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in England, died at his home in Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, last Friday.

He was born, Dec. 10, 1890, at 116 Charles st., Boston, which was not the "aristocratic" slope of Beacon Hill of those days. He had a year at Harvar with the Class of 1912, after education in Boston Latin School, studied some more at Boston College and then settled at Bass River on Cape Cod, writing poetry.

O'Brien was so widely known as editor of the "Best Short Stories" that not everyone remembers he was an editor of a little Boston magazine of verse, "Poet Lore," before America entered the World War, and that he published several volumes of poems. A keen judge of short stories, he boasted that he never wrote one in his life, although he read a couple of hundred a week, making selections for his annual volume of "Best Short Stories."

He went to live in Europe in 1919. "I want to be where I can see the show—where I can see the world topple down about our heads," he said, presciently, at that time. He traveled and lived in Rapallo, Italy, 1923-30 and in Locarno, Switzerland. He thought deeply about world affairs, although taking no active part.

"Harvard's tradition of individual freedom, tolerance and disinterested intellectual curiosity is likely to be of paramount education importance during the next 20 years," he told his 1912 classmates at their 25th reunion in 1937. "Those will be the fateful coming years in which young men will be asked to choose between two opposed collectivist philosophies, neither of which values democracy or is likely to encourage the disinterested artist."

His first wife, Roma Wilson, was an English writer whom he married in 1923, when he bought his Oxford home, and by whom he had a son, John Berar, 17, who survives, as do two daughters by his second wife. His first wife won the Hawthornden Prize, a British equivalent of a Pulitzer prize. Two years after her death, in 1932, O'Brien married another woman writer, the German Ruth Gorgel, who survives him.

The literary center of America had shifted to the Mid-West, O'Brien declared, 20 years ago. Boston, he said, had "too many grandnieces of Longfellow and Emerson writing biographies about one another." He called his home city "a little pocket in the world where people don't know what is going on in the world, or if they do know are like a lot of ostriches sticking their heads in the sand."

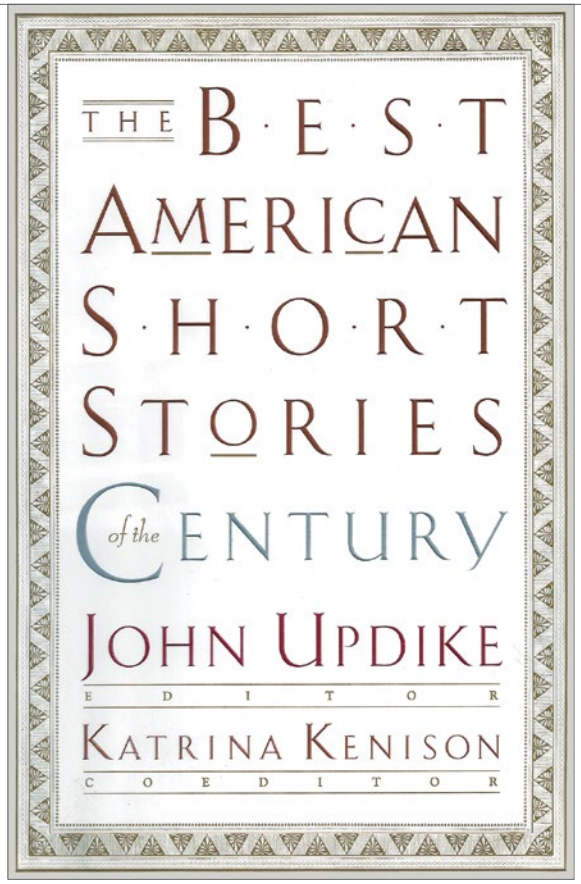
His last public appearance in Boston was in January, 1937, before the Boston Teachers' Club at Ford Hall. He told how he skimmed through 2500 American short stories that year. "You don't have to eat all of a bad egg to pass judgment on it," he quipped with Irish wit.

"For 23 years I have sought to publish and preserve the best short stories in England and America, discover promising short story new writers, and combat the system of short story teaching, based on mass production and assembling of standardized parts which was prevalent in most American universities when I began my work."

EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

O'Brien's obituary in the *Boston Globe* (Feb. 25, 1941), drawing from an Associated Press report, did not give his cause of death.

Anthologies, as the *MLA Handbook* reminds us, are "containers" of shared values, time capsules of a sort. Bernice Slote in 1973 collected "Double Birthday" with six other stories Cather published between 1915 and 1929, all set in Pittsburgh or New York. This collection, *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories*, is prefaced with Slote's lucid introduction that is still referenced by scholars. Possibly because it was issued by a university press rather than a trade publisher, *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories* has not had the audience of the three collections Cather arranged in her lifetime, or even *The Old Beauty and Others*, published posthumously. Just as wine aficionados cannot predict how a vintage will mature, but only hope that those coming after will curate their collection after they are gone, Edward O'Brien, Katrina Kenison, John Updike, and Bernice Slote did their best to preserve Cather's best story for the new millennium.



Dustjacket of *Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999)

NOTES

1. When referring to Best American Short Stories as a series, we have spelled the title in full; when speaking of a specific volume, the acronym *BASS* in italics and the year is used (acknowledging that the word *American* was not added to the main title until 1942, when Martha Foley became editor). O'Brien's project began in the pages of the Boston *Transcript* newspaper, but was picked up by Small, Maynard, which published annual volumes from 1915 to 1925. Dodd, Mead published the series from 1926 to 1932, at which time it passed to Houghton Mifflin.

2. For more about Cather's interactions with William Stanley Braithwaite, see Robert Thacker's Historical Essay in the forthcoming Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *The Complete Poems of Willa Cather*.

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The Willa Cather Childhood Home

Will You Help Us Restore a National Historic Landmark?

The Willa Cather Childhood Home is the most iconic historic structure associated with Cather's life and career. Described in her novel *The Song of the Lark* and short stories "Old Mrs. Harris" and "The Best Years," the house has served as a literary shrine for nearly sixty years. It is recognized as a National Historic Landmark, representing an outstanding aspect of American history and culture.

A transformative restoration and rehabilitation that is currently underway will ensure the home is preserved for the learning and enjoyment of future generations. Cather's attic bedroom, still adorned in its original paper with pink roses, is a centerpiece of the rehabilitation. The delicate wallpaper will be cleaned and treated by expert paper conservators.

To date, $905,000 of our $1.1 million goal for restoration of the Childhood Home has been secured thanks to donors to our *Campaign for the Future* and a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service. While the project is now 80% funded, $233,000 is urgently needed to complete the building renovations and the conservation of Cather's wallpaper.

Will you help us reach our goal for this vital project? With your help, the site will reopen this year as an immersive destination for visitors to explore the lived world of the Cather family. Please mail contributions to the Willa Cather Foundation, 413 N. Webster St., Red Cloud, NE 68970, donate online at **www.willacather.org**, or contact Jeniffer Beahm at **402-746-2653**. Pledges to this project are payable over a five-year period and are tax-deductible.

Cather's Universal Appeal and Enduring Relevance: How She Inspires Today's Multicultural Writers

Maria Mackas

Throughout America's history, immigrant stories have inhabited the layered spaces of our imagination, none more powerfully than those by Willa Cather. Against Cather's legendary landscapes, her characters loom large: the ambitious and intelligent Alexandra Bergson, the artistically driven Thea Kronberg, and, especially, the strong, soulful Ántonia Shimerda. Their stories are inscribed on the American—and global—psyche, inspiring readers all over the world. In the five years since I finished my thesis on Cather's tenebraic word pictures I've been amazed that scholars from around the globe have downloaded it. I would love to connect with these students from India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, China, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Egypt, and Jordan and explore what draws them to Cather. They were likely attracted to the same characteristics that inspired me: her simple yet profound words; her timeless, universal stories; her empathy and clearheadedness. As the child of immigrants, I was captivated by her immigrant stories, and, clearly, other readers like me have been as well.

Over the past five years, my research has focused on immigrant literature. Whenever I come across a multicultural author who cites Cather, I say to myself, "Yes! Cather gets us!" But not everyone is as enthused as I am about Cather, a white woman, writing about white immigrants. In response to a glowing *New York Times* opinion column by Bret Stephens about *My Ántonia*, there was a bounty of backlash. Titled "The Perfect Antidote to Trump," the piece, published in the summer of 2019, asserts that the vision offered in *My Ántonia* was apt to the present moment. Subtitled "Willa Cather Knew What Made America Great," Stephens discusses "the timelessness of America's bigotries." Writing that the novel is the story of a country that can overcome prejudice, the columnist recounts that after Ántonia's father commits suicide, Jim Burden's grandfather prays "that if any man there had been remiss toward the stranger come to a far country, God would forgive him and soften his heart" (*My Ántonia* 113). Stephens writes "that *My Ántonia* becomes an education in what it means to be American: to have come from elsewhere, with very little; to be mindful, amid every trapping of prosperity, of how little we once had, and were; to protect and nurture those newly arrived, wherever from, as if they were our own immigrant ancestors—equally scared, equally humble, and equally determined."

As we know, 2019 was a divisive time. Stephens's article garnered nearly nine hundred comments online from *Times* readers, many of them critical: that *My Ántonia* was "a backhand slap to those immigrants who are neither white nor Christian"; that Cather ignored displaced indigenous peoples and the antisemitism of the era, that racism toward African Americans was just assumed. In response to these comments, Kevin Mims published an article in the *Federalist*, a conservative publication, defending Stephens's column. Among other things, he writes that "'Champions' of non-white immigrants seem to have a low opinion of the people they purport to be defending. They appear to believe that browner-skinned people are incapable of appreciating a novel like "My Antonia" because it was written by a paler-skinned woman and features mainly white characters."

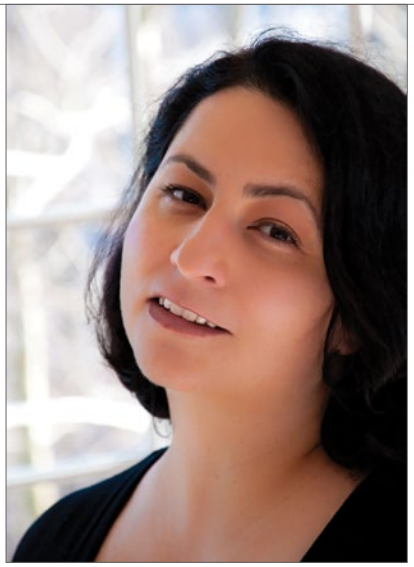
Reading this I found myself surprised to be agreeing with a *Federalist* article, or even agreeing with a conservative like Stephens (though he has long been a Never Trumper), but I am. Mims writes further that:

> a certain faction of the illiberal left is doing its best to discourage these narratives from reaching the people who need them most. If these leftists were seriously interested in the plight of immigrants, they would actively promote books like "My Antonia". . . . When they actively discourage such books, it betrays that they're more interested in signaling their "wokeness" than in helping immigrants.

In the midst of the politics here there is strong evidence of the contemporary influence of Cather's work, perhaps most especially that of *My Ántonia* as American literature's quintessential immigrant story. But there's more than that: There's the question of who has the right to tell the stories.

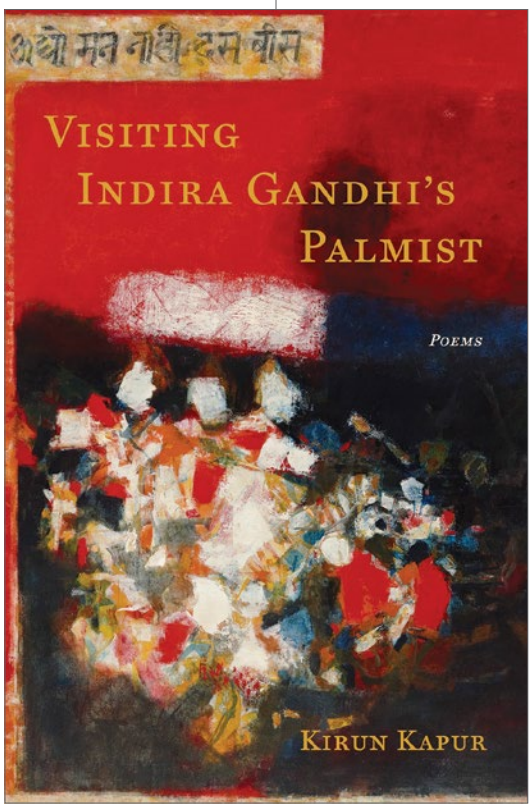
As a not Black, not-quite-brown, not-yellow, second-generation immigrant who chose to write a dissertation about immigrants of all colors, I have run into some of the same attitudes. I have been accused of not being qualified to sit at the table—of appropriating and using immigrants to my advantage. I respectfully disagree. I am Greek. Does this background mean, as I once asked a professor, that I

can only write about Greeks? Who decides who should write what and who should read what? Anand Giridharadas, American journalist and son of Indian immigrants, recently weighed in on the writing side of this debate: "Of late, we've had an important but also sometimes facile debate about who gets to tell what stories . . . if you are willing to do the grueling work to de-center your own way of seeing and bring the other's way of seeing to the fore, then I say: Write about whatever the hell you want" ("By the Book"). Cather certainly brought "the other's way of seeing to the fore" in her empathetic works about immigrants. Mims addresses the reader side of the debate, asking, "isn't it at least *possible* that a young lesbian Latina might be more inspired by the life and works of Cather than by the life and works of Sherman Alexie or Gabriel García Márquez?"



Kirun Kapur

It is much more than possible that Cather's work transcends generations and ethnicities. Consider these three writers, with roots in China, who have been inspired by Cather: Popular novelist Lisa See (age sixty-eight) lists *O Pioneers!* as one of her favorite books. Essayist and novelist Yiyun Li (age fifty) often quotes Cather. Willa Chen, the main character in *Win Me Something* by Kyle Lucia Wu (age thirty-three), mentions that her mother named her after the author. Cather lives on too, not only in the themes of multiethnic writers, but in their styles. A commonality among multicultural writers is the powerful everyday language they use, their lingua franca. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie instructs her students to "avoid inflated language—don't purchase when you can buy" (McFarquhar). This is just like the famous assertion beginning Cather's "The Novel Démeublé": "The novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished" (35). Multicultural writers, even those who don't invoke her by name, employ styles reminiscent of her plainspokenness; others openly admire her detailed observations about the land through characters who draw strength from nature; for others, it is Cather's interiority that resonates: her innate ability to inhabit characters, and her exploration of family dynamics and the notion of home. These elements figure prominently in the works of multicultural authors inspired by Cather. Here are striking examples of contemporary writers whose works display Cather's palpable influence, illustrating the ongoing pull of her fundamental humanity.



Kapur's debut volume (2015).

Kirun Kapur: "Two or Three Human Stories"

Kirun Kapur, a second-generation American, deals with themes of borders, religion, and feminism in her debut volume of poetry, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (2015).[1] Specifically, the volume explores her father's experiences in India during the Partition: When British rule came to an end in India in 1947, the country was divided into two independent states, Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. More than twelve million people were displaced and two million killed. Tens of thousands of women were raped and abducted. The Partition divided not just countries, but families. In a 2017 interview, Kapur says the story of Partition was always present in her house, but rarely spoken of. She wanted the poems to be "the voice I sensed but couldn't hear . . . they are made of the stories I remember . . . books I've read and books I've forgotten I read, things I dreamed or wished or hoped." She also wanted her poems to explore family:

> I was fascinated by the way family stories are the bedrock of all our great books and deepest beliefs—from Greek myths to Hindu epic poems to the Bible. The first book of the Bible, of course, is Genesis—one long family drama. The Mahabharat is comprised of thousands of verses about a conflict between brothers and cousins. For me, family isn't a purely personal topic. It's epic, vast, and mythical. (Meyers)

Kapur's book opens with an epigraph from *O Pioneers!*: "there are only two or

Tarfia Faizullah. Larry D. Moore, Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0.

three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years" (110).

Surely obvious to most, this is Carl Linstrum, Alexandra Bergson's childhood friend and later her husband. He says this at the point in the story when he returns to Nebraska from Chicago on his way to Alaska. Partly the tale of star-crossed lovers, the novel recounts the story of Alexandra's brother Emil and Marie Shabata, who are murdered by Marie's jealous husband Frank. He goes to jail and Alexandra, with tremendous generosity of heart, forgives him.

Kapur's poem "Light" tells another human story, the story of a family broken apart by partition. The poet lyrically recounts how her grandfather had a lost niece traced; she could have been recovered but was not. We don't know why. There's estrangement and rejection; is it because she was raped and therefore considered dirty? We don't know. But we do know that there has been pain. In her poem, Kapur reveals that the niece's brothers refused to reclaim her, and her aunt says, "This is what broke us apart." Kapur asks, "How should we remember the old stories? / What will break and what will toughen" (38). The two stories illustrate two different outcomes: though both families are broken, Alexandra rises above the pain. Kapur's family does not. These global questions parallel Carl Linstrum's observation in Kapur's epigraph, the three human stories that repeat themselves like the larks' singing. That Kapur chose these lines from *O Pioneers!* to preface her poetry about family—past and present—illustrates the universality of Cather's story.

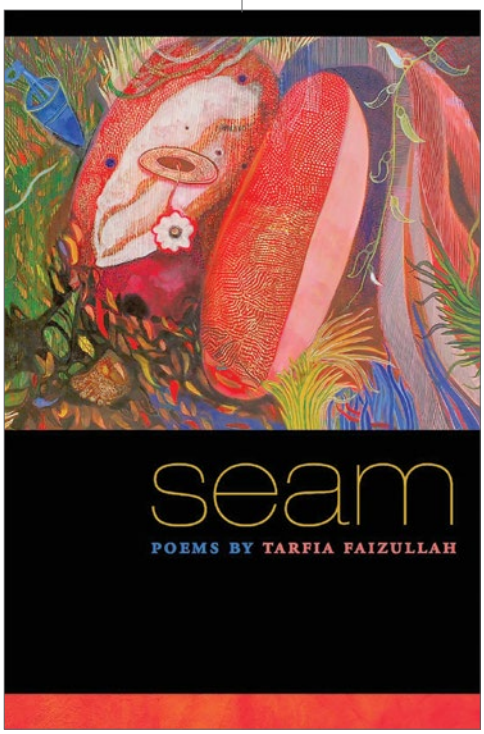
Tarfia Faizullah: "Lifting a Lid, Pulling Out a Drawer"

Tarfia Faizullah is another well-respected Asian American poet who writes insightfully about atrocities associated with her heritage. Born to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh, she was raised in Texas.[2] Her 2014 book *Seam* tells the stories of the mass rape of Bengali women during East Pakistan's 1971 War of Independence. More than three million people were killed in this war, and 200,000 women were raped. Faizullah bears witness to this underreported war: she went to Bangladesh to interview some of these women; *Seam* is the result of her interviews and experiences there. On that journey, she took favorite books, including *The Song of the Lark*, and several of the poems in *Seam* are based on those books. When asked how she chose these books, she said:

> It's funny because I was allowed two suitcases for a year in Bangladesh, so a lot of it was dictated by what I decided to take. Most of the authors I wrote about in *Seam*, I'd read for a very long time and admired. But I had never read them in the context of being in Bangladesh, and I was astonished by how I could see so much of what they had written right in front of me in Bangladesh in this very neat way. (White)

The poem "Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh" opens with these lines from *The Song of the Lark*: "Together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer, and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen; but neither of them forgot it" (88). This passage is not about a literal lid or drawer. It's about discovering something inside yourself: something special, intangible, unnameable—something about your internal landscape. These lines refer to a point in the story of the future world-renowned singer Thea Kronberg and her piano teacher, Professor Wunsch. Wunsch recognizes that unnameable something in thirteen-year-old Thea, and he encourages her to explore this "something," this gift, this love of beauty and art and aesthetics, this yearning to create. He says to Thea: "Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires. The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing—desire" (84). Thea gets it somehow, even at thirteen. She knows she's different. Cather offers Thea's thoughts like this:

> But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of



Faizullah's *Seam* (2014) includes the poem "Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh."

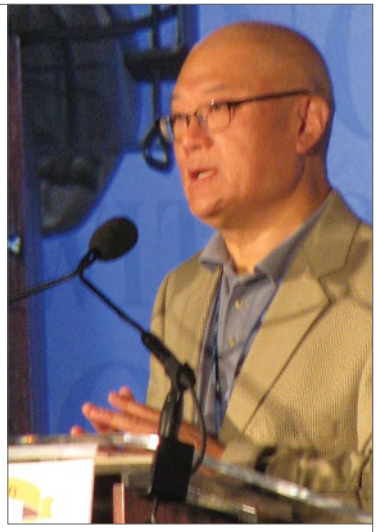
> herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. The something came and went, she never knew how. Sometimes she hunted for it and could not find it; . . . a kind of warm sureness. And when it was there, everything was more interesting and beautiful, even people. (87–88)

That "kind of warm sureness" is what Faizullah's poem is about. She writes of lifting lids and pulling out drawers, of beginning "to disappear into yards / of silk or cotton— / the one that is me but not / begins to emerge," much like the "friendly spirit" that Thea describes. Like Wunsch, she speaks of desire—the "desire to remember" (35). Like Thea, Faizullah is discovering herself.

Beautiful, but anguished, Faizullah's poems deal with extremely difficult subject matter. Speaking about Arundhati Roy, she said "It takes courage, and a difficult kind of courage, to be able to say difficult things" (White). She could be speaking about herself. It's significant that Faizullah counts Cather as a favorite author; as Ladette Randolph has written, "there are groundbreaking aspects of her work I find relevant for contemporary writers. It isn't only her clear-eyed accounts of a world she saw disappearing beneath the systematic forgetfulness of American capitalism, it's also the unusual structures she adopted in her best work." Faizullah takes the unusual tack of transforming difficult subject matter into art and giving clear-eyed accounts of atrocities that should never be forgotten. Randolph writes further that she keeps this Cather quotation above her desk: "Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness. The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is" (*The Song of the Lark* 525). Like Cather, Faizullah has refined the sense of truthfulness and, as she has noted, uses her poetry as a safe place to say difficult things.

Ha Jin: "Nothing But Land"

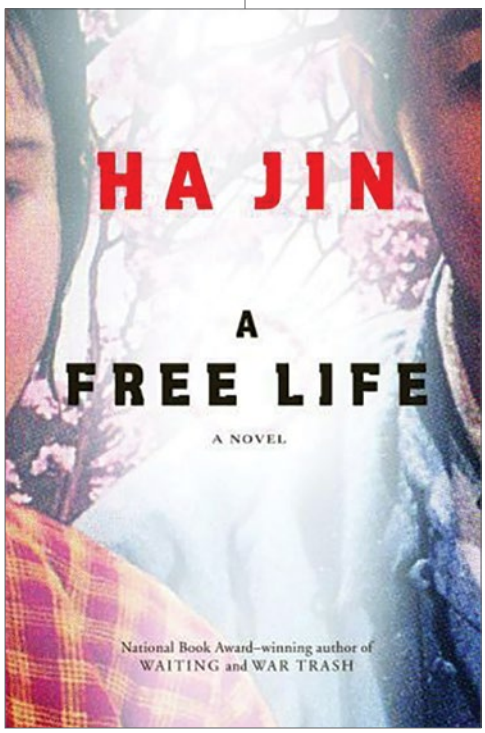
Born in China, Ha Jin is a prolific, award-winning writer.[3] His work, translated into more than thirty languages, is powerful in its simplicity. He frequently mentions Cather and her works in essays and articles. In one he says: "Land is more important than the idea of country. Land is more permanent, a character itself. In Willa Cather's novels, the largest character is the land" (Italie). Jin teaches migrant literature at Boston University, and I expect that Cather's books appear on his syllabi. Jin's 2007 novel *A Free Life* tells the story of an immigrant family and their everyday struggles as they pursue the American dream. Protagonist Nan Wu often reflects on the American landscape and, in this passage, he's driving through New England toward Georgia, where his family would relocate:



Ha Jin. Slowking4, Creative Commons noncommercial 3.0.

> Nan was struck by the undulating landscape, so sparsely populated that most farmhouses looked deserted. Few human beings were visible on the farms, while dappled cows with bulging udders grazed lazily in the meadows. There were also horses and colts walking or lying in the distance. The land was rich and well kept, though some pastures were enclosed by wire fences. The sight reminded Nan of his first impression when he had come to the United States six years ago—he had written to his friends in China that nature was extraordinarily generous to America. (180)

Compare that passage to this one, in *My Ántonia*. Ten-year-old Jim Burden has traveled from Virginia to Nebraska by day coach; having finally arrived, he peers out from the back of a wagon:



Dustjacket of the hardcover edition of *A Free Life* (2007).

> There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. (7)

These corresponding passages are a representative example of the fundamental and significant similarities in the authors' works: plainspokenness, interiority, and appreciation of nature.

Nan gives detailed observations about the land in simple language: "few human beings . . . dappled cows with bulging udders . . . the land was rich and well kept." The paragraph opens with Nan being "struck" by the landscape and closes with him noting that "nature was extraordinarily generous to America." Similarly, Jim is struck by the landscape, noting "There was nothing but land," and like Nan, who references nature, says he felt "outside of man's jurisdiction." Did Jin have this passage in mind when he said "land is more important than country"? Probably. Did Nan Wu take a cue from Jim Burden in his description of the undulating land? Likely.

Lee Isaac Chung. Voice of America screen capture.

Lee Isaac Chung: "Ceased to Admire, Began to Remember"

In a *Los Angeles Times* column, writer-director Lee Isaac Chung revealed that Cather was the inspiration for his critically acclaimed 2021 film *Minari*. The plotline involves a Korean American family in Arkansas chasing the American dream, so Cather's direct presence seems initially unlikely. But reminiscent of Chung's own boyhood in Arkansas, the film explores themes of family, home, and resilience—so that is the Cather connection. This was not what Chung originally set out to make; the filmmaker had fallen in love with *My Ántonia* and wanted to adapt it, but after discovering Cather's attitude toward screen adaptations of her works after the 1934 filming of *A Lost Lady*, he considered making one about Cather herself:

> The more I researched her biography, the more I saw my story in hers. I was also a farm kid who had found my way to East Coast academia. I had also planned to become a doctor but took a risk by going into the arts. I had also churned out a few modest successes but felt discouraged and thought about quitting. Insecurities and missteps can plague writers and artists who come from rural places. We worry that our provincial life experiences won't gain the approval of urban curators.

Chung read that "Cather began to place trust in her own experiences. She drew upon memories of life in the Great Plains and wrote a series of intensely personal works that are among the most moving novels in American literature. She said 'Life *began for me, when I ceased to admire and began to remember*'" (emphasis in the original). Reading these words from Cather was a turning point for Chung; he began writing memories of his childhood:

> I remembered our family's arrival at a single-wide trailer on an Ozark meadow and my mother's shock at learning this would be our new home. I recalled the smell of freshly plowed soil and the way the color of it pleased my father. I remembered the creek where I threw rocks at snakes while my grandmother planted a Korean vegetable that grew without effort.
>
> With each memory, I saw my life anew, as though the clouds had shifted over a field I had seen every day. After writing 80 memories, I sketched a narrative arc with themes about family, failure and rebirth. That's how I got the idea to write "Minari"; it *began for me, when I ceased to admire and began to remember* (emphasis in the original).

Previously modeling his work "after contemporary masters of art house cinema," Chung had not found his voice—until *Minari*. When Cather ceased to admire artists like Henry James and Edith Wharton and began to remember her childhood and those who inhabited it, she found her voice. As Kathleen Norris writes, "It was risky, in the early part of this century, to presume to write fiction about ordinary, rough-hewn people engaged in the rigors of dry land farming in frontier Nebraska. The prevailing literary style was for overrefined, predictable, plot-driven novels with characters who held fast to European pretensions and standards of gentility."

In a sense, Chung *did* create an adaptation of *My Ántonia,* though his version takes place in Arkansas, not Nebraska, and the plot revolves around a family that is Korean, not Bohemian. Family, failure, and rebirth are at the heart of *Minari*, just as they are in *My Ántonia*. And it all starts with that most human of mental processes: remembering, the root of most stories. Kapur and Faizullah delve into painful historical evens tied to their family stories; Jin and Chung mold their experiences as first- and second-generation immigrants into simple, powerful stories about the geography of home. The humanity of the stories in these poems and narratives cuts across cultural differences. We shudder with Kapur and Faizullah as they

dive deeply into their interior landscapes, discovering the painful pasts tied to their ethnicities, just as we mourned with Alexandra Bergson when she lost her brother. We delight in the love of the American landscapes that Jin and Chung describe so joyfully, just as we were awed by Jim Burden's luminous recollections of the Nebraska plains. The fact that American artists with roots in China, Korea, India, and Bangladesh are inspired by Cather's work illustrates the universality of her appeal and her enduring relevance. Cather's themes of family, land, resilience, and self-discovery transcend time, place—and ethnicity.

NOTES

1. Kapur won the Arts & Letters Rumi Prize in Poetry and the Antivenom Poetry Award for her debut volume. Her second collection, *Women in the Waiting Room* (2020), was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and was listed in *Kirkus Review*'s Best Books of 2020. Named by NBC News as an "Asian American Poet to Watch," Kapur is editor at the Beloit Poetry Journal, one of the nation's oldest poetry publications. She teaches at Amherst College and serves as director of the Creative Writing Program.

2. Faizullah's honors include a Fulbright fellowship and three Pushcart prizes. Her work has been translated into Bengali, Persian, Chinese, and Tamil.

3. Ha Jin has published eight novels, four story collections, four volumes of poetry, a biography of the Chinese poet Li Bai, a libretto, and a book of essays. Jin has received the National Book Award, two PEN/Faulkner Awards, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the Flannery O'Connor Award. In 2014, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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Contributors to this Issue

Timothy W. Bintrim teaches literature and writing at Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania. Currently, he is helping plan an event at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Lecture Hall to celebrate Cather's 150th birthday (one week early) on November 30, 2023. As academic advisor to Scott Riner, he is sad to see this young man graduate, but glad Scott got to attend his third Spring Conference in person in 2022, visit the Pavelka homestead and the Memorial Prairie, and wade barefoot in the Republican River.

Stéphanie Durrans is professor of American literature at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France. She is the author of *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* (2007) and of *Willa Cather's My Ántonia: A Winter's Journey* (2016). She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers, with a special focus on questions of intertextuality and transatlantic literary relationships.

Maria Mackas recently received her Ph.D. from Georgia State University. Her dissertation, "Georgia Immigrant Voices: Intersecting Texts and Testimonies," focuses on immigrant literature related to her home state. A Cather enthusiast, her master's thesis explored the author's use of tenebrism. She has worked in corporate communications for over forty years.

Scott Riner is a graduating senior English major at Saint Francis University with a concentration in writing and minors in communications and theater. In December 2022, he directed and acted in a student production of his full-length play *A Star Over Bethlehem, Ohio*, a retelling of the Nativity story set during the Great Depression. Last year, after years of studying Cather and her works, Scott was finally able to traipse the grounds from which she drew inspiration. He is thankful that Dr. Timothy W. Bintrim encouraged him to present at the past three Spring Conferences and to coauthor essays in these pages.

John Swift is professor emeritus of English at Occidental College and has taught and written about Willa Cather and her work for forty years. A former issue editor of the *Willa Cather Review* and president of the Cather Foundation, he lives with his wife Cheryl and their many dogs in rural Maine.

Tracy Sanford Tucker is director of collections and curation at the National Willa Cather Center.

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THE NATIONAL Willa Cather CENTER

Ashley Olson, Executive Director

www.WillaCather.org

The *Willa Cather Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook.*

Direct essays and inquiries to Ann Romines at annrom3@verizon.net.

Send letters and inquiries to Thomas Reese Gallagher at treesegallagher@gmail.com.

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The Willa Cather Foundation

The World of *A Lost Lady*

As we observe the publication centenary of Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, we feature highlights from our collections related to the novel and Silas Garber and Lyra Wheeler Garber, inspirations for the novel's Daniel and Marian Forrester. Silas Garber, a Civil War veteran and one of Red Cloud's founders, was the third elected governor of Nebraska and served two terms. During this time, he married Lyra Wheeler of Grass Valley, California. The Garbers built their home in Red Cloud, on the site of Silas Garber's dugout homestead, after Garber's two terms as governor were finished. Garber went on to found Red Cloud's Farmers and Merchants Bank, which failed in the Panic of 1893. The Garbers' financial setbacks, coupled with Silas Garber's deteriorating health, gave Cather the inspiration for her 1923 novel. Later in 2023, we will open a new permanent exhibit in the lower level of the the Farmers and Merchants Bank that will explore these topics and the long history of Red Cloud, and we expect the objects on these pages to be featured there.

Tracy Sanford Tucker

Silas Garber's Canes

Two canes owned by Silas Garber aptly symbolize the contrast in his fortunes. At the height of his success, Garber received an ebony walking stick with an elaborately chased brass handle and collar. It was created by J. B. Trickey & Co., a Lincoln jeweler, and was presented to the governor-elect by several Lincoln colleagues, whose initials are engraved around the handle. Walking sticks like this one were a fashionable accessory, meant to display wealth and stature.

The wooden cane with the Davol rubber tip is evidence of Silas Garber's decline in his later years. Even though the depositors at the Farmers and Merchants Bank were successfully repaid, it came at great cost and sacrifice. This simple wooden cane, bowed and worn from heavy use, is a fitting accessory for a man in humbled circumstances.

MORE CANING.

Gov. Garber and Dr. Gilbert have Something to Lean Upon.

Pleasant Surprises.

Capt. Garber, who is soon to be a real live governor, and who is known for his extensive modesty and diffidence from one end of the State to the other, was called into the Executive chamber yesterday evening and presented with a handsome gold headed cane. The friends who appreciate the Governor are Major Robinson, G. W. Watson, Sam. Cannon, and John English. Major English "gave away the cane" and after a few ahems and coughs, the governor returned the compliment in his peculiarly composed manner.

Nebraska State Journal, Jan. 1, 1875, p. 4. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/313715783.

The Calling Card Holder

In *A Lost Lady*, Willa Cather's impressionable young narrator Niel describes "a scantily draped figure, an Arab or Egyptian slave girl, holding in her hands a large flat shell from the California coast" inside the front door of Daniel and Marian Forrester's home; "in the days when the Forresters had servants and were sending over to the town several times a day, the letters for the post were always left in this shell." The Garbers displayed this decorative painted brass and mother-of-pearl blackamoor-style figurine in their own home.

Today, rather than suggesting exoticism and sophistication, these highly stylized and romanticized depictions of enslaved people are associated with colonialism and racism. After years on display in the Farmers and Merchants Bank, this piece is now undergoing professional conservation at the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha. When completed, the piece will be a part of the new permanent exhibit in the Farmers and Merchants Bank that will explore the complicated legacy of Silas Garber.

China Pieces

Cather's depiction of the Forresters emphasizes their worldliness and affluence in the years before their inevitable downfall. These objects belonged to Silas and Lyra Garber and were in the governor's residence in Lincoln and, later, their Red Cloud home.

The Garbers in their Early Years and Late

Civil War-era photograph of Silas Garber, top left: Unknown photographer, circa 1863, from the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites, Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection. Other images from the Dunbier and WCPM Collections.

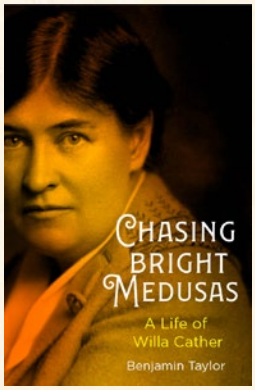
MARKING A BIG YEAR

Celebrate 150 years of Willa Cather, the 100th anniversary of her Pulitzer Prize, and the publication centenaries of two books in 2023 with these best-loved products and new additions at the Cather Center shop.

Willa 150 Pop Art T-Shirt

$37.00

Wear your Willa in retro style with this pop art–inspired design. Made in a comfortable tri-blend and available in seven sizes.



***Chasing Bright Medusas: A Life of Willa Cather* by Benjamin Taylor**

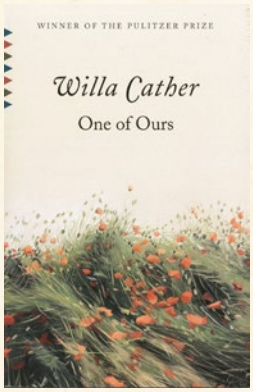
$28.00 (pre-order)

The forthcoming Willa Cather biography is an elegant exploration of artistic endurance, as told by a lifelong lover of Willa Cather's work. Available to ship after publication on November 14, 2023.

Willa 150 Graphic Art T-Shirt

$37.00

Celebrate Willa with this graphic art signature T-shirt designed to commemorate her sesquicentennial. Made in a comfortable tri-blend and available in seven sizes.



***One of Ours* by Willa Cather**

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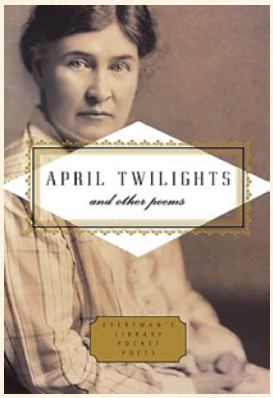

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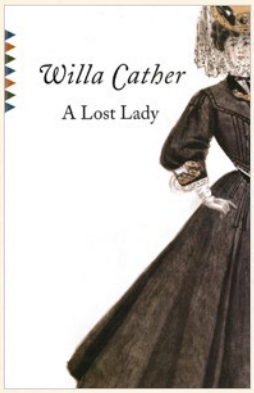

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