

Willa Cather

REVIEW

Volume 60 • No. 3

Winter 2018



*My Ántonia* at 100

# Willa Cather REVIEW

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*On the cover:* Photo collage by Bunny Zaruba. Original photo of Anna Sadilek Pavelka by Fred Bradbrook, ca. 1887, from the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



## Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

A belated happy New Year to each of our friends and supporters. At this moment we find ourselves embarking on another exciting and important year. As you'll note when you delve into the pages of this issue, *My Ántonia* celebrates its publication centenary in 2018, and we weren't about to let this milestone pass without commemorating the occasion.

This beautiful novel holds deep meaning for many readers and we'll be working diligently throughout the year to introduce the book to many more who have yet to discover the timeless and inspirational story. For those who wish to engage in our

program offerings, we have worked with partners in various locales to put together a full calendar of events that will examine *My Ántonia's* continued relevance and celebrate its place as a great American classic.

We also encourage educators to take advantage of our offer to provide free books and resources to facilitate reading and discussion of *My Ántonia* in the classroom. A collaboration with Vintage Books has resulted in publication of a special centenary edition of the novel that we're eager to share. During this special year, we challenge you to gift a copy of *My Ántonia* to a friend, student, colleague, or stranger; to choose the work as one of your book club selections; or to visit us at the National Willa Cather Center for an unforgettable literary pilgrimage. We hope to see you soon!



## Letter from the President Marion A. Arneson

As incoming president of the Willa Cather Foundation's Board of Governors, I have big shoes to fill in following Lynette Krieger's successful tenure as president. Lynette is to be commended for her demonstrated leadership of our vibrant, dedicated board. I am privileged to serve as its next president.

To our delight, we're currently working with leadership at the Nebraska State Historical Society to explore the return of Cather sites and collections that were acquired and preserved by the Cather Foundation in its early years and given to the NSHS in the late 1970s. One of these is Willa's childhood home. My goal

is to maintain the momentum of 2017, with the full restoration of the "Moon Block" and grand opening of the National Willa Cather Center. Its restoration celebrates Cather's legacy, but we also have an obligation to maintain and restore other structures that Cather described in her novels.

The locations and characters referenced in Cather's novels reflect my own genealogy. My great grandmother, Mary Holcomb Arneson, was the first woman homesteader in Webster County in 1871. You don't need to be a native Nebraskan to make a connection with Willa Cather. Her works make a personal connection with each of her readers. As we commemorate the 100th anniversary of *My Ántonia*, the Willa Cather Foundation remains committed to preserving and promoting the continued legacy of Willa Cather—in Nebraska and beyond.



## Letter from the Editor Ann Romines

This year, as we celebrate the centenary of *My Ántonia*, all three issues of the *Willa Cather Review* will be devoted to this beloved and endlessly engaging novel. Two years ago, as we began to plan this first 2018 issue, my first thought was that we must have a conversation with Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, the granddaughter of Anna Pavelka, Cather's prototype for Ántonia, who, at 97, is perhaps our last living link to Cather's novel and still has so much to tell us. Daryl Palmer and Tracy Tucker's richly illustrated conversation with Antonette leads off this issue.

So many of us, all over the world, love *My Ántonia*, for so many different reasons. We wanted to hear as many of those reasons as possible, so we invited thirty widely varied readers—fans, scholars, neighbors, students, Cather and Pavelka relatives, and many others—to send us their *Ántonia* stories. Once you've read them, I suspect that you'll wish—as I did—that you could join this lively conversation and share your own story. And you may! Please send me (at the address on page 37) your own brief story of why this book is important to you. We'll feature these stories on the Willa Cather Foundation website this year, as we begin a second hundred years of conversation about *My Ántonia*.



# Sharing *Ántonia*: A Granddaughter's Purpose

Tracy Sanford Tucker and Daryl W. Palmer

Weeks after our first visit with Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, Tracy discovers some uncatalogued notes taken by Mildred Bennett in the early days of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. “She is breathless, eager, quick, bright eyes,” Mildred has typed out. “Today she made a cake. If she had only known we were coming, she’d have had something to eat. Next time, let her know.” Bennett’s undated notes detail what might be her first visit with Anna Sadilek Pavelka, the prototype for Willa Cather’s *Ántonia* in the 1918 novel, but we are struck by how easily we might have written the same sentences about Antonette, Anna’s feisty ninety-seven-year-old granddaughter. We have spent four days recording Antonette’s stories, in local restaurants and at her kitchen table. Antonette, with a boost from Daryl, has climbed into Tracy’s pickup for an afternoon of talk in her grandmother’s kitchen at the Pavelka homestead. Over these days with Antonette, we have eaten a month’s worth of desserts—*kolače*, cake, ice cream, doughnuts, canned peaches, orange wedges, cherry pie, slices of apple—but it’s Antonette’s stories we remember, and her laughter.

We have come to talk with Antonette because of her relationship to Anna Pavelka. Like our predecessors (and there are many who have interviewed Antonette over the years), we thought of Toni as a primary source, a reporter of historical fact who might help us to understand Cather and her fiction. We have discovered that she is much more than that. Antonette is a natural teacher, a raconteur of public history, a family historian, a lively spokesperson for Czech culture, a warm hostess, a deeply religious person with a gift for spontaneous prayer, and more than anything else a storyteller from a long line of storytellers.

When she was about ten, Antonette read *My Ántonia* for the first time. Before reading the novel, she says, she hadn’t thought deeply about her own relationship to the fictional *Ántonia*. But she was already well-versed in the universe Cather had created, and in the history of the friendship between her *babička* Anna and the famous Webster County author who had written the family’s story. Antonette’s mother, Julia Pavelka Skupa, remembered racing out of the cellar to meet Cather, as did Antonette’s aunts and uncles, many of whom told their own versions of the story to local newspapers—as well as to the many young Pavelkas. Leo, Emil, and Hugo Pavelka, and Antonette Pavelka Kort, Lucille Pavelka, and Elizabeth Pavelka Boyd, six of Anna and John Pavelka’s ten surviving children—helped Mildred Bennett

and other Cather researchers over the years to document the friendship between their mother and Willa Cather.

Antonette also has her own story—one her mother told her of the famous author who gave baby Antonette a string of coral beads from Saks Fifth Avenue. “I wasn’t allowed to play with them, but you know that I did,” she says. Though the box that held them long ago disintegrated, she regularly wears the coral beads, especially when she talks to groups about the friendship between her grandmother and Willa Cather, who “were as different as day and night.” When Antonette—*our* Antonette—read *My Ántonia* for the first time, she questioned her mother Julia about the inconsistencies between the story she read and the stories she’d grown up hearing. “Why, I’d always ask my mother, ‘You said that author was a lady! But there’s a man telling the story in the book!’” Antonette says. The storyteller has always brought her own questions to Cather’s fiction.



Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, 2017.



As a child, Antonette looked forward to big Pavelka Sunday dinners—made all the more special because they were rare treats for her. “Because we lived far away—or at least it seemed so back then,” Antonette says. Her home was in Campbell, Nebraska, about ten miles west of Anna’s Bladen farmstead. On those Sunday visits, Anna sent the smaller grandkids to fetch things from the big brick cellar. “‘Now you kids run down to the cave and get the butter and the cream,’ and all those sorts of things that we would need for the meal,” Antonette remembers. Rather than being scared of the big fruit cellar, she thought the cave was a delight.

The Skupa side of Antonette’s family—her father’s family—was nearby; because they too were Czech, they kept many of the same traditions: the Christmas goose served with dumplings, the home-brewed Czech beer, the heavy goose down feather beds. Antonette tells us that they spoke Czech at home, reminding us of *Ántonia*’s children in the novel, who “could not speak English at all—didn’t learn it until they went to school.” Antonette, growing up in the French-settled area around Campbell, had a similar experience. She tells us that she was teased for answering her teacher in Czech when she arrived at school, even when the teacher spoke in English.

This became an important point of connection between *babička* and her American granddaughter. Anna told Antonette that her own family, the Sadileks, were among the first Czech settlers in Webster County. Anna herself had been teased for not speaking English and for being unfamiliar with the foods she encountered here. For years, Antonette has shared her grandmother’s story of being given bananas to eat when the Sadilek family arrived at Red Cloud’s Burlington depot. Because they had never seen bananas, they tried to eat them peels and all, and the Red Cloud people laughed. “It looked like they were trying to make fun of the strangers,” Antonette concludes. Whenever she told this story to elementary school audiences, she always asked, “If someone gave you a banana, and you’d never seen one before, what would you do with it?” This gambit usually segued into a conversation about cultural difference, tolerance, friendship—and what those things can mean to a child.

Deeper connections between Antonette and her grandmother came later, much later, as we were surprised to learn. After Antonette married “a Bladen man,” Carrol Turner, in 1943—“Yes, I was a war bride!” she says—the couple lived near Antonette’s grandmother, and Antonette collected the mail for her every day. This errand gave them a chance to visit and become well-acquainted in a way they never had while living in different towns. But in spite of all our talk of pastries, Antonette did not bake with her grandmother as we had always supposed

she had, even though Anna was an outstanding cook and baker, just like the character she inspired. “Her recipe for banana cream pie was published in the 1967 *Nebraska Centennial Cookbook*,” Antonette tells us. She’s proud of her grandmother’s skill, despite not learning those elements of family history herself, and we bump up, again, against our own expectations. After living alone on the farm after John’s death in 1926, Anna moved to Bladen in 1939, to live with her daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s husband Byron Boyd. When Antonette was bringing her the mail, Anna would have been in her seventies—during a time when U.S. life expectancy for women was sixty-six years. Like Jim Burden in the novel, we seem unable to see our *Ántonia* as anything other than the young, vital woman of the Plains.

This is an important reminder for us. It is all too easy for eager listeners to begin talking with Antonette as though we are interviewing her mother Julia, as though Antonette herself once darted out of a cellar to meet Willa Cather. Now and then, we may even feel as Erika Hamilton did, when she described her conversation with Antonette in *The Mowers’ Tree* back in 2005: “As I spoke with her, I felt like I was in the presence of *Ántonia* herself.” But the granddaughter’s recollections are of a different order, intimate yet unquestionably distinct from the firsthand accounts of Uncle Leo, Aunt Elizabeth, Aunt Antonette Kort, mother Julia, and the rest, and removed further still from the family experience Cather recast in *My Ántonia*.

Today, Antonette encourages her listeners to accept her stories as simple reportage, uncomplicated memories preserved by blood relatives. “Grandmother used to talk about Willa Cather,” she told us. “That’s why I could tell my stories.” Make no mistake, Antonette does know a lot about her grandmother’s friendship with Cather, the Pavelka family, and the Czech culture that inspired Cather. When Cather scholar Ann Romines went in search of the one true *kolače* recipe, she called Antonette: “It was time, I decided, to consult one of the ultimate sources for Cather readers.” If they show anything, our conversations with Antonette confirm Romines’s sobriquet, but “ultimate source” does not mean *uncomplicated*.

Our visit to the Pavelka farm helps us appreciate this. On a cloudy May day, we drive four miles southeast of Bladen to the homestead. As we approach from the north, wild turkeys call from the trees, and Antonette points us toward where her Uncle Leo hid in order to surprise visitors like Cather. She notes the site of Anna’s orchard between the muddy road and the house that now stands empty. Antonette talks about the cherry trees she remembers. We recall that she has shown us an old photograph in which she and her brother Francis Skupa are posed “in front of *Ántonia*’s orchard,” as the photo’s inscription reads. A row



of cherry trees and more widely spaced apple trees stretch to the eastern horizon behind the two toddlers. It becomes clear to us that, despite the generational distance, the Pavelka family narrative continues to hinge on these *Ántonia* stories.

After spending so much time with her grandmother and learning the real stories that inspired the novel, Antonette says she felt called to teach people about her grandmother. It's a story of discernment and vocation that she has been refining for decades. In Antonette's mind, the story begins in Biblical fashion. "Called by God," she clarifies.

In fact, Antonette's Christianity is woven through her life and work. When we share food and drink with her, we always begin with a prayer of gratitude. After asking us to join hands, she speaks eloquently of gratitude for the day and the talk, naming each of us with heartfelt care. When we ask her about her religious practice, Antonette is quick to credit the power of prayer over the course of her life, and her thoughts turn naturally to her grandmother. "She always said she wouldn't have changed a thing. It was all in God's plan," Antonette remembers. "I always ended my talks with that point."



Anna Pavelka as photographed by David E. Scherman for *Life* magazine. Original print courtesy of the photographer.

Antonette may have found her public voice through a call from God, but she was also called to tell her grandmother's story by Mary Ann Adee, the wife of superintendent of Kearney, Nebraska public schools Clayton Adee, around 1965. When

Mrs. Adee learned that Antonette was the granddaughter of Anna Pavelka, she implored her to come speak to her PEO group. Antonette demurred. "I was always so scared to get up in front of people, I says, and I was just a little ol' country girl." But Mrs. Adee persisted, and Antonette—and her husband Carrol—prepared. "Carrol typed up three cards of notes," Antonette says, prompts that kept her talking. "My knees were shaking, my voice was shaking, and I thought, 'Well, this is a one-time thing,'" she remembers. Antonette still has those three cards, among the many mementos, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and programs that she has lined up on the dining room table for our inspection.

In her collection of newspaper clippings from the last five decades, we watch as Antonette and her interviewers refine the story of how she came to talk about her grandmother and Willa Cather. Like all good stories, this one is marked by turning points and epiphanies, sometimes difficult to pin down for interviewers intent on writing definitive history based on oral memory. "When David Scherman from *Life* magazine came to take a picture of my grandmother!—why, that's when I began to realize and get interested in my grandmother's history."

Looking back at that March 19, 1951, issue of *Life*, between Studebaker advertisements and the war news from Korea, we find David Scherman's lengthy photo essay, "Willa Cather Country." Scherman even then was perhaps best known for photographing *Vogue* correspondent Lee Miller in Adolph Hitler's bathtub before the arrival of Allied troops. His stark, black and white Webster County landscapes record a countryside still marred by settlers' wagon ruts; his image of eighty-two-year-old Anna Pavelka captures not only the lines and furrows of her face—recognizable signs of a lifetime of work—but it somehow captures her energy, her humor, the vitality in her eyes. We realize what a turning point this must have been for both granddaughter and grandmother. The magazine inspired Antonette even as it brought Anna Pavelka to the world's attention. *Life*, the magazine claimed, was read by half the American population.

Soon after the publication of Scherman's photo essay, Jaroslav Drabek, a Czech attorney who had escaped the Iron Curtain himself, brought a Voice of America recording team to Bladen to record Anna's stories in her native language for later broadcast to forty-six countries. Drabek had read *My Ántonia* and arranged for the interview through Bladen's postmaster, William Hoffman. Throughout the interview, he called Anna "Ántonia." Years later, Antonette sent away to Voice of America, hoping to find a recording of this broadcast. So far as VOA is concerned, none exists. Among the many mementos of her school presentations, we find a box of letters that students have



Anna Pavelka with the Voice of America's Jaroslav Drabek (right) and an unidentified technician. From the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

written to Antonette. One of them asks about Anna's renown, prompting Antonette to respond, "I remember Ralph Edwards called for an interview" with her grandmother. Edwards "wanted her to be on *This Is Your Life*."

Surprisingly—to us anyway, living as we do in the internet age—not many sought Anna out at first, even though it was local knowledge that she was "Ántonia." Leo Pavelka, in interviews, often told the story of his father proudly exclaiming that he was "the husband of Ántonia." Antonette tells us, "Mildred Bennett was the instigator." Mildred, as founder of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, often brought people to meet Anna Pavelka at the Bladen Café downtown, which was run by Anna's daughter Elizabeth Boyd. At home, Anna would put on her dime store glasses so she could see better to open the door and talk with those who made a pilgrimage to find her. When Anna died in 1955, her obituary included her lasting legacy as "Cather's Ántonia." Several years later would come the call to Antonette from Mrs. Adee, and Antonette would find herself—and her grandmother's stories—in high demand. An unlikely friendship arose between Antonette and Mildred, focused as the two were on preserving and telling their stories. "Oh, we were real close. She was real kind," Antonette said of Mildred. "A lot of people talked about her and her husband, how she spent more time with her books and things than with her family. But I liked her a lot." We were reminded again of the friendship between Willa Cather and a young Anna Sadilek, the two as different as could be.

Over the years Antonette has spoken to groups all over Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado. In 2002, the city of Chicago chose *My Ántonia* for its city-wide reading program, and Antonette was invited to speak. The Nebraska Humanities Council, now known as Humanities Nebraska, and its Speakers Bureau have long supported her presentations on the Pavelka family and Cather, and on Czech culture in Nebraska. Our attempts to find just how many presentations Antonette has given were futile—Antonette began giving her talks before sponsoring organizations began tracking them. In 2016, she was honored by the nine Czech societies of Nebraska with the Vladimir Kucera Award for her lifetime of work in preserving the Czech heritage of Nebraska. In addition to her lectures, Antonette was an early organizer of the South Central Czech Society's annual festival, which regularly features a Czech bake sale, accordion jam sessions, the crowning of Czech royalty, and the requisite *kolače* and coffee. Through the Willa Cather Foundation, Antonette endowed two scholarships for first-year college students, awards that require them to submit original scholarship on *My Ántonia* or "Neighbour Rosicky." In this way, she says, she can make sure that students continue to read about her grandparents and understand the importance of history.



Antonette in 1988 with her granddaughter Anna Marie Hoyt (left) and Mildred Bennett. Antonette still has the "Antonia's Lineage" poster, which now reads "14 great great great grandchildren." Photo from the Cather Foundation's Mildred Bennett Collection.



We first met with Antonette for these interviews in December, 2016. We ate lunch and talked in Bladen’s only restaurant, the KO Bar, during the Nebraska volleyball team’s NCAA run, and the bar was full of farmers and construction workers, with their coveralls unzipped and turned down at the waist, eating their sandwiches hunched over the bar. Frequently, in the middle of our questions, Antonette asked, “Well, what’s the score now?” She knew the stories of these Husker volleyball players—their injuries, their local-girl-makes-good narratives, their on-court struggles—and shared these with us. By the end of the last set, the farm crowd had transitioned from burgers to beer, and the room cheered when Nebraska rallied to win. As we left the bar, we were left standing by the door as Antonette visited with almost everyone. “Did you get someone to come out and check on that furnace?” many of them asked her. In this small town, everyone knew that Antonette’s furnace went out on what had been our coldest night of the year. While we waited on the blustery front stoop of the restaurant, we watched Antonette shaking hands, laughing, telling the furnace story, and we realized we were in the presence of celebrity.

It contained rare cabinet card photographs of the Pavelka and Skupa families. On the back of the album, a tiny key unwound, freeing tinny strains of “Mister Dooley” and “Heidelberg.”

Over the last century, many interpreters of *My Antonia* have referred to Pavelka family history, using the kinds of details Antonette shares—the banana story, for example—to supplement their interpretations, nodding to tunes we think we should remember. But the more time we spend with Antonette, the more we appreciate the ways in which her storytelling nudges scholarly readings of the novel toward subtle shifts in perception. “They met out on the prairie,” Antonette says of Cather and her grandmother. We recalled that the old road from Catherton to Red Cloud ran right past the Sadilek farm. “They played,” Antonette says with a twinkle in her eye. “Willa told Antonia, ‘I’ll be the doctor. You be the nurse.’” We smiled at the recollection because of the way it subtly differs from the novel and because of the way Antonette calls her grandmother *Antonia* as she reminisces. At some point, the granddaughter’s storytelling began to blend with Cather’s novel. But Antonette’s stories are like her *kolače*. They come from her kitchen, her recipes. Take the famous encounter between Jim, Antonia, and the snake in the novel. As Steven Trout suggests in his fine article on the scene, “few moments in Cather’s writing convey so vividly the essential strangeness of wild animals . . . and, at the same time, the urgency with which humans apply the structures of myth and science to deny this strangeness.” Antonette told us a different story about the reptilian encounter. “Antonia killed it,” she said, “and Willa made her cut it up to study it.” We all laughed at the delightful reversal. And it really does sound like the young author, fascinated by dissection and desperate to see beneath the skin of other creatures.

Visiting with Antonette about *My Antonia* was like meeting a good neighbor for coffee and cake. We talked about the way things used to be and gossiped about a familiar cast of characters and the important events in their lives. Take the plow, for instance. Icon. Leitmotif. Symbol. The vision of the “plough” in the novel has come to stand for pioneer endeavor and the inevitable mutability of all such enterprises on the Great Plains. The Willa Cather Foundation uses this logo—has always used this logo—on its materials. When we arrived at Antonette’s house that December day, she proudly pointed to the plow in a flower bed near her front door. She told us that it was a gift for her ninetieth birthday—a gift her children had kept hidden in the garage at the side of the house until the big day. Their secrecy had caused her to fear they had gotten her a pet, and she told them that she didn’t want “a python or any animals either!!” We thought we knew why she values this plow until she began



Antonette’s musical photo album.

As important as Antonette’s stories are, she is also important as a curator of artifacts. When we arrived at her brick ranch house in Bladen, we found her dining room table covered with binders of newspaper clippings, photograph albums, the coral necklace, and so on. When she invited us to explore her closets, filled with more memorabilia that she hadn’t yet gotten out, we couldn’t say no and soon found cardboard boxes of binders and albums. At the very bottom of one of these stacks, we hit upon a stunning album given to Antonette by her aunt, Christina Skupa.





Antonette at home with her 90th-birthday gift from her grandchildren.

talking solemnly about her great-grandfather's suicide and how this event changed her grandmother's life: "And this is why I treasure the plow symbol. Because Antonia had to provide for the family. She broke the sod." Listen to Antonette talk about the plow and you feel inspired to work harder at understanding women's work on the nineteenth-century plains.

Everyone who reads the novel will remember the scene when Jim Burden arrives on Antonia's farm and the children burst forth from the cellar. When we visited the farm with Antonette, we headed straight for the cave. Antonette sat by the open cellar doors, encouraging us to notice the beautiful arched brickwork. We crept down the steps to look about. This was no primitive burrow, but a concrete reminder of how Anna preserved her harvests.

With this perspective in mind, Antonette liked to read the following passage from the novel at her presentations: "She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last." This passage reminded her of that particular photograph from long ago, taken with her brother in the orchard. The children are standing, though chairs stand behind them, and Antonette recalls sitting with her brother on her grandmother's lap in the orchard. She remembers the holes in her grandmother's canvas shoes and her grandmother's arms holding her and her brother close. "It is so touching," she says. "It is that love that God has given us through our nurturing."

"To me Grandmother was a very ideal person . . . not a conquering heroine but truly a hardworking and lovable peasant," Antonette says. After reading and rereading the novel, though, Antonette has come to believe that, in Cather's estimate, Anna "seemed a part of the prairies, belonging in the wind and the sunshine." Antonette says that her grandmother never

realized the importance of her story and the way generations to come would identify with it—and with her.

If that's true of Anna, it surely will never be said of Antonette, who has recognized the importance of Anna's story—her stories—and promoted her grandmother's legacy for more than fifty years. Back at Antonette's home, we read through more student letters, each with questions and theories about both Anna and Antonia. Antonette has answered each one, jotting a shorthand version of her response in one corner as a reminder. Many students have attached their school picture for Antonette to keep, and we recognized some of the students as teachers who now bring their own students to Red Cloud to visit the historic sites and learn about Willa Cather and Antonia. "My grandmother always said, 'If I had my life to live all over again, I'd do just the same way again.' All the trials and all the pain. I still think I have some of Antonia's genes, her energy. I think that is really why I'm living as long as I have—I'm the only one who has lived to ninety-seven. It's an honor to meet people and talk to them."

As we celebrate the centenary of *My Antonia* in 2018, we realize just how blessed we've been over the years to have had the Pavelka family involved in our work—as a resource, certainly, but also as friends and as supporters—and in Antonette's case, as an evangelist. Antonette is a frequent guest when the Willa Cather



Antonette and her brother Francis Skupa "in front of Antonia's orchard."





"I still think I have some of *Ántonia's* genes, her energy."

Foundation hosts special tour groups, and her appearances are often marked by spontaneous autographs, kisses and hugs and handshakes. The people she meets feel as though they've been touched by something special—*someone* special, something in Antonette that summons the spirit of Cather's *Ántonia*. And when we spent these four days together, we too felt that we had encountered something that was more important than a verification of dates and locations and facts. As Cather herself wrote, a work of "imaginative art" cannot be journalism. And so it is that we can talk with Antonette and quibble over the small details of when and where, but still take away some of the fundamental truths of *My Ántonia*: the value of friendship, the importance of family, and "the precious, incommunicable past."

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**Tracy Sanford Tucker**, education director of the Willa Cather Foundation, is a certified archivist. She presents and publishes regularly on topics related to Willa Cather, Great Plains literature, and the environment.



Antonette at the entrance to the Pavelka family fruit cellar.





Clockwise from top left: Antonette and Daryl Palmer at the Pavelka farmstead; Antonette's high school graduation photo; Antonette's paternal great-grandparents (Johnny Skupa's grandparents), photographed in Bohemia; Julia Pavelka and Johnny Skupa, Antonette's parents, on their wedding day; Antonette's aunt Lucille Pavelka (seated) and her mother, Julia Pavelka, as young women. Except as noted, Antonette's family photos are from her own collection. The present-day photographs of Antonette in this story are by Tracy Sanford Tucker.



# Nebraska, France, Bohemia: “What a Little Circle Man’s Experience Is”

Stéphanie Durrans



*mon amie  
antonía*

*Mon amie Antonia* (cover detail), translated by Blaise Allan (Paris: Éditions Seghers/Vent d'Ouest, 1967).

Willa Cather once confided to her friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that she had “cried with nostalgia” on seeing a great wheat field for the first time during her travels through France. Researching Cather’s connections with France has made me aware that so many things in my homeland brought back to her fond memories of her own childhood in a country that would seem to bear no likeness whatsoever to the geographical features of the Old World. In

the same way, *My Antonia* possesses this amazing ability to tap into shared sensory experiences regardless of your nationality, background, and personal experience. That this novel should mean so much to so many people across the world gives a measure of the versatility of Cather’s genius and testifies to her skill at weaving invisible connections between people, cultures, or stories that might have seemed completely unrelated at first glance. The reader who knows how to look on the other side of the rug will see various patterns emerge from all these intertwined strands.

A frail insect singing on the prairie conjures up Antonia’s early memories of an old woman back in Bohemia. Later, the mere fragrance of elder flowers by the riverside transports one back to a world where music and philosophy reigned supreme. Our entry into this world of sensations is poetically marked by the inaugural statement: “the dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things.” Many things indeed . . .

So why is this novel so close to my heart? What chords does it strike in the depths of my own history? Is it because my own grandfather died at a crossroads, stranded between two countries, and had to wait for many years to be allowed to rest in peace in the beloved village where he had been born? Is it because Black Hawk and the Divide remind me so much of my own childhood in a small country place up to the time when, like Jim, I entered what Cather calls “the world of ideas”? Is it because I was named after an old Czech immigrant who had come to France as a teenager after the First World War with a group of fellow farmworkers but who decided to hide away in a hay-wagon when the time came to

return home? Whatever the answer might be, one thing is sure: my own road home goes through the prairie of Nebraska.

*In loving memory of André Brochon and Stefan Bilka.*



**Stéphanie Durrans** is professor of American literature at the University of Bordeaux, Montaigne, France. She is author of *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* and *Willa Cather’s My Antonia: A Winter’s Journey*.

## Walking into *My Antonia* . . .

Betty Kort

Picture this: You’ve just read *My Antonia* and are planning an outing to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. You head south out of Red Cloud, Nebraska, cross the Republican River, and began to climb higher with each rolling hill until you see a high point ahead. Halfway up this last hill, you turn right, pass through the gate, stop your vehicle, and step onto the prairie.

Now grab your hardcover notebook, heavy No. 3 art pencil, and pristine 9"x12" piece of white drawing paper and begin walking forward maybe 150 yards through the knee-high grass, making certain to stay on high ground. Then, looking westward, find your special spot and nestle into the grass. Your assignment: Place the sheet of drawing paper lengthwise atop the hardcover notebook, place the No. 3 pencil a third of the way down on the left side of the paper, stare outward to where the prairie meets the sky, and begin drawing one line that represents the contours of the horizon, pressing hard into the paper. This is to be a blind contour line drawing, so don’t look back down until your pencil exits the right side of the paper. Assignment completed.

I’ve given this assignment to hundreds of people, young and old, to illustrate the seemingly simple structure Cather devises to introduce *My Antonia* and begin recording settlement of the Nebraska prairie.



The Cather Memorial Prairie: “nothing but land” and a multitude of stories.



Like the drawing, the first chapter of *My Antonia* portrays a nearly blank canvas that was the Nebraska Jim Burden first saw. “There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. . . . 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. . . . Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.” In the remaining chapters of the novel, this immense, empty space will be filled in—trees planted, sod broken into fields, fences constructed, houses built, a fresh new town embedded. Roads wind through the whole of it to connect the “composition” . . . until Grandfather Burden and countless others can envision a future “breadbasket of the world.”

To produce these results, Cather’s creative process begins with broad strokes to smooth in a vast sky above and then she settles in to paint the details of her landscape, dipping her fine brushes into a thick, colorful palette of stories that emblazon her canvas with human struggles, successes and failures as the spaces are filled in—for every new country needs its stories, its history and traditions. With the composition complete, the desolate, untamed frontier has melted like the setting sun into the horizon line, replaced by a thriving, industrious community and hopes for a bright future.

Cather’s novels are never “simple” as they may seem on a first read, though she takes pains to create a surface texture that suggests as much. Cather’s *My Antonia* builds on itself, providing layer upon layer of color so that the many stories she depicts become extensions of the human experience that translate into experiences we all have—experiences that touch us and color our lives.

Toward the middle of the novel, she boldly hints at these complicated levels of meaning by introducing the Roman poet Virgil to guide the reader deeper into the novel. Virgil is not misplaced. Cather is retelling stories, archetypes, if you will—she’s telling an *old, old story* once again. In other words, she had studied the masters before setting forth her composition. Virgil’s little *patria* provides a simple beginning that marks the founding of Rome. Virgil went on to fill in the spaces until Rome in all its glory was projected. Cather does the same in *My Antonia*, and, in the process, suggests for her own little *patria* a potentially glorious future as well—and justly so. The prairie states have become a “breadbasket for the world” just as *My Antonia* has remained a masterpiece of art.

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**Betty Kort** is a former president of the Willa Cather Foundation’s Board of Governors and a former executive director of the Foundation. She was for many years a teacher of English and art at Hastings, Nebraska High School. Her many awards include the 1993 Nebraska Teacher of the Year.

My favorite story of reading *My Antonia* is about the woman I lovingly referred to as my mother-out-law because she died before her daughter and I were legally married in 2014, after thirty years of domestic partnership. Hattie Mozelle Owens Smith (who went by her middle name) was a proud Texan, a yellow-dog Democrat, and a devout member of the Church of Christ. Born in 1919, she had a high-school education and honed her critical reading skills through study of her favorite book, the Bible. She didn’t spend much time reading novels, until she lost her sight to macular degeneration late in life. Not long after my book, *Willa Cather: Queering America*, was published in 1999, Mozelle started making her way through Cather’s major works on Talking Books. I was touched and delighted when she asked me for recommendations, but I’ll never forget the day she called to talk about reading *Antonia*.

My partner answered the phone. “Hi, darlin’,” Mozelle said impatiently. “Get me Marilee. I need to speak to her.” Mozelle was sweet but commanding. You did not disobey her orders. Martha handed me the phone.

“Hey, Mo,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Well, Marilee, I just finished *My Antonia*, and I’ve got a question. I’m sure it’s a stupid question, but I’ve got to ask it.”

“There truly are no stupid questions. What’s on your mind?”

“I *loved* the book. I mean, it’s a *beautiful* story and *Antonia* is such a remarkable character, but I just don’t understand, well, I mean, *really*, what is the *deal* with that male narrator? *Why* would Cather do that?” (Italics intended to indicate the dramatic emphases produced by Mozelle’s charmingly thick West Texas accent.)

I laughed. Loudly. “Mozelle,” I replied, “that is the opposite of a stupid question! Indeed, that question has been central to



Hattie Mozelle Owens Smith and her daughter Martha Nell Smith in Austin, 2007.



discussions of *My Ántonia* for decades! And it's had me scratching my head since I first read the novel in grad school!" With that, we were off to the races, dissecting the pleasures and the puzzles of Cather's most widely known book.

*Antonia* has never been my favorite of Cather's novels, but I love it for having been the catalyst for two readers of markedly different backgrounds and worldviews to deepen their bond through lively engagement with a text. Cather enjoyed intergenerational friendships, and I'm sure she would have appreciated the indomitable spirit of a little old lady from Texas who cultivated auditory skill as a way of compensating for her loss of sight. Mozelle was smart, gregarious, and practical. She did what she needed to do in order to remain intellectually active and connected to the world.

As we talked, I marveled at how keen Mozelle's ear was for the details of the text. My own auditory skills are comparatively weak, and I have the English teacher's reflexive bias toward reading with a pen in one hand and printed book in the other. Cather's limpid prose style is, of course, quite friendly to the ear, and her knack for drawing visually striking scenes and images in relatively few words helps ground the listener in the novel's world. The world of *My Ántonia* was likely a congenial, readily imaginable place for Mozelle, bearing some resemblance to the plains of West Texas, where she grew up in the 1920s as the daughter of a wholesale produce dealer. Her mother Ruby was a tall, handsome woman who was a quarter Cherokee and took over the produce business after her husband's death. Family lore is rife with stories of her tooling around in her Ford to take orders from grocery stores up into the 1960s.

Given her life experience and family history, I'm not at all surprised that Mozelle loved *My Ántonia*. I'm also not surprised she shared my frustration that a strong woman's story was mediated through the voice of a disappointed romantic man. Mozelle listened politely while I unpacked my theory that Cather's point was to lay bare a sociocultural system that gave men the power and privilege of narrating and interpreting women's experiences, but I could tell she wasn't satisfied.

"Well," she said, "I managed to love Jim Burden's Ántonia, but I bet I would have loved Ántonia's Ántonia even more."

"Me, too, Mozelle," I said as we disengaged. "Me, too."

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**Marilee Lindemann** is associate professor of English, executive director of College Park Scholars, and founding director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies program at the University of Maryland. She is author of *Willa Cather: Queering America*, and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather* and the Oxford World's Classics *O Pioneers!*

## Farms and Wilderness . . . and Family

Aisling McDermott

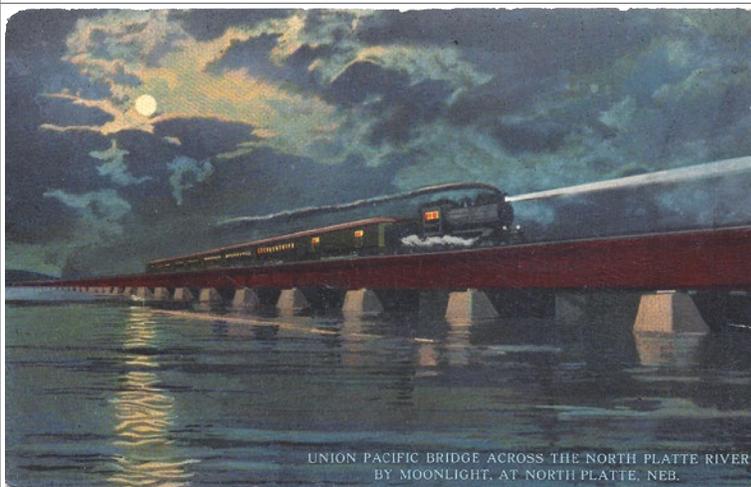
Of all the texts that we were told to read for my American literature class, the one that I looked forward to the least was *My Ántonia*. Although a large, brick-like anthology was also required, the novel was what seemed the most daunting to read. Partially, this was because my American lit. class was one of four English classes that I was taking that semester and the thought of having to read yet another full-length novel seemed like a lot more work than I wanted to do.

Mainly, though, it was because, when I thought "Willa Cather" I thought farms and wilderness. I thought of scenes that I had no way of relating to. Having spent all my life in a small city, I didn't think the stories of farming people would resonate with me at all. How could they? Not only were we separated by location but also by time and culture. How could I relate at all to Jim or Ántonia?

The funny thing about books, though, is that they can transport you to a time and place you're completely unfamiliar with and you somehow enjoy every minute of it. As soon as I started reading *My Ántonia*, I was transported to Black Hawk, Nebraska. Despite having been so sure that I wouldn't be able to relate to any of the characters, I found myself doing just that.

As Jim described the ride from the Black Hawk train station to his grandparents' farm, I immediately thought of the train ride I took to visit family out west. We made a quick stop in Omaha at about 2:00 a.m. It was so dark that I couldn't see anything out the window. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning lit up the sky and all I could see was fields, stretched out as far as the horizon. Just like Jim, I was amazed by how flat Nebraska was.

This wasn't the only time *My Ántonia* reminded me of that trip either. It was on this trip that I discovered my family history. While my cousins and I and our parents all lived in cities, their parents were born and raised in rural areas. My grandfather grew



Curt Teich "CT Photochrom" postcard ca. 1911.

up on a farm, and my grandmother's family were migrant workers, traveling from Oklahoma to California in search of work.

As I continued to read *My Ántonia*, I kept thinking back to their farms, to what it must have been like to uproot their entire life and move from Oklahoma to California. I thought of my family and the families who must have come before and after them. How many had ended up flourishing and how many had been beaten down by the harsh conditions? While California's terrain and weather are nothing like those of Nebraska, farming, no matter where you are, seems like a harsh profession.

I was originally hesitant to sit down and read *My Ántonia*, sure that I would find nothing redeemable in the novel. Sure, it was a classic, but there were so many other classics that I had hated. And instead of feeling that this book had wasted my time, I finished it with a new appreciation for something I hadn't expected: my family.



**Aisling McDermott** is a senior at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. She is majoring in English, with minors in education and French.



Educators getting into the spirit of the "Classics of the American Frontier." Photo courtesy of William Anderson.

## Cather in the Classroom

William Anderson

In 1987, I was asked to teach Advanced Placement English for high school juniors. Concurrently I was accepted as a summer scholar in the National Endowment for the Humanities secondary educators' seminar. The six-week session on "Classics of the American Frontier" was held at University of California, Davis. Eighteen high school instructors from disparate locales met daily to discuss books on our reading list. Our leader was an eminent Western scholar, Dr. W. Turrentine Jackson. Since I was assembling a reading list for the upcoming Advanced Placement course, I considered all the texts required by the seminar. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* was included—a nod to immigrants and homesteading on the prairie.

I had encountered Cather's work as an undergraduate and graduate student, but somehow missed the eponymous Ántonia. I eagerly read the book, impressed by the simple majesty of Cather's Nebraska pioneers living close to the elemental forces of nature. During the seminar study of *My Ántonia*, Dr. Jackson stepped aside, allowing UC Davis professor of English James Woodress to discuss his new book, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. I decided to write one of the seminar's required essays on *My Ántonia*, focusing on the novel's immigrant characters. I also placed the novel on my growing syllabus for the upcoming AP course. When the seminar was over, my homeward route to Michigan included a stop in Red Cloud, Nebraska—Cather's hometown.

For all the remaining years of my teaching career, March became Ántonia's month. Also during that period my American history classes studied the western expansion era, offering an excellent cross-curricular experience. Jim Burden, the Shimerdas, Lena Lingard, Anton Jelinek, the Harlings and other Black Hawk residents became subjects of lively classroom discussion.

*My Ántonia* was well received by students. Groups were assigned chunks of text to analyze and present to classroom peers, effectively discussing the book's themes, mood, tone, style, characterization, dialect and historical allusions. Ántonia's story inspired student creativity, lending well to art projects, dramatic vignettes based on the book, and even an original song accompanied by a guitar-strumming student.

As educators we wonder if topics we introduce remain in student consciousness. How long do classic novels like *My Ántonia* remain embedded in educational experience? Recently I received an email from Ellen Rose, a former student who is now a teacher herself. She wrote:

Hi Mr. Anderson! I just wanted you to know that I thought of you and your class the other day.

My boyfriend is in his final semester of college, and he is taking a "Woman and Literature" course. He studied the life and works of Willa Cather! I remembered *Antonia* so well and was able to draw so many memories from that great book. Just thought you would like to know that!

Indeed: I was very happy to know that!



**William Anderson** is an author, educator, and speaker. His twenty-seven books include *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography*, *The Selected Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, *River Boy: The Story of Mark Twain*, and *The World of the Trapp Family*.



## Each Time, Something New to Love

Trish Schreiber

I've always been proud of being related to Willa Cather. My mother, Margaret Cather Shannon, was one of her brother Roscoe's twin daughters. I never took an active interest in her life, though, until I was in my fifties.

The first Willa Cather Spring Conference I ever attended was in 2005. It was an important year. The fiftieth anniversary of the Cather Foundation was being celebrated. Also, *My Ántonia* had been chosen as the "One Book, One State" selection for Nebraska and it was the featured text of the conference.

It was very exciting to be in Red Cloud. I was in awe of the beautifully restored Opera House, where top Cather scholars were gathered to discuss Willa Cather and one of her greatest books, *My Ántonia*. During one of the discussions a woman raised her hand and said something like, "I've read the book countless number of times. I just pick it up and start reading from different sections and each time, I find something new to love." This statement made quite an impression on me. I had only read *My Ántonia* twice: once, as an adolescent girl and just recently in preparation for the conference.

When I read the book the first time, I interpreted the story in very different ways than I did as an adult. Probably the biggest difference was my impression of Jim's reunion with Ántonia at the end of the book. When Jim visits her and finds her "a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled," I felt sad. For me, at that time, the fate of the strong, lovely heroine was a disappointment.

So reading the book again, as a middle-aged woman, I was surprised to realize that Ántonia's story actually had a happy ending. Now I was able to get past Jim's first impression of Ántonia and read his true understanding of her. "I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered—about her teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life." Ántonia had triumphed. She had a successful marriage, many healthy children, and she was happy.

I now feel like the woman who spoke up at the 2005 Willa Cather Spring Conference. I've reread the book several times and each time I find something new to love. The book has meant different things to me at different times in my life, but with Cather's beautiful writing it has always been a wonderful pleasure to read.

Trish Schreiber is the granddaughter of Willa Cather's brother, Roscoe Cather. She lives in Meadow Vista, California, with her husband James Schreiber. They are generous and enthusiastic participants in the activities of the Willa Cather Foundation.



Trish Schreiber, Charles Cather, John Cather Ickis, and Margaret Fernbacher in Red Cloud, 2005. Charles Cather, the son of Cather's brother James, was her second executor. He died in 2011.

## Our Reflections on *My Ántonia*: A Family Perspective

John Cather Ickis and Margaret Ickis Fernbacher

Since our mother, Elizabeth, was one of the twins, Willa's favorite nieces, we grew up surrounded by Cather novels and pictures. Among our early childhood memories are the photographs of "Aunt Willie," as our mother would call her: Aunt Willie as a little girl with her bow and arrow, Aunt Willie as a tomboy with her butch haircut and her Civil War cap (at least that's what we thought it was), Aunt Willie as a doctor.

**Margaret:** I was fourteen years old the first time I read *My Ántonia*, and I felt a special empathy with Ántonia because she was exactly my age at the beginning of Jim Burden's narrative. As I am reading the novel again, many years later, I am pleased to note that the empathy is still there, along with a more mature outlook that enables me to better appreciate Cather's beautiful writing.

**John:** For me, there has always been a mystical quality surrounding Aunt Willie's westward journey from Virginia to the Nebraska prairie, an experience captured vividly in *My Ántonia*. I sought to share this experience with our youngest daughter Catherine, age seven at the time, by reading a few pages each evening at bedtime. My job was to put her to sleep, but she would remain awake, fascinated, until it was I who dozed off . . .



**Margaret:** As a teenager I'll have to admit that my favorites were *O Pioneers!* and *One of Ours*. This changed when we first visited Red Cloud at the fiftieth Spring Conference. Seeing the real Harling House and the fruit cellar at the Pavelka farm made the novel very special for me.

**John:** Our first visit to Red Cloud brought *My Ántonia* to life for me as well. I shall never forget meeting Toni, Ántonia's granddaughter, or being waited on at Cutter's Restaurant (no relation to Wick) by a descendant of the Pavelka family. Suddenly *My Ántonia* was no longer a novel, it was Aunt Willie's early years unfolding before us.

There were two other facets of *My Ántonia* that were important and special to both of us. One such facet was Jim Burden's admiration for the immigrants who come to Nebraska from faraway places like Bohemia, Russia, and Scandinavia.

**John:** Many of my boyhood friends were second-generation immigrants from Calabria and Sicily: from the boys I learned Italian card games; from the girls, dancing—as Ántonia and the other hired girls learned from the Italian couple, the Vannis, in the dancing pavilion they put up near the Danish laundry.

**Margaret:** By the time I was seventeen, I was competing in horse shows around Ohio. That was 1956, the year of the Hungarian revolt, and many refugees from Hungary came to look for jobs around the stables. One of the Hungarians was special for me because he became a great horse trainer and sometimes gave me lessons. The Hungarians in Ohio, with their rich culture and strong determination, often made me think of the Bohemians in Nebraska.

A second facet was Aunt Willie's strong feelings about commerce and business people, both negative and positive. The Black Hawk money-lender of *My Ántonia*, Wick Cutter, epitomizes the negative, while the eldest Harling daughter, Frances, illustrates the positive: business savvy and ability to talk with the men about grain cars and cattle, but always ready to help others. This facet is also seen in her many letters to our grandfather Roscoe. In a letter to our mother at the time of Roscoe's death, Willa contrasts the "slick salesmen" types against the ethical fortitude of Roscoe, a banker with deep moral values.



**John Cather Ickis and Margaret Ickis Fernbacher** are grandchildren of Willa Cather's brother, Roscoe Cather. John is professor emeritus and former dean of the faculty at INCAE Business School in Alajuela, Costa Rica. Margaret is a former rider, judge, and newspaper columnist on equestrian events and competitions, now retired and living in Clermont, Florida.

## Looking Back at *My Ántonia*

Sharon O'Brien

When I was in graduate school I had a difficult time finding a thesis topic. It was no wonder—I hadn't gone to graduate school out of an interest in being an academic but because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I'd been an English major in college and I'd done well, so maybe more of the same? I'd written my thesis on the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet George Herbert and applied to Harvard saying I wanted to be a seventeenth-century literature specialist. That lasted about a month, destroyed by my encounter with seventeenth-century prose writers. So I became an Americanist—"it's *our* literature!" I told a friend in excited discovery. This was my first step on the road to my thesis on Cather, but there were delays. For my first thesis topic I picked Faulkner as a detective writer. I have no idea why I thought this was a good idea—I disliked Faulkner and couldn't understand *Absalom, Absalom!*, which, I suspected, was crucial to my argument. So I backed out of Faulkner and took on Marianne Moore, another absurd choice. I couldn't understand her poetry, didn't much like it, and wasn't a poetry specialist. So, exit Moore, enter nothing.

At that time I was taking a seminar on Hawthorne and James and tried to find a topic there, but nothing arose. I was interested

MY  
ÁNTONIA

MY ÁNTONIA

BY

WILLA S. CATHER

WILLA  
CATHER

Author of  
THE SONG OF THE LARK, O PIONEERS! etc



OF all the remarkable women that Miss Cather has created no other is so appealing as Ántonia, all impulsive youth and careless courage. Miss Cather has the rare quality of being able to put into her books the flame and driving force of unconquerable youth.

MY ÁNTONIA is a love story, brimming with human appeal, and a very distinguished piece of writing.

WE unreservedly recommend it to all lovers of good stories and to those who appreciate the very best in fiction.

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A view of the spine and cover of the dust jacket to the first edition of *My Ántonia*.



in their women characters but their stories were so depressing. “All the strong women in American literature end up punished or dead,” I complained to a friend. I was thinking about Hester Prynne, Zenobia, Isabel Archer, Edna Pontellier. “Have you tried Willa Cather?” he asked. “She doesn’t punish her strong women.” “No,” I said. “I’m not sure I’m interested.” I felt resistance to Willa Cather. My father had been pushing her Catholic novels on me for years. I associated Cather with the church as a result and since I had become a lapsed Catholic I didn’t want any religious stories.

But I thought I’d give her a try and began with *O Pioneers!* I loved the book. First of all, the literary voice was so satisfying. Although there were layers of meaning, I could tell that the novel was rejecting a convoluted Jamesian style for something more lucid and bright. And the heroine was a revelation: Alexandra Bergson manages a farm with skill and firmness and ends up with a man only in the last paragraph; perhaps, I thought, Cather’s brief nod to convention. I read the book in 1972, during the heart of the early women’s movement. Feminist critics had discovered patriarchy and analyzed the portrayal of women in misogynist literature. This was important work, but what I felt was so important about Alexandra (and then Thea) was that they were resisting patriarchy—and not being punished for it. When I first read *My Ántonia*, I was not so delighted. I was alert to the complexities of a male narrator and at first thought that Jim’s representation of Ántonia as an earth mother—a “rich mine of life”—made her only a signifier of Jim’s narrow, masculine vision. But after rereading the book I saw many signs of Ántonia’s creative power—her ability to translate stories for Jim, her narration to her children of stories in which Jim only figures as a character. So she struck me as another strong woman who does not end up, in the end, punished or dead.

When I was recently editing the Norton Critical *My Ántonia*, a task which involved reading just about every scholarly book or article concerned with *My Ántonia*, I was impressed by the range of writing on the novel and its continuing aliveness as a subject for scholarly inquiry. Writers from a variety of critical fields had something to say about the novel—writers drawing on new criticism, myth and symbol studies, feminist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, new historicism, Native American studies, critical race theory. The novel is endlessly rich, offering important narratives to a variety of critical approaches, and isn’t that the definition of a classic?

So I’m grateful to my friend who steered me away from Hawthorne and James, and I’m grateful to myself for dispensing with Faulkner and Moore. Willa Cather and *My Ántonia* have been part of my life for decades. She helped me find my footing as a scholar, and I’ll always be grateful for that.



Sharon O’Brien is author of *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. She edited the Library of America’s Willa Cather (volumes 1–3), *New Essays on Willa Cather*, and Norton Critical Editions of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*.

## *My Ántonia* and the Power of Place

Jarrod McCartney

*My Ántonia* is responsible for my being the Heritage Tourism Development Director in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Sure, *O Pioneers!* is the text I am most knowledgeable about. *O Pioneers!* got me through my master’s program and is the centerpiece of my hopefully soon-to-be-finished dissertation, but *My Ántonia* is the text that pulled me fully into the world of Willa Cather. *My Ántonia* made me realize my hometown, warts and all, is someplace special and so are the people who live there.

Astonishingly enough, I was never assigned any of Cather’s texts to read as a student. I did self-select “The Sculptor’s Funeral” in high school. At that time, I was riddled with teen angst and therefore fully enmeshed in contrarian antipathy towards all things Red Cloud. “The Sculptor’s Funeral” spoke to me in my youth as it skewered small-town life quite mercilessly. Perhaps it punctured small-town life a little too deeply, however, as its cynicism became less appealing as I aged.

I avoided reading Cather again until after I finished college—indeed I avoided her until I briefly moved back to Red Cloud after an ill-fated attempt at law school (I had exchanged teen angst for an overwrought idealism). Being a bit adrift and looking for inspiration from a hometown hero, I went to the Auld Public Library and checked out *My Ántonia*. It was magic. It hit so close to home, spiritually, geographically, and psychologically. I felt as if



The view looking west from the homestead site of Cather’s grandparents. Photo by Robert Olsen.



Jim's struggles were my struggles, and I knew that no matter where I went in life I would not be able to shake this place.

Plus, the writing is just plain beautiful. Simple yet shimmering, stark but bold, her prose is perfectly suited to the prairie. I suspect she might be the only one who could adequately convey why I feel so at home and yet so alone when I drive through rural Webster County, or the feeling I get when I drive between Bladen and Campbell and am utterly convinced that those shaggy lands and endless fields of row crops are some of the most beautiful places on the planet. There's also something simply wondrous in that line of hers, ". . . that is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great." I think of this every time I visit my mother's gravesite at Walnut Creek Cemetery near Inavale. It's a comforting line that suggests loss can lead to fulfillment and that we should strive to become part of something greater than ourselves.



**Jarrod McCartney** is Heritage Tourism Director in his hometown, Red Cloud, Nebraska. His wife, Rachel Olsen, owns Prairie Plum Coffee in Red Cloud and is a tour guide at the Willa Cather Foundation.



The Sadilek siblings, ca. 1894. Standing, left to right: Anna, Frank, Christine. Seated: Anton. From the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

## *My Ántonia*, the Scholarly Edition, and Me

Kari A. Ronning

We will forget about my first encounter with *My Ántonia*, which was assigned reading my junior year in high school, because I have forgotten any reactions I had to it back then, as well as most of the rest of that year.

In 1990, when I joined the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, a part of the Cather Project at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, I knew essentially nothing of scholarly editing or of Willa Cather. Scholarly editing means repeated close readings of a text down to the punctuation marks. It means reading down the right hand margins of each page to catch end-of-line hyphenations, two or three times. It means assembling lists. And then proofing the text microscopically three times for the press.

Fortunately, the volume I began on was *My Ántonia*. That smooth, beautiful prose, so fit to the events and characters of the story, never got old or trite during all those rereadings. And even though we were supposed to be paying attention to the ink on the pages, not to the story, still the feelings behind the ink glowed through it. I soon realized how lucky I was to be reading so good a book; later I realized that almost any other of Cather's novels could have drawn me in so—and came to pity editors of many other writers.

That was the work. The real fun of *My Ántonia* for me was researching annotations. Most scholarly editions then simply translated foreign words and provided the sources of allusions. General Editor Sue Rosowski was determined to provide much more historical (and biological) background. Mildred Bennett had already shown links between the story and Cather's Red Cloud background; I began reading the Red Cloud newspapers and poring through census records on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society to find more. Look, there's the *Red Cloud Chief's* account of the inquest on Francis Sadilek—and John Polnicky was the only Bohemian on the panel, just like Anton Jelinek! Look, the 1885 Nebraska census shows there was a Danish laundryman named Hansen, just like Mr. Jensen! The *Chief* says Mrs. Mathew Bentley wore a silver brocade dress to a wedding, like the one Mrs. Wick Cutter wears. And look, there's the report of the Cutter murder-suicide copied from the Arkansas newspaper! It was like a treasure hunt, trivial as some of the parallels might be. But I learned how deeply Red Cloud had informed Cather's *My Ántonia*, and I learned to value the town as well as the book.



**Kari A. Ronning** is a research associate professor at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and textual editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. She is currently working on the final two volumes, the collected poetry and *My Mortal Enemy*.



## Venus Lived Here

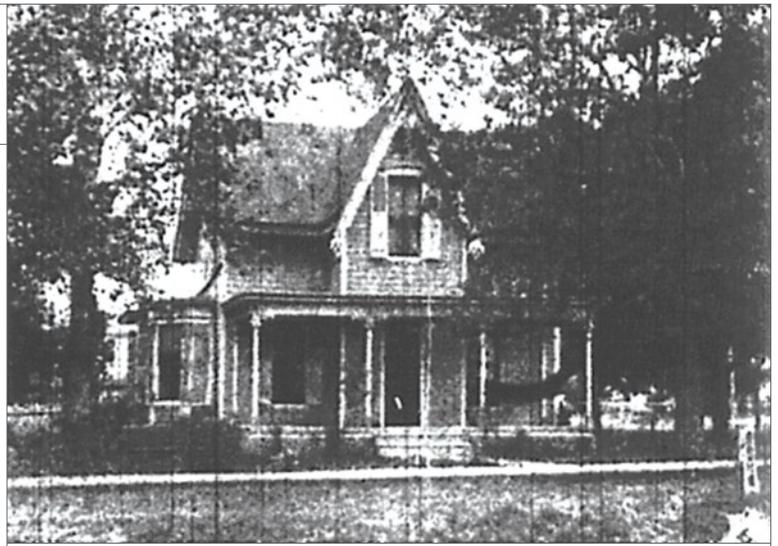
Thomas Reese Gallagher

For much of its history, the M. R. Bentley house in Red Cloud has had an unsavory reputation. As recently as last year, a tour group expressed interest in seeing “the devil’s house.” Mathew R. Bentley had been a prototype for the villainous Wick Cutter of *My Ántonia*, and much of the picture we get of Wick Cutter is compatible with what can be seen of M. R. Bentley in public records and personal accounts. On the afternoon of April 10, 1912, Bentley shot and killed his wife, Agnes Cook Bentley, and then shot himself. He died that evening. Contemporary news reports, which informed Cather’s account of the crime in *My Ántonia*, pointedly refer to Bentley’s premeditation and to the couple’s disagreements over his estate (although not in such detail as Cather provides).

As students of the novel know, this crime did not occur in the house in Red Cloud, but in Siloam Springs, Arkansas; the Bentleys moved to Arkansas in 1904. No matter. Perhaps it is the close similarity between M. R. Bentley and the fictional Wick Cutter, or the breathless account of the crime as it is told to Jim Burden by Ántonia’s son Rudolph toward the close of the novel, but the Bentley house on Cedar Street is indelibly the “Wick Cutter house,” the scene of an unspeakable crime, and I have known people to cross themselves as they pass by. Another curious factor also plays into some perceptions of the house: mightn’t the decorative trusses in each of the house’s four gables—the “king’s posts”—be inverted crucifixes? Signs of Satan? (No. No. No.)

When I had the opportunity to buy the Bentley house just over a decade ago, it was not one I seized instantly or without anxiety. But buy it I did, without having set foot in it. The long restoration process, now nearing its final stages, has been fueled by the same conviction that made me acquire the property in the first place: there is absolutely nothing wrong with this house that can’t be cured by love. (Even when dealing with banks and contractors and subcontractors and insurance agents and the lot, I still know this to be true.)

In *My Ántonia*, when Ántonia leaves the Harlings’ employ and goes to work for the Cutters, she is doing something that Anna Sadilek might have done. In her time as a “hired girl,” Anna is likely to have worked in several Red Cloud households, although it’s not known whether she worked for the Bentleys. Similarly, given what is known of M. R. Bentley, the attempted rape described in the novel is entirely plausible, but unverified. The small bedroom where this would have occurred, just off the kitchen, is nearly restored (no longer the bathroom it was for decades).



The house on Cedar Street. From the *Webster County Argus*, July 14, 1905. Image courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

My affection for *My Ántonia* is a fundamental part of my love for this house. But in the years of working on the restoration, my sense of the novel has changed. Another figure has appeared to haunt the margins of the story, in the borderland where Red Cloud and Black Hawk merge—but decidedly on the Red Cloud side. I think of her alongside Cather’s characters who have their moments on the stage and then disappear, like Jake and Otto in *My Ántonia*, Professor Wunsch in *The Song of the Lark*, Roddy Blake in *The Professor’s House*. This one, though, lived in the real world, if only for a short time, and she is allowed no appearance in the Black Hawk of *My Ántonia*. This is probably a blessing.

Her name was Venus Bentley. She was the adopted daughter of M. R. Bentley and Agnes Bentley, and almost certainly his natural daughter (one or two plausible candidates for her birth mother can be found in newspaper accounts of the Bentleys’ visitors and travels). Born in 1897, when M. R. Bentley was fifty-six years old and Agnes Bentley was fifty, Venus became part of their family that year—her first home was the Bentley house on Cedar Street in Red Cloud. She was brought into this household, it was said, as yet another way for M. R. Bentley to manifest his hatred for his wife. In the few documents that acknowledge her existence, I’ve found no expression of concern for her welfare.

While still a young girl, she developed what Mildred Bennett refers to in *The World of Willa Cather* as “some nervous ailment.” This was probably St. Vitus’s Dance (also known as Sydenham’s chorea), a disorder of the nervous system marked by involuntary jerking movements of the face and extremities. It is associated with acute rheumatic fever. She was eventually institutionalized, but I believe not until some time after the Bentleys moved to Arkansas. She was still in their household in Siloam Springs in 1910, according to the U.S. Census. None of the news accounts



of the murder-suicide in 1912 mentions her—she was not in the Bentley household by then. But she was still alive. We see her again in 1920, as an inmate in the Arkansas State Hospital for Nervous Diseases in Little Rock. She died there on January 12, 1921, a few months shy of her twenty-fourth birthday. She is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Siloam Springs. In what feels like a final cruelty, her grave is alongside her father’s.

I do not care to think of such things as restless spirits or afterlives. But if I can manage it, this one house in Red Cloud—the one with the bad reputation—is going to be a happy house, and full of light.



**Thomas Reese Gallagher** is managing editor of the *Willa Cather Review* and former president of the Willa Cather Foundation.

## An Association of Forty+ Years

Virgil and Dolores Albertini

“Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again” is our favorite quotation from *My Ántonia*, as it certainly resonates with our forty-one year association with Cather, her novel, Catherland, and the Willa Cather Foundation.

We made our initial trip to Red Cloud and Catherland on the Thanksgiving weekend in 1977. We did the traditional town and country tours, leaving us with lasting memories and extremely vivid ones of Annie Pavelka’s homestead and the country cemeteries. It was one of the coldest days of the year, but we lingered long over the graves of Annie and John Pavelka in the Cloverton cemetery a few miles southeast of Bladen, recalling Annie and Cather’s friendship and how that led to the inception of *My Ántonia*. Visiting these places certainly enhanced further readings of the novel, and students in Virgil’s classes would echo the same sentiments in ensuing years after class visits to Catherland.

During the summer of 1979, Virgil attended a Cather workshop in Red Cloud where the focus was on *My Ántonia* and the flowers and fauna that Cather inserted into her works. The highlight of this conference for Virgil was meeting and talking with Elizabeth, one of Annie’s daughters, at the Pavelka farm. They happily discussed the Pavelka family and Annie’s fruit cellar where she stored the jars of fruit for her kolache, the traditional treat for some of the Czech immigrants who helped settle Nebraska. Elizabeth referred to her restaurant in Bladen, which she owned for eight years. She laughingly said she did not make kolache because it was “too much work.”

That kolache discussion leads us to Virgil’s 1980 summer Cather class, where one of his students was the university’s assistant news and information director. Whenever Virgil taught *My Ántonia*, Dolores would arise early and make kolache for his 7:30 morning Cather class. The assistant director snapped pictures of the delicacy. She and her director then wrote an accompanying essay and sent them to the *Omaha World-Herald*. They immediately caught the attention of the columnist Robert McMorris, who wrote a series of columns disclaiming Dolores’ kolache as not authentically Czechoslovakian, since they were square-shaped, with the corners folded over the fruit filling, as opposed to the ones with a round depression at the center containing the fruit.

Many allies, including McMorris’s wife, McMorris’s Czech printer’s wife, the people of the Czech community of Wilber, Nebraska, and Mildred Bennett defended Dolores’s choice, claiming that the “true and original Kolache are square.” Even McMorris eventually conceded and apologized to Dolores. After all, she was using a recipe from the *Nebraska Centennial First Ladies Cookbook*—a recipe submitted by Lucille Pavelka, the “Martha” of *My Ántonia*. What better supporter can one have than Annie Pavelka’s own daughter?

Our forty-one year interest in Cather and her writings and our association with Catherland, its ambience, and the engaging personalities involved, like Annie’s granddaughter, Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, have not diminished over time. We expect the present and near future experiences will also be deposited in our memory well, to emerge eventually as cherished realities, much as those of the past years have done. Thanks for all the memories, Willa Cather.



**Virgil Albertini** is professor emeritus at Northwest Missouri State University and a founding editor of *Teaching Cather*. **Dolores Albertini** was a librarian at Northwest Missouri State. They serve as copy editors for this journal, and Virgil is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation’s Board of Governors.



Kolache round and kolache square, baked and photographed by Tracy Sanford Tucker.



# Cather's Lament

Joseph Urgo

I have written and spoken thousands of words about Willa Cather, many of them focused on *My Ántonia*, a novel with which I never grow tired or believe there is nothing more to say. I have taught the novel dozens of times as well—but that is only the formal arrangement of matters, because in fact I have learned so much more about the novel from my students over the past four decades than I have from reading in solitude. Evidence of this is in Kirsten Frazelle's essay, included in this issue, a fresh perspective from Cather's second hundred years of readers.

I married into Cather. After we began thinking about marriage, Lesley suggested I read *My Mortal Enemy*, so we'd have a common reference. That got my interest. I read *My Ántonia* next and always think of these two first-person-possessive titles as Cather's vision of entangled lives. Maybe that's because there is a female voice at the heart of my lifelong, adult relationship with *My Ántonia*. The female voice of the novel (narrating the Introduction) creates the man's voice (on the train), which both gives and withholds voice to the woman who inspired his vision. The struggle to survive, like Ántonia's will to live a life independent of Jim's voice, and our will to see around Jim to

the woman herself, fills my sense of this novel's essence. And in Cather's second possessive, *My Mortal Enemy*, published six years later, we see more clearly what that struggle entails, and what engulfs us as we realize, as Jim does at the end of *My Ántonia*, "what a little circle man's experience is." This experience, this mortality, Jim insists, is one "we possessed together." But we know full well, as emphasized in *My Mortal Enemy*, that we also possess it alone, in solitude. The interplay of the possessive as something both embracing and solitary, in fierce binary, enlivens and eludes my, *My Ántonia*.

Jim recalls how on Saturday nights the hired man Otto Fuchs would sing "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairee," a lament not heeded upon the singer's death. In the song the living who remain go ahead and bury him anyway, bury him on the lone prairie. In that way, his survivors memorialize his lament, not his will. *My Ántonia*, as I age and it does not, comes to me now as Cather's lament. She did manage, in time, to escape burial on that lone prairie. The novel, which we memorialize today, opens with an epigraph's lament, "the best days are the first to flee," and closes, again, in lament for "the precious, the incommunicable past." In tune with the cowboy's song, we return again and again to Willa Cather's voice, which in its fullness, possesses us, and is gone.



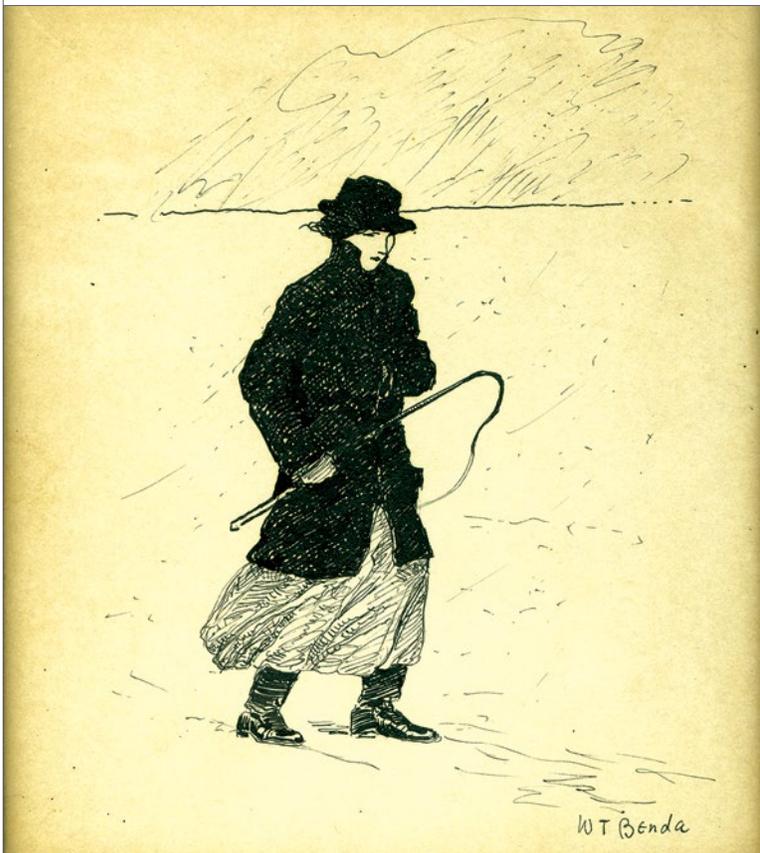
**Joseph Urgo** is author of *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* and editor of the Broadview edition of *My Ántonia*. He is provost and professor of English at the University of North Carolina Asheville, and a former member of the Willa Cather Foundation's Board of Governors.

## Reading *My Ántonia* Gave My Life a New Roadmap

Nancy Selvaggio Picchi

*My Ántonia* first entered my life over a half-century ago, when its tale of dislocation and longing for the past touched my imagination. It also provided a way for me to gain a greater understanding of my own experiences and feelings. I was eleven years old when I borrowed the book from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's bookmobile, which made a once-weekly stop in the Pittsburgh suburb where I lived with my parents and siblings.

Although the first book I read by Cather was *O Pioneers!*, I turned almost immediately to *My Ántonia*, and then followed up with *Lucy Gayheart*. At the time, I had no idea that the Hanover of *O Pioneers!*, the Black Hawk of *My Ántonia*, and the Haverford of *Lucy Gayheart* were



"The snow was driving around her and she bent to face it": an image of solitary endurance by W. T. Benda for the first publication of *My Ántonia*. Original art donated to the Willa Cather Foundation by Jim and Angela Southwick.





"NO PLACE LIKE HOME."  
Modern Home of today.



The "Harling House" through the years.

fictionalized versions of the very real small town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Cather and her family had moved when she was ten years old. What I did know, though, was that the story told in *My Ántonia* by Cather's narrator, Jim Burden, resonated powerfully with my eleven-year-old self, who keenly understood Burden's initial estrangement from his new home and landscape. I had experienced a similar sense of alienation three years earlier when my parents had moved our family from our close-knit Pittsburgh neighborhood, where we lived next-door to first cousins and were only a short walk or streetcar ride away from other family members, to a brand new house on a street of other brand new houses. Where once an orchard had flourished, now eighteen homes and two trees stood. Our new community lacked all the things that I loved: my cousins, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my friends, the corner stores, and libraries. For a child who had no access to a car or public transportation, my former urban home might as well have been half a continent away, as it felt that way to me.

*My Ántonia* met my eleven-year-old self where I was at the moment I opened the book. The power of Cather's language and her ability to communicate the importance of loss and memory took hold of me so strongly that I never wanted it to let me go.

It wasn't until 1968, as a freshman in college, that I discovered that Jim Burden's story was essentially Cather's and that Black Hawk was based on Red Cloud, Nebraska. Research for an assigned paper led me to Mildred Bennett's *The World of Willa Cather*, one of the early works to explore the correspondences between Cather's fictional characters and those she had known in real life, and to other scholarship. I learned that many of the strongest characters in *My Ántonia* were based on her friends and neighbors. I promised myself that one day I would replicate Jim Burden's train trip and visit the town where, in my imagination, I had already spent so much time. Twenty years later, in July 1988, I did just that.

During a three-day visit to Red Cloud, I met Mildred Bennett and her colleague at the Willa Cather Foundation, Pat Phillips, as well as Toni Turner, a granddaughter of Anna Sadilek Pavelka, the prototype for Ántonia.

On my last afternoon in Red Cloud, Mrs. Bennett led me on a walking tour of the town. As we passed the Miner house, which became the Harling house in *My Ántonia*, she stopped and noted that its owner, a granddaughter of the original owners, had recently died and that it was now up to me to save the house by buying it. My insistence that this was not in the cards did not dissuade my acquaintance of three days. For the next year and a half, until her death in late 1989, she would end her telephone calls and letters to me with a sentence or two about the Harling house.

In November 1990, a year after Mildred Bennett's death, my husband and I became the owners of the Harling House. By 1996, with the help of Red Cloud contractor Bob Schulz and his crew, and guidance from the descendants of the original Harling House owners and from Nebraska historians, we had restored the exterior of the house to the way it had looked in 1885. In 2001, we donated the Harling House and all of its contents to the Willa Cather Foundation.

In the intervening years since my first visit to Red Cloud, I've had the honor of serving on the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors and of becoming friends with many Red Cloud residents. Little did I know when I first read *My Ántonia* over fifty years ago that the book would lead me on the adventure of my life.



**Nancy Picchi**, a former member of the Willa Cather Foundation's Board of Governors, spent several years researching and restoring the Harling/Miner house in Red Cloud, which she and her husband Bernard Picchi purchased and donated to the Foundation. That house, prominently featured in *My Ántonia*, has become one of the Foundation's most visited properties.





Kent Pavelka's brother David in the arms of their grandmother Anna Pavelka, ca. 1947, when Anna lived with her daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth's husband Byron Boyd.

## My Grandmother—My *Ántonia*

Kent Pavelka

It is with surprisingly semi-precise clarity that, as a five-year-old child, I recall my grandmother, Anna Sadilek Pavelka. Or as readers of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* know her, *Ántonia* Shimerda Cuzak.

I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. My father Edward was Anna Pavelka's youngest child. I was her second youngest grandchild. On frequent family trips to Bladen, Nebraska in the mid-1950s, to visit my aunt and uncle, Byron and Elizabeth Boyd, with whom Grandma lived her final years, I vividly recall an extremely wrinkled and weathered woman, her thin white hair pulled back in a bun, sitting in a worn old rocker in the kitchen and wearing her ever-present trace of a very gentle smile. Her eyes sparkled. She wore long, simple cotton dresses and didn't talk much. At dinners, she ate what we ate, despite no benefit of teeth or dentures. She preferred the outhouse to indoor plumbing, and behind the house, she would unhesitatingly hack off the heads of chickens, which would soon enough become our next lunch or dinner. This was Anna Pavelka, my grandmother, in her mid-80s.

Those are still indelible pictures in my mind from all those years ago. But now, more than six decades later, I am taken not so much by all of that as by the memory of how her children (my father and aunts and uncles) and grandchildren revered, respected and honored her. And none of that had anything to do with the book. It had everything to do with her real life, as they all had lived it together. The honor and love they carried for her was because of her character, strength, and spirit, which were palpable even in those final years, despite the toll taken by her austere and spartan life, which the book perfectly describes.

You may be surprised to learn that the family didn't talk all that much about Willa Cather or the book. Certainly, there

was the occasional reference and response to questions. I asked as many as I could think of as the years went by. But to this day, I am disappointed that I don't know more about the relationship between Willa and my grandmother.

In the living room in that house, on a side table, there sat the copy of the book that Cather gave to my grandmother. Ironically, there is no personalized message in it. Just the initials W.C. written in pencil. I would pick up that book when we visited and ask questions, but for whatever reasons, I didn't get the details I was hoping for. Today, I have that copy of the book.

I don't know why *My Ántonia* wasn't discussed more, but all these years later, I suspect they just didn't quite experience, understand or relate to their mother as readers do to *Ántonia* Shimerda. She was not *Ántonia* Shimerda to them. She was Anna Pavelka—their mother. She was real flesh and blood, whose story in the book was not a story. It was reality. The family always stood by the accuracy of the book in terms of its being an account of my grandmother's life. I hope people understand that. *My Ántonia* is not fiction. Some scholars have written that Anna Pavelka was “the real life inspiration” for Willa Cather's *Ántonia*. The word “inspiration” suggests the character was fictionalized more than it was.



Anna Pavelka and Carrie Miner Sherwood, ca. 1954. Photos on this page courtesy of Kent Pavelka.

In reality, little was changed except for the names: Willa Cather as Jim Burden, Anna Pavelka as *Ántonia*, Red Cloud as Black Hawk, and so on.

I have always felt something akin to pride about being part of all this, even though I had almost nothing to do with it. But at the same time, the years and life's lessons suggest to me that *My Ántonia* and the story of Anna Pavelka's life were not unique. Surely, her life was that of the quintessential American pioneer. But her story also represents the entire flock of Eastern European immigrants who were in search of a better life and found it (or did not) in Nebraska.

*My Ántonia* is my grandmother's story because the serendipity of life brought Willa Cather and Anna Pavelka together in Red Cloud, Nebraska. It is my grandmother's story because Willa Cather became a writer able to tell a story as few ever have. And it is my grandmother's story because, as it has been from the beginning of time, life was difficult. What made *My Ántonia* work is that Anna Pavelka defeated the difficulties.



**Kent Pavelka**, a grandson of Anna Sadilek Pavelka, owns an advertising agency and public relations firm in Omaha. To fans of University of Nebraska basketball and football, he is the long-time radio "Voice of the Huskers." He also hosts an Omaha public affairs television show for Metropolitan Community College.

## Growing Up with *My Ántonia*

Fritz Mountford

*"Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again."*

—*My Ántonia*

"For Miriam, Christmas 1960. With best wishes, Mildred." "Mildred" is, of course, Mrs. Bennett, and "Miriam" is Miriam Mountford, my mom. I know this wasn't Mom's first copy of *My Ántonia*, but it is the one that became her reference copy and scrapbook—crammed with paper clips and bookmarks and handwritten lecture notes: "*Ántonia's* son still works here in Red Cloud. The other day I was reading this book in the doctor's waiting-room; her grandson came in with his wife and little boy and sat down next to me. That has got to be rare!" The printed text is underlined in a variety of colors, the margins are filled with cue words and brackets—obviously roadmaps for various abridged versions for public readings.

My personal perspective on *My Ántonia* begins, not as a reader, but as a listener—a "visualizer" of Willa Cather's words

as read aloud by my mom. There was never a time when *Ántonia* and Jim, poor Mr. Shimerda, the hired girls, and Mrs. Wick Cutter were new; they have lived in my head for as long as I can remember.

Miriam told her listeners, "The *people* in the story are our grandparents and great-grandparents. The *land* is the same that surrounds us. The *town* is our town. Because this book was written, people all over the world know and love our grandparents, our land, our town."

Yes, Cather vividly described it all to the rest of the world. But to us—to me—surrounded in every season by the actual scenes and people she wrote about—she also revealed trees we visited "as if they were persons," winter sunsets "like the light of truth itself," river sandbars as "newly created worlds," and autumn light with "the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending."

Mom's note concludes, "This book means more to us than to anyone else, because here are our roots. After reading *My Ántonia*, because of Willa Cather's perception and artistry, we see and smell and feel our surroundings in more detail and with more appreciation."

Much later I discovered that kids who grew up in other Nebraska towns never realized the *significance* of their people and places. Thanks Miriam, thanks Willa, thanks *Ántonia*.



**Fritz Mountford** is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation's Board of Governors. He is the son of Miriam Mountford, one of the founding members of the Foundation.



Miriam Mountford, first secretary of the Cather Foundation and long-time editor of this publication. (We'll ask our readers: what is Miriam counting?) From the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.





A weathered sign marks the original crossroads gravesite of Francis Sadilek, the prototype for Mr. Shimerda. Photo by Robert Olsen.

## *My Antonia*, My Grandparents, and Me

Ashley Nolan Olson

Curiously enough, my interest in *My Antonia* started long before I read the novel. As a child, I spent a few days each summer with my grandparents on their farm near Bladen, Nebraska. At the impressionable age of nine, I'd completed fourth grade and the accompanying study of Nebraska history. The next summer, I peppered my grandparents with inquiries. I needed answers to so many questions that my new knowledge had raised. Did my grandparents ever live in a sod house? No. Did they attend a country school? Yes. Had they ever milked a cow? Yes. Were they pioneers? Not exactly.

It was probably this barrage of questioning that prompted my grandfather to take me out for a drive in "the country" one afternoon. Three hours later, I'd discovered the house where he was born and subsequent homes occupied by his family, the country schools he attended, the homes of his grandparents, and the rural cemeteries where generations of our family were laid to rest. Something I remember vividly about this exploration was a moment in which my grandfather pulled over to the side of a gravel road and directed my attention toward a crooked little sign nestled in the tall grass near an intersection. He explained that the sign marked the location where a real pioneer was once buried and that this man had been sequestered to this location after committing suicide—presumably in the depths of despair during a difficult winter on the prairie. He told me the story was recounted in Cather's *My Antonia*.

When it came time for the assigned reading of *My Antonia* in high school, I happily read the novel and eagerly arrived to English class for discussion. I sat quietly as a majority of my outspoken classmates erupted to speak of their disdain for the

book. I was dismayed, but too introverted to say that I enjoyed the novel. My mind was racing. Did my friends know that this fictional story was based on events that occurred right here in Webster County? Had they recognized Red Cloud in Black Hawk? Did anyone care to learn about the people who came before us and sacrificed so much to create better lives for future generations? I was too timid to raise these questions. So there I sat, in silence, bewildered.

Years later, reading *My Antonia* has helped foster an immense interest in my own ancestors, who immigrated from Germany, Ireland, and Sweden to pursue new lives in America—making a living as farmers and raising large families. To this day, the novel also evokes fond memories for me. Fittingly, I recall that first drive into the country with my grandfather and all the subsequent hours we spent and tanks of gas we emptied on later journeys. I've never read Book V without thinking back to the trips I made down to "the cave" to fetch canned goods for my grandmother. And after becoming a mother myself, I've developed an admiration for Antonia's dedication to her work and to her family, along with a greater appreciation for the tender love and care my own mother presented to me. Today, I can confidently proclaim that I adore *My Antonia* and I have no doubt it will continue to inspire other readers for the next one hundred years.



**Ashley Nolan Olson** is executive director of the Willa Cather Foundation. She oversees management and operation of the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud and the largest collection of national historic sites dedicated to an American author.

## Reflection on *My Antonia*

Ann M. Ryan

I've never floated down the Mississippi on a raft, or gone fishing on Walden Pond, and while I've ridden the subway to Brooklyn, I've never crossed the East River on a ferryboat. Still, when I take up *Walden* or *Huckleberry Finn* or "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I recognize something familiar. As Whitman would have it, time, like distance, "avails not."

When I first heard the voice of Jim Burden as he rode through the night in a "wagon-box," looking up at "the complete dome of heaven," I felt that Willa Cather had, likewise, transcended time and distance, that she had conjured a place for me. I've never been to Nebraska or to any part of the Midwest, unless O'Hare airport counts. I'm afraid of snakes, wide-open spaces, farm animals, and for that matter, manual labor. Yet each time I read *My Antonia*, I feel welcomed home.



As a Mark Twain scholar, I find my affection for *My Ántonia* slightly embarrassing. Early in her career Cather described Twain as “little short of a clown,” though she later admitted reading *Huckleberry Finn* at least twenty times. It would be satisfying to imagine Cather and Twain being friends—the way we like to think about the Beatles hanging out with Elvis—but it’s not necessary. Cather and Twain are connected, despite themselves. Both hear poetry in untutored, unaffected speech. Both are repelled by small-town hypocrisy and quotidian violence. Both are exquisitely attuned to the heartbreak of childhood, to the truth that all children intuit: “Optima dies . . . prima fugit.” Whatever tensions existed between Twain and Cather, Huck and Ántonia are comrades, resisting everything that would tame them. At the end of his adventures, Huck lights out for the territories; I like to think he finds Ántonia there, waiting for him.

Reading *My Ántonia* makes me yearn for those far-off territories as well. What’s so spectacular about the novel is that Cather shows me how close they are, how close they’ve always been: my mother’s kitchen, the bakery where I worked as a teenager, the school bus my father drove. In these places I hear Mrs. Harling’s laughter and Mr. Shimerda’s sorrow; I see Ántonia dancing or Jim in a pumpkin patch, peering toward the edge of the world. And when the snow falls in upstate New York, I can hear the howl of a Nebraska blizzard.

In an alchemy known only to the most extraordinary artists, Willa Cather brings us to that frontier wilderness we recognize as home—no matter the distance we travel to get there.



**Ann M. Ryan**, professor of American literature at Le Moyne College, is former editor of *The Mark Twain Annual*. She is currently coeditor of and contributor to *Cosmopolitan Twain*.



TAKING A REST.

Huck on the river, from the original edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) with illustrations by Edward W. Kemble. “The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine.”

## Red Cloud, Then and Now

Amy Springer

My favorite part of *My Ántonia* is the preface. Every time I open the book, I quickly thumb to those first pages, in which the author finds herself one summer on a train, crossing the burning plains and reminiscing with her old friend Jim Burden. I love how she describes growing up in their small prairie town as a rite of passage. In reflecting on my own life so far, as well as things I hope to do in the future, I think about growing up in New Orleans, living in Los Angeles, and working with



Amy Springer at a gallery reception at the National Willa Cather Center.

Doctors Without Borders (perhaps in the future) as falling into that category of true experiences. In a landscape of strip malls that repeat themselves for endless and recurring stretches, and a life of work schedules in which we can feel pigeonholed, there is a lot to be said for authenticity. It relieves me just to say that word out loud. AUTHENTICITY. I crave it.

We all have our unique reasons for loving *My Ántonia*, and I am no exception. This book is important to me because it was the impetus for my visiting and then living in Red Cloud and having the privilege of being a resident and town doctor here for fifteen years. After I finished my family practice residency program in 1992, my partner and I decided to venture on a cross-country trip. Having grown up in New Orleans and done my residency in North Carolina, I had never much ventured west of the Mississippi River. We pooled our money, secured a low-mileage 1965 Mercury Monterey convertible, belted in Josephine the standard poodle, and took off along America’s backroads.

In college I had taken a class entitled “Great American Authors,” and there I was first introduced to *My Ántonia*. And I loved it! I had never been one for descriptive passages, but I loved hers. So when we saw a sign for Red Cloud, and I remembered it as Willa Cather’s home town, it became our next stop. All these small towns of course need doctors, and I returned a year later to live the life. I was not disappointed. I am grateful for the medical and life experience Red Cloud had in store for me. I’ve loved being a participant. I also knew that being a doctor in Red Cloud was the closest I would ever get in the U.S. to practicing medicine



as it was intended in terms of time spent with patients and conversations about health issues woven into weather issues or a town meeting the previous evening. In many ways, Red Cloud is still not so different from Black Hawk in *My Ántonia* and all the other small towns Cather described.

Maybe I like the preface so much because it warms my heart to hear Cather reflect back on a life in a small Nebraska town so lovingly, while still knowing that we share the experience of actually living there being a tough go. But loving it nevertheless. As crazy as it may sound, there are Red Cloudians who complain about this whole Cather connection and the inconvenience caused by all these people with cameras. However, I also recall, in my very earliest years, a patient who (out of earshot of his cronies) loved to remind me of how he “danced with Willa Cather.” Just as our community was recently mesmerized and honored by a visit from Laura Bush.

I have always believed in the importance of what we know first. For me, it’s a breath of humidity on a Louisiana evening as it begins to cool after a scorcher of a day that brings me home. I feel when reading *My Ántonia* that I am privy to Willa Cather’s similar deep early connection. It had a hold on her, and now on me.



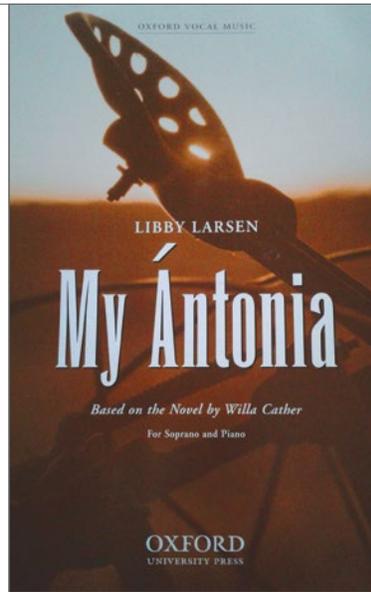
**Dr. Amy Springer**, a New Orleans native, has provided primary care and emergency room service in Red Cloud, Nebraska, intermittently since 1993. Breaks along the way have included living and working in Los Angeles and studying architectural glass in Swansea, Wales, among other glass and medical adventures.

## Libby Larsen’s *My Ántonia* (2000)

Jane Dressler

I am honored to write about my part in the creation of Libby Larsen’s song cycle *My Ántonia*. A Nebraska native, I read Cather’s fiction at Loup City High School, including excerpts of Cather’s 1918 novel. My family had settled in Nebraska after the Civil War, and most of them had been educated in English-speaking schools. Some of my classmates came from families who preferred to speak their native language at home. Either way, connections to the “old country” were always present.

The genesis of the cycle took place during a flight from Chicago to Brussels. I struck up a conversation with another passenger. A faculty member at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, he mentioned that his wife Sue also taught at UNL. She was a Willa Cather scholar, he said, and gave me his card. A schedule of concert performances in Italy had led me



The cover of the Oxford University Press publication of Libby Larsen’s *My Ántonia* for soprano and piano.

to a conversation with Dr. Jim Rosowski.

Eighteen months later, I realized that a song cycle on Cather texts would be a signature project for me, and I knew that Libby Larsen was my composer of choice. Libby’s interest in setting texts of women writers and texts connected to Great Plains history was well known. In fact, she was finishing her opera based on a Cather short story, *Eric Hermansson’s Soul*, for Opera Omaha (1998).

With the passage of time, I wonder which element of the *My Ántonia* cycle is stronger—Libby’s firmly edited text or her glorious music? As the cycle progresses, Libby’s melodies recreate the wheels of a train churning across the landscape. Tremolo figures evoke icy winds blowing across the prairie. The composer’s inclusion of the jerking, heavy beats of the “Valse Anders Sveen,” an authentic folk song, perfectly shapes a glimpse of the hired girls at a Black Hawk dance. Libby’s insistent and jagged rhythms suggest the return of fresh spring breezes, and, finally, her soaring, full-bodied melody that appears for the moment of Jim’s return to Ántonia is masterful.

Linda Jones, a premiere collaborative pianist on the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music, and I presented *My Ántonia* nearly twenty times in six states between 2000 and 2005. It was my privilege to be a part of the project.

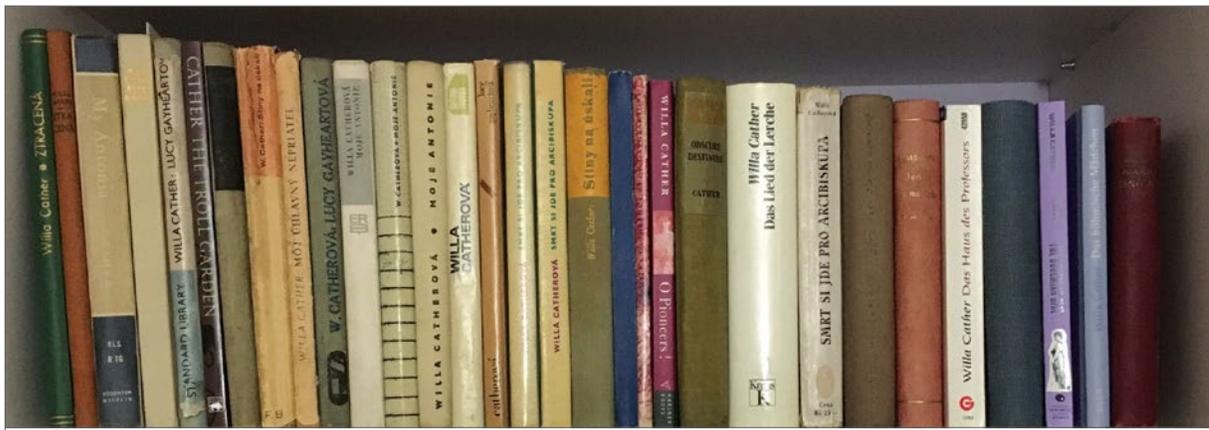
As I prepared this essay, I found a note from Sue Rosowski, written after the cycle’s premiere in Brownville, Nebraska, at an International Willa Cather Seminar. Her words offer another view of the song cycle: “Everyone refers to it—and to that experience of hearing it in that place—as what the seminar meant to them, and it’s clear that your performance of that song cycle encapsulated the best of the seminar—and confirmed why they were living the lives they are.”

Thank you, Miss Cather, for your wonderful novel!



**Jane Dressler**, soprano, is professor of voice at Kent State University. She commissioned and performed Libby Larsen’s song cycle, *My Ántonia*, and she has published several essays on Cather’s writings on classical singers.





Thirty-one volumes, four languages.

middle of until then unknown Nebraska. Even though the time, circumstances, and conditions of my case were totally different from those of the Shimerda family, I still could feel that the general framework was quite similar.

## How I Met Willa Cather and Her *My Antonia*

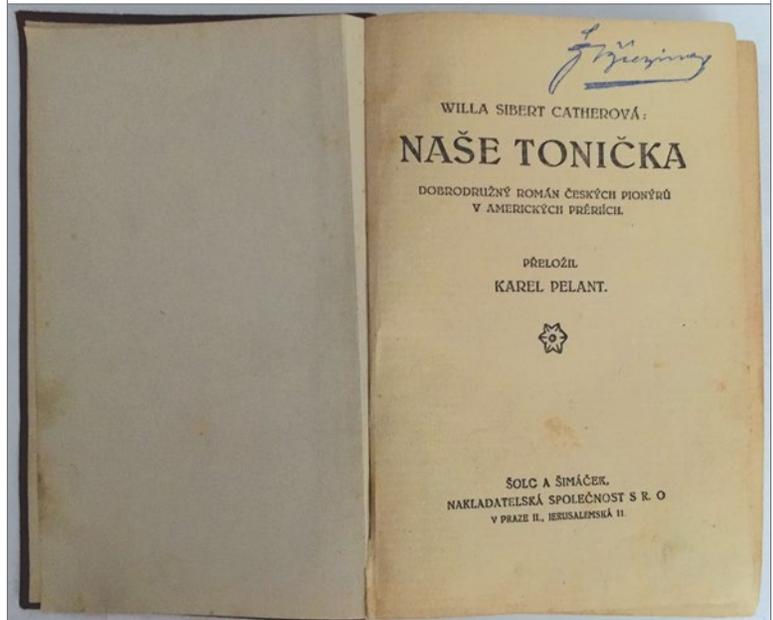
Petr Just

When I was asked by the *Willa Cather Review* to contribute a short essay on my reflection of Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, I was first unsure that I am the right person to do so. My professional background is a little bit (or actually quite a lot) different from literature, and I did not feel qualified to contribute to a journal devoted to study of Willa Cather and her work. However, at the end I was convinced by the fact that the contributions for this special issue are supposed to be personal and "as informal or formal" as I'd like.

I got to know Willa Cather and *My Antonia* after my own arrival to Nebraska in 1994. I spent one year there as an exchange student at Lincoln High School. The person who introduced me to Willa Cather and her work was University of Nebraska–Lincoln Professor Míla Šašková-Pierce, originally from Czechoslovakia, who took me to an Omaha literature fair (I don't remember the exact name of the event). Professor Šašková-Pierce gave a lecture on the impact of the most famous Czech female author, Božena Němcová (1820–1862), on Willa Cather. And this impact was mainly presented on *My Antonia*. My first reaction was: what a shame I have never heard about this author during my elementary and high school studies in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. And I suddenly realized the importance of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* for Czechs, and not only for those living in Nebraska.

That moment, listening to Míla Šašková-Pierce's lecture, was the beginning of my personal interest in Willa Cather's work. I immediately borrowed and later bought the *My Antonia* book, and watched the 1995 movie based on this novel. My view of *My Antonia* naturally reflected the situation I was in at that time: an adolescent Czech suddenly emerges in the

After my return to the Czech Republic, I began to collect anything related to Willa Cather. Today my personal collection contains thirty-one Cather books in four different languages, including the first Czech edition of *My Antonia* (1922, titled not *My*, but *Our Antonia*). I would very much like to have more time to get back to them. Moreover I feel that importance of books such as *My Antonia* and lessons learned from the time of European migration to the USA is highly relevant in these days when migration and the image of immigrants (and foreigners in general) have become key political, social, and economic issues.



The first Czech edition of *My Antonia* — "Our Antonia."

**Petr Just**, chair of the Department of Political Science at the Metropolitan University of Prague, has written numerous books and articles on post-1989 Czech and Central European political systems. In 1994–95 he was an exchange student at Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska, and he has since returned to Nebraska several times.



# An Immigrant on Immigrants

Richard Norton Smith

That America is a land of immigrants is accepted wisdom. That *My Ántonia* is a novel of the immigrant experience helps to explain its continuing hold on America's sense of self—never more so than in this time of narrowed sympathies and jaundiced nationalism that coincides with the centennial of its publication. Succeeding by paradox, the novel immerses us in a past so vividly rendered as to become timeless. Likewise, with her luminous sense of place Cather gives us a Black Hawk as parochial on the surface as it is universal in experience of the human heart.

That the author of *My Ántonia* was herself an immigrant, one who never entirely shed her sense of otherness, has largely escaped notice. Cather's old country was post-Civil War Virginia, her Ellis Island "that shaggy grass country" into which she was transplanted as a girl. In this stark landscape of sod houses and sunflower trails, Jim Burden, Cather's narrator and

stand-in, feels hardly less alien than the Bohemian neighbors whose forced adjustment from Old World to New offers a test of character just as surely as the overcrowded tenements of the Lower East Side.

Often said to be lacking in plot, *My Ántonia* offers readers something far better—life, credibly unfolding in daily contact with the elements and one's neighbors. If her prose is evocative of an American Eden, Cather never lets us forget that there are serpents in the garden deadlier than Nebraska rattlesnakes. Wick Cutter, for one, an amoral moneylender who preys on the innocence of Ántonia Shimerda. Larry Donovan, for another, the railroad conductor who impregnates Ántonia before he abandons her.

The untamable land defeats old Mr. Shimerda. It hardens his son Ambrosch. Yet it exalts Ántonia. For all her troubles, Jim tells us, following a separation of twenty years, "she still had that something which fires the imagination." Something synonymous with the land itself, a fertility renewed in her many children. Otherwise Jim's return to Black Hawk, a dusty way station populated by ghosts, is a disappointment. He is grateful for the



*Abschied der Auswanderer, or the Immigrants Farewell (sic)*, an 1883 lithograph created by the Major & Knapp Engraving Co. and published by S. Zickel. From an original painting by Christian Ludwig Bokelmann. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



incommunicable past, but he cannot live in it. Like Willa Cather, who waged a lifelong struggle between town and country, nature and art, fidelity and assimilation, he makes his home in New York City, even though part of him is prairie-haunted. And that is why *My Antonia* will always be a novel of affirmation and ambivalence. How thoroughly American.

**Richard Norton Smith** is a presidential historian and biographer of George Washington, Herbert Hoover, and others. His most recent book is *On His Own Terms: A Life of Nelson Rockefeller*, and he is currently working on a biography of Gerald Ford.

## My Two Antonias

Evelyn Funda

My life and writing have been colored by my two Antonias. Long before the college class where I was introduced to Cather's heroine, I had known my own kolache-baking, Czech immigrant Antonia—that is, the woman who was my mother. My *own* Antonia—yes, that really was her name—had been born in 1926 in a tiny village in southern Moravia, then part of Czechoslovakia. Even today, it is a remote place where wheat fields and vineyards cover the rolling hills and red-roof tiled buildings and white church spires mark little communities that cluster along meandering roads.

My mother had her individual heroic story, of course. She was a teen during the Nazi occupation of her homeland, and she was forced to work in a German-run factory where she suffered from nickel poisoning. After 1945, when the country was “liberated” by the occupying Russians, she worked as a nanny before secretly joining a dissident group that helped people escape the Communist regime. Then in 1951, fearing arrest, she was forced to escape by hiding under the false bottom of a huge wine barrel that was transported across “no-man’s land” and into the Austrian forest. She left her home village without a word of goodbye to her family because to know any of the details of how or why she escaped would have endangered those she left behind.

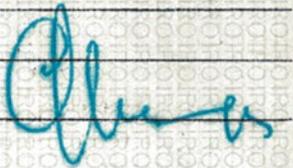
By 1955, after years of living as a “displaced person” sheltered by friends in Munich, Germany, she was lucky enough to be among the few Communist-country immigrants granted a refugee visa for the U.S. Although the historical circumstances necessitating her emigration were different from the Shimerdas’ story, like them, when my mother arrived “from across the water,” she had little more than a small suitcase, a purse, and less than \$100 equivalent dollars. Eventually, she made her way to a rural Idaho town not unlike Black Hawk or her small hometown village. She married a kind man from a Czech immigrant family and lived out her life

Der Inhaber dieser Bescheinigung CM/1 Nr. 974 749  
Name KRATOCHVÍLOVA  
Vorname Antonie Geschlecht F.



Stempel und Unterschrift des Inhabers  
(teilweise über die Photographie)

steht unter dem Mandat  
der Internationalen Flüchtlings-Organisation  
(Spezial-Organisation der Vereinten Nationen)

Ort der Ausgabestelle Control Center Munich  
Datum 28. Dez. 1951  
Unterschrift des Beamten der Ausgabestelle 

Toni Kratochvilova's International Refugee Organization card, issued 1951, soon after her escape from Czechoslovakia. Courtesy of Evelyn Funda.

on a farm where outside our back door we even had our own cellar that was stocked with such treats as spiced plum preserves. She was known as a skilled baker and a wonderful dancer at local Czech lodge dances. Like Cather's heroine, she was open-hearted, hard-working, generous to a fault, opinionated, joyful in good times and stoic in bad. Moreover, she “had that something which fires the imagination” that “leave[s] images in the mind that did not fade — that grew stronger with time.”

I have written about my mother in my memoir *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*, where I've also written about discovering Cather, and I believe that knowing my own Antonia helped me understand certain nuances of Cather's immigrant stories where the difference between “refuge” and “refugee”—between that place we choose to call home and the experience of exile that forever colors our actions there—is as subtle as a single letter and as inscrutable as another human soul.

**Evelyn Funda**, professor of English at Utah State University, is author of a memoir about her Czech family, *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*. She has published numerous essays on Cather and is working on a book about Cather's interest in Bohemian immigrants and culture.





# THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting:

Homestead Certificate No. 2514  
APPLICATION 1785

Whereas There has been deposited in the General Land Office of the United States a Certificate of the Register of the Land Office at Blomington, Nebraska, whereby it appears that, pursuant to the Act of Congress approved 20th May, 1862, "To secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain," and the acts supplemental thereto, the claim of Mary C. Arneson, formerly Mary C. Holcomb, has been established and duly consummated, in conformity to law, for the north east quarter of section eight in township one north, of range twelve west of the Sixth Principal Meridian in Nebraska containing one hundred and sixty acres.

according to the Official Plat of the survey of the said Land, returned to the General Land Office by the Surveyor General:

Now know ye, That there is, therefore, granted by the United States unto the said Mary C. Arneson the tract of Land above described: TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said tract of Land, with the appurtenances thereof, unto the said Mary C. Arneson and to her heirs and assigns forever.

In testimony whereof, I, Chester A. Arthur, President of the United States of America, have caused these letters to be made Patent, and the Seal of the General Land Office to be hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand, at the City of Washington, the tenth day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-one, and of the Independence of the United States the one hundred and sixth

BY THE PRESIDENT:

By [Signature], Secretary.

Recorded, Vol. 6, Page 17

[882-2881]

8 1 12

[Signature], Recorder of the General Land Office.

The original "land patent" dated 1881, granting Mary Holcomb Arneson title to her 160-acre homestead in Webster County. Courtesy of Marion Arneson.

## Pioneer Days in Webster County

Priscilla Hollingshead

In my twenty-three years as a tour guide for the Willa Cather Foundation, I have escorted many visitors through sites from the pioneer years in Webster County, places that Jim Burden and Antonia Shimerda would have known well, such as the Red Cloud railroad station where they both arrived in Nebraska, the Harling house where Antonia worked as a hired girl, the Red Cloud Opera House where Jim gave his graduation speech, and the Pavelka farmstead where Antonia raised her children. As I talk with our visitors about Willa Cather's stories of those pioneer days in Nebraska, I often think about my own family's pioneer stories.

When I was a little girl, I spent lots of time with my grandmother, Grace Arneson Sutton, and I loved to listen to her stories from her childhood. I learned that Grandmother's mother, Mary Holcomb, came to Walnut Creek in Webster County as a young single woman in 1871. She joined her two bachelor brothers, who were from Chicago and had worked for a newspaper there, before ending up in Nebraska. Mary followed on the train and was met by one of the brothers in a wagon. They made a claim on

three parcels of land south of Inavale, on Walnut Creek near the Republican River. Their original dwelling was a sod house, like the Shimerda family's first Nebraska home. Eventually their mother also traveled from Chicago to join them in Nebraska.

As a young woman, Mary rode a pony, crossing the river to teach in a rural school. Rules were strict for young women then. In order to go on a dinner date, she had to have her brother's permission. A formal written note was found in our family letters, requesting that she and another young lady be allowed to go on a double date. A report of that date was published in the local newspaper!

When Mary was thirty-one or thirty-two, she married a Norwegian man named Arneson, who had travelled from Wisconsin to explore Nebraska. Three children followed. My grandmother, the oldest, was born in 1880, followed by a brother and a sister. When Grandmother was four years old, they were burning off prairie grass and the tail end of her dress caught fire and she was badly burned. Dr. Denny came out to the farm to take care of her and saved her life; he appears as "Dr. Dennison" in Willa's *A Lost Lady*. Later he cared for one of the Holcomb brothers, who lost a leg in an accident with a runaway horse and buggy, out on the prairie.

When Grandmother was thirteen years old, her father died of consumption (tuberculosis), leaving a widow with three young

children. He was taken by canoe on the Republican River to be buried in the Riverton cemetery. The stone is dated only with the year, 1893. The widow and her children continued to live on the Walnut Creek homestead, with help from her brothers and from her mother, who carded wool from their sheep and knitted socks. Sometimes Indians came to the house, looking for help and food. One winter wealthy friends in Chicago, who owned a confectionery, sent the family a shipment of barrels filled with hardtack crackers, dried fruit, and other special treats. Then they had many visitors!

Like young Willa Cather, I was fascinated by these tales of early days in Webster County. I have never forgotten them, and they have helped me to understand Cather's Webster County novels, especially *My Antonia*.



**Priscilla Hollingshead** has worked for the Willa Cather Foundation for twenty-four years and is the Foundation's senior tour guide. She is a native of Webster County, where her family has a long history. Her great-grandmother, Mary Holcomb Arneson, took a homestead in 1871 and is believed to be the county's first woman homesteader.

## Growing Up in the World of Willa Cather

Kay Hunter Stahly

I grew up in the small community of Inavale, in Webster County, Nebraska. When Mildred Bennett, the founder of the Willa Cather Foundation, came to Webster County in the 1930s, she taught school in Inavale and became friends with my mother. Mom saw Mildred's excitement and enthusiasm as she discovered how deeply Willa Cather's Nebraska books, such as *My Antonia*, were rooted in our local landscape and began to write her first book about those connections, and she shared Mildred's excitement when that book, *The World of Willa Cather*, was published in 1951.

While Mildred was promoting her book, a *Life* magazine photographer, David Scherman, spent time in Webster County photographing various sites relevant to Cather's novels. One of the locations he photographed (probably at Mildred's suggestion) was land owned by my parents. I believe that some of these photos were featured in the *Life* article. Since Mom and Dad owned horses, Scherman took several photos of their horses, with riders. None of these shots were published.

I was a baby at the time, and Mr. Scherman took some shots of me and the girl who "portrayed" a young Annie Pavelka for the *Life* article. So, at an early age, I got to play the part of Annie

Pavelka's—or Antonia's—baby daughter! Of course, my mother saved these photographs. When Mr. Scherman spoke at the Spring Conference in 1991—forty years after the *Life* article—Mom and I attended the conference and were able to have the photographer autograph the prints he had left with us, along with our treasured copy of the original *Life* magazine.

For as long as I can remember, that *Life* magazine from March, 1951, was on the shelf, beside the hardcover copy of Mildred's book. As a child I "studied" these publications and learned about Cather's life growing up in Webster County before I read any of her books or stories. The captions on the photos in Mildred's book were interesting to me and were a brief biography of Cather. I also looked at the pictures of our farm and family taken by a photographer from *Life* magazine! Certainly I came to know that Willa Cather was a famous person and known far beyond the boundaries of Webster County, Nebraska.

The *Life* photo shoot was just one of my early Cather connections. I also knew that my mother was a great-niece of Silas Garber, the prototype for Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. My great-grandfather Garber came to Red Cloud at the same time as his brother Silas, and they ran one of the first stores in Red Cloud. Mom was very proud of her pioneering ancestors. Growing up in Cather's world and knowing that she wrote about our family and neighbors, such as Annie Pavelka in *My Antonia*, was a special and unique experience that has stayed with me all my life.



**Kay Hunter Stahly** grew up in Webster County, Nebraska, and lives in Kearney, Nebraska, where she works as a certified public accountant. She is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation's Board of Governors, currently serving as its treasurer.



David Scherman  
5/4/91



Images not used in David E. Scherman's 1951 *Life* magazine photo story titled "Willa Cather Country" included these pictures of Kay Hunter Stahly as an infant and Karen Jackson as "Antonia." When Scherman visited Red Cloud again in 1991 he autographed Kay's souvenir prints.



As Sarah Orne Jewett advised, Willa Cather filled *My Ántonia* with what she knew. Unearthed from the boundless prairies surrounding Red Cloud, opportunity was found between suspenders, a crew cut, and the young mind of Cather. While William M.D., formerly known as Willa, engaged the medico-scientific world, diagnoses of lesbianism as a disorder threatened her interests, identity, and freedom of expression.

Eventually, as she began to write, Cather found a medium through which identity and spirit could be conveyed and, paradoxically, censored by unfurnishing the novel. In 1922, Cather stated, in “The Novel D meubl ,” that “whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is 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, that gives high quality in the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.” Cather used such un-naming strategies in a variety of ways throughout her career, and in *My Ántonia* she was able to freely express a complex and genuine spirituality by un-naming what the majority perpetually defined as a sickness through the forensic rhetoric of the novel.

In the novel’s introduction, two autobiographical characters, a man and a woman who are old friends, meet in a train’s observation car, and the unnamed woman, who is an author, absorbs Jim Burden’s remembered experiences. It becomes transparent that their mirrored echoes of the past, endowed in furtive fervor, extend beyond Jim Burden’s taking Ántonia’s (or Tony’s) place in her bed and experiencing Wick Cutter’s attempted rape. Cather’s non-binary perspective, in which Burden blossoms, bridges the gender gap between William and Willa, and Ántonia and Jim, within one possible medium: Art. Both Ántonia and Jim begin to enact gender as fluid. Ántonia takes pride in doing “men’s work” in the fields, and Jim finds his preferred peers among the hired girls, not the town boys. In this novel, an incommunicable past of intolerance, relayed through spiritual deprivation, yearns to voice self-actualization in unfurnished structures, ribbed by golden poesy, the oracular, and contradiction.

*My Ántonia* paints an environment that weaves character development as Tony enjoys the life of a man and Jim becomes infatuated, yet infuriated, by societal conventions. Jim and Tony’s youthful expectations of freedoms fossilize, just as the last wild rose blooms to die and the prairies grow to be groomed, and all signify the novel’s subterranean subtext of “the thing not named.” Cather’s non-binary approach, plowed into the rising sun of future pioneers, haunts our history of rhetoric, as each laced finger, clutching self-awareness, grasps the power of the pen to both celebrate and prosecute that non-binary strategy. For example, on Jim’s final visit to “his” Ántonia, he admires her power to plant, harvest, endure, and inspire, yet also frames her in the reductive gender stereotype of an earth mother of sons. In 2018, as we celebrate the centenary of *My Ántonia*, what a large circle man and woman can now experience across the queer horizon of our states—in one of which, our very sun set upon William Cather’s adolescence.



**Kirsten Frazelle** recently graduated from the University of North Carolina Asheville. She is now seeking a graduate program that will challenge and expand her understanding of rhetoric in literature and the humanities.



Willa Cather ca. 1890 by Fred Bradbrook. From the Willa Cather Foundation’s Mitterer Collection.

# Our *Ántonia*

Sallie Ketcham

*Ántonia* Shimerda has followed me all the days of my life. Like Jim Burden, I met her the year I turned ten, the year my family abandoned beautiful, rolling Virginia and returned to Nebraska, where my mother (former Curator of History at the Nebraska State Historical Society) and my father had deep roots. So I waved goodbye to our breezy colonial home, my ramshackle tree-fort, the cascading pink dogwoods that dappled the creek at the foot of the hill, and proceeded to crash-land in Omaha, land of shag-carpeted tract houses, roasting cornfields, and the smell of the stockyards.

School was a daydreamer's nightmare. At recess, I paced the chain-link fence of the concrete playground like a convict. I ate my peanut butter and pickle sandwich alone. My teacher (the aptly named Mrs. Yeats) tried her best. "Here, Sallie Jane," she said, handing me a book. "This is *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. She moved from Virginia to Nebraska when she was ten, she was Nebraska's greatest writer, and she had hair exactly like yours. Read it."

Just like that, I came home.

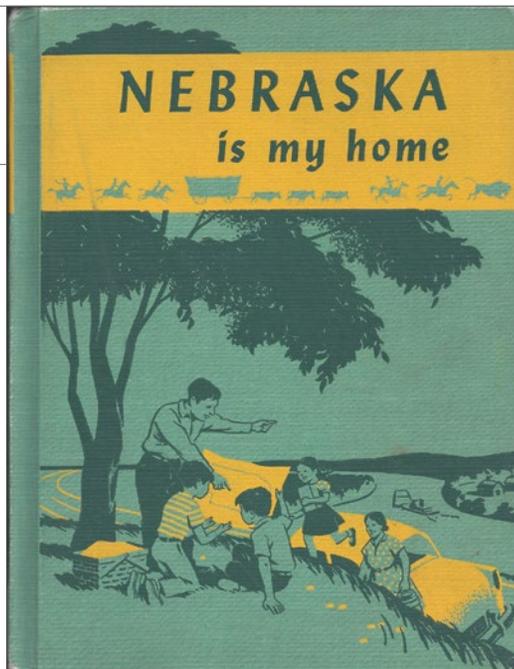
I could follow the plot, if not the whole story. As Jim and *Ántonia* took me by the hand, Cather showed me a new way to read the world. One line transfixed me. I remember slamming the book shut, then staring at the wall until the words had done their work.

*As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of winestains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.*

That's what a writer does, I thought; that's it, *right there*. I had seen the land running; I just hadn't grasped it, I hadn't understood.

Over a decade later, the faculty chair of English skimmed my senior thesis proposal with a disconcerting *tsk*. "Willa Cather?" he said, looking down his nose and over his reading glasses. "Maybe Wayne Carver will take you on."

Writer, editor, raconteur, author of the dazzling *A Child's Christmas in Utah*, Wayne Carver was one tough nut. He had



Many readers who hail from Cather country (and are of a certain age) found their way to *My Ántonia* by way of *Nebraska Is My Home*, where we learned that "Willa Cather died only a few years ago and by then the whole world knew her as one of the finest writers of our times."

fought his way across Belgium and Germany, but his eyes welled with tears when we read *My Ántonia*. We spent hours discussing the book over black coffee, turning it like a prism, admiring its precise facets, its rainbow of refracted light. At my graduation, Wayne stood in the sweltering heat and quietly handed me a note, thanking me—*me*—for returning to Cather country with him, for letting Cather guide him west toward home, reminding him exactly how it felt to wander past the hot granary at four o'clock on a summer afternoon in Plain City, Utah, chores done, book in hand, certain there would always be world enough and time. Any friend of *Ántonia*, he told me, is a friend of mine.

He was right, of course. She is our *Ántonia*—yours and mine—always the same girl, always the same story, never quite the same.

Sallie Ketcham is author of *Laura Ingalls Wilder: American Writer on the Prairie*. She also writes for children and is a frequent lecturer on the history of children's books.

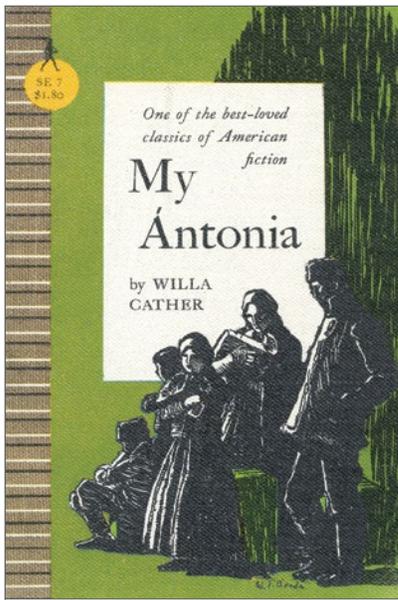
## What *My Ántonia* Has Meant to Me

Janis Stout

I never read a word of Willa Cather's until after college. It was when I was teaching in an adjunct kind of way after graduate school, and was asked to do a course in women writers, that I somehow hit on *My Ántonia*. At this point I'm not even sure why. But it was about that time that Sharon O'Brien's essay "The Thing Not Named: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" was published, and I read it. It gave me a powerful sense that new things were happening in Cather studies.

About that same time, by coincidence, I became aware of how *My Ántonia* was being taught in the high school attended by a young person I knew. It seemed to me that everything was being taken at the surface level. "Oh, there's more to it than that!" I wanted to say. I let it go. One doesn't want to undermine a fine young person's confidence in her teacher. But I felt sure there was more going on with this writer than met the eye.





A 1961 Sentry Editions volume from Houghton Mifflin.

Rarely in life have I had a sudden reaction that proved to be so durable. Yes indeed, far more than met the eye. One book of Cather's led to another and another. When I started teaching a course on the twentieth century American novel, I put *A Lost Lady* on the reading list. The students were glad, mostly because it wasn't very long. (A novel *démeublé!*) And how I enjoyed leading them through the first few

pages, where so many things are packed into so few words.

These experiences set me on a course that has proven to be career-long, even life-long. It is a course that has brought me not only the pleasure of continuing fascination with Cather's writing (including her letters) but the comradeship of the Cather community. And *My Antonia* has stayed with me all the way.

I am no longer so proud of my early work on Cather as I once was. I needed to learn my own lesson: when Cather writes, there are usually multiple meanings, rarely just one. I suspect that I'm not the only one in this community for whom the experience of teaching this book has played a large part in what it means to us.



**Janis Stout** is professor emerita and dean of faculties/associate provost emerita at Texas A&M University. She is author and editor of numerous books and articles on Cather, and her latest book, *Cather Among the Moderns*, is forthcoming.

## Three Keys to America

Oleg Bondarenko

Translated from the Kyrgyz by Cholpon Bakirova

There are books that are simple, uncomplicated. There are also books that are complex in their idea, their content, and their inner world, which must be discovered for oneself. These books are riddles, to which you need to find the keys. For me, *My Antonia* is one such book. Three keys in the novel allowed me to open the lock and learn the joy of reading this book.

*My Antonia* became available to reading America a hundred years ago. This unique novel opened American eyes to a different

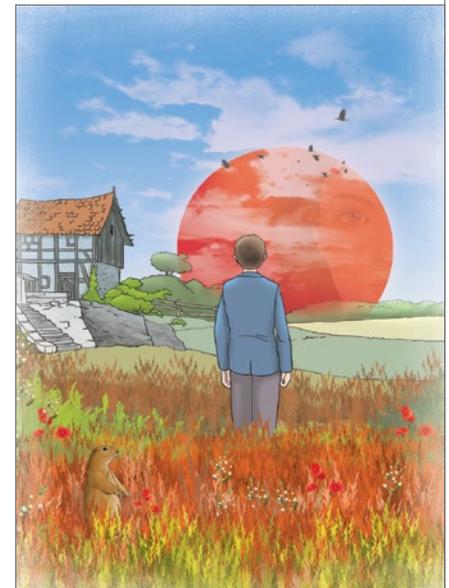
way of writing in a new era. Before *My Antonia*, there was popular demand for novels about famous and rich people, and about historical personalities. Suddenly there was a book about ordinary farmers, about the beauty of their hard and honest life, about their daily work. It was a real discovery. The first of many such novels.

The second time this book was discovered was here, in Kyrgyzstan, the country in which I live. And it was a discovery for me as a reader. I've been fond of American literature since childhood, and I have read many American books. But I did not know about this novel. *My Antonia* was only translated into Russian in 1952, and wasn't translated into Kyrgyz until 2014. So this novel came late to our readership in Kyrgyzstan. And to me.

When I explored it for myself, I understood much more about America—not the America of businessmen and millionaires, but the America of ordinary women and men who made the country the way it is. In addition, I discovered that American literature consists not only of those writers who were included in the curriculum at my university. Learning that American literature was broader and deeper was another discovery for me.

Finally, after reading *My Antonia*, I discovered for myself the most important thing: that the multicultural American population is made up of immigrants from many countries. On the Nebraska prairie of this novel lived Germans and Russians, Norwegians and Swedes, and the main character of the book was a Czech. This discovery was amazing! And all these people are Americans, with their spirit and culture. So I learned that the great American population emerged through the commonality of all people.

And I also discovered for myself the world of American prairies. I could smell the wild steppe. I heard the hooves of the horse, the mooing of cows, and the voices of farmers. I heard the cheerful music of the small towns of the Wild West. I saw boundless expanses, grasses stretching to the horizon,



An illustration by Zlota Koksai from the Kyrgyz *My Antonia*.



and fields of corn. I felt the fresh air and the wind of Nebraska. And this was, probably, my most remarkable discovery.

I discovered an America for myself. I thank the fate that gave me such a wonderful book!



**Oleg Bondarenko** is a writer, editor, and executive director of the Association of Publishers and Editors of Kyrgyzstan. He is coordinator of “New Literature of Kyrgyzstan,” a multilingual digital library of works by Kyrgyz authors.

## Splendor

Mary Pipher

When I first read *My Ántonia* I was in eighth grade and living in a town much smaller than Cather’s Black Hawk. Sunflowers formed golden ribbons across the land outside my town, Beaver City, and endless prairie dog villages dotted the countryside. I identified immediately and totally with Jim and Ántonia. I too spent my days outdoors or talking with the people around me. My grandmother was not unlike Jim’s—loving, but formal, and insistent on upright behavior. My Mr. Shimerda was a Danish immigrant named Mrs. Van Cleave who worshipped at the altar of music, art and literature. After school, she taught me pottery making and china painting.

All of my life I’d been overcome by great swellings of appreciation for sunlight through cottonwoods, moonrise, the Milky Way, and the vast blue sky shimmering over fields of wheat. However, until I read Cather, I hadn’t realized that other people also felt these same swellings. Cather had even considered them the important moments in our lives. I later learned to call these moments “epiphanies,” but before Cather, I hadn’t understood that the ecstasy that washed over me when I was outside was, in fact, the great poetry of life.

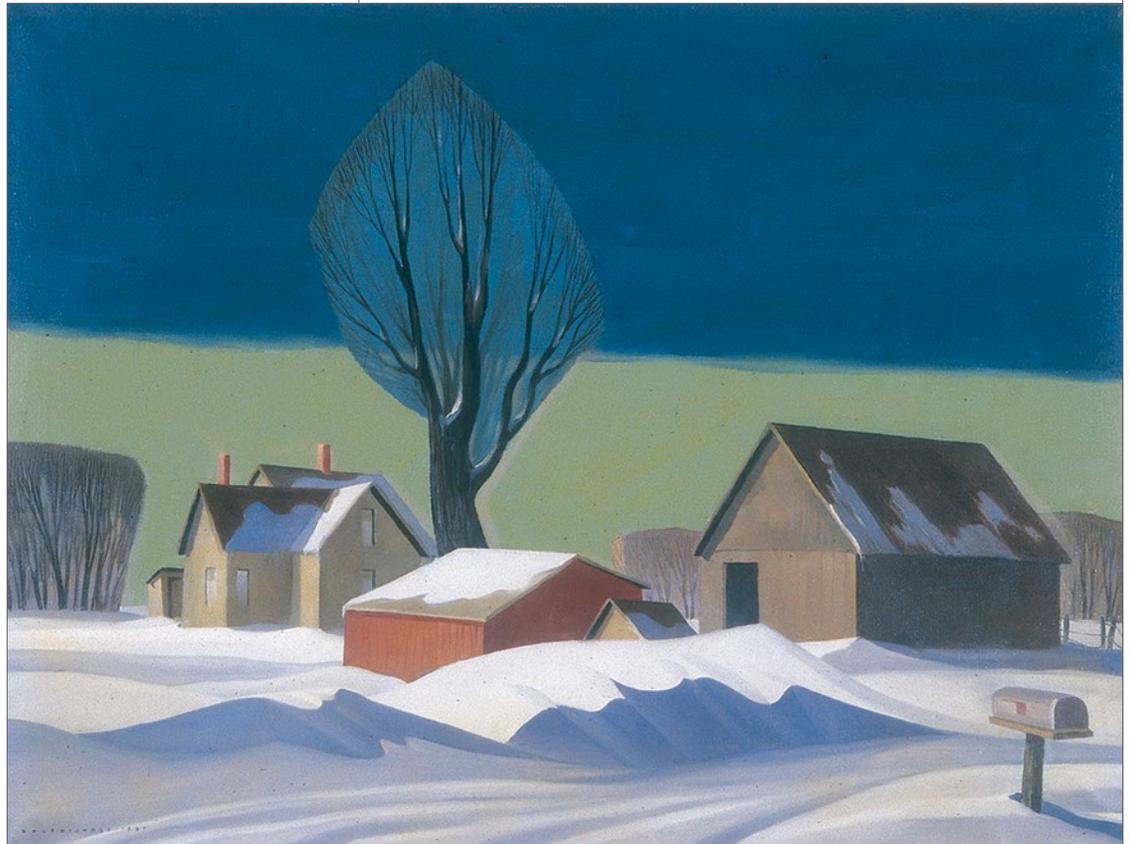
One of Cather’s greatest gifts was that she could elevate and sanctify the most ordinary of human experiences. For example, with Mr. Shimerda’s death, she simply wrote where he was found, how he killed himself, how his body looked, and the practical details of burying him in the frozen ground. And yet somehow, in her description of the details, she conveyed something profound about both living and dying.

It would be thirty years before I became a writer and turned to Cather for her wisdom as wordsmith. I paid special attention to her descriptions of characters. She could capture the complexity of people by describing how they walked, slouched, or ate their food after a long day’s work in the cold. Her details were so perfect and unique that a few paragraphs captured Jake, Otto, Mrs. Harling and Lena and made them as real as our next-door neighbors. Her simple style for conveying significant information influenced my style greatly.

However, long before I was a writer myself, Cather showed me what to look at, to look for, and to look with. She taught me to look at the land and the people, to look for beauty, and to look with eyes ready for splendor.



**Mary Pipher** is a psychologist and author whose works include *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) and *The Green Boat: Reviving Ourselves in our Capsized Culture* (2013).



Dale Nichols, *After the Blizzard*, oil on canvas, 1967. Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney, Nebraska. Gift of Eloise (Dierks) Andrews Kruger and Miller & Paine/R. E. Campbell Collection.



# My Antonia

AT 100: THE ONGOING STORY

LEARN MORE AT [MA100.ORG](http://MA100.ORG)  
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- March** **Vintage Classics release of *My Antonia* 100th anniversary edition**  
With new introduction by Pulitzer Prize-winner Jane Smiley
- March–April** **“Legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches”:  
The Changing Ecology of the Great Plains**  
Crane viewing at Audubon Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon, Nebraska,  
and Cather historic site and prairie tours in Red Cloud, Nebraska
- March 22–23** ***Prairie Songs: Remembering Antonia***  
An original song cycle by Brent Edstrom, Scott Miller, and Tana Bachman-Bland  
Red Cloud Opera House, Red Cloud, Nebraska
- April 7** ***My Antonia: New Readings for a Centennial Celebration***  
With Max Frazier, Ann Romines, Linda Cather, and John Jacobs  
Handley Regional Library, Winchester, Virginia
- May 21** **A Centennial Celebration of *My Antonia* and Music Inspired by Cather**  
New York, New York
- May 31–June 2** **“Here at last is an American novel”: Celebrating 100 Years of *My Antonia***  
Willa Cather Foundation’s 63rd annual Spring Conference,  
featuring Nina McConigley, author of *Cowboys and East Indians*,  
and “Black Hawk, the new world in which we had come to live”:  
Stories from the Red Cloud Community
- June 28–July 1** **Willa Cather’s Irish Connections**  
Cather Symposium in Limavady, Northern Ireland  
Scholarly presentations, touring, and music
- August 8** **“She was nearly as strong as I”: Being Woman in the Workplace**  
Guest speakers Emily Rau, Assistant Editor of the Willa Cather Archive,  
and Ashley Olson, Executive Director of the Willa Cather Foundation.  
In partnership with the Panhandle Business and Professional Women  
at Scottsbluff, Nebraska
- September 21** **“What a tableful we were at supper”: *My Antonia* Birthday Feast**  
Translations of the novel from Lincoln’s immigrant community.  
With Community Crops at Peter Pan Park in Lincoln, Nebraska
- September 22** ***My Antonia* marathon reading**  
Gallery 1516 in Omaha, Nebraska
- October 19–22** **Willa Cather Celebration Weekend**  
With Ashley Olson, Willa Cather Foundation Executive Director, and Tracy Tucker,  
Education Director, at the Jaffrey Historical Society, Jaffrey, New Hampshire

*A collaboration with the Willa Cather Archive. For more information, call 866-731-7304.*



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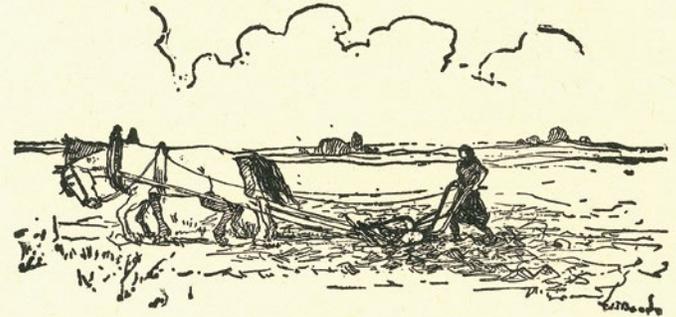
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## The Tulip Quilt

Anna Pavelka, inspiration for Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, created this quilt around 1940, one of several she made for family members in her later years. While the Cather Foundation is proud to hold several fine pieces of Anna Pavelka's needlework, including a finished quilt and an appliquéd quilt top, this quilt is on loan to us from Antonette Willa Skupa Turner and her family. The "Czech tulip" quilt, as the family knows it, has for many years been a literal backdrop for Antonette's presentations to Cather fans and students about her noted grandmother. It is hand-quilted and appliquéd from brightly patterned scraps of fabric, saved from farm feed sacks and a lifetime of sewing projects.