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Introduction

Willa Cather as Icon

GUY REYNOLDS

That Willa Cather, in many ways the most elusive of early-twentieth-century American writers, might now be thought of as an “icon” is one of literary history’s best jokes. Cather had a long career and moved through a variety of places and jobs and roles during her life. She was something of a moving target, able to transform herself from one literary identity to another. In the 1890s she was a wasp and a critical shrew, a precocious reviewer of books, plays, and music, armed with an acid pen. In the early years of the twentieth century she had become her mentor S. S. McClure’s right-hand (wo)man, the managing editor of one of the age’s leading magazines. Across her desk came works by many of the era’s leading authors. She became an adept businesswoman. As she continually adjusted herself to the literary market, looking for cracks in the publishing industry, Cather took on odd projects that have to be fitted—somehow—into a map of her career. She helped to write, or “ghostwrite,” McClure’s autobiography, and she edited a muckraking exposé of the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, written by Georgine Milmine. Even before she became a novelist Cather had written across and within a number of literary discourses: reviewing, poetry, muckraking journalism, autobiography, short fiction.

One might put “novelist” in inverted commas, since Cather’s inflection of this term was ongoing. Her novels sometimes seemed to their readers, in their plotlessness and episodic construction, to be barely novels at all. Cather herself would adopt the term

narrative, in the 1920s, deploying this word in a flexible way to explain the experimentalism of her mature fiction. The range of her works, especially the geographical variety of their settings, would make Cather's identity problematic. Although Cather had achieved fame as a Nebraskan novelist and the author of those quintessential frontier or Old West texts, *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, her regionalist identity was in fact varied and even heterotopic. She wrote about Quebec, London, France, New York, Pittsburgh, New Mexico. There is probably *more* of North America's sheer geographical variety in her work than in fictions by her contemporaries. And at the end of her life she was working on a manuscript set in medieval Avignon.

These are the well-known facets of her career, but they need to be recapitulated because they bear on Cather's iconicity. An icon, one supposes, is singular. The religious and pictorial origins of the term suggest the meditative stillness of a medieval saint's image or, in the secular realm, the permanence of monarchical imagery (think of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen). A certain stasis is implicit in the original meaning of the term. But Cather's iconicity seems less fixed, less determined. In part, this is because Cather was in a continual and changing dialogue with the culture around her—and that culture was itself a highly mobile, commercialized, and transitional network of ideas, images, and narratives. In her relationship to iconicity and its associated themes (celebrity and publicity; literary canonicity and the place of the woman artist) one also senses Cather's ambivalent relationship to modern America. A good deal of evidence suggests that she disliked aspects of the contemporary culture of the icon. She became famous, was awarded honorary degrees, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. But she also stepped away from Hollywood, unlike Faulkner and Fitzgerald, and eventually prohibited the filming of her novels. She seems to have become uncomfortable with her own fame, and there are accounts of her resentment at being recognized in public. Cather was an icon discomfited by iconic status.

These biographical details underpin her work's ongoing interest in icons and in a related nexus of themes and scenarios. As many of the writers in this volume note, her stories touch on

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motifs that derive from a reading of icons and iconicity. A relatively humble figure, *Antonia*, might become an iconic figure in the memory of a man far removed from her in place and status (*My Antonia*). A young man might flare in the imagination of an older man, and remain there as an embodiment of values lost in a tawdry age of commercialism (*The Professor's House*). A morally "fallen" woman, the cynosure for rumormongering, sustains an idealized allure for a younger man (*A Lost Lady*). Two Catholic priests move through a terrain where Christian and secular icons, and the iconic places of indigenous religion, present a varied and complex pilgrim's progress (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*). A female artist dies tragically and young, but resonates in the imagination of the man who loved her (*Lucy Gayheart*). Again and again, Cather's texts center on dynamic relationships between an onlooker (or secret sharer) and the object of fascination who achieves, for the viewer, the status of an icon.

The final proof of Cather's status, of course, is her steady movement to the center of the twentieth-century U.S. literary canon. This volume diagnoses a cultural transformation of which it itself is a symptom. But even here there are characteristically Catherian twists to the story. Cather is an icon for a good number of literary scholars (many of them represented in these pages), but she has achieved a status that extends beyond the immediate community that works on her texts. A commentary by poet laureate Robert Pinsky begins our book; Pinsky's poem *An Explanation of America* (1979) extensively meditated on Cather's work as the major artistic representation of the so-called frontier experience. In a further turning of the iconic circuit, Cather's texts now insert themselves into the works of a future generation of writers, becoming part of an evolving American iconography.

C O N T R I B U T O R S

Timothy C. Blackburn is English Chair at Forsyth Country Day School, near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He has taught at several colleges in Minnesota and independent schools in Minnesota and New Jersey. His previous publications include papers on Defoe's *Captain Singleton* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

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Erika Hamilton is a graduate student and researcher at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she recently received an MA in English and creative writing. She is currently working on her PhD in literature with an emphasis on Willa Cather and Renaissance Studies. Hamilton is a Program Officer with the Nebraska Humanities Council.

Richard C. Harris, Professor and Director of Humanities at Webb Institute, Long Island, New York, has previously pub-

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Mark J. Madigan, an Associate Professor of English at Nazareth College of Rochester, has published widely on Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and other American writers. He is the editor of *Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher* as well as Fisher's *The Bedquilt and Other Stories* and *Seasoned Timber*. He is the volume editor of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, forthcoming in the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. He taught American literature at the University Ljubljana, Slovenia, as a Fulbright Scholar in 2004.

Richard H. Millington is Professor of English at Smith College. He is author of *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne's Fiction* and of essays on Hawthorne and Cather. He is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne* and the coeditor of *Hitchcock's America*, which includes his essay on *North by Northwest*.

John J. Murphy, Professor of English at BYU, is the author of "My *Ántonia*": *The Road Home* and over sixty essays and chapters on Cather and other American writers. He has edited *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* and *Willa Cather: Family Community, and History*, and is volume editor of the Cather Scholarly Editions of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*.

Joseph C. Murphy is Assistant Professor of English at Fu Jen University, Taiwan, where he serves on the editorial board of *Fu Jen Studies*. His publications and conference papers have focused on Whitman, Howells, Henry Adams, and Flannery O'Connor, as well as on Cather, and on the areas of American architecture, painting, and religion. He is completing a book entitled *Exposing the Modern: Worlds' Fairs and American Literary Culture, 1853-1907*.

Elsa Nettels is Professor of English Emeritus at the College of William and Mary. Her publications include *James and Conrad; Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America*; and *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*. For six years, from 1997 to 2002, she wrote the chapter on Wharton and Cather for *American Literary Scholarship*.

Robert Pinsky, Poet Laureate of the United States (1997–2000), is poetry editor of the online journal *Slate* and a contributor to *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS. He teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University. His book-length poem *An Explanation of America*, awarded the Saxifrage Prize when published in 1980, has been reissued by Princeton University Press in a new edition.

Jessica G. Rabin is author of *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen*, along with several articles on Cather. She is Assistant Professor of English at Anne Arundel Community College and teaches American Literature, Women's Studies, and Bible and Literature. She also serves as Associate Editor of *Philip Roth Studies* and Secretary/Treasurer of the Philip Roth Society.

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Michael Schueth earned a PhD from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2005. His dissertation was entitled “Willa Cather and Celebrity: The Writer's Self-Image and the Literary Marketplace.” He has presented several papers on Cather and currently teaches at Creighton University.

Merrill Maguire Skaggs is author of *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* and of numerous essays on Cather and other subjects. She edited *Willa Cather's*

New York: New Essays on Cather in the City and now does research within, as well as helps other scholars to use, the Caspersen Cather Collection at Drew University, where she serves as Baldwin Professor of the Humanities.

Janis P. Stout is Professor Emerita of English at Texas A&M University. Her most recent books are *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure, from Austin and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion*; *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*; and *Coming Out of War: Poetry, Grieving, and the Culture of the World Wars*. She is the editor of *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World* and *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*.

John N. Swift is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where he teaches British and American modernism and psychoanalytic approaches to literature. A past president of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, he has published many essays on Cather and her work and is coeditor of *Willa Cather and the American Southwest*.

Robert Thacker is Professor of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University, and has been Molson Research Fellow there. He codirected the Sixth International Seminar in Quebec City and coedited its volume of essays, *Cather Studies, Volume 4: Willa Cather's Canadian and Old World Connections*. His recent work on Cather has appeared in *American Literary Realism*, the *Canadian Review of American Studies*, and *A Companion to the Regional Literature of America*. His *Alice Munro, Writing Her Lives: A Biography* was published in 2005.

Steven Trout is an Associate Professor of English at Fort Hays State University. He is the author of *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* and a coeditor of *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory*. His articles on twentieth-century fiction have appeared in numerous journals, including *Hemingway Review*, *Studies in Short Fiction*,

and *Twentieth Century Literature*. Most recently he edited *Cather Studies, Volume 6: Willa Cather and the Great War*.

Joseph R. Urgo is Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of Mississippi. His works include *Novel Frames: Literature as a Guide to Race, Sex, and History in American Culture* and *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, as well as journal articles, book reviews, and encyclopedia entries on Cather and Faulkner. He was coeditor of *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* and appears in the PBS production *The Road Is All: Willa Cather*.