

WILLA CATHER: *Double Lives*. By *Hermione Lee*. Pantheon. 410 pp. \$29.95

Willa Cather's novels of Midwestern prairie life made her one of America's most popular novelists. Indeed, many of her fans came to associate the qualities of such novels as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) with Cather (1873–1947) herself: provincial simplicity, innocence, integrity, endurance. But Lee, a British critic who has written about Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, finds that Cather was “no laureate of rural America.” As Lee's subtitle, *Double Lives*, suggests, things were not as simple as they once seemed.

Cather's childhood was already half over when, in 1883, her family moved from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, a bleak land that the nine-year-old girl viewed with an outsider's eye. After college, she left the Midwest for Pittsburgh and later New York, seeking to lead the life of the “new woman” and supporting herself as a schoolteacher and journalist. The Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett, whom she met in 1909, convinced Cather that the region she had once almost despised, and its “everyday people who grow out of the soil,” could be material for the fiction she soon began writing.

Feminist and lesbian critics have claimed Cather as one of their own, even though Cather never openly expressed her sexual orientation. Lee describes the youthful Cather wearing mannish attire and signing herself “William Cather.” But she warns readers “not to collapse Cather's imaginative life into a simple matter of repression.” (Lee herself treats Cather's 44-year “Boston marriage” to Edith Lewis in a mere four pages.) What makes the gender question interesting, however, is that it seems to influence the genre question.

The struggle for the frontier was long considered an essentially male story. Lee praises Cather for “being the only woman of her time to have appropriated a ‘great tradition’ of male American writing.” Male authors like Hamlin Garland and Ole Rølvaag propounded a kind of liter-



ary Manifest Destiny, a romantic self-identification with the conquest of the continent. Cather was more interested in *Obscure Destinies* (as she titled her 1932 short-story collection). Her aim was to reveal the emotional lives of settlers rooted to one spot on the prairie. In that prairie existence, according to Cather, it was women who displayed the traditional masculine strengths and the men who were weak.

In 1923, Cather wrote that “we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished . . .” Her own pioneer experience having lasted barely a decade, she began to cast about for other subjects. Her travels to the Southwest inspired *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (1927). And in *The Professor's House* (1925), her own difficult transition inspired the story of a Midwestern boy who leaves the prairie, enjoys initial success, but finds himself increasingly at odds with the modern world. Much of her own experience Cather considered too private to write about. (She began dodging reporters, building a mountain retreat, and even burning letters and manuscripts.) In her writing, she abandoned the contemporary world for 17th-century Quebec (*Shadows on the Rock*, 1931), Old Virginia (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, 1940), and even a story of 14th-century France. Little wonder that the New Critics of the 1930s and '40s dismissed her as provincial and escapist.

Lee joins those who would revive Cather's reputation. But she does so not because of Cather's feminism but because of her art, her creation of a language uniquely suitable for American experiences and landscapes. Lee weakens her case somewhat by overstating it, by indiscriminately approving all of Cather's stories, and by characterizing this author who finally fled the modern world as a modernist “in the company of Proust, Lawrence, Eliot, and Virginia Woolf.”

History

LET THEM CALL ME REBEL: Saul Alinsky—*His Life and Legacy*. By *Sanford D. Horwitt*. Knopf. 595 pp. \$29.95

Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835 that the genius of American politics expressed itself at