

Willa Cather Biography

by Whitney Lloyd

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Wilela Cather, subsequently named Willa by her family, was born in her grandmother's house in the Black Creek Valley near Winchester, Virginia, which is still a beautiful rural part of the state and a location where there had been considerable fighting during the Civil War involving renowned Confederate generals. One of my college roommates moved to the area, combining a career in investments and cattle raising. His wife was raised in Westover, the home of William Byrd, whose journal is taught in high school history classes. Willa's father was a farmer and businessman and her mother a school teacher. They went on to have seven children with whom Willa had a pretty close relationship. Various family members had fought each other from either the Confederate or the Union side during the war. To familiarize myself with Cather's life I purchased a 400 page biography by James Woodress, which was exceptionally detailed and a daunting undertaking. Last month I stumbled on a new biography, *Chasing Bright Medusas* by Benjamin Taylor, which provided excellent analysis while eliminating extraneous details. There are a number of other secondary sources on Cather, who was a fascinating woman.

When Willa was 10, the family moved to an area called "the divide" in rural Nebraska, and after a year of farming moved to the nearby town of Red Cloud, the inspiration for Black Hawk featured in *My Antonia*. Very different from her surroundings in Western Virginia, Cather described the landscape as an "erasure of personality." That region provided inspiration for many of her subsequent novels, providing her with insight into the challenges encountered by the Scandinavian émigrés, such as Annie Sadelik, who embodied Antonia Shimerda the chief protagonist in our novel. Although Willa subsequently resided in cosmopolitan enclaves in eastern United States and in Europe, she went to elementary school and college later in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she managed to study music, literature, and creative writing, always near the top of her class.

Willa had a very strong assertive personality. She was quick to find fault in people's performances, yet an excellent judge of quality and true talent. She had a tendency to form close relationships with people of her own sex and was not impressed with the artificial measures of glamour. She developed a close relationship with an Isabelle McClung a scion of the socially prominent McClung family in Pittsburgh. Sam McClung presided over the trial of Alexander Berkman, the would be assassin of Henry Clay Frick. Her other closest female friend was Elizabeth Lewis, who was with her when she died in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, near Mount Monadnock, another favorite haunt of mine.

In later years, Willa became a close confidant of Sarah Orne Jewett and Dorothy Fisher Canfield, both prominent writers. Canfield's father was president of Columbia University.

Throughout her career, Willa was a prolific writer of magazine articles, theater reviews, orchestral reviews, short stories and novels. In Pittsburgh she taught Latin, English, and algebra at Central High School and later at Allegheny High School, during which time, she got to travel to London with the McClung family. She managed to travel extensively in later life although having started with limited resources.

One of Willa's most important career steps in life was working for Samuel McClure, editor of *McClures' Magazine* a reform orientated journal prominent in the Progressive Era. McClure had a combative nature and was not a very good businessman, but brought to light significant then current issues, including railroad reform and social injustice. While at McClure's she interacted with many influential people and made her mark in muckraking. She contributed poetry and essays and assisted with the shaky business model.

Having made her mark as a journalist, school teacher, essayist and poet, Willa Cather is probably best known as a novelist. *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, both of which we have read in the Novel Club, her prairie trilogy including *O Pioneers*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Antonia* are well worth reading. She loved to write about the post Civil War frontier experience. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, her last novel, was drawn from pre-Civil War family history, finished in June 1940 when Cather was devastated by the fall of France. I am looking forward to reading this. Cather's biographers report that her readers familiar with only Cather's Nebraska fiction found *Sapphira* a great surprise without the romantic affirmations of the earlier novels with no heroine to empathize with, the subject matter is dark and sinister, yet also suggest that it is not an anti-slavery polemic.

In all Willa Cather was a high achiever on many fronts. She earned a strong reputation as a writer, teacher, and critic. In many of her novels, she showcased the frontier experience. She made her mark in many areas and in many respects embodied the American dream. She valued the qualities that really matter in life and never lost sight of her humble origins. I look forward to reading more of her works and enjoyed revisiting *My Antonia*, which I read in high school along with Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.