BANTAM CLASSIC

My Ántonia

Willa Cather

With an Introduction by Stephanie Vaughn

MY ANTONIA

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

Optima dies . . . prima fugit

VIRGIL

With an Introduction by

Stephanie Vaughn

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MY ÁNTONIA
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BRINGING THE MUSE INTO THE COUNTRY

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

WILLA CATHER looked at Nebraska and saw paradise. She saw the sun and the moon in the same sky, and a whole prairie that "was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed." She saw a river turned to copper, cottonwood trees transformed to gold and silver, and grass moving like an ocean. In the farmhouse kitchen of Cather's paradise, a grandmother is baking gingerbread for an orphan and geraniums bloom their hopes on the windowsill. To read *My Ántonia* is to slip through the garden gate of a fairy tale and return to the lost world of childhood—not only to the adventure of Jim Burden's and Ántonia Shimerda's childhood but to the mythology of an American national childhood, a collective dream of life liberated on the frontier. In Cather, though, if the frontier offers the possibility of a newly constructed life, where a character like Ántonia may achieve fertile productivity, heroic status, and sanctification, it also offers the possibility of extinction. Jim Burden may literally kill the snake in his grandmother's garden, but demons still rise like mist over the prairie—loneliness, despair, bad luck and bad weather, greed, self-absorption, and, above all, a failure of the imagination.

Except in her imagination, Willa Cather did not live most of her life in the region that has become synonymous with her name. Born in Virginia in 1873, she moved with

her family to Nebraska when she was nine and left the state forever when she was twenty-three. She moved to Pittsburgh to become an editor, a journalist, and teacher, and then to New York City, where she became the managing editor of *McClure's* magazine and, finally, a full-time fiction writer. When she published *My Ántonia,* her fifth book, in 1918, she was forty-five. She was not yet famous, although she had always had a secret sense of a grand destiny. Like the heroine of her bildungsroman, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), she had a "personality that carried across big spaces and expanded among big things."

My Ántonia was at first only a modest financial success, but it was praised by H. L. Mencken, who called it one of the best novels ever written by an American. Four years later Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (1922) and became one of the best known and most influential writers in the United States. F. Scott Fitzgerald, shortly before he published *The Great Gatsby* (1925), wrote to Cather apologizing for what he feared was "an instance of apparent plagiarism" from her novel *A Lost Lady* (1923). Sinclair Lewis, in 1930, is reported to have said that his Nobel Prize should have gone to Cather. Truman Capote, at age nineteen, newly arrived in New York City but already insinuating himself among the rich and famous, stalked Cather for weeks in the Society Library until she finally spoke to him and invited him for a hot chocolate at Longchamps. (Capote said that he ordered a martini.) According to Cather's companion of nearly forty years, Edith Lewis, Cather had such celebrity in the last two decades of her life that she could not walk through Central Park without being asked for her autograph.

Sometimes an artist's first invention is herself. As a girl in Red Cloud, Nebraska, Cather began to sign her name as "William." She also signed "William Cather, M.D.," signi-

fying her early desire to become a doctor. She wore closely cropped hair, men's hats, and short skirts—that is, skirts that hit at midcalf in an era when conventional women revealed only a peek at their shoes. At the University of Nebraska in Lincoln she incorporated "Sibert" into her name (Sibert was a family name) and continued to wear radically short hair and sporty clothes. (An athlete through most of her life, she was the kind of woman who was still riding horses into the canyons of the Southwest well into her middle age.) So astonished were classmates by her hair and dress at the University of Nebraska that when asked to reminisce about her half a century later, some of them could recall only (and inaccurately) that she never wore a dress or a "street length" skirt.

Cather abandoned her radical costumes when she discovered that she was a writer and that she was about to gather into herself the writer's power to recast the universe in her own image. In 1891, when she was still seventeen, she appeared in print for the first time after one of her professors submitted to the *Nebraska State Journal* an essay on Thomas Carlyle she had written for his class. (Simultaneously, it appeared in a campus magazine.) The following year, with similar help from another professor, she published her first short fiction. "Peter," a story about a Bohemian violinist, anticipates the tragedy of Mr. Shimerda and is therefore remarkable for the way it reveals an eighteen-year-old Cather illuminating in a single lightning strike the material that would make her into a major American novelist twenty-six years later. It was not long after she saw herself in print that she changed her name back to Willa and began to let her hair grow. By graduation she was wearing silk dresses. For the rest of her life she was a clotheshorse. Interviewers and memoirists invariably remembered her silks and furs, her scarlet dresses and parrot-green blouses, her embroidered scarves and smartly cut coats. Surely it is not coincidental that she moved from the

flamboyantly unconventional to the flamboyantly conventional mode at the moment that she understood that she was going to have a career as a writer. It is as if she knew that the real mark of her difference and distinction would be in her work. Thereafter, her preoccupation with the body—how to name it, how to clothe it—is transferred to the page, where clothing becomes a signifier of character as well as one of the many metaphors she uses to describe the art of writing.

While she was still a student at the University of Nebraska, Cather published two lofty essays in defense of American football. "It makes one exceedingly weary to hear people object to football because it is brutal," she wrote in 1893. "Of course it is brutal. So is Homer brutal, and Tolstoi." The next year she wrote that "[football] is one of the few survivals of the heroic . . . there must always be a little of the barbarian lurking. . . . When the last trace of that vital spark, that exultation of physical powers . . . that fury of animal courage dies out of the race, then providence will be done with us." Even at the ages of nineteen and twenty it was characteristic of her to take the oppositional stance, to be provocative, to celebrate physicality and barbarianism, and to read a subject through the lenses of literary texts and an epic past. (She also collaborated with her classmate Dorothy Canfield Fisher on a gothic horror football story that may have been the first and last of its genre. Titled "The Fear That Walks by Noonday," it won first prize in a contest and was published in a campus magazine.)

At the university Cather took fifteen semesters of English literature, substituting advanced courses for introductory ones, studied Latin and Greek, became an editor of a campus magazine, and was an irreverent presence in the classroom. She disliked the scholarly methods of the English department chair, Lucius Sherman, who analyzed lit-

erature in the "scientific" way, by counting instances of word usages and images in a text. Like Jim Burden reading Virgil at college, Cather wanted to be "brushed by the wing of a great feeling." Years later, in "The Novel Demeuble," she would articulate an aesthetic of "the thing not named"—"the inexplicable presence . . . the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura . . . that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself." In the meantime, she attacked Sherman's reductive, quantifying methods in print, and one day in class, when Sherman asked the students, "What did the noble matron Volumnia [in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*] say next?" Cather replied, "The noble matron Volumnia then said 'Bow-wow.' "

Between 1891 and 1896 Cather published several hundred essays, book reviews, and play reviews, in the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier,* as well as in university magazines. The witty impertinence she later would bring to characters such as Mrs. Shimerda she first tried out on some of the literary stars of the nineteenth century. Of Walt Whitman she wrote: "He is sensual . . . in the frank fashion of the old barbarians. . . . He is rigidly limited to the physical. . . . There is an element of poetry in all of this, but it's by no means the highest. If a joyous elephant were to break into song, his lay would probably be very much like Whitman's 'Song of Myself.' " She said that Oscar Wilde "might have been one of the greatest living dramatists, he might have been almost anything, but he preferred to be a Harlequin," by which she meant that he had settled for epigrammatic cleverness. She was even more high-handed with the popular women novelists of her day. "All minor authors have their specialities," she wrote in a review of Marie Corelli. "Miss Corelli's are the dash and the exclamation point." In her youth she associated women's writing

with idle pursuits: "The feminine mind has a hankering for hobbies and missions, consequently there have been but two real creators among women authors, George Sand and George Eliot." She doubled the length of the list a year later when she added "Miss Brontë" (probably Charlotte) and Jane Austen. Growing up at the end of the nineteenth century, with an education in Greek and Latin texts and in English, French, and American literature, Cather had few female literary models, and even fewer who published under female names. The typical middle-class home of her day had on its shelves at least one book written exclusively for women, like *The Household* (1881), edited by May Perrin Goff, which suggested that women's creative work was confined to little crafts. In *The Household* you could find out how to use silk, leather, gold braid, or bows to make a fancy cover for a book, but you would not be told that you could write one.

By the time she left Nebraska for Pittsburgh, Cather had published nearly a half million words of journalism. Her daunting drama reviewer's stance—exuberant, strong-minded, often hilarious in its ferocity (and even epigrammatical)—made her a nationally known drama critic who inspired fear in every actor who came down from Chicago to play in Lincoln. In her early works one gets a sense of a writer looking for a usable self and usable material—looking for the heroic, the passionate, for whatever was original but not contrived, for the strong and muscular rather than the domestic and refined—and she was not going to find enough of that in football, literary analysis, or reviews. Where she found it, of course, was where she had found her first fiction—back in Nebraska.

II

IN AN article Cather wrote looking back at her first two novels, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) and *O Pioneers!* (1913), she commented, in her sardonic way, on the impropriety of using Nebraska as a subject: "As everyone knows, Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background; its very name throws the delicately attuned critic into a clammy shiver of embarrassment. Kansas is almost as unpromising. Colorado, on the contrary, is considered quite possible. Wyoming really has some class, of its own kind, like well-cut riding breeches. But a New York critic voiced a very general opinion when he said: 'I don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it.' " In the same article Cather was almost defensive in describing her use of immigrant-farmer characters who were in every conceivable sense remote from the New York world where she lived and wrote: "Since I wrote this book for myself, I ignored all the situations and accents that were then generally thought to be necessary.... The drawing room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were smart or clever people." To be sure, American writing already had a long tradition of men entering the wilderness to become trail blazers, crack shots, poker players, crafty scouts, Alamo defenders, and hunters of giant mammals, but it was a radical project to undertake the representation of obscure farmers who did not even speak English, who were the subjects of vaudeville skits, and were regarded contemptuously by "real" Americans. "My God!" the tramp says in "The Hired Girls" section of *My Ántonia,* "so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy."

The characters in *My Ántonia* are Bohemians, Russians,

Austrians, Hungarians, Swedes, and Norwegians who have left the old orders of Europe to make new lives on an untracked land, just as the Cather family had left the relatively antique and highly structured society of Virginia for a farm in southcentral Nebraska. (After one year the family moved into town.) In an interview she gave in 1913, five years before the publication of *My Ántonia,* Cather recalled her unsettling first encounter with the prairie:

> The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality.

Jim Burden has a similar memory in the opening pages of his narrative:

> There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creek or trees; no hills or fields. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it. . . . If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.

The prairie in *My Ántonia* is sometimes the site of extinction—the locus of suicide and murder. Ántonia's father is a casualty, a man who, Jim Burden says, is killed by "homesickness." Homesickness in Cather is the disabling desire, the paralytic sense of how things were or might have been instead of how things are or can be. Jim Burden, who seems to understand what broke Mr. Shimerda, says that some "memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again." But if the prairie is obliterating, if it can erase a human being, it also is a blank page on which much can be written. Corn can be written

there, wheat can be written, so can a kitchen garden, cattle pastures, farmhouses, families, children, a whole new life in which adversity is rewritten into achievement by hard work and a Christian sense of benediction. When a blizzard buries the land, the snowbound Burden household makes do by "greasing their boots, mending their suspenders, plaiting whiplashes." When it is too snowy to go to the town of Black Hawk to buy Christmas presents, they make use of what resources they have at hand and produce the magnificent Christmas tree which is the "talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches. Grandmother said it reminded her of the Tree of Knowledge."

Nebraska is part of that colossal tract of land known as the Louisiana Purchase, sold in 1803 by Napoleon to Thomas Jefferson, who believed that he had bought enough land to make all future generations of Americans into landholders and farmers. Like Jefferson, whose democratic ideals were expressed as agrarian ones, Cather idealized the heartland as a place where the bounty written across the fields might produce a new kind of society. At Christmas the Burdens pray for the "poor and destitute in the great cities." Even in a town as small as Black Hawk "the guarded mode of existence was like a tyranny," and the "country girls," with their erotic exuberance and athleticism are "considered a menace to the social order." Ántonia will return to the country to bear and raise her many children, who, late in the novel, come running up the steps of a fruit cellar into the sunlight looking like a League of Nations: "big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown." Although some of the immigrants may bring their ethnic enmities with them—the Norwegians will not allow the Bohemian Mr. Shimerda to be buried in their cemetery—Grandfather Burden articulates an ideal, what Cather in another context called "the

gift of sympathy," when he overcomes his Protestant antipathy to Catholicism and says, "The prayers of all good people are good."

Cather said in interviews that the "American language works on my mind like light on a photographic plate." Ultimately, she understood herself to be an American writer working out of the traditions of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and the mentor she met early in her career, Sarah Orne Jewett, rather than out of the delicacy and Anglophilia of her older contemporary Henry James, whose work was among her first literary models. Like Mark Twain, she worked to achieve the fluidity and improvisational energy of oral storytelling in her fiction. For that reason *My Ántonia* is not so much a single story as it is a confabulation of tales. Tales within tales are tucked into the novel like the legends and stories nestled into the Burden Christmas tree. The story of the Russian bride and groom thrown to the wolves is told by Russian Pavel to Ántonia's father, is then translated by Ántonia, who retells it for Jim Burden, who writes it into the manuscript he gives to the frame narrator of the novel. The story of Ántonia's first pregnancy and her heartbreaking trip to and return from Denver, where she is abandoned by the railroader Donovan, is narrated by the Widow Steavens. The story of "Crazy Mary"—"her feet were as hard as hoofs"—and of Ole Benson, and Lena Lingard—"I can't help it if he hangs around, and I can't order him off. It ain't my prairie"—is told by a "young Dane." The story of the tramp is told by Ántonia. The story of Wick Cutter's apocalyptic end is told, with considerable zest for the telling, by one of Ántonia's sons. Perhaps because it begins with a pair of railroad journeys, the novel seems to promise a linear narrow-gauge progression. Instead, as Jim Burden himself says at the conclusion, his story moves in a "circle." It does not so much end on the final page as it makes a return, like Jim Burden, to its source, where it can once again rise out of itself.

Nevertheless, Cather's project was to write a story, not speak one. For all its invocation of multiple voices and its oral virtuosity, the novel is insistently self-reflexive about its own status as a written document and about the status of readers as inventors of meanings. Jim Burden's story enters the novel as a manuscript given to the frame narrator. The young Jim Burden rides the train into Nebraska while reading *The Life of Jesse James,* which inspires him to "read" the kindly hired hand, Otto Fuchs, as a desperado: "He might have stepped out of the pages of *Jesse James*. . . . He looked lively and ferocious, I thought, and as if he had a history." The snake Jim kills "was lying in long loose waves, like the letter 'W.'" When Mr. Shimerda kneels to pray, "his long body formed a letter 'S.'" To "find meaning in common things"—Jim's description of what Ántonia has inspired him to do—is to read; and to read is to construct a fiction.

Just as Cather's readers will read the sod busting of the American heartland through *My Ántonia,* Jim Burden reads his own story (though often unreliably) through other fictions—through *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Swiss Family Robinson,* through various fairy tale narratives, and finally through the pastorals of Virgil, who had celebrated his own country in a "perfect utterance . . . where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow." Cather celebrates the connection between sod busting the prairie and writing an epic narrative (as opposed to indulging in exclamation points and epigrammatic cleverness) in what has become one of the most famous images in all of American writing:

> On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue,

> the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

At the exact geographical center of the novel, the black musician, Blind d'Arnault, comes to town to play the piano at the hotel. In the only disembodied story of the book—the only story not reported to or witnessed by Jim Burden or the frame narrator—Jim Burden offers an account of Blind d'Arnault's introduction to the piano as a child, when d'Arnault lived on a plantation and listened through a window to the music lessons undertaken by the daughter of the mansion. It is an extraordinary moment in Cather—a narrative celebrating the white European migration to America is disrupted by the image of a black child standing at a window of the Big House, and he cannot even see. Perhaps the reason that most Cather critics have ignored the section is that Jim Burden's characterization of d'Arnault uses the familiar language of racism. D'Arnault is an "African god of pleasure," a "Negro enjoying himself as only a Negro can." The passage is a reminder that the American mythology of hardy individualism and of fidelity to the community that is articulated in *My Ántonia* was written in spite of, or against, a history of grievous oppression and disabling misapprehension. Embedded as it is in the middle of the novel, drawing attention to itself as the very hinge of the book, the d'Arnault story is above all the story of an artist who achieves something against all probabilities. When Cather writes that d'Arnault "played barbarously and wonderfully," that "as piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real," Cather is naming the virtues she found in American football and, more ambiguously, in Walt Whitman. D'Arnault may be the outrageously eroticized black male, but his eroticism is directed (in an outrageous pun) to his "instrument": "Through the dark he found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. . . . He approached this highly artificial instrument

through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it." Real artists, in both Cather's fiction and her journalism, are always barbarians and sensualists. If the d'Arnault model suggests that they are also autoerotic and self-generating, so does the remarkable portrait of Ántonia late in the novel, where she appears androgynously as the Earth Mother, pregnant, alone, and wearing men's clothing.

III

WILLA CATHER wrote *My Ántonia* during World War I, when she was in her mid-forties. The era of dugout houses and of sod busting the prairie was past. The steam thresher had replaced the horse-drawn farm equipment of her childhood. The opera houses, with their live dramatic performances, which Cather loved just as Jim Burden does, were being replaced throughout the United States by theaters for moving pictures. Cather had settled into lasting companionship with her friend Edith Lewis. Since neither woman spoke publicly about their relationship or left letters or diaries revealing the nature of it, it is not clear how sexual or romantic their friendship was. Recent biographers and critics generally agree, though, that Cather and Lewis had a kind of sustaining marriage, like the one between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with Cather becoming the literary star and going into the world as the major public figure, while Lewis, who had a career in journalism and advertising, created a domestic tranquillity that enabled Cather to write.

The great passion of Cather's life seems to have been for Isabelle McClung, whom she met in Pittsburgh and whose family home she lived in before Cather moved to New York. Just before she began work on *My Ántonia,* she was

alarmed to learn that Isabelle McClung had married a man named Jan Hambourg. Cather's friend Elizabeth Sergeant recalls in *Willa Cather, A Memoir* that when Cather spoke of the marriage, "all her natural exuberance had drained away." Although she eventually became a good friend of Hambourg's (she later dedicated a book to him) and continued to see the couple until Isabelle died in 1938, she seems to have suffered, at the time of the marriage, a lacerating loss. At about the same time, Cather's mother fell seriously ill, and Cather spent several months back home, cooking for a household of eight, and nursing her mother. It was the sense of deprivation and longing out of which she wrote the novel that accounts for its elegiac tone and its somber epigraph: *Optima dies... prima fugit* (The best days... the first to flee—Virgil).

Elizabeth Sergeant reports that when Cather was preparing to write the book, she visited Sergeant's apartment and, gesturing at a vase of flowers standing on a table, said, "I want my new heroine to be like this—like a rare object in the middle of the table, which one may examine from all sides." If Cather was referring to Ántonia as Sergeant suggests (though Sergeant also wonders whether Cather was speaking of Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady*), then Cather must have discovered a new mode of thinking about her heroine as she wrote the novel. Rarely has a woman character in American fiction been depicted less like a vase on a table. Like the grass on the prairie, Ántonia is motion itself. She rarely is caught in a still moment. She sometimes disappears from the narrative altogether, as in the second half of "The Hired Girls" section, where Jim Burden narrates, instead, the story of Lena Lingard. Ántonia is sometimes no more than a voice, the major storyteller on the prairie. By the time the middle-aged Jim Burden visits her, she is moving through the misty golden light cast by his poetic diction and musical rhythms—she is the founder of all races, the mother, even, of trees—"They were on my mind