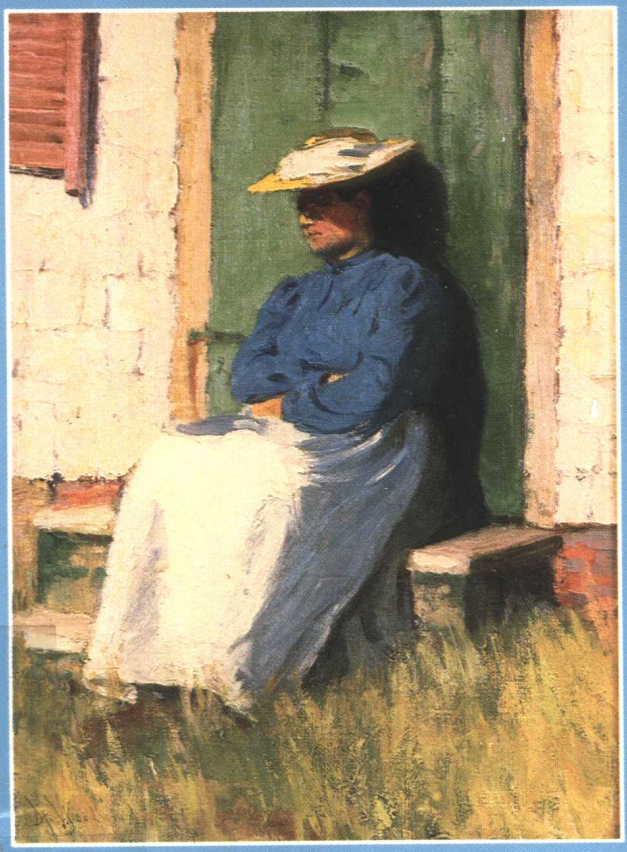
BANTAM BOOKS®

O Pioneers!
by Willa Cather



With an Introduction
by Vivian Gornick

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O PIONEERS!

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Willa Cather

was probably born in Virginia in 1873, although her parents did not register the date, and it is probably incorrectly given on her tombstone. Because she is so famous for her Nebraska novels, many people assume she was born there, but Willa Cather was about nine years old when her family moved to a small Nebraska frontier town called Red Cloud that was populated by immigrant Swedes, Bohemians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, and Russians. The oldest of seven children, she was educated at home, studied Latin with a neighbor, and read the English classics in the evening. By the time she went to the University of Nebraska in 1891—where she began by wearing boy's clothes and cut her hair close to her head—she had decided to be a writer.

After graduation she worked for a Lincoln, Nebraska, newspaper, then moved to Pittsburgh and finally to New York City. There she joined *McClure's* magazine, a popular muckraking periodical that encouraged the writing of new young authors. After meeting the author Sarah Orne Jewett, she decided to quit journalism and devote herself full time to fiction. Her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge,* appeared in serial form in *McClure's* in 1912. But her place in American literature was established with her first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!,* published in 1913, which was followed by her most famous pioneer novel, *My Antonia,* in 1918. In 1922 she won the Pulitzer Prize for one of her lesser-known books, *One of Ours. Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), her masterpiece, and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) also celebrated the pioneer spirit, but in the Southwest and French Canada. Her other novels include *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). Willa Cather died in 1947.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1940 Wallace Stevens wrote of Willa Cather, "She takes such pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality," but "we have nothing better than she is." Now, almost fifty years later, I'm reading her and I want to say to Stevens: The sophistication is transparent, and not only is she the best we have, she's what we're all about. The open style, the unpretentious high-mindedness, the penetrating interest in the idea of individuation, all seem richly American to me—and above all, the understanding in her that the struggle to become takes place not "out there" in the world, but "in here" in what we call intimate relations.

Cather once observed that in all families the "struggle to have anything of one's own, to be one's self at all, creates a strain that keeps everybody almost at the breaking point. . . . One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life: that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them."

Years later, Katherine Anne Porter wrote of these words: "This is masterly and water-clear and autobiography enough for me: my mind goes with tenderness to the big lonely slow-moving girl who happened to be an artist coming back from reading Latin and Greek with an old storekeeper

[in the town] to talk down an assertive brood of brothers and sisters, practicing her art on them, refusing to be lost among them—the longest-winged one who would fly free at last."

Willa Cather was born in 1873, in Virginia, into a family of highly literate country people (both grandmothers knew Latin and Greek). When she was nine years old, the family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska. The father proved to be a disastrous farmer. A year on the open plain, and they took a house in town. Mr. Cather became an insurance agent. The children grew up healthy, loving, competitive. Everyone knew Willa's intelligence was remarkable, and when the time came, she was sent to the university at Lincoln. In Lincoln she distinguished herself as a brilliant eccentric: a large girl, ungainly and overly direct; a passionate reader and talker with unreliable social skills, often blurting out some indiscreet bit of scorn.

By the time she graduated she knew she could write. Music and theater had always meant a great deal to her, and she was thrilled to be taken on by the Lincoln newspaper as a reviewer. She did wonderfully well. So well that in a year or two a job offer came from a Pittsburgh magazine, and off she went. There was never a thought of her going home to Red Cloud. It's as though everyone knew she'd gone out into the world the minute she left for school, and now there was nothing for it but to go further into the world. Such an urban natural! From Red Cloud to Lincoln to Pittsburgh to New York. The bigger the city, the more she loved it. With each leap in population she experienced a leap in heart.

Cather had been writing stories for some time, sending them out, getting them back. Then a small miracle occurred. In 1903 she met Sam McClure, editor of *McClure's Magazine* and a book publisher as well. McClure

urged her to send him her stories. She did, he summoned her to New York, and told her he would publish anything she wrote.

McClure's response to Cather's writing was genuine but also sprang from a motive he kept secret. McClure was a magazine genius who could talk anybody into working for him, but then had trouble keeping his people. Energetic, openhanded, in love with good writing, and possessed of a missionary zeal for investigative reporting, he was also a man who needed to live at the center of a storm. Chaos was his natural condition. When he met Willa Cather, his famous muckraking writers—Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker—were leaving him, and he saw Cather as their replacement. He needed her, was determined to have her, and he got her—because she needed him, too. She needed to get to New York, needed to get on with her apprenticeship, needed to start what became the years of active delay out of which, at last, she would begin to write.

Under McClure, Cather became a skilled editor and magazine writer, and came to see clearly the difference between journalism and literature, and what each meant to her. She spent six years with McClure, years in which there slowly accumulated in her the compulsion to write out of the experience of her inner life. She needed the six years (could not have done it one minute sooner), but against the fear and the anxiety the drive was gathering. To write from the quiet center was her necessity. To discover for herself what it was she knew about human beings (really knew) and to spend her life exploring that territory. To find her true subject: what was it that made the words come alive under the pen? which of her feelings aroused that level of response? what did she know only on the surface of things, and what did she know down to the

bone? To think about what she felt: that was her life's work.

In 1912 she left *McClure's* for good (she'd tried a number of times before but couldn't manage it), settled into a Greenwich Village apartment, and began to live the remarkably quiet life that produced an unbroken flow of novels, stories, and essays over the next thirty years. By 1918 she had written *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark,* and *My Antonia*. Her books, from the beginning, brought her money and recognition. She spent the winter in New York, the summer in Nebraska and New Mexico. In the fall or spring she often went to New Hampshire. A number of times she traveled to Europe. Music remained a passion, and many of her friends were musical.

Greenwich Village in the twenties and thirties was exploding with Freud, Marx, and Emma Goldman, but for Cather it was all at a great distance. In the country of her life these were border disturbances. The landscape of her youth and the figures on that landscape were what held her inner attention, aroused in her the poetic imagination. The people she had left behind continually reawakened in her the single large concern that stirred her to write: the question of how one becomes. In all human beings, she felt, there is what she called a soul, an essential spirit, an expressive, inviolable self. She knew it was the task of every life to fashion an existence that would free the expressive self. This was the thing she saw from the very beginning. It became her subject, her metaphor, her lifelong preoccupation. For thirty years she fashioned stories and novels in which human beings struggle with the question of how to be themselves. If her characters struggle successfully, somehow or other, they come to glory. If not, if the inviolable self is denied or ignored, abused or pushed out of shape, the character comes to grief.

The Song of the Lark, published in 1915, was her

manifesto. In this novel she stakes out her territory for the first time—and loads the issue shamelessly. The story is a great romance. Thea Kronborg, a musically gifted daughter of Swedish immigrants, grows up in Moonstone, Colorado, in the 1880s. The doctor in the town, an intelligent, unhappy man, sees the sensitivity of the child and becomes her friend and mentor. In time he helps her leave Moonstone for Chicago, where she will study with a pianist of reputation. In Chicago, Thea endures poverty, loneliness, and terrible uncertainty. But the will that drives her is overpowering. The piano teacher makes the crucial discovery: it's her voice that's the real talent, not the piano playing. He shows her the way forward. A wealthy musical dilettante falls in love with Thea. He also helps her to see herself better. Then she makes a trip to the Southwest, where, in the great canyons of the American earth, she undergoes a mystical experience and knows what she must do. She returns to Chicago, wires the doctor for money, goes to Germany to study singing, and at the end of the book we leave her, a rising prima donna in the New York opera: intent and narrowed down, staring straight into the glory filled, demanding years ahead of her. She is, of course, alone.

In *The Song of the Lark,* Cather makes a great romance of the loneliness of the artist's vocation—into which she pours her own defiant necessity—but that is not her subject at all. Her subject is the idea that in the pursuit of the deepest self there is salvation, and in the absence of that pursuit there is a kind of death-in-life. Willa Cather left twelve novels, four collections of stories, two volumes of nonfiction, and two of poetry. It seems to me there are traces of this preoccupation throughout her work, even when the story—as in *O Pioneers!*—is a ceremonial devotion to the land, and to the idea of family trapped in the

tenderness Cather felt for the great American plain civilizing itself. Even then.

When I think of *O Pioneers!*—that is, when I remember the novel with my feelings—I think of a wild gloomy landscape that slowly brightens and clarifies, becoming with each page of description, open and wholesome. Like a child's drawing, the country is rendered in primary colors without line or shadow. Then, suddenly, a dark blot is thrown onto the sunny composition. Anxiety seeps across the clear simple prose. The story is saved from sentimentality; the novel becomes a piece of writing for adults.

That dark blot is Cather's knowledge of the hidden self, compelled by its own hungers; of necessity, unreliable and even antisocial; a puzzle and a grief for those devoted to the idea that all virtue resides in the trustworthiness of group feeling.

In *O Pioneers!* the land itself—taming it, bringing it under control, making it yield its riches—is at one with the idea of the group, the family, the tribe. Illicit love is the unruly self that threatens and must be done away with, but its dark and bloody consequence soaks into the open landscape, undermining those who imagine this simple fruitfulness can supply all human needs. What a sorrow that it cannot! Thousands of men and women broke their heads and their hearts on this fierce and wild plain only thirty years before our story takes place. How is it possible this monumental effort was not sufficient to explain all? to, in fact, *be* all? What makes *O Pioneers!* a work of substance and of art is Cather's intelligent compassion for a piece of life that moves her even while she sees its profound insufficiency.

Alexandra Bergson is a kind of essence of pioneer. She is the first character in American literature to yearn over Nebraska. Possessed of strong feeling and a mind "slow, truthful, steadfast . . . [without] the least spark of clever-

ness," she experiences the land as others might experience religion or politics: a visionary moment becomes sealed in permanent conversion. "When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide . . . [Alexandra's] face was so radiant. . . . For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before." Alexandra sees not the world before her but the one that is to be made, and the unimaginative mind coupled with the prodigious strength of feeling becomes wedded to a single-mindedness of purpose that will not be weakened by complex or inappropriate emotions. This single-mindedness enters like passional love into Alexandra, becomes her sensual connection, binds her to the enduring effort. It makes Nebraska prosper, and it keeps her simple.

Marie Tovesky is the wild card in the deck. It is she, trapped in an unhappy marriage, who remains sexually alive and dangerously discontented on the clear lovely farmland Alexandra has created, she who tosses the blot onto the sunny composition, she who cripples Alexandra's self-belief, leaves her brooding and confused.

O Pioneers! belongs to these two women. The men are either shadowy or instrumental. The story lies with the combined elements of Alexandra on the land and Marie on the land: the one who is simple thrives; the one who is complex is destroyed. They are really family, these two—and they are really spiritual strangers. Lonely in the dailiness of her farmwife life, Marie turns with pleasure and affection to Alexandra for companionship, but when she is driven by the emptiness in her soul toward the power of

sexual desire, she dare not confide in Alexandra. She knows instinctively that Alexandra will not understand the intensity of her need. Indeed, Marie herself does not understand it. Unlike Thea Kronborg, Marie cannot act on the urgency gathering in her, she can only be overtaken by it. The difference between *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* is the difference between ignorant hunger and an act of consciousness. A difference Willa Cather understood deeply.

O Pioneers! is a classic American novel. It can be read with profit and pleasure at any age. To read it first in adolescence and then to return to it as an adult is to feel the texture of its intent ripen and mature. Cather's love of the American Midwest is as vividly alive on the page now as it was seventy years ago, and her appreciation of the painful contradictions buried in family life or group life is as tenderly indicated here as in anything she ever wrote.

When I read Willa Cather, I sometimes find myself thinking of two writers who were working at the same time as she, women for whom the fear and difficulty of sexual independence were also richly suggestive, Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf. And it's then that I realize how American Cather is. The tone and perspective she brings to her work, the way she frames the problem, the spirit of approach, the underlying mood of expectation—all mark her as an American.

Imagine. In 1925 Jean Rhys was writing *Quartet*, Virginia Woolf published *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Willa Cather published *The Professor's House*. Woolf and Rhys were a pair of Englishwomen much influenced by modernism. One made of sexuality a bleak urban parable, the other created a vast inner field of vision on which to play out the promise and failure of human sympathy. Cather, that in-

comparable daughter of Transcendentalism, made a contemplation on the struggle to achieve wholeness.

In 1925 Woolf and Rhys seemed sophisticated, Cather an American provincial. The Englishwomen wrote as though from a position of knowingness, Cather as though from naïveté. When Jean Rhys wrote, "He left me all smashed up," she meant, "Life and history leave one all smashed up." Cather, on the other hand, wrote as one who saw herself pitted against the elements in a fair fight, and there was no question that the struggle was a worthy one. Not only worthy, obligatory. At all times one's life is worth having. In the most unsentimental of Cather's novels there is neither despair nor a loss of energy. This seems to me American through and through, and not only American but very much of our moment.

The long bitterness of modern alienation feels worked out just now. The greatest of its talents still holds our attention, but the smaller ones make us restless, and some who appeared to be off the map fifty years ago are looking pretty good. Today Jean Rhys seems dated, Virginia Woolf important, and Willa Cather wise.

VIVIAN GORNICK

To the memory of
SARAH ORNE JEWETT
in whose beautiful and delicate work
there is the perfection
that endures

"Those fields, colored by various grain!"
MICKIEWICZ

PRAIRIE SPRING

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.