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Foreword by

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cather, Willa, 1873 – 1947.
O pioneers!

I. Title.
PS3505.A8702 1987 813'.52 87-22605
ISBN 0-395-08365-6 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

S 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOREWORD

by Doris Grumbach

EVERY WRITER of fiction, it turns out, is complex, inventive, and paradoxical. Some convert their lives into fictions agreeable to their vision of themselves. (Willa Cather, we may assume, instructed Edith Lewis to place the wrong birthdate on her gravestone.) Others use autobiographical facts as the omnipresent catafalque of their fiction. Willa Cather was both kinds of writer. Her life was full of contradictions, some of which she was conscious of, and of myths which she created about herself. She used what she had experienced from the age of eight to fifteen as the material for many of her short stories and five of her novels. Her reputation, which has grown steadily since her death in 1947, rests primarily on her first four Nebraska novels. Most critics agree that it was with these that her position in the canon of enduring American novelists was secured. Many readers met her first in school through these novels; some mature people in this country have been reading *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia* again and again since their childhood in the twenties.

It is often assumed that Willa Cather must have been born in Nebraska. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, published in 1977, Ann Douglas boldly states so. But of course this is not true. She was born in 1873 (not 1876) and spent her first nine years in Winchester, Virginia. Hers was an extended family of Boaks and

Cathers; she was the first of seven children. Her parents took the family, together with her beloved grandmother, Rachel Boak, and a simple-minded servant, Margie, to the prairie on the Divide and thence, after more than a year, to Red Cloud, Nebraska, because her grandfather, who had gone west earlier, believed it would be a healthier climate for his family.

For Willa, it was psychically a traumatic move. She had loved the lush, damp greenness of the hills and great trees of Virginia. In Nebraska the child saw flat, hard, tall-grassed land without any signs of human habitation. "I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything," she told an interviewer for the *Philadelphia Record* soon after *O Pioneers!* appeared in 1913. "It was a kind of erasure of personality." She described the new country as "bare as a piece of sheet iron" and admitted: "For the first week or two on the homestead I had the kind of contraction of the stomach which comes from homesickness." Nebraska, she said (through Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*), was "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."

Cather received her elementary schooling at home, from her grandmother, and she read to herself from the family's eclectic collection of books. Her enduring education, however, came from her neighbors — Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Bohemian (Czech) immigrants — whom she rode out to visit on the bleak prairie. She heard these hard-working people tell the stories of their lives. As she listened, she felt the stirrings of the state in which, years later, she wrote their histories. Later, she told the *Philadelphia Record*, "I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement: I always felt . . . as if I had actually got inside another person's skin. If one begins that early, it is the story of the man-eating tiger over again — no other adventure ever carries one quite so far."

The stories she heard, the people under whose skins she was able to get became, in her maturity, her most successful subject matter. She heard about the suicide of Francis Sadilek (father of

her friend Annie), the Bohemian farmer who had brought with him from Europe a cultivated love of music. Sadilek despaired of the bleak Nebraska existence and took his life in his barn by shooting himself. This bloody tale stayed with Cather. She must have seen it as a graphic and telling representation of the contradictions in the lives of these immigrants, who were looked down upon for their poverty but were lonely for a culture which was, in many cases, richer than their American neighbors'. She remembered it twice, once in the first story she published, "Peter" (1892), and again, more permanently, as an episode in *My Ántonia*.

Cather also used in her work less dramatic but equally vivid memories of the prairie. The scarceness of trees had impressed her deeply: "Sometimes I went south to visit our German neighbors and to admire their catalpa grove, or to see the big elm tree that grew out of a deep crack in the earth. . . . Trees were so rare in that country . . . that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons." In *My Ántonia*, a mature Ántonia proudly shows Jim Burden the trees in her orchard: "I love them as if they were people. . . . There wasn't a tree here when we first came." Cather also remembered her grandmother using a walking stick to frighten rattlesnakes away; Jim Burden's grandmother has a "snake-cane." Her own terror of snakes is reflected in some of her books: in *O Pioneers!*, where John Bergson loses his stallion to a snake bite; in *The Song of the Lark*, when Thea warns her brothers of rattlesnakes; in *The Professor's House*, where the story of Henry's death (in two hours) from a rattlesnake is related; and again in *My Ántonia*, where Jim is repulsed by a giant rattler and violently kills it while Ántonia stands by, first screaming and then crying. Years later, Ántonia's and Cuzak's son Charley asks Jim Burden about the rattler he killed at dogtown.

When Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* tells of his first year on the Divide, he re-creates Cather's memories. In the introduction, Cather (as Jim Burden's friend) recalls her Red Cloud years poignantly:

> We were talking about what it was like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.

Red Cloud High School whetted Cather's appetite for learning. Two adult friends opened her eyes to the classics. Her love of music was born in her friendship with townswoman Mrs. Minor (Mrs. Harling in *My Ántonia*). Her affection for languages began with a German-Jewish couple named Wiener. (They come to life as the Rosens in Cather's later Nebraska story "Old Mrs. Harris" [1932].) Yet it took many years for Cather to appreciate all the prairie had given her. The difficult lives led on the harsh landscape caused her to believe she had not relished life there. After graduating from high school, she was impatient to leave Red Cloud and eager for the learning and culture the University of Nebraska at Lincoln promised her.

Based on her youth in Red Cloud, Cather thought that if she was to accomplish anything she would have to identify closely with the male world. She admired Red Cloud's Dr. McKeeby, who helped her through a serious illness, and so she planned to be a doctor, indeed, signed herself Wm. Cather, M.D. She preferred dressing as a boy, called herself Willie (her family used that name all her life), and signed some of her books Wm. Cather, Jr. Her university classmates would remember the Willa Cather who was masculine, brash, and unconventionally dressed. She was to abandon the tomboy clothes when she entered the world of professional journalism.

Cather spent five years in Lincoln, the first year in preparation for entry into the freshman class because her Red Cloud schooling had been insufficient. At age sixteen and a half she entered the university, where she worked hard and impressed her teachers

and friends as a fine student. Early in her college career she abandoned medicine for the study of classics. She had written an extraordinary essay on Thomas Carlyle which her professor had printed, without her knowledge, in the *Nebraska State Journal;* it was reprinted in the college magazine. Later she wrote, "What youthful vanity can be unaffected by the sight of itself in print!" From that time on, nothing was more important to her than writing — first reviews and essays, then short stories and poetry, finally novels. The Chicago book critic Fanny Butcher said Cather told her "nothing mattered . . . but writing books, and living the kind of life that made it possible to write them."

Cather was a forthright, well-read, and sometimes unhappy student. She resisted learning French grammar but read more of the classic French texts than her instructor. She hated the pedantry and rigidity of her English professor and lost no chance to say so. She ridiculed in print persons in the arts she scorned, and expressed her aesthetic views with a brash certainty unusual for a girl of her age and experience. When, in her junior year, she began to write a column for the *Nebraska State Journal*, she showed herself to be a harsh critic, unafraid to express cutting opinions, astonishingly sure of herself in her affection for or dislike of plays and concerts. She was accused of criticizing with a meat ax. Years later, a good college friend called her reviews "blasts."

At school, Cather formed close friendships with women. The novelist-to-be Dorothy Canfield became a good friend: the two collaborated on a Gothic short story published in the *Sombrero*, a student publication. Cather was deeply attached to Louise Pound, an upperclassman whose family befriended the brilliant young student. Cather wrote her a series of moving letters and confided her emotional involvement to close friends in Red Cloud. Her friendships with women would remain strong. She never married (indeed, marriage is a very unhappy state in much of her fiction); she created heroines who are larger than life and stronger than the men around them; her male characters seem to me weak and ineffectual in contrast.

Upon graduating in 1895, Cather no doubt wanted to put Ne-

braska behind her. She spent an unhappy year in Red Cloud and then in 1896 left for Pittsburgh, where she had been offered a job on a new magazine. She was compelled, I believe, by her impatience with life in a small town, by her strong ambition, and by her desire to enter the wider world of art, music, and literature. She spent ten years in Pittsburgh, five as a journalist, sending reports of events in that cultivated city back to the *Courier* and the *Nebraska State Journal*. She left journalism for teaching, first at Central High School and later at Allegheny High School.

In 1899, in the dressing room of a well-known actress, she met Isabelle McClung, a young and beautiful Pittsburgh socialite, the daughter of a judge, who was to be the strongest and most enduring influence on her emotional life; their friendship lasted until Isabelle's death in 1938. Cather dedicated *The Song of the Lark* to Isabelle, and confessed to a friend that everything she had written was for her. In 1901, after living in several boarding houses, Cather moved to the McClungs' luxurious home on fashionable Murray Hill Avenue. There she was provided with a small study on the third floor; there she entered into the artistic life in Pittsburgh. Two years later she published a volume of her own poems, *April Twilights*, undistinguished but, it may be, a sign to those around her that she was a writer. Later she disparaged the poems, reprinting only a few in her collected works.

Cather had begun to publish some new short stories and to reconsider her views on regional subject matter. One of her early reviews was of a book by the British writer Eden Phillpotts. She wrote that she wished there was an American writer who "could write of the American common people, the people on whom the burden of labor rested, who planted the corn and cut the wheat." She could not have foreseen (her attitude toward Nebraska life was still critical and even resentful; see her stories "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Wagner Matinée," both published in 1903) that she would become one of the most noted of those writers.

In the summer of 1902, Cather, with Isabelle, went abroad for the first time, beginning a long affection for Europe. She loved

the Old World — the past in literature had always interested her — and now she found contact with it invigorating. As a novelist with a passion for the past, Cather produced novels that went further and further back into history, including *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), which has scenes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. The violinist Yehudi Menuhin, her young friend in later years, wrote in his autobiography: "She adored what she felt had not been her birthright — the old, the European, the multilayered, and above all, music." When the young man was worried about his future, she told him: "If we remain always in our land we miss the companionship of seasoned and disciplined minds. Here there are no standards of taste and no responses to art *except emotional* ones." But she realized that "if we adopt Europe altogether, we lose that sense of *belonging* which is so important, and we lose part of our reality." Young writers living abroad, she said, "are just unconscious imposters. The things his own country makes him feel (the earth, the sky, the slang in the streets) are about the best capital a writer has to draw upon." She herself may have been tempted by Europe. Surely she grew to despise American materialism and indifference to culture. But she knew where her roots were: in Nebraska, on the prairie, with her beloved European immigrants.

McClure's, Phillips & Company published the first collection of Cather's stories, *The Troll Garden*, in 1905. Most of the stories had appeared before in magazines; some were discarded for a later collection, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), and were omitted in her collected works. Here are stories of art and artists as well as impressive tales that express the author's critical view of life in a small prairie town ("The Sculptor's Funeral") and the harshness and cultural deprivation of life on the prairie ("A Wagner Matinée").

The Pittsburgh years were brought to a close in 1906 by the New York publisher and editor S. S. McClure, who admired Cather's stories and persuaded her to come to New York as an associate editor for his magazine. She stayed with the difficult

and demanding McClure for six years, editing hundreds of pieces, rewriting many of them entirely. She took a long leave from her job and, in 1912, resigned. She never regretted her decision to leave teaching, writing to her Pittsburgh students: "So I turn to work I love with very real regret that I must leave behind, for the time at least, a work I have come to love almost as well."

New York, the city she came to, perhaps tentatively, became her permanent home; she lived there until her death in 1947. Her first residence in the city was an apartment in Washington Square, which she shared with another journalist, Edith Lewis. Lewis was a copyreader at *McClure's* and later worked as an editor for Bruce Barton's *Everywoman*. The two women lived together for forty years — after Washington Square, in an apartment at Washington Place, then for many years on Bank Street, and finally in an apartment on Park Avenue. It is interesting to note that the great Nebraska novels were written from the distant comfort of a New York residence.

During her time as an editor for *McClure's*, Cather was sent to Boston to do research for a series of articles on the life of Mary Baker Eddy. There she had a crucial meeting with the sixty-year-old Maine short story writer, Sarah Orne Jewett. In the Beacon Hill house of elderly Annie Fields, widow of James Fields, the publisher, Cather talked with the writer whose work *The Country of the Pointed Firs* she admired. Before she died sixteen months later, Jewett gave Cather advice that effectively changed the direction of her writing. Jewett thought she should abandon journalism if she wished to be a serious novelist. She said in a letter, "If you don't keep and guard and mature your force, and above all, have time and quiet to perfect your work, you will be writing things not much better than you did five years ago." She warned Cather, "Your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet center of life, and write from that to the world." In another letter she told her younger acquaintance, "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on

paper — whether little or great, it belongs to Literature." Cather was to say in an essay on writing, "One of the few really helpful words I ever heard from an older writer, I had from Sarah Orne Jewett when she said to me: 'Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish.' "

We may consider that Cather had not forgotten Jewett's advice about leaving *McClure's* when she remained a while longer as managing editor; there she continued to learn about the world. McClure, responding to her discontent, gave his opinion that she should remain a magazine editor because she was good at it, while her chances of being a successful fiction writer were slim. As inducement, he sent her abroad for two months, but by 1911 she knew that Jewett had been right about quitting journalism for fiction-writing.

In the same year her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, was accepted and published by Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin. It is an interesting, if nonpersuasive, international novel in the manner of Henry James. Greenslet heaped praise upon it and, in a memo to other editors in the house, mentioned that it was "workmanlike" and perceptive. Cather herself cared little for this book, belittling it in her preface to the second edition ten years later.

During the summer of 1912 Cather made what turned out to be an important trip to Winslow, Arizona, to vacation with her brother. A section of *The Song of the Lark* draws upon this visit. Thea, in the presence of the silence and mystery of Panther Canyon, makes a crucial decision about her future. I have always assumed that Cather similarly reviewed her life and confirmed her choice of future work; she returned from her trip to Walnut Canyon and the cliff dwellers' ruins even more determined to be a writer of fiction.

Before reaching Arizona, Cather spent the early summer months in Red Cloud. She watched the wheat harvest, a view that renewed her memories of farms and prairie. She had an idea for a story she called "The White Mulberry Tree," about Frank Sha-

bata, a Bohemian farmer, who kills his wife and her lover as they lie under a mulberry tree. Combined with an earlier manuscript she called "Alexandra," it was to be the core of *O Pioneers!* She thought she was on to something good, for she felt a "sense of excitement," she told an interviewer for the *Philadelphia Record* in 1913. The two parts put together, she told her friend Elizabeth Sergeant, were like a "sudden inner explosion and enlightenment." Feeling it, she knew that the form was right, that she had hit upon "the inevitable shape that is not plotted but designed itself." When the book was finished she sent it to Ferris Greenslet, who believed this novel would establish her as a writer of the first rank. It appeared in June 1913 and received exceedingly good reviews.

O Pioneers! is a triumph of regional writing given cosmic meaning. Cather must have known that when she wrote to her friend the playwright Zoë Akins: "It was the country that was the hero, or the heroine." It was bigger, greater, than those who peopled and struggled with it. Early in the first section, "The Wild Land," Cather writes: "But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes."

The novel is, properly enough, dedicated to the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett, whose prophecy of knowing the parish Cather was now fulfilling. The epigraph is a 1903 poem of Cather's about the fierce passions of youth and her own feelings for the land. The title of the book is taken from the poem by Walt Whitman: "Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping, / Pioneers! O pioneers!" The story is an extraordinary one, episodic and celebratory of the great virtues of heroic persons — like Alexandra Bergson — who hold the land sacred, giving themselves wholly to its dangers and hardships. It begins in pathos with the Swedish girl Alexandra, whose eyes "were fixed intently on the distance," and her little brother, Emil, whose cat is stranded up a pole in the freezing cold of Hanover (Red Cloud under another name), a town "anchored on a windy Nebraska table-

land." Young Carl Linstrum enters the story when he rescues the cat and takes the children home. During the long, lyrical account, Alexandra becomes a heroic woman. She is charged by her dying father, who has been defeated by "the wild land he had come to tame," to head the family and to save the land for her brothers and her mother. Cather raises Alexandra to epic status. Driving back with Emil from visiting the rich river farms to assess the farming there, she is triumphant: "Her 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." This is the glowing prose of epic. The paragraph ends in lofty aphorism: "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman."

For Alexandra, knowledge of the land is instinctive: "She had not the least spark of cleverness." Her gift is prophetic: "Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring."

The novel moves ahead sixteen years. Father and mother have died, the young Bergsons have prospered, the farm is now distinguished by "order and fine arrangement." Alexandra's beloved Emil has grown up, and Carl and his family have given up the struggle and left the land. Then Carl returns for a visit. The two friends resume their talk in rhapsodic terms. She tells him: "It [the land] had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself." Carl replies that he preferred the way the country was when he was a boy: "There was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years."

Thus, early in her first Nebraska novel, Cather has sounded what are to be major themes in all the immigrant novels: the nobility and beauty of the wild prairie; the brave, enduring foreigners who suffer as they farm it; and the slackness and veniality of the next generation, who inherit the cultivated richness of farms that no longer satisfy them.

Into the pastoral of Alexandra's success enters the tragedy of the love affair of Emil and a neighbor, Marie, and their murder

by her wildly jealous husband, Frank. The brave dream has disintegrated. The idealism and innocence of Alexandra ("her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things") have begun to come apart when Carl visits the Bergson brothers; he understands their unworthiness and tells Alexandra: "It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men."

The novel closes with the heartbroken Alexandra as forgiving savior, selflessly promising to help free Frank, who is in jail. Carl returns to claim her in marriage, but on her terms. They will travel but then will come back to the farm to live. Carl, echoing the first chapter's sentimentality, tells her: "You belong to the land. . . . Now more than ever." Alexandra, in her prophetic manner, responds: "The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me." Their union is not to be romantic or passionate, we know. Alexandra assures him: "When friends marry, they are safe." Cather's summary elegy is contained in the last lines of the novel: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!"

The power of *O Pioneers!* lies in Cather's resolve to raise what Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* calls her "empress of the prairie" to the heights of epic proportions. To a cast of characters who are Swedish, "heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards, set in Nebraska of all places!" (Cather's description), she gives nobility and eddic enchantment. Alexandra is as creative with the land as are the artists in Cather's earlier stories. She becomes part of a historic dream, conqueror of the forces of nature. The personified land and Alexandra, one with the land, are the stuff of American epic. Nebraska, Cather saw, was not simply territory or one homesteaded place on the American continent, but a universal symbol of suffering and hardship overcome by the indomitable immigrant spirit.

Cather got to know the great Metropolitan soprano Olive Fremstad while writing an article, free-lance, for *McClure's*. Fremstad was Swedish, came from Minnesota, and interested Cather because she had made her way from a lowly start to the top by hard study and unusual creative energy. Cather went to interview her in her New York apartment. She saw her transformed, when the opera house needed her to fill in at the last moment, from a weary, wan woman to a glittering, radiant star. This impressed Cather. She used what she had seen in *The Song of the Lark*, her next novel. From Olive Fremstad's career, Cather created Thea Kronborg. To this career she added many details of her own life as a girl in Nebraska.

The Song of the Lark appeared in 1915 under the aegis of Houghton Mifflin. It is part fairy tale and part Arthurian romance. Its heroine is a glamorous princess whose career is furthered by Dr. Howard Archie, Professor Fritz Wunsch, roughneck railroad brakeman Ray Kennedy, and Andor Harsanyi, her Chicago music teacher — four fairy princes or, perhaps better, four chivalric knights who serve the enchanted lady.

Cather's lifelong love of music and the stage centered around the diva, or the woman stage performer. She envisioned her as larger than life, a great voice embodied in a Wagnerian body enacting great roles: a heroic figure. In 1895, having seen Helena Modjeska on stage in two Shakespearean plays, Cather wrote that the actress projected "those lofty heroic impulses which belonged to the days when women were saints and queens." In *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), she described Modjeska's hands as "worldly, indeed, but fashioned for a nobler worldliness than ours; hands to hold a sceptre, or a chalice — or, by courtesy, a sword." Thea is such an exalted heroine. She begins her artistic life in Moonstone, Colorado, where she studies piano with the tragically isolated, drunken Professor Wunsch. Slowly she separates herself from her undistinguished family. Like Cather in her Red Cloud home, Thea is given a tiny attic room where she reads and relishes the privacy and quiet: "The acquisition of this room was the

beginning of a new era in Thea's life. It was one of the most important things that ever happened to her." She tells her friend Ray Kennedy: "Somehow I can think better in the little room."

From the men who support her, Thea acquires a vision of her destiny. Dr. Archie tells her not to marry and settle down in Moonstone, and Professor Wunsch urges ambition upon her: "There is only one big thing — desire." To himself he wonders: "What was it about the child that one believed in? Was it her dogged industry, so unusual in this free and easy country? . . . She had the power to make a great effort, to lift a weight heavier than herself." Thea's father knows that his daughter is not the marrying kind. In this observation lies Cather's deep-seated conviction that women who are artists destroy themselves if they marry. There is in Thea a virtuous purity, an innocence, a dedication to the life of the artist, the only life that makes her happy. Cather writes in the preface to the 1932 edition of *The Song of the Lark* that "personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer."

Thea escapes a humdrum existence in Moonstone just as Cather shed Red Cloud. Her escape is the heart of the novel, "the way in which commonplace occurrences fell together to liberate her from commonness." Cather felt the book failed because success is less interesting than struggle. Often in her life she remarked that the end is nothing, the road is all. The epigraph to the novel, "It was a wond'rous lovely storm that drove me!" suggests the great pleasure of the effort, the struggle, and, by inference, the disappointment, often, of success once it is achieved.

Ellen Moers has suggested that Cather chose opera as the arena in which her heroine's talent and energy operate and lift her to acclaim as a stand-in for literature, the singer for the successful woman Cather was. In the details of her childhood in the Midwest Thea is much like Cather: her hard work to achieve technique in her art, her willingness to submit to rigorous training. Both are educated but without initial refinement ("I come of rough people," Thea tells Harsanyi), neither is a traditional beauty, both are fired by intense ambition and are scornful of failure. Thea believes Dr.