

# O PIONEERS!



*Willa Cather*

*With an Introduction and Notes by  
Chris Kraus*

George Stade  
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS  
NEW YORK

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# Table of Contents

[FROM THE PAGES OF O PIONEERS!](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[WILLA CATHER](#)

[THE WORLD OF WILLA CATHER AND O PIONEERS!](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PRAIRIE SPRING](#)

[Praise](#)

## [PART I - The Wild Land](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

## [PART II - Neighboring Fields](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[x](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

## [PART III - Winter Memories](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

---

## PART IV - The White Mulberry Tree

I  
II  
III  
IV  
V  
VI  
VII  
VIII

## PART V - Alexandra

I  
II  
III

ENDNOTES

AN INSPIRATION FOR O PIONEERS!

COMMENTS & QUESTIONS

FOR FURTHER READING

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## FROM THE PAGES OF *O PIONEERS!*



Alexandra often said that if her mother were cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden, and find something to preserve.

(page 18)

The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.

(page 35)

“There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before ; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.”

(page 63)

“I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.”

(page 78)

From two ears that had grown side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why.

(page 83)

When she went out into the dark kitchen to fix her plants for the night, she used to stand by the window and look out at the white fields, or watch the currents of snow whirling over the orchard. She seemed to feel the weight of all the snow that lay down there. The branches had become so hard that they wounded your hand if you but tried to break a twig. And yet, down under the frozen crusts, at the roots of the trees, the secret of life was still safe, warm as the blood in one's heart; and the spring would come again! Oh, it would come again!

(page 104)

There was about Alexandra something of the impervious calm of the fatalist, always disconcerting very young people, who cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storm

unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain.

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(page 118)

She did not want to die. She wanted to live and dream—a hundred years, forever! As long as the sweetness welled up in her heart, as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain! She felt as the pond must feel when it held the moon like that; when it encircled and swelled with that image of gold

(page 131)

“Maybe it’s like that with the dead. If they feel anything at all, it’s the old things, before they were born, that comfort people like the feeling of their own bed does when they are little.” (page 148)

There are always dreamers on the frontier.

(page 157)

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# WILLA CATHER



Willella Sibert Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in the small Virginia farming community of Winchester. When she was ten years old, her parents moved the family to the prairies of Nebraska where her father opened a farm mortgage and insurance business. Home-schooled before enrolling at the local high school, Cather had a mind of her own, changing her given name to Willa and adopting a variation of her grandmother's maiden name, Seibert, as her middle name. As a young woman she met Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a schoolmate who would later become the main character in her acclaimed novel *My Ántonia* (1918).

During Cather's studies at the University of Nebraska, she worked as a drama critic to support herself and published her first piece of short fiction, "Peter," in a Boston magazine. After graduation, her love of music and intellectual pursuits inspired her to move to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she edited the family magazine *Home Monthly*, wrote theater criticism for the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*, and taught English and Latin in local high schools. Cather's big break came with the publication of her first short story collection, *The Troll Garden* (1905). The following year she moved to New York City to work for *McClure's Magazine* as a writer and eventually the magazine's managing editor.

Considered one of the great figures of early-twentieth-century American literature, Willa Cather derived her inspiration from the American Midwest, which she considered her home. Never married, she cherished her many friendships, some of which she had maintained since childhood. Her intimate coterie of women writers and artists motivated Cather to produce some of her best work. Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful author from Maine whom Cather had met during her *McClure's* years, inspired her to devote herself full-time to creating literature and to write about her childhood, which she did in several novels of the prairies; one of the best known is *O Pioneers!* (1913), whose title comes from a poem by Walt Whitman. A critic of the rise of materialism, Cather addressed the social impact of the developing industrial age in *A Lost Lady* (1923), which was made into a film starring Barbara Stanwyck. For *One of Ours* (1922), a novel about World War I, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

In her later years Cather produced some of her most recognized work. For *Death Comes for Archbishop* (1927) she won a gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1931 she received the Prix Femina Americaine for *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), a collection of short stories. Two years after publishing her last novel, *The Best Years* (1945), Willa Cather died of cerebral hemorrhage, on April 24, 1947, in New York City. A collection of short fiction, *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), and a literary treatise, *On Writing* (1949), were published after her death. Among Cather's other accomplishments were honorary doctorate degrees from Columbia, Princeton, and Yale Universities.

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# THE WORLD OF WILLA CATHER AND O PIONEERS!



- 1638 Dutch explorer Peter Minuit leads Swedish immigrants to establish the first Swedish colony in Delaware Bay.
- 1848 The California Gold Rush stimulates emigration from Scandinavia to the U.S. Midwest.
- 1855 Walt Whitman publishes the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems he will expand in several editions before his death in 1892; his poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” which will have an impact on Willa Cather, will be published in his collection *Drum Taps* in 1865 and incorporated into the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1862 The passage of the Homestead Act encourages immigrants to cultivate the U.S. prairies; immigrant settlement in the Midwest increases significantly.
- 1873 On December 7 Willa Cather is born, the eldest of her parents’ seven children, in Winchester, Virginia, a farming village near the Blue Ridge Mountains.
- 1877 Sarah Orne Jewett, who will become one of Cather’s mentors, publishes *Deephaven*, her first collection of stories and sketches, about small-town life in New England.
- 1883 The Cathers join Willa’s grandparents and her uncle George in Webster County, Nebraska.
- 1884 The Cathers settle in Red Cloud, Nebraska, a railroad town on the prairie, where Cather’s father opens a farm mortgage and insurance business. Most of their neighbors are European immigrants. Cather enrolls in Red Cloud High School and meets Annie Sadilek Pavelka, on whom she will base the title character in her novel *My Ántonia*.
- 1890 Cather graduates from high school and moves to Lincoln to study for the entrance exam for the University of Nebraska. To finance her education, she works as a drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*.
- 1892 New York City becomes an immigration mecca as Ellis Island opens on February 14. Cather’s short story “Peter,” which will later be incorporated into *My Ántonia*, is published in a Boston magazine.
- 1895 Cather graduates from the University of Nebraska and returns to her family in Red Cloud.
- 1896 She moves to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she begins work as an editor at the *Home Monthly*, a family magazine, and as an editor and drama critic for the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*, a newspaper.

- 1901 Cather teaches English and Latin at Central High School in Pittsburgh, then transfers to Allegheny High School, where she becomes head of the English Department.
- 1902 She visits Europe.
- 1903 Upon her return from Europe, Cather publishes a collection of verse, *April Twilights*.
- 1905 She publishes *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of short stories; it includes “Paul’s Case,” a story, set in Pittsburgh, of a young man with tragically frustrated aspirations.
- 1906 Cather moves to New York City to write for *McClure’s Magazine*, where she eventually will become the managing editor. She moves in with Edith Lewis, a colleague at *McClure’s*.
- 1908 Cather meets Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful writer from Maine, who encourages her to pursue writing full-time and inspires her to write about her experiences in Nebraska.
- 1911 She begins to write “Alexandra,” which will become part of *O Pioneers!*, a semi-autobiographical novel about the early Scandinavian and Bohemian settlers of Nebraska.
- 1912 Cather’s first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, is published, and she works on “The White Mulberry Tree,” which will become another part of *O Pioneers!* She visits the Southwest for the first time.
- 1913 *O Pioneers!* is published, dedicated to Sarah Orne Jewett.
- 1915 Cather visits Mesa Verde in Colorado. *The Song of the Lark*, a psychological novel that explores the meaning of aesthetics and music, is published. Cather returns to the Southwest and visits Wyoming and Nebraska; she meets her childhood friend Annie Pavelka again.
- 1917 While living in New Hampshire, Cather writes *My Ántonia*, based on Pavelka.
- 1918 *My Ántonia* is published to critical acclaim; H. L. Mencken calls it the greatest piece of fiction written by a woman in America.
- 1920 American women win the right to vote with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Cather publishes *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, a collection of eight short stories; *The Nation* hails it as a representation of “the triumph of mind over Nebraska.”
- 1922 Cather publishes *One of Ours*, a novel about World War I.
- 1923 Cather wins the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. She criticizes the developing industrial age in the novel *A Lost Lady*.
- 1925 Cather publishes *The Professor’s House*, a novel that juxtapose a teacher’s middle-aged disillusionment and his memories of the work of a brilliant student.
- She publishes another novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, in which the heroine regrets the choices she

1926 has made.

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1927 Cather publishes the historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in the American Southwest. The Hollywood film version of *A Lost Lady*, starring actress Irene Rich, premieres in Red Cloud; a second version, starring Barbara Stanwyck, will be released in 1934.

1930 Cather receives the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

1931 She publishes *Shadows on the Rock*, a collection of three short stories for which she is awarded the Prix Femina Americaine in 1933.

1932 She publishes more short stories in *Obscure Destinies*.

1935 She publishes *Lucy Gayheart*, a novel that turns on the tension between artistic values and those of hometown life.

1936 Cather publishes *Not Under Forty*, a collection of literary critiques.

1940 She publishes *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

1945 *The Best Years*, Cather's last novel, is published.

1947 On April 24 Willa Cather dies of a cerebral hemorrhage in

her Madison Avenue apartment in New York City. She is buried in New Hampshire.

1948 *The Old Beauty and Others*, a collection of Cather's shorter fiction, is published.

1949 Her literary treatise *On Writing* is published.

1974 Cather is inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners in Oklahoma City. The Nature Conservancy buys a 210-acre plot of grassland south of Red Cloud and dedicates it as the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie.

1988 Cather is inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca, New York.

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# INTRODUCTION



A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves.

—Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

## Movie

Movies had scarcely been invented in 1913, when Willa Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* Certainly on the Divide of the Nebraska wild lands, movies existed only in their most embryonic form: pictures painted on thin sheets of glass and projected by a “magic lantern” on the wall. And yet the opening scene of *O Pioneers!*, by far the novel’s strongest chapter, is completely cinematic in its execution and intent, exemplary of the novel’s gorgeous kind of slowed-down realism. The movie opens with a long tracking shot of the windswept town of Hanover, Nebraska. The camera holds on this “cluster of low draft buildings.” Snow flies against the grayness of the sky and prairie, as this tiny town “anchored on the windy Nebraska tableland” holds itself against the elements, “trying not to be blown away.” And then the camera moves—as slowly and deliberately as the book’s protagonist, Alexandra Bergson—in a tracking shot across the town. We see the frozen, rutted road that is the town’s main street; the “square red railway station,” the town’s few businesses, which cater mostly to the outlying farms: a drugstore, a feed store, two general stores, a bar, and a post office. It’s 2 p.m., and all the storekeepers are back from lunch, but except for a few farmers and their wives and horses, shivering under blankets, hardly anyone is around.

In film it’s called the “money shot,” the tracking shot at the beginning of the film that shows us everything in one exquisitely choreographed camera move: where the film takes place, the nature of the drama, the types of people in it. In this first paragraph, Cather tells, cinematically, everything she knows about the primitive state of the Nebraska landscape where her family arrived from Virginia in 1883, when she was nine years old. Incidents from life (the “plot”) will eventually fill in the details, but this compressed, poetic evocation of the landscape has already told us everything we need to know about the story. It’s an aesthetic practice Cather passionately believed in. In her famous essay “The Novel D meubl ” (from *Not Under Forty*; see “For Further Reading”), she complains that the novel has, for too long, been “over-furnished.” She wants to throw the furniture out the window. If a writer’s job consists of observation, the job of the true artist is to choose the details that should be put in the picture, the scenes that make the final cut.

Movies are made of character and situation. Aspiring Hollywood screenwriters learn to write the scripts according to a “five-act story structure” devised by script-gurus like Robert McKee, and *O Pioneers!* is written in five parts, or acts. In fact, many of the premises on which the five-act story structure formula is based have not been articulated recently; they come from ancient Greek ideas about tragedy and drama, and are largely drawn from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Both Aristotle and McKee tell us that the essence of drama is conflict, that its materials are time and space, and that through the drama a single protagonist is transformed by his or her movement through the plot, which mu



always be a series of colliding situations.

Next in *O Pioneers!* the tracking shot moves in for a closeup. And Cather gives us here a human interest scene, the novel's first, featuring a little Swedish country boy sobbing on the sidewalk. Why did he insist on bringing his new kitten into town with him? When he put it down, a big dog chased it up a telegraph pole. And now he's scared, the wind is cold and howling, and the town is filled with strangers who don't care about his kitten. He'll never get her back! It is through this single incident that Cather introduces the novel's four main characters.

The heartbroken little boy, Emil, is Alexandra Bergson's youngest brother. Emil is the only one of Alexandra's three brothers who possesses sympathy, passion, and imagination, qualities that will eventually become the grown-up Emil's tragic flaws, through a story that unwinds with the inevitability of Greek tragedy or allegory. But for now Alexandra, leaving the town doctor's office, strides out onto the windy boardwalk street and bends down to help her brother. She is a "tall strong girl," wrapped in a large man's coat, who "walks rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next." Her "clear deep blue eyes" are "fixed intently on the distance." Alexandra, with her large-boned body, creamy Swedish skin, and two red braids, will become the person who will tame this savage country: the character whose destiny will serve to prove Cather's axiom, which appears on page 35, that "the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman."

But now she's twenty years old and has just been talking with the doctor, who tells her that her ailing father will soon die. When a traveling salesman dares to flirt with Alexandra, by admiring her hair, he immediately regrets it.

Carl Linstrum now strolls in from off-camera. He is Alexandra's closest neighbor and best (and only) friend, and he's in town at the same time. He is "a thin frail boy with brooding dark eyes" with a delicately pale face and a mouth "too sensitive for a boy's." Four years Alexandra's junior, Carl will eventually become her husband, although their marriage—which is arrived at through a process of maturity and resignation—must be one of the most spectacularly unromantic love stories ever told.

After running off to the railway depot to grab some spikes, Carl climbs up the pole and, with some difficulty, rescues Emil's freezing kitten. Protectively, Carl and Alexandra send the child and the kitten to warm up in a dry goods store, and here Emil encounters Marie Tovesky, a little Bohemian girl who as an adult will prove to be his downfall. Marie is visiting from the big city of Omaha with her mother. Even at age five, she's irresistibly coquettish, dressed up in her red cashmere Karen Greenaway dress and white fur scarf. The rough men sitting around the store tease her into choosing one of them as a sweetheart—a prefiguring of a choice she will make disastrously in real life thirteen years later, when she will elope from convent school with good-looking Frank Shabata. But the five-year-old Marie chooses her uncle, and all the men find this adorable. They shower her with bags of candy, which she promptly shares with Emil. Finally Carl, having fed and watered Alexandra's horse, comes into the dry goods store and finds the two children on the floor. He picks up Emil and takes him to the carriage.

The camera pulls back to a wide shot. "Although it was only four o'clock, the winter day was fading," and the town gradually vanishes behind Alexandra, Carl, and the sleeping Emil as they ride back home. "The great fact," Cather tells us, "was the land itself." This immense and overwhelming land will soon defeat Carl and his family when, during a three-year period of drought and famine, the land will threaten to reclaim itself. But for now, it is simply ominous.

Carl gets out near the pathway to his home and settles Alexandra in for the remainder of the ride with amazing gentleness, lighting a lantern, covering it with a blanket “so that the light would not shine in her eyes.” This lantern, held between her feet, makes a moving point of light, going deep into the darkness, like the protagonist herself.

It is pure myth. Everything that happens in the book has, in a sense, already happened in the first nine pages. In the years following World War I, the imagination of a later generation would be captured by the fragmenting of reality through cinematic editing and montage. The rupture of the war years and the attendant industrialization of the 1920s would lead writers and their readers to doubt that there could ever, once again, be such a thing as unity of time. In Germany, Alfred Döblin would conceive his epic novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, as a cinematic experiment of flashbacks, jump-cuts, and montage. In USA and other novels, the American writer John Dos Passos would cannibalize the format of the “news-reel” and the “Camera Eye” to give a panoramic impression of America as he saw it, “the speech of a people,” an agglomeration of office girls and laborers, union bosses, corporation society men and women, the vibrant raucous babble of a thousand warring tribes. Half a century later film directors like Jane Campion in *The Piano* and Lars von Trier in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* would reengage with cinema’s ability to function as pure myth: the inevitable unfolding of a story, predetermined by character and situation, against time. Von Trier, a Dane, readily admits that his movies contain elements of great Scandinavian epics— maybe even the same stories Cather heard throughout her childhood, among the Swedish immigrants living on the Divide.

But Cather was the first writer of the cinematic age to embrace the mythic sweep of cinema, its enormous artificial unity and continuity. How did she do it? By writing from the movies in her mind.

## Life

If the opening of *O Pioneers!* unfolds with amazing cinematic ease, it is because Cather is writing almost literally from memory. When one is in a heightened state of recollection, which can feel like sitting in a darkened room, the movies of one’s life unwind, and composition becomes a matter of transcription, not invention: The job is simply to write them down. Cather theorized this process in her preface to a 1925 edition of *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*: “The shapes and scenes that have ‘teased’ the mind for years, when they do themselves get put down, make a very much higher order of writing, and a much more costly, than the most vivid and vigorous transfer of immediate impressions.” (*Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*).

When she was nine, Willa Cather’s family left the comfortably cultivated farmlands of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia to try their luck out West with relatives, who’d already settled in the south-central region of Nebraska known as the Divide. On the day of their departure, Vic, the family dog who’d been given to a neighbor, ran across the fields in an attempt to follow the departing family. It nearly broke young Willa’s heart. Years later, she recalled arriving at their destination:

We drove out to Red Cloud to my grandfather’s homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding onto the side of the wagon to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint rails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out in the country I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything.... It was kind of an erasure of personality.... I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on pretty well during that ride if it had not

been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something—I don't know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I would go under (James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, p. 36).

Perhaps nothing is more mythic than the sense of possibility and loss experienced by a child who leaves one place, permanently, for another. The loss of home, the sense of exile is devastating, opening up the possibility of the “erasure of personality” that Cather speaks of—the possibility that identity might be conditional on place. Who you thought you were may not be the same as who you will always be. And yet the intense longing of the exiled state is so emotionally powerful that it is best evoked by conjuring “the things left out,” as Cather describes narrative’s poetic subtext in “A Novella Demeublé” (collected in *Not Under Forty*). To suggest something deeply upsetting has a greater effect than actually coming out and saying it, because then the reader isn’t just a passive listener anymore. He sees things through the author’s eyes. Katherine Mansfield, one of the few female writers Cather publicly admired for her “singular beauty ... powerful slightness ... and even deeper tenderness” (“Katherine Mansfield,” in *Not Under Forty*), wrote from a similar place of exile, trying continually in her stories to recapture her New Zealand childhood from the chilly distance of her London rooms.

It is interesting to observe the things Cather leaves out of the narrative in *O Pioneers!* In chapter II of the section *The Wild Land*, Alexandra’s father is on his deathbed; at the opening of chapter III, he has been dead for six months. By withholding any kind of death scene, Cather makes us experience Alexandra’s loss more forcefully. We are left with continuity, not closure. As a friend remarked after reading the novel for the first time, “It’s interesting how the choice of words can impart so much about internal feeling. She takes things a step away from the direct. Reading her, I almost feel like crying. And yet there’s nothing there, specifically, when you look back on it that makes you feel like crying. It is just the overwhelming sense of things.”

Cather took a strong interest in the work of Henri Bergson, whose writings on memory have become a key reference for theories about cinematic time and movement. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes about the fluidity and duration of recollection: that remembered time is not just the recording of a succession of events; it has a different speed and rhythm. From Bergson, Cather recognized “the wisdom of intuition as opposed to intellect.” Though she had been a professional writer for more than twenty years, in *O Pioneers!* Cather was writing for the first time with this exiled sense of possibility and loss.

“I wanted to let the country be the hero,” Cather explained to her friend, the journalist Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, in a letter written apprehensively several months before *O Pioneers!* was published (Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir*). Cather, then age forty, had recently taken the big plunge of quitting her job as managing editor of *McClure’s*, a magazine, based in New York, which had a large circulation. She had decided, after a lifetime of journalism that began when she was eighteen and studying at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, to become a full-time fiction writer. Like her protagonist Alexandra Bergson, who, her brother Lou derisively points out, “... ain’t much like other women-folks,” Cather must have realized at this moment in her life that she’d “as soon be forty as not!” (p. 88). The same year she and her companion Edith Lewis gave up the cramped rooms they had been occupying on Washington Square since Cather joined *McClure’s* and rented a spacious Barrow Street apartment.

Fearing, as she once confessed to Sergeant, that she might die in a cornfield, Cather’s life until the

point had been marked by the extraordinary effort and ambition that it took for a mortgage-broker's daughter, one of seven children, to move out into the world from the little town of Red Cloud (population 1,200 (the outpost on which she based Hanover)). She might also have added to her fear of dying in a cornfield her great fear that she would die as a girl.

In her extraordinary book *Willa Cather: The Politics of Criticism*, Joan Acocella describes young Cather's childhood: "No money, no privacy, no great things around her, but just a dusty prairie town with a mother usually sick or pregnant, and a pack of noisy little brothers and sisters" (p. 8). By all reports in Red Cloud she was an outrageous genius—in Acocella's words, "a show-off, an explosion, a pest" (Acocella, p. 8), selecting from among the town's adults those who would be most interesting and helpful.

As scholarly research into Cather's life and work has shown, she made up very little. Descendants of the "originals" on whom many Cather characters are based speak regularly to researchers and fans of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. (No one, yet, has been identified as Alexandra's model, though it might be fair to assume that parts of Alexandra's character—her industriousness, her sense of purpose—were based on Cather's own.) Likewise, Cather's Red Cloud reputation is remembered, via stories told by grandparents, by many people in the town. Her close childhood friends were Dr. Dammeral, the town's physician (on whom Cather based Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*), who once let the twelve-year-old Willa assist him with an amputation; He Scheindelmeister (the model for Professor Wunsch in *Lark*), the town drunk and sometime piano teacher, who told her stories about classical music and the lives of the great musicians in Europe; and William Ducker, a clerk in a dry goods store who taught her Greek and Latin (he appears in *Lark* as Johnny Tellamantez). Sometimes Ducker would invite young Willa to help him perform a vivisection in his homemade lab.

When she was thirteen, Willa was given her own tiny, freezing attic room, a privilege she abused by endless reading. And then she just exploded. At fourteen, she went to the town barber, got a crew cut, and started dressing like a man. She liked to call herself "William Cather" and sometimes even "William Cather, M.D." Acocella recalls a "friendship album" kept by one of Cather's schoolmates in which "William" lists "flirting" as the trait that she admires most in women. In men, of course, it was "an original mind." Perfect misery, she wrote, was doing needlework. And perfect happiness was amputating limbs (Acocella, p. 9).

She escaped from Red Cloud thinking she'd learn exactly how to do this. Using money that her father borrowed from a friend, she took a year of prep school in Lincoln, and then signed up for the pre-med course at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. But when an English teacher got her essay on Thomas Carlyle into print with the *Nebraska State Journal*, she quickly changed her mind and decided to become a writer. She became coeditor of the school's literary magazine, *The Hesperian*, and wrote freelance articles for Lincoln newspapers. While she was still a college sophomore at age nineteen, she was invited to become a regular columnist for the *State Journal*.

As James Woodress notes in his biography of Cather, her output during these years was astonishing. She wrote music reviews, theater reviews, feature articles, reports on the populist agrarian Chautauque movement, and, in an article in *The Nebraska Editor*, was noted as "a young woman with a genius for literary expression." Short stories she worked on in her "spare" time were published in prestigious journals in New York and Boston. She fell in love with many of the actresses she wrote about, and lavished them with champagne and clothes and jewels. For Cather as for Balzac, a writer she despised

debt was a fantastic motivator: She had to keep writing in order to pay the debts she ran up hanging out all night with glamorous people, whose luminescent presences in turn excited her and inspired her to keep on writing.

By her second year in Lincoln, friends managed to persuade Cather to stop dressing like a man. Nevertheless, she found it necessary to create some distance between herself and the crippling fact of being female in the nineteenth century. Though she declared with some bravado, “The fact that I was a girl never damaged my ambitions to be a pope or emperor,” she went out of her way to dismiss the work of other female writers. Acocella provides a roundup of Cather’s early anti-feminist criticisms: “Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts (literary) talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it,” she wrote in 1895. “I think He must do it as a sort of ghastly joke.” Female poets were so gushy—“emotional in the extreme, self-centered, self-absorbed.” As for female novelists, all they could write about was love: “They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable.” The necessity for powerful, distinguished women to separate themselves from the perceived triviality of femaleness and the politics of feminism is a tendency that has persisted until the present. The critic Laurie Stone has written incisively on the anti-feminist positions held by Margaret McCarthy and Elizabeth Hardwick, and it is fascinating to consider, as Stone does, how these stances have been picked up and deployed by those wanting to keep women in their place within the culture. But as Joan Acocella points out, one of Cather’s greatest achievements was to write fiction in which love and marriage comprise only partial aspects of her female protagonists’ destinies. Alexandra does marry Carl, but this isn’t the point of the story. By the time they marry, Alexandra’s character has already been formed—by her relationship to the land, and to others; she is not defined by her marriage. Surely despite her courage and enormous literary achievement, Cather deserves the right to be as complex and as contradictory as any person. Cather’s sexual orientation remains ambiguous: nothing, she had obviously decided, to be left out of any discussion of her life and her work. Although all of Cather’s intimate relationships were with women and she maintained raging crushes on girls, none of the women in her life ever spoke of their relationships with her in sexual terms. To seal the decision of silence, letters were constantly burned: by Cather herself and by recipients, at her request.

The Agricultural Depression of 1893-1896 (described at the end of “The Wild Land” section of *Pioneers!*) drove Cather home to Red Cloud in 1895 when she graduated. Her father’s farm mortgage and insurance business was foundering, and she agreed to mind the office while he pursued other business prospects in Lincoln. Back in Red Cloud, she dreamed mostly about traveling, so when an opportunity arose the following year to join the staff of the Pittsburgh *Home Monthly*, she took it.

From the *Home Monthly*, she moved to the more prestigious Pittsburgh *Daily Leader*, rewriting war stories and continuing to publish various freelance reviews. By the time she was twenty-eight years old, she’d published nearly half a million words of journalism. Exhausted and despairing that she would never have the time to write the fiction she was meant to, she left journalism to teach high school for four years in Pittsburgh.

During this period she wrote “Paul’s Case,” the short story that was to be most prescient of her later writing, and the one of which she was proudest. “Paul’s Case” is an exquisitely objective psychological portrait of a young man whose amorality dazzles and bewilders everyone he crosses. (The unrepentantly amoral Paul in many ways became a model for Tom Ripley, the hero of Patricia Highsmith’s Ripley novels.) The last line of the story is shocking in its radical acceptance of Paul’s fate: When Paul throws himself under a train, he drops “back into the immense design of things.” The conclusion echoes Cather’s childhood epiphany of the “erasure of personality” effected by the star-

Nebraska landscape. It's the first suggestion of the irrevocable sense of fate that will inform *Pioneers!* and Cather's later writing.

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While in Pittsburgh, she published her first two books of creative writing: a book of poems called *April Twilights* (1903) and a collection of seven short stories, including "Paul's Case," entitled *The Troll Garden* (1905). In Pittsburgh she became the friend of many sophisticated, fascinating people: artists, industrialists, and socialites. With her new friend Isabelle McClung, a prominent judge's daughter, she had an opportunity to follow in the path of other cosmopolitan Americans, visiting the most fashionable parts of Europe. This, she thought, must be the stuff of fiction, and this brilliant Red Cloud girl did her best to write stories in the vein of Henry James and Edith Wharton. It was only after finishing *O Pioneers!* that she would realize "life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember." But she would not have the opportunity to pursue this until years later; a visit from the New York publisher of *The Troll Garden*, S. S. McClure, who also owned a magazine named for him, seduced her back to journalism. She left Pittsburgh and went to New York to join the staff of *McClure's Magazine*.

Cather's work for *McClure's*—in her six years there, she became the managing editor of one of the most influential political and literary magazines in America—afforded her many opportunities for travel, the most important of which was the half year she spent in Boston, fact-checking a series of articles on the Christian Scientist Mary Baker Eddy. Because it was there that she met Annie Adams Fields, keeper of Cambridge's most dazzling salon, whose habituées had included every important nineteenth-century writer from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Charles Dickens. Cather would later record her impressions of this house and the still-beautiful eighty-year-old woman in her essay "148 Charles Street" (collected in *Not Under Forty*). And it was Mrs. Fields who introduced to her to the essayist and fiction writer Sarah Orne Jewett. At age sixty, twenty-five years Cather's senior, Jewett took the younger writer absolutely seriously.

In December 1908 Jewett wrote Cather an extraordinary letter that would change her life. Responding to "On the Gull's Road," a short story Cather published in *McClure's*, Jewett said she loved the story but found Cather's use of a male narrator false. In another letter, written two weeks later, Jewett advised: "I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, important, responsible work as you ... have now. You must find your own quiet center of life and write from that ... to write and work from this level we must live it."

It was the most commonsense advice—write what you know, and find the time to do it—and Cather took it. The next year she wrote her first Nebraska story, "The Enchanted Bluff." She made notes for "Alexandra," an unpublished story that would form a basis for *O Pioneers!* In 1911 she took a long leave from the magazine to write *Alexander's Bridge*, a society novel set in Boston, but as soon as she finished it she threw herself into writing another Nebraska story, "The Bohemian Girl." Then she traveled to the Southwest for seven weeks and did nothing. The immenseness of the desert settled down on her and made it seem possible to start a new life. She then went to Red Cloud, where she wrote "The White Mulberry Tree," which would become Part IV of *O Pioneers!* She stopped in Pittsburgh before returning to New York, and it was here, when she put the unpublished "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree" side by side, that she realized she'd already written half a novel. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant recalls: "She said she could only describe this coming together of the two elements ... as a sudden inner explosion and enlightenment ... The explosion seemed to bring with it the inevitable shape that is not plotted but designs itself" (Woodress, pp. 231-232).

She'd finally discovered how she wanted to write fiction.

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## Fate

In all the great Greek tragedies, it's as though a clock starts ticking at the beginning of the play and eventually it will explode. The clock becomes a time bomb. No matter what humans do, they can't escape the destinies that have been allotted to them by the gods. Oedipus *will* have sexual relations with his mother and go on to pluck his eyes out; there is no escape. The drama only shows us *how* the destiny is unfolded day by day. Similarly, in *O Pioneers!* there are no surprises. It is inevitable that Emil and Marie's doomed love will end in violent death; that the sweetness of Alexandra's triumph over the barren landscape will be undercut by loss; that Carl Linstrum will eventually return to carry her away. But while the Greeks locate this tragic sense of fate in the inexplicable decisions of the gods, Cather locates it at the heart of human character.

At the opening of the novel, Alexandra's elder brothers Lou and Oscar are simple oafs who "did not mind hard work, but ... hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains" (p. 27). They see no point, as Alexandra does, in "thinking things out." Sixteen years later, neither one has changed. One is thin and shrewd, the other thick and dull. "They have simply, as Alexandra said of them long ago, grown to be more and more like themselves" (p. 57). Eventually these limitations in the characters will make them do the most atrocious and unconscionable things: They become two self-righteous burghers intent on ruining their sister's happiness and dispossessing her of her property.

Likewise, there is something about Marie's vivacity and beauty that must destroy itself and those around her. "There are women," Carl explains to Alexandra in the last scene of the book, "who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. They can't help it" (p. 166).

Marie's husband Frank Shabata is a violent, thwarted man who will be led by circumstance to do real evil. When we first meet him, he is described "muttering to himself." He is sunburned and sports a three-day stubble. Cather barely needs to add that though he's handsome, he "looked a rash and violent man" (p. 78). There can be no doubt about Frank's character when Cather flashes back to Marie's father's first impression of her suitor: "Why don't he go to work like the rest of us did? Haven't I seen his mother out in the morning at five o'clock ... putting liquid manure on the cabbage? Don't I know the look of old Eva Shabata's hands? Like an old horse's hoofs they are—and this fellow wearing gloves and rings!" (p. 81).

There is a deep conservatism at the heart of Willa Cather's sense of human fate and character. Some must succeed, while others fail. Even as a child, the placid, steadfast Alexandra "read the papers and followed the markets, and ... learned by the mistakes of their neighbors" (p. 15). Eventually she profits by them. Alexandra makes her fortune by mortgaging her father's land and using the cash to buy the failing farms of her less fortunate neighbors during the Agricultural Depression of 1893-1896. It is not by farming, but by speculation (motivated, as Cather tells it, by Alexandra's vision of the transcendental goodness of the land) that she becomes a wealthy woman. She has, writes Cather, "the impervious calm of the fatalist" (p. 125). Her mind is calm, "a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things" (p. 112), and it leaves her free to channel all her personality into work and business enterprises. Yet this very absence of personality makes her overlook the growing attraction between Emil and Marie that will have such tragic consequences.

There is no room for politics in this fatal vision. Interestingly, it is the foxy Lou and brutal Frank who embrace the populist movement of their era. Led by William Jennings Bryan, the Populist Movement of late-nineteenth-century America sought redistribution of wealth and monetary reform, but Cather seems to see this movement as a sign of bitterness, a personal grudge against the rich held by petty men who lack the vision to accumulate wealth themselves. Marie finds trees exemplary because “they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do” (p. 85), and it is Marie’s failure to resign herself completely to a life with Frank that will be her downfall. Emil knows his love for her is doomed. He compares his love and his friend Amédée’s careless version of the same emotion to two ears of seed-corn whose grains are planted side by side: “The grains of one shot joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still on the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why” (p. 90).

Struggle is the essence of Greek drama, whose characters rebel against a fate they can’t control. But in Cather’s world, fate has become internal. No longer exercised by gods, it lives within the characters themselves.

After the publication of *O Pioneers!* Cather quickly finished two more novels in her Nebraska trilogy: *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918). The books were well received. As Cather aged, her vision of the world became considerably darker. She went on to write eight more major novels and several books of essays. She is remembered as an elderly woman who shunned all tokens of modernity. She refused to ride in cars, detested Freud, and pitied younger writers who lacked a firmly rooted sense of national identity from which to write.

In her analysis of Cather’s critical reception, Joan Acocella shows how over the years, Cather has been embraced polemically by both left and right, by Christians, feminists, and queer theorists. Her work has a perfect stillness upon which it’s possible to project almost anything. And yet, as Acocella says, it may be possible after all these years to read her work as what it is: just writing.

**Chris Kraus** is the author of *Aliens and Anorexia* (Semiotexte, 2000), *I Love Dick* (Semiotexte, 1997), and the forthcoming novel *Torpor*. She is coeditor of *Hatred of Capitalism: A Reader* (Semiotexte, 2001) and edits *Semiotexte Native Agents*, a series of mostly female underground fiction. She has written for *Artext*, *The Nation*, and *Art in America*, and teaches in the MFA program at San Francisco Art Institute.



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