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Book Review: *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction*

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Loretta Wasserman's *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.

In this new critical volume on the short story collections which Willa Cather herself brought out and arranged during her lifetime (*The Troll Garden*, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, and *Obscure Destinies*), Loretta Wasserman provides her readers, and those of Cather's fiction, with a host of valuable insights and sensitivities. Directed especially to general readers and students, Wasserman's work asserts that while Cather—known best for novels such as *My Antonia* and *Death Comes to the Archbishop*—“has not yet been firmly placed in the front ranks of short story writers of her time,” she indeed “belongs there” (xii).

Wasserman's assessment deserves close attention. It stands among a number of other voices insisting that America's literary landscape, like the vast prairie Cather memorialized in her art, is a dynamic, changing one, with a horizon far broader than it had earlier appeared to have. In contributing to this larger view, Wasserman has become a name recognized in Cather studies. And it is explorers and scholars like Wasserman who have been especially attentive to recovering or rediscovering works of American women and minority writers (such as Harriet Ann Jacobs, Julia Foote, Kate Chopin, Rebecca Harding Davis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Maud Eaton [Sui-Sin Far]) previously neglected, marginalized, or forgotten.

Wasserman's book, however, does more than assert Cather's role as a creator of first-rate short stories. It traces the vagaries of

Cather's critical reputation; clarifies Cather's thematic and stylistic kinships among the early modernists; and offers keen insight into Cather's readings of Henri Bergson and William James, whose theories of memory, the wisdom of intuition, and evolutionary vitalism became formative influences in her literary aesthetic. And although Wasserman's volume bypasses many of the theoretical concerns literary critics are currently addressing (questions such as the relationship between textual voice and authorial consciousness, narrative stance and point of view, social history and what Wayne Booth calls “the ideology of the form,” and distinct issues related to short fiction as a genre), her close readings of Cather's stories clearly reveal the consummate artistry and care with which Cather created and refined her short stories.

While much of Cather's writing, David Stouck has reminded us, is deceptively simple and straightforward, Wasserman demonstrates convincingly (as does Cather's friend Edith Lewis whose essay is included in this volume) that Cather's work, whether long or short, possesses “an evocative quality—a quality of creating much more than her words actually stated, of summoning up images, suggestions, overtones and undertones of feeling that opened long vistas to one's imagination” (Lewis 85). In prose that is consistently jargon-free, Wasserman explores these depths and undertones, illuminating Cather's use of Norse, Indian, and Spanish legend, her fascination with the interconnectedness of transience and transcendence in human life, her rich allusions and complex layers beneath graceful surfaces.

Wasserman's reading, for example, of “The Old Beauty,” one of Cather's often-over-

looked stories, guides deftly through its surface narrative to reveal the “spiritual plot”—a term Cather used (108) to describe an element she considered fundamental to the best works of fiction. Accordingly, we see that “The Old Beauty” is not merely about the death of an aging and forgotten international beauty. With its cultural-historical context, its resonant questions and ambiguities, its meaningful references to other artists and art forms, the work is Cather’s exploration, in surprising depth and breadth for so short a story, of the relationship of beauty to art, of goodness to beauty, of art to life, and of the artist’s sacrifices to serve, as Wasserman puts it, in “a priestly kingdom that demands so much of its votaries” (21).

Whether discussing some of the more familiar stories (“Paul’s Case,” “Neighbor Rosicky,” “Old Mrs. Harris”) or the numerous lesser-known pieces such as “Before Breakfast,” “Enchanted Bluff,” “A Golden Slipper,” and “Uncle Valentine,” Wasserman proves herself a reliable literary host, both considerate of her readers and candid with her subject. Valuing Cather’s love of silences, Wasserman seldom overstates. She alerts us when she is speculating (73). In dealing with weaknesses in Cather, she is frank—as when she discusses “The Marriage of Phaedra,” for example, and sees it as unnecessarily convoluted and ultimately “unsuccessful” (27) or when she comments on “a slackening into self-indulgence” in “The Best Years” in which Cather’s nature descriptions become “calendar scenes” and the landscape “feels dimmed into an idea” (64).

Willa Cather, with an eye acutely aware of shape and form, often supervised the physical design of her books: the paper tint and finish, ink color, margin width, illustration size and placement. Given the obvious aes-

thetic limitations on a critical work which is part of a series (Twayne’s *Studies in Short Fiction*), Wasserman has designed her volume in a triptych arrangement to present Cather and her fiction from a variety of angles: Part 1 investigates the short stories themselves; Part 2 presents Cather directly through the eyes of close friends and interviewers; Part 3 offers a cluster of useful studies by late-twentieth-century critics. Each part has a life of its own, can be read independently with satisfaction, but also effectively reflects and complements the others.

Among the most useful essays reprinted in Part 2 is Cather’s “The Novel Demeuble.” First appearing in *The New Republic* in 1922, it reveals what Cather sees to be the essential differences between fiction as amusement and fiction as art, and writing as journalism (with its “literalness” and “enumeration [110-113]) and writing as “imaginative art” created by selecting “eternal material” from “out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present” and capturing “the overtone divined by the ear, . . . the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed” that results in the highest quality of literature (112). The effect of making this document available in its entirety to students and general readers is to offer ready access to Cather’s “most important statement of her aesthetic beliefs” (82) and thus to an important tool for gauging and understanding Cather’s short stories on her own terms.

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