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Reader Resources

My **Ántonia**

by Willa Cather



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My *Ántonia*

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“An artist should have no moral purpose in mind other than just his art.”

Preface

When Willa Cather's editor first read the manuscript of *My Ántonia*, he experienced "the most thrilling shock of recognition of the real thing" he had ever felt. Few books pack so much vibrantly genuine life into their pages as this classic novel of the American immigrant experience. *My Ántonia* teems with romance, violence, tenderness, cruelty, comedy, and tragedy—all bustling side by side in a narrative at once compassionate and gripping.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

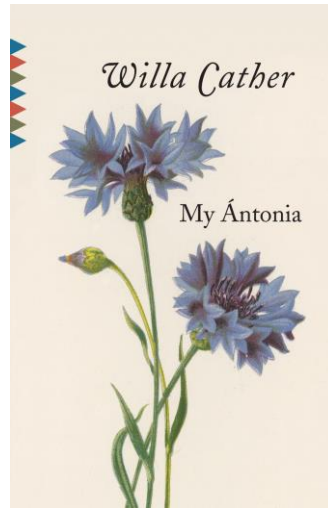
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

A beloved American classic, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) is best summarized by its epigraph: "the best days are the first to flee." In it, the adult narrator, Jim Burden, remembers his childhood through the memory of his friend, Ántonia Shimerda, a Bohemian immigrant. As Cather herself did, ten-year-old Jim has left Virginia for Nebraska by train and is shocked by the barren prairie on his first wagon ride. Unlike Cather, Jim is an orphan joining his paternal grandparents on the Nebraska Divide.



The novel comprises five sections, called "books" by the author, and may appear at first to lack a cohesive structure. As Cather intended, there is no plot in the usual sense of the word. Instead, each book contains thematic contrasts. Book One, for example, begins with an idyllic autumn of exploration for Jim and Ántonia; it ends with a bitter winter and an unforeseen family tragedy that changes Ántonia's life forever.

In Book Two, Jim's family leaves the prairie for the small town of Black Hawk, where many of the young immigrant women help alleviate their families' financial hardships by becoming the town's "hired girls." After Jim leaves Black Hawk to attend the University of Nebraska, he reunites with Norwegian Lena Lingard, who has become a successful dressmaker in Lincoln. He flees to Boston to avoid a lasting romance with her.

Still, Jim cannot escape his love for either Ántonia or the prairie. Similar to Cather, Jim regards the land as "the happiness and curse" of his life. While living in New York, Jim hears rumors of Ántonia's ruin. More than fifteen years pass before he musters up enough courage to find out what really happened to her.

The novel owes its enduring appeal partly to its universal themes of time, death, youth, and friendship. Children grow up and lose their innocence; the virgin land becomes productive but fenced. Cather's friend Edith Lewis once reflected, "The whole book was a sort of love story of the country." The beautiful elegiac tone of *My Ántonia* captures the taming of the American frontier as no other work of fiction ever has. Perhaps most of all, the novel is about

memory, as Jim concludes at the novel's end: "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the previous, the incommunicable past."

The Model for Ántonia Shimerda

Willa Cather once set a jar filled with orange-brown flowers in the middle of an antique table and told a friend, "I want my new heroine to be like this—like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides."

The character of Ántonia Shimerda embodied all Cather's feelings about the early immigrants to the prairie country. Cather told an interviewer in 1921 that one of the people who had interested her most as a child was Anna Sadilek, later Anna Pavelka, the Bohemian "hired girl" who worked for one of her neighbors: "She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains. I did not realize all this as a child, but Annie fascinated me and I always had it in mind to write a story about her." Since the most popular American novels featured upper-class ladies and gentlemen, it was a radical aesthetic move for Cather to feature lower-class, immigrant "hired girls." In fact, the Pavelka family was upset that a novel had been written about them because, according to Anna's granddaughter Antonette Willa Skulpa Turner, the book so clearly described their poverty. In addition, Cather accurately described Anna's disgrace: When she went west to marry a brakeman, he deserted her as an unmarried pregnant woman with no choice but to return to her mother's Nebraskan dugout.

Cather's later story, "Neighbor Rosicky" (from 1931's *Obscure Destinies*), centers on the quiet kindnesses of a Bohemian farmer at the end of his life—a man based upon Anna's husband, with whom she bore twelve children.

About the Author

Willa Cather (1873-1947)

Born on a sheep farm near Winchester, Virginia, in 1873, Willa Cather was named Wilella after her aunt (Willa was her own invention). Cather's grandparents left Virginia for Nebraska in 1877, but the burning of the family's sheep barn gave the final push for her father to uproot his family in 1883. The journey from Virginia's lush mountains to Nebraska's open range shocked the nine-year-old Cather, a transforming experience she later described as "a kind of erasure of personality."



Willa Cather as managing editor of *McClure's*, 1908 (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections)

After eighteen months on her grandparents' farm, the Cather family moved to the prairie town of Red Cloud. The privacy of her attic room afforded Cather countless hours to read adventure books, Russian and British novels, and Shakespeare's plays. When she left Red Cloud at age sixteen to attend the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, she wanted to be a surgeon. But after her freshman English professor secretly published her essay on Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle, she decided to become a writer.

Twenty years passed between the publication of this first essay and her first novel. A year after her college graduation, Cather left Nebraska for Pittsburgh to work as the editor of *Home Monthly*.

In 1899, Cather met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a wealthy and prominent Pittsburgh judge. Cather later declared that all her books were written for McClung, and their intimate friendship would continue until the latter's death in 1938.

While living at the home of the McClungs, Cather taught English and Latin at two Pittsburgh high schools (1901-1905). During this time she wrote the stories and poems that led to her employment as associate editor of *McClure's Magazine* in New York.

Between 1906 and 1912, Cather became the foremost woman in American journalism. After she published a book of poetry, a collection of short stories, and her first novel, the separation between her journalism and her art became more pronounced. At age thirty-eight, she gathered enough strength to take a leave of absence from her prestigious job at *McClure's*, eventually leaving the magazine for good after

a transformative trip to the Southwest. In a remarkable five-year period of productivity, she wrote three American masterpieces: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918).

By the mid-1920s, Cather was one of America's best-loved writers. She won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* in 1923, made the cover of *Time* in 1931, and received the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1944. She died on April 24, 1947, at her home in New York, never finishing a final novel set in medieval Avignon. Despite her acquired affection for the Nebraskan prairie, she chose to be buried on a hillside in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a place she had loved and returned to every year after her first trip there in 1916. Her grave includes a citation from *My Ántonia*: "that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Willa Cather

1870s

- 1873: Willa Cather is born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia on December 7.
- 1877: Cather's paternal grandparents move from Virginia to Nebraska.
- 1873-78: Drought and grasshopper infestations drive many American farmers to despair.

1880s

- 1883: Charles Cather moves his wife and four children, including nine-year-old Willa, from Virginia to Nebraska.
- By the mid-1880s, Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák's international fame is firmly established with works such as his "Slavonic Dances."
- Thousands of Scandinavians and Bohemians immigrate to the United States.

1890s

- 1892: New York's Ellis Island opens as an immigration depot, serving more than 17 million people until its closure in 1954.
- 1896: Cather leaves Nebraska for Pittsburgh.
- 1899: Cather meets Isabelle McClung, who will become "the one person for whom all [her] books are written."

1900s

- 1901: Cather begins five years as a high school teacher.
- 1903: Cather's first book, a collection of poetry, *April Twilights*, is published.
- 1909: The death of American author Sarah Orne Jewett devastates Cather.

1910s

- Cather's novels *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918) are published to critical acclaim.
- World War I begins in 1914. America enters in 1917, joining the Allies-France, Britain, Italy, and Russia. Armistice ending the war signed on November 11, 1918.
- 1916: Isabelle McClung marries Jewish violinist Jan Hambourg.

1920s

- 1923: *One of Ours* (1922) receives the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.
- 1924: Nearly 40% of New York's population is foreign-born. New laws drastically curtail U.S. immigration.
- 1929: Cather elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1929: Stock Market crashes, triggering the Great Depression.

1930s

- Franklin Roosevelt is elected U.S. president in 1932; Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany in 1933.
- 1934: Angered by two films of *A Lost Lady*, Cather takes legal measures to prevent further adaptations of her fiction.
- Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) and *Not Under Forty* (1936) are published.

1940s

- 1941: Japanese forces bomb Pearl Harbor; America enters World War II. The Axis surrenders in 1945.
- 1942: Nobel Prize-winning novelist Sigrid Undset, exiled from Norway to New York, becomes friends with Cather.
- 1947: Cather dies in New York, leaving a will that forbids any reprinting of her letters.

Willa Cather's Nebraska

Willa Cather is celebrated for her portrayal of the American frontier, describing with poignant beauty the brave immigrant pioneers for whom exile and trials led to a better life for many in the next generation.

The 1862 Homestead Act offered free land in the new territories to those who would live on it, and the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad made the dream of fertile, cheap land a possibility for more than a million European immigrants in the 1880s. No one told them about the grasshopper plagues, the severe droughts, or the rising price for the best land. Due to the shortage of timber, many early settlers and immigrants were forced to live in dugouts or sod houses. Although hogs often ate the snakes, women still carried a rattlesnake cane, especially in the hen and milk houses.

The deaths of six family members led the Cathers to leave Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. After their first eighteen months on the Nebraska Divide, they moved to the small, poor town of Red Cloud, where, under different names, she set most of her novels. In 1883, Cather was one of sixteen students in the township's one-room schoolhouse. The daily arrival of eight passenger trains led hundreds of travelers to stop for meals. The still-standing opera house was completed in 1885, and by 1889 Nebraska Governor Silas Garber (the model for *A Lost Lady's* Captain Forrester) had built his grand bank on the main street. The populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan often visited Red Cloud. By the time Cather left for college, the town's population rose from 1,200 to almost 3,000.

Forty-five percent of Nebraska's population comprised immigrants. Within a wagon's drive, Cather could have attended a church service in Swedish, Norwegian, Bohemian, French, German, Danish, or English. She once remembered a day spent in town without hearing a word of English.

Amid this cultural diversity, Cather pursued an unconventional education. A Jewish couple who spoke French and German let her borrow books from their vast European library. Cather befriended two of the town's most intellectual men: Herr Schindelmeisser, the German piano teacher who taught her about music and Europe, and William Ducker, the Englishman who taught her Latin, Greek, and how to perform vivisection. She loved listening to immigrant women's stories, later saying: "I never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her

baking or butter-making.... I always felt ... as if I had actually got inside another person's skin."

This is exactly what her fiction does. Cather's protagonists often feel homesick, restless, displaced, or discontented, and they are almost all exiles. After Cather left Nebraska in 1896, she never lived there permanently again. After the death of her mother in 1931, Cather never returned at all to "that shaggy grass country" that she later said had "been the happiness and curse" of her life.

Willa Cather commissioned Bohemian artist W.T. Benda to create illustrations for the first edition of *My Ántonia*. When her publisher balked at the cost, Cather fought to keep them in, without success. The University of Nebraska scholarly edition has restored the images according to Cather's original intent.

Other Works/Adaptations

Cather and Her Other Works

Willa Cather's most popular novels today feature strong female protagonists who emerge as uncompromising artists. Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and *Ántonia* Shimerda each possess vision and energy, and all three fight to overcome great obstacles.

But when Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* (1913), she never expected anyone to see greatness in a slow-moving novel set in Nebraska that focused on a Swedish immigrant, Alexandra. No American writer before her had tried to write seriously about Swedish settlers, and Cather contradicted the vaudeville stereotypes. Dedicated to Isabelle McClung, *The Song of the Lark* (1915) focuses on Thea Kronberg, an aspiring opera singer who leaves her Colorado home to pursue success in Chicago. *My Ántonia's* (1918) Bohemian heroine prevails despite a tragedy, tames the land, and raises twelve children.

This so-called prairie trilogy was not Cather's most widely read work in her own day. World War I ended as *My Ántonia* was published, and Cather's cousin's death in battle at Cantigny took hold of her imagination. Her Pulitzer-Prize winning war novel *One of Ours* (1922) was based on journals and letters from the front and her travels to French battlefields. Despite the scorn of many critics, including Ernest Hemingway, the public loved it. The \$19,000 in royalties she received from Knopf that year meant she would never have financial trouble again. (Compare this to the \$1,700 she earned in two years for *My Ántonia!*)

When Cather said that "the world broke in two" in 1922, this brokenness did not derive only from the tragedy of the Great War. A melancholy pervades her later work, based partly on several personal sorrows: the marriage of Isabelle McClung, the death of Cather's father, and her own health problems. Another five-year burst of brilliant fiction—according to both critics and the public—resulted in *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). All three remain beloved classics to this day.

While all Cather's fiction evokes the past, her later fiction draws on ever more distant histories. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and "Shadows on a Rock" (1931) are set in the nineteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively, painting the Catholic and French presence in the New World. In her last completed novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Cather finally revisits her native Virginia to reconstruct the most memorable event of her childhood: the return of Nancy Till, the ex-slave whom Cather's grandmother Boak had secretly delivered to underground railroad agents years before. Her final, uncompleted manuscript went even farther

back: to the Middle Ages. Critic Joan Acocella believes these last novels plow the same furrow: the idea that "to desire something is to have as much of it as you will probably ever have. The mind dreams; life mocks the dream. The only real life is in the imagination, in desire and memory." No American novelist described this dream with more lyrical power than Willa Cather.

Works by Willa Cather

- *April Twilights*, 1903 (poetry)
- *The Troll Garden*, 1905 (stories)
- *Alexander's Bridge*, 1912 (novel)
- *Pioneers!*, 1913 (novel)
- *The Song of the Lark*, 1915 (novel)
- *My Ántonia*, 1918 (novel)
- *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, 1920 (stories)
- *One of Ours*, 1922 (novel)
- *A Lost Lady*, 1923 (novel)
- *The Professor's House*, 1925 (novel)
- *My Mortal Enemy*, 1926 (novella)
- *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927 (novel)
- *Shadows on the Rock*, 1931 (novel)
- *Lucy Gayheart*, 1935 (novel)
- *Not Under Forty*, 1936 (essays)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, 1940 (novel)

Discussion Questions

1. Why might Willa Cather begin her novel with an introduction from an unnamed female acquaintance of Jim Burden? What effect does this device have on the reader?
2. Why does Jim title his manuscript "*My Antonia*"? What does he mean when he states, "It's through myself that I knew and felt her"?
3. This book is often seen as a coming-of-age novel. How does *Antonia* challenge Jim's growing masculinity?
4. When does *Antonia*'s father call her "*My Antonia*"? How deeply does his death change her life? Why does it affect Jim so much?
5. Do you feel the stories narrated by others—such as the story of the young bride and the wolves—are essential to the novel? Why or why not?
6. How is the land a character in this novel? Is it the hero?
7. What qualities do *Antonia* and Lena share? How do they differ? Why does Jim pursue a romance with Lena and not *Antonia*?
8. Jim's family is low-church Protestant; the Shimerda family is Roman Catholic. What role does religion play in the novel?
9. Is *Antonia* triumphant at the end? Is Jim?
10. Why do you suppose the image of the plough in the setting sun has become one of Cather's most memorable symbols?
11. Cather once said that "one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen." How is this true for Jim Burden and his view of *Antonia*?
12. The novel's epigraph, "Optima dies ... prima fugit," is cited by Jim later in the novel: "the best days are the first to flee." How is this a fitting summation of the novel's theme?

Additional Resources

Willa Cather's Bookshelf: Literary Influences on *My Ántonia*

Virgil's *Georgics*, 29 BC

Cather knew Greek, Roman, and Germanic-Norse mythology so well that a classical allusion was always on the tip of her pen. *Virgil's Georgics* extols the virtues of farm life and is the source of *My Ántonia's* epigraph.

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678

Cather's grandmother taught Cather to read with this book. Raised a Baptist and confirmed as an adult in the Episcopal Church, Cather's fiction often alludes to the Bible and Bunyan's description of Christian's journey to the Celestial City.

Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, 1844

Cather believed that "romance is the highest form of fiction," and *The Count of Monte Cristo* was a favorite. She praised French romances for their brilliance of action and demonstrations of heroic courage.

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, 1877

Long before she studied it at the university, Cather secretly bought one of her favorite Russian novels at a drugstore in Red Cloud. She once said, "If God is at all a literary God *Anna Karenina* will certainly do more toward saving its author's soul than all the prosy tracts [Tolstoy] has written since."

Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, 1896

Cather praised this novella as one of America's best. In 1908, Jewett gave Cather a much-needed push to quit McClure's to find "time and quiet to perfect [Cather's] work." When Jewett died a year later, Cather said that life was "dark and purposeless" without her. She dedicated *O Pioneers!* to her mentor in 1913.

If you enjoyed *My Ántonia*, you might also enjoy:

- Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 1920
- John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939
- Vilhelm Moberg's *The Emigrants*, 1949
- Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*, 1951

Books about Cather and *My Ántonia*

- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. Introduction by John J. Murphy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
- O'Brien, Sharon. *New Essays on My Ántonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

Websites

- [The Willa Cather Archive](http://cather.unl.edu/)
This website features letters, maps, illustrations, biographical information, multimedia resources and more.
<http://cather.unl.edu/>
- [The Willa Cather Foundation](http://www.willacather.org/)
This website allows a visitor to view a virtual tour of Cather's home, read her work, and experience her life and times.
<http://www.willacather.org/>
- [Nebraska Studies](http://www.nebraskastudies.org/)
This website offers a historical timeline with photos, documents and video of Nebraska.
<http://www.nebraskastudies.org/>

Credits

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