

# On the material of Willa Cather's life and art

Willa: *The Life of Willa Cather*. Phyllis C. Robinson. 280 pages. Doubleday. \$17.95

"If a young woman sits down in a cornfield and howls because she can't hear music, it does not mean she has fallen out with the cornfields. Give her all the music she wants and take her about the world a little and she will come out all right with the corn," advised Willa Cather, and her life was a long, fruitful process of taking her own advice.

When she was 10, the Cathers moved from the green, rolling country of Virginia to the Nebraska prairie: "no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields . . . nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." Phyllis Robinson's biography makes clear that it was also the material out of which novels are made. Cather's childhood experiences in Red Cloud, where she fished and camped with her brothers, made friends with the Bohemian, Scandinavian and Spanish settlers, dissected animals and

went on house calls with the town's two doctors, formed a mother lode from which she mined her best work.

At 15, she was an accomplished eccentric who cropped her hair and dressed as a boy, signed herself "William Cather, M.D.," and listed "vivisection" as her favorite amusement. She entered the University of Nebraska to become a doctor, but when *The Lincoln Journal* published one of her essays, she determined to be a writer. All through her school years, she wrote columns of caustic criticism for the *Journal* on the several hundred touring companies that played Lincoln each year from New York.

She dismissed Mendelssohn's music as "pitifully weak and childish," described Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan" as "driveling," and when Julia Marlowe announced she would play Prince Hal implored, "Is there no kind friend . . . to beseech her not to make of herself one blooming idiot?" She returned to Red Cloud briefly after graduation and signed

her letters, "in Siberia . . . consider me dead." Cather, the quintessential voice of the lonely places, had recurrent nightmares of dying in a cornfield. Instead, she took an editorship in Pittsburgh.

She never lived in the West again, though she visited it frequently. The five great novels of her productive years, "O Pioneers" (1913), "Song of the Lark" (1915), "My Antonia" (1918), "A Lost Lady" (1923) and "Death Comes to the Archbishop" (1927) were written in a succession of rooms and residences in Pittsburgh, New York, Europe and Maine, but her strongest characters were drawn from Red Cloud, and from her own restless spirit straining against the conventional strictures of small town life.

Robinson is at her best when she juxtaposes Cather's travels and the people she knew against passages from her books. Her detailed research makes clear why Cather was often accused of lifting her characters straight from life to the page, and why the victims of that metamorphosis were not al-

ways pleased. John Pavelka, a farmer in Red Cloud, breezily introduced himself as "My Antonia's husband," but other models objected in ways Cather never forgot or forgave. "My art is more important than my friends," she remarked, and meant it.

Robinson deals at length with Cather's feelings for the women in her life, especially Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis. Unfortunately, she writes too often from speculation rather than fact: Cather was so determined to protect her private life from posthumous revelation that she burned all the correspondence she could regain from old friends. She became so reclusive that Robert Frost quipped, "with Carl Sandburg, it's the People, yes. With Willa Cather it's the People, no."

It's a pity Robinson felt she had to clutter an otherwise forthright, well-organized effort with florid conjecture about what "Willa must have" felt. The best guide to Cather's innermost thoughts is her books, which is exactly what she intended.

ROSEMARY KNOWER