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0521527937 - The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather
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The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather

The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather offers thirteen original essays by leading scholars of a major American novelist. Willa Cather's luminous prose is 'easy' to read yet surprisingly difficult to understand. The essays collected here are theoretically informed but accessibly written and cover the full range of Cather's career, including most of her twelve novels and several of her short stories. The essays situate Cather's work in a broad range of critical, cultural, and literary contexts, and the introduction explores current trends in Cather scholarship as well as the author's place in contemporary culture. With a detailed chronology and a guide to further reading, the volume offers students and teachers a fresh and thorough sense of the author of *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

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*In memory of
Susan J. Rosowski
1942–2004*

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JOHN N. SWIFT is professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Occidental College in Los Angeles. A past president of the Willa Cather Foundation, he has written numerous articles on Cather and other modern writers and is co-editor of *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* (2002).

JOSEPH R. URGO is professor and chair of English at The University of Mississippi. He is the author of *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995) and, most recently, *In the Age of Distraction* (2000). He also edited the Broadview Press edition of *My Ántonia* (2003).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Willa was just plain Billy to all of us,” remarked one of Willa Cather’s classmates in the prep program at the University of Nebraska in the early 1890s in commenting on how the mannishly dressed, intelligent, and highly unconventional young woman from Red Cloud was received by her peers. (The comment is reprinted in James Shively’s *Writings from Willa Cather’s Campus Years* [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1950], p. 122.) This book is for all the students, teachers, fans, and admirers of “just plain Billy,” who know well that there is nothing simple about her “plainness” and much to enjoy in the limpid prose of one of the finest stylists the United States has yet produced.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague Robert S. Levine for cajoling me into taking on this project and to Ray Ryan of Cambridge University Press for seeing to it that I got it done. Jennifer Landon was an intrepid research and technology assistant whose work on the chronology saved me from pulling out my hair. Her help was invaluable. My thanks and admiration to the volume’s contributors, who produced excellent work in a timely way and made this a book that will be worth reading for years to come. I note with sorrow that one contributor, Susan J. Rosowski, did not live to see her fine essay on Cather’s comic spirit into print, as she succumbed to cancer while the book was in production. Sue was one of the best friends that Billy and many a Cather scholar ever had. Her years of extraordinary dedication to Cather studies and the community that surrounds it helped to create the varied audiences for this book, and so I am pleased to offer it in her memory.

Finally, Martha Nell Smith is the best friend and more than *this* friend of Billy ever had. I embrace you, darling, as Latour embraced Vaillant, “for the past – for the future.”

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

- 1873**
December 7 Wilella Cather is born in Back Creek Valley, near Winchester, Virginia in the home of her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak. Named after a deceased aunt, she is the eldest child of Charles and Mary Virginia (Jennie) Cather. Nicknamed “Willie” by her family, she will rename herself “Willa.”
Brothers and sisters: Roscoe (b. 1877), Douglass (b. 1880), Jessica (b. 1881), James (b. 1886), Elsie (b. 1890), and John (Jack) (b. 1892).
- 1874**
Fall Willa’s parents move the family to Willow Shade, home of her paternal grandparents, William and Caroline Cather. Willow Shade is located between Back Creek Valley and Winchester.
- 1877** William and Caroline Cather move to Nebraska, joining a son and daughter-in-law who are already farming there.
- 1883**
February Willow Shade sold after the sheep barn burns down.
April Charles and Jennie Cather move the family, including Grandmother Boak, to Catherton Precinct, Webster County, Nebraska.
- Fall* Willa attends the New Virginia country school.
- 1884** Willa’s family moves to Red Cloud, after her father decides to give up farming and open a real-estate and loan office.
- 1886** Cather cuts her hair short, takes to wearing boys’ clothes, and calls herself “William Cather.” She will sustain this public stance of radical gender nonconformity through to 1892.

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER'S LIFE

- 1890**
June Gives the commencement speech, "Superstition vs. Investigation," at her high-school graduation in Red Cloud.
September Enrolls in the Latin School (University Prep) in Lincoln, Nebraska.
- 1891**
March 1 *Nebraska State Journal* publishes Cather's essay on Carlyle, which was submitted by her teacher, Ebenezer Hunt, without her knowledge.
September Enters the University of Nebraska. Begins relationship with Louise Pound, a student three years ahead of her in school who was a brilliant student and an accomplished athlete.
November *Nebraska State Journal* publishes Cather's essay on Hamlet.
- 1892**
May First fiction published. "Peter," a story submitted by Professor Herbert Bates, is published in *The Mahogany Tree*.
June Poem, "Shakespeare: A Freshman Theme," published in the University of Nebraska student newspaper, *The Hesperian*. In a passionate letter to Louise Pound, she declares that it is unfair that "feminine friendship" should be regarded as unnatural.
Fall Becomes the literary editor of *The Hesperian*.
- 1893** Becomes a regular contributor to the *Nebraska State Journal*; reviews plays and writes a Sunday column.
- 1894** Publishes a satirical piece about Pound's brother Roscoe in *The Hesperian*, ruining her relationship with Louise and the entire Pound family.
- 1895**
June Graduates from the University of Nebraska. Works for the Lincoln *Courier*.
- 1896**
June Publishes stories in *Overland Monthly* and *Nebraska Literary Magazine*.
October Moves to Pittsburgh, PA, to edit *Home Monthly*.
 Contributes drama criticism to the *Pittsburgh Leader*.

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

1897	
January–	Contributes column to the <i>Nebraska State Journal</i> . Still
June	edits <i>Home Monthly</i> . Returns to Red Cloud in June.
July	<i>Home Monthly</i> sold.
September	Returns to Pittsburgh with job on the <i>Pittsburgh Leader</i> . Works on the telegraph desk and writes play and book reviews. Sends “Passing Show” column to the <i>Lincoln Courier</i> . Continues to write “Helen Delay” book column for the <i>Home Monthly</i> .
1898	
February	Spends a week in New York, has lunch with Modjeska; may have contributed a review or reviews to the <i>New York Sun</i> .
May	Visits her cousin, Howard Gore, in Washington, DC.
1899	Meets Isabelle McClung, daughter of a prominent Pittsburgh judge, Samuel McClung, and wife Fannie. Cather and McClung form an intense, life-long friendship based in part on their mutual interests in the arts. Cather would later claim that Isabelle was the one person for whom all her books had been written.
1900	Resigns from <i>Pittsburgh Leader</i> .
Fall	Moves to Washington, DC. Secures a part-time job editing translations.
November–	Article about Nevin appears in the <i>Ladies Home</i>
December	<i>Journal</i> . Writes a Washington column which appears in the <i>Nebraska State Journal</i> and <i>Index of Pittsburgh Life</i> until March, 1901.
1901	
March	Returns to Pittsburgh and moves into the McClung residence on Murray Hill Avenue. Teaches Latin and English at the Central High School.
June	Story, “El Dorado,” appears in <i>New England Magazine</i> .
1902	
April	Last contribution to the <i>Lincoln Courier</i> .
June–	Goes abroad with Isabelle McClung. “The Professor’s Commencement” appears in <i>New England Magazine</i> .
September	Weekly columns about her trip appear in the <i>Nebraska State Journal</i> . Articles also appear in the <i>Pittsburgh Gazette</i> .

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

1903	
January	“A Death in the Desert” appears in <i>Scribners</i> .
April	Publishes a book of verse, <i>April Twilights</i> .
May	Meets S. S. McClure, editor and publisher of <i>McClure’s Magazine</i> , in New York City; he expresses great enthusiasm for her work.
Summer	Vacations in Nebraska, where she meets Lincoln native, Edith Lewis.
1904–5	Teaches at Allegheny High School and freelances. Publishes a collection of short stories, <i>The Troll Garden</i> , in May, 1905. Visits Edith Lewis in New York both years.
1906	
June	Ends teaching career and moves to New York. Joins <i>McClure’s</i> editorial staff. Lives in Greenwich Village.
1907	Temporarily moves to Boston to research the life of Mary Baker Eddy for <i>McClure’s</i> . Three stories appear in <i>McClure’s</i> , one in <i>Century</i> .
1908	
March	Meets Sarah Orne Jewett, accomplished author of regionalist short fiction, and Annie Adams Fields, widow of Boston publisher James T. Fields. Jewett is a crucial source of professional advice as Cather wrestles with the dilemma of how to develop as a writer of fiction while earning a living as a journalist.
April–May	Promoted to managing editor of <i>McClure’s</i> . Goes abroad with Isabelle McClung.
December	“On the Gull’s Road” appears in <i>McClure’s</i> . Moves into a Greenwich Village apartment with Edith Lewis.
1909	Saddened by death of Sarah Orne Jewett. Assumes full editorial responsibility for <i>McClure’s</i> when S. S. McClure travels in Europe.
1910	Travels to London for <i>McClure’s</i> . Begins work on <i>Alexander’s Bridge</i> .
1911	S. S. McClure dismissed from magazine. Cather finishes <i>Alexander’s Bridge</i> . On leave from <i>McClure’s</i> , Cather and Isabelle McClung rent house in Cherry Valley, NY, for fall.

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

1912	
Winter/spring	<i>Alexander’s Bridge</i> serialized in <i>McClure’s</i> under the title <i>Alexander’s Masquerade</i> . <i>Alexander’s Bridge</i> published by Houghton Mifflin in April. “Behind the Singer Tower” appears in <i>Collier’s</i> . On leave from <i>McClure’s</i> , Cather visits her brother in Arizona and travels extensively in the Southwest. The trip fired her imagination and helped her to make a permanent break from the magazine, though she would collaborate with McClure over the next year on his autobiography.
August	“The Bohemian Girl” appears in <i>McClure’s</i> .
1913	<i>O Pioneers!</i> published by Houghton Mifflin. Cather moves to an apartment at 5 Bank Street with Edith Lewis. <i>My Autobiography</i> by S. S. McClure serialized in <i>McClure’s</i> , beginning in October. “Three American Singers” published in <i>McClure’s</i> in December. Wagnerian soprano Olive Fremstad is featured in the article and will enter into Cather’s depiction of a singer in <i>The Song of the Lark</i> .
1914	Writes articles for <i>McClure’s</i> . Begins <i>The Song of the Lark</i> .
1915	
Summer	Visits Mesa Verde with Edith Lewis, a trip that would later inspire the “Tom Outland’s Story” section of <i>The Professor’s House</i> .
Fall	<i>The Song of the Lark</i> published by Houghton Mifflin. Judge McClung dies; Isabelle McClung announces she is to be married to Jan Hambourg.
1916	Travels to New Mexico with Edith Lewis. Begins <i>My Ántonia</i> .
1917	Receives honorary degree from the University of Nebraska.
1918	<i>My Ántonia</i> is published by Houghton Mifflin in September. Visits Red Cloud, reads cousin G. P. Cather’s letters home from the front, and then starts work on her novel of World War I, <i>One of Ours</i> .
1920	Travels to Europe with Edith Lewis. Publishes <i>Youth and the Bright Medusa</i> with new publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

1921	Spends April–July with Isabelle and Jan Hambourg in Toronto. Visits Red Cloud. Finishes <i>One of Ours</i> . Begins <i>A Lost Lady</i> . Has tonsils removed, hemorrhages and is very ill. Sanatorium stay in Wernersville, PA.
1922	
Summer	Teaches at Bread Loaf School in Middlebury, VT. Visits Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy. Knopf publishes <i>One of Ours</i> .
December	Joins Episcopal Church when visiting parents in Red Cloud for their fiftieth wedding anniversary.
1923	Spends six months in Europe with Hambourgs. <i>A Lost Lady</i> serialized in <i>Century</i> magazine April–June. Knopf publishes <i>A Lost Lady</i> . Warner Brothers buys film rights. Begins <i>The Professor’s House</i> . Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for <i>One of Ours</i> .
1924	Finishes <i>The Professor’s House</i> . Edits two-volume edition of Sarah Orne Jewett’s fiction for Houghton Mifflin. Meets novelist D. H. Lawrence in New York.
1925	Serializes <i>The Professor’s House</i> in <i>Collier’s</i> magazine June–August. Visits Red Cloud and Southwest. Begins work on <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> . Knopf publishes <i>The Professor’s House</i> . Film version of <i>A Lost Lady</i> released.
1926	Knopf publishes <i>My Mortal Enemy</i> . Cather purchases land on Grand Manan, and she and Lewis have a cottage built there.
1927	<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> serialized in <i>Forum</i> magazine January–June. Knopf publishes <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> in September. Moves with Lewis to Grosvenor Hotel after Bank Street apartment is torn down.
1928	
March	Father dies. Cather stays in Red Cloud for a month. Mother moves with brother Douglass to southern California.
Spring/Summer	Visits Quebec and spends two months at Grand Manan. Begins work on <i>Shadows on the Rock</i> .

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLA CATHER'S LIFE

- 1929 Receives honorary degree from Yale. Visits mother in Long Beach, CA.
- 1930 Visits mother in sanatorium in Pasadena. Visits France. Finishes *Shadows on the Rock*. Receives the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
- 1931 Receives honorary degree from Princeton. Mother dies. Knopf publishes *Shadows on the Rock*. Cather family reunion in Red Cloud in December (Cather's last trip to Nebraska).
- 1932 Publishes a collection of short stories, *Obscure Destinies*. Moves to 570 Park Avenue with Edith Lewis. Begins working on *Lucy Gayheart*.
- 1933 Receives the Prix Femina Américain for *Shadows on the Rock*. Receives an honorary degree from Smith College.
- 1935 Visits Isabelle Hambourg, who returns to US for medical reasons. Knopf publishes *Lucy Gayheart*.
- 1936 Knopf publishes *Not Under Forty*, a collection of essays.
- 1937 Begins work on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and oversees preparation of the Autograph Edition of her collected works, which Houghton Mifflin publishes in twelve volumes in 1937–8.
- 1938 Brother Douglass dies. Isabelle Hambourg dies in Sorrento.
- 1940 Knopf publishes *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.
- 1944 Receives Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1945 Brother Roscoe dies.
- 1947 Dies on April 24 of a cerebral hemorrhage at her apartment in New York. Buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.
- 1948 Collection of short stories, *The Old Beauty and Others*, published by Knopf.