

# Willa Cather

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**Wilella Silbert Cather**



Cather in 1936.

**Born:** December 7, 1873  
near Winchester, Virginia, USA

**Died:** April 24, 1947  
New York City, New York, USA

**Occupation:** Novelist

**Nationality:** American 

**Writing period:** 1912-1947

**Willela Sibert Cather** (December 7, 1873<sup>[1]</sup> – April 24, 1947) is among the most eminent American authors. She is known for her depictions of U.S. life in novels such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

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## Early life

Willa Cather was born on a small farm in Back Creek Valley (near Winchester, Virginia). Her father was Charles Fectigue Cather (d. 1928), whose family had lived on land in the valley for six generations. Her mother was born Mary Virginia

Boak (d. 1931), and she had six younger children: Roscoe, Douglass, Jessica, James, John, and Elsie.

[2] In 1883, Cather moved with her family to Catherton in Webster County, Nebraska. The following year the family relocated to Red Cloud, the county seat. There, she spent the rest of her childhood in the same town that has been made famous by her writing. She insisted on attending college, so her family borrowed money so she could enroll at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While there, she became a regular contributor to the *Nebraska State Journal*.

She then moved to Pittsburgh, where she taught high school English and worked for *Home Monthly*, and eventually got a job offer from *McClure's Magazine* in New York City. The latter publication serialized her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, which was heavily influenced by Henry James.

Cather was born into the Baptist faith but converted to Episcopalianism in 1922, having begun to attend Sunday services in the church as early as 1906.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Writing career

Cather moved to New York City in 1906 in order to join the editorial staff of *McClure's* and later became the managing editor (1908). As a muckraking journalist, she coauthored a powerful and highly critical biography of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. It was serialized in *McClure's* in 1907-8 and published as a book the next year. Christian Scientists were outraged and tried to buy every copy; it was reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press in 1993.

She met author Sarah Orne Jewett, who advised Cather to rely less on the influence of James and more on her native Nebraska. For her novels she returned to the prairie for inspiration, and these works became popular and critical successes. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for *One of Ours* (1922).

She was celebrated by critics like H.L. Mencken for writing about ordinary people in plainspoken language. When he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Sinclair Lewis said Cather should have won it instead. However, later critics tended to favor more experimental authors and attacked Cather, a political conservative, for ignoring the actual plight of ordinary people.

In 1973, Willa Cather was honored by the United States Postal Service with her image on a postage stamp. Cather is a member of the Nebraska Hall of Fame. In 1986, she was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. She was a close companion to opera singer Olive Fremstad.

## **Personal life**

As a student at the University of Nebraska in the early 1890s, Cather sometimes used the masculine nickname "William" and wore masculine clothes.

[4] A photograph in the University of Nebraska archives depicts Cather, "her hair shingled, at a time when long hair was fashionable, and dressed boyishly." [5]

Throughout Cather's adult life, her most significant relationships were with women, such as her college friend Louise Pound, the Pittsburgh socialite Isabelle McClung, with whom Cather traveled to Europe, and most notably the editor Edith Lewis. Cather's friendship with Lewis began in the early 1900s; the two women lived together in a series of apartments in New York City from 1912 until the writer's death in 1947, Lewis afterwards serving as

the literary trustee for the Cather estate.<sup>[6]</sup>

Cather is buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

A resolutely private person, Cather destroyed many old drafts, personal papers, and letters. Her will restricted the ability of scholars to quote from those personal papers that remain. Since the 1980s, feminist and other academic writers have written about Cather's sexual orientation and the influence of her female friendships on her work. <sup>[7]</sup>

## Trivia

- From 1913 to 1927, she lived at No. 5 Bank Street in Greenwich Village, until the apartment was torn down during the construction of the Seventh Avenue subway line.<sup>[8]</sup>
- After reading her cousin G.P. Cather's wartime letters home to his mother, wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning "*One of Ours*". He was Nebraska's first officer killed in World War I. Those same letters are now held in the George Cather Ray Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

- Cather and Pound residence halls at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln) are named after Willa Cather and Louise Pound. [1]

## Quotes

- "Youth is the source of power and creativity."
- "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."
- "'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.'" - Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!*
- "'I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.'" Marie, *O Pioneers!*
- "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman." - *O Pioneers!*
- "The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own."
- "Even the wicked get worse than they deserve."

## References

1. ^ Woodress, James Leslie. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, University of Nebraska Press, Omaha, 1987, p. 516. Cather's birth date is confirmed by a birth certificate and a 22 January 1874 letter of her father's referring to her. While working at *McClure's Magazine*, Cather claimed to be born in 1875. After 1920 she claimed 1876 as her birth year, and that is the date carved into her grave in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.
2. ^ Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, pp. 5-7. Alfred Knopf, New York, 1953.
3. ^ Acocella, Joan. *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, p. 84. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2000.
4. ^ O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Oxford, 1987. pp. 96-113.
5. ^ Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, p. 38. Alfred Knopf, New York, 1953.
6. ^ "Cather's Life: Chronology." The Willa Cather Archive, University of Nebraska. 21 March 2007 (<http://cather.unl.edu>)
7. ^ Ahern, Amy, "Willa Cather: Longer Biographical Sketch." The Willa Cather Archive, University of Nebraska. 21 March 2007 (<http://cather.unl.edu>).
8. ^ Bunyan, Patrick. *All Around the Town: Amazing Manhattan Facts and Curiosities*, p. 66. Fordham University Press, New York, 1999.



# Bibliography

## Nonfiction

- Willa Cather and Georgine Milmine *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* (1909) (reprinted U of Nebraska Press, 1993)
- Willa Cather *On Writing* (1949) (reprint U Nebraska Press, 1988)

## Novels

- *Alexander's Bridge* (1912)
- *O Pioneers!* (1913)
- *The Song of the Lark* (1915)
- *My Ántonia* (1918)
- *One of Ours* (1922)
- *A Lost Lady* (1923)
- *The Professor's House* (1925)
- *My Mortal Enemy* (1926)
- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)
- *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)
- *Lucy Gayheart* (1935)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)

## Collections

- *Early Novels and Stories*, Sharon O'Brien, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1987) ISBN 978-0-94045039-4. Includes *The Troll Garden* (stories), *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia*, and *One of Ours*.
- *Later Novels*, Sharon O'Brien, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1990) ISBN 978-0-94045052-3. Includes *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *Lucy Gayheart*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.
- *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, Sharon O'Brien, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1992) ISBN 978-0-94045071-4. Includes *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, *Obscure Destinies*, *The Old Beauty and Others* (stories), *Alexander's Bridge* and *My Mortal Enemy* (novellas) with essays, occasional pieces, and poetry.

## External links

- [Prairie to Paris](#) An Interactive Exploration of Willa's and Antonia's Prairie
- [Willa Cather Page](#)
- [Willa Cather Archive](#) at University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- [Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial](#) and

Educational Foundation in Red Cloud,  
Nebraska

- Willa Cather Quotes
- American Masters - Willa Cather
- Works by Willa Cather at Project Gutenberg
- glbtq article on Willa Cather with special focus on her possible lesbianism
- Willa Cather birthplace
- LitWeb.net: Willa Cather Biography
- Willa Cather papers at Nebraska State Historical Society

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