

Review

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in mid-twentieth-century fiction, in history of women and science, and in women's studies more generally. It is meticulous, exhaustively researched, deftly written, and framed by a rich history of postwar American culture and its effects on gender roles. This study uncovers a fascinating literature by women science fiction writers who adapted narrative devices from women's magazines, civil rights conversion narratives, Cold War fiction, and science fiction itself to worm their way into the predominantly masculine genre of 1950s science fiction and make it their own. Yaszek enters an ongoing conversation about science fiction by women, and she is thoughtful in connecting her work to previous scholarship. In some places, Yaszek, I think, misleads readers by referring to these 1950s, realistic, mainstream science fiction stories (albeit on women's subjects) as "postmodern." However, Yaszek is one of the few critics of women's science fiction to give science its due place, and her readings are consequently exceptionally informed and enlightening. And the index is satisfyingly thorough—always a test of a real scholar. Her study is a model for such historical readings.

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*LITTLE HOUSE, LONG SHADOW: LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S IMPACT ON AMERICAN CULTURE*, by Anita Clair Fellman.  
Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. 343 pp. \$34.95.

In the first few pages of *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture*, Anita Clair Fellman introduces the Laura Ingalls Wilder of familiar legend: the white-haired farm woman who sits writing the story of her pioneer childhood on lined school paper, and, by dint of her untutored artistry and the homespun authenticity of her life story, who becomes the best-selling author of *Little House in the Big Woods*. Over the past few years, this version of the Laura Ingalls Wilder story, and with it the underlying facts of the novels she wrote, have been challenged by biographers and critics such as Rosa Ann Moore, Ann Romines, William Anderson, Donald Zochert, John E. Miller, and William Holtz, but the legend of a lone woman writing the truth of her experiences persists in popular culture. In this excellent, well-researched study, Fellman looks beneath the surface of the legend not simply to separate truth from fiction but to ask a different set of questions: what gives these novels their enduring popularity, and to what extent is their vision of the past colored by Wilder's intention to show a Depression-era America that it had lost its core pioneer values of stoicism in the face of adversity and a sense of individual responsibility? In its treatment of Wilder's biography, the kinds

of truths that her books present, and the phenomenon of canon formation that made them a cultural institution, *Little House, Long Shadow* argues that Wilder's seemingly artless presentation of pioneer life masks a purposefully interjected ideology of individualism—one that paved the way for the nation's acceptance of Ronald Reagan's folksy conservatism of the 1980s and laid the groundwork for the culture wars of today.

In the first three chapters, Fellman discusses the biographical and historical contexts for the series as well as the ways in which Wilder and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, transformed the events in Wilder's life for dramatic effect. Fellman's account of the Ingalls family's restless journeys in search of a stable economic future—together with their struggles against the catastrophic natural forces that complicate their lives (grasshoppers, blizzards, droughts, and hailstorms)—reads not only as a series of challenges to be overcome but also as a record of "unmitigated disaster" (p. 21). Fellman also investigates the difficult relationship between Wilder and her daughter, herself a successful journalist and novelist. After years of writing a column for *The Missouri Ruralist*, Wilder had produced a long autobiographical manuscript, "Pioneer Girl," that she hoped Lane could help her sell; when attempts to market the manuscript for adults failed, Lane encouraged Wilder to mine it for material for the "Little House" novels, each of which Lane edited for structure and style. Despite the friction that grew between the two as Lane's reputation for fiction diminished and her mother's rose, Wilder and Lane worked diligently to convey the themes they saw as crucial to the books, among them the dangers posed by the natural world contrasted with the security offered by the nuclear family, negative views of government, informed obedience to parental authority, the necessity of self-control, and a general disdain for Eastern ways.

The "truth" of the books is strongly influenced by these ideas. As Fellman shows in one of the most interesting sections of the book, "Revisiting the Little Houses," Wilder repeatedly altered or invented episodes from the "Pioneer Girl" manuscript to emphasize these themes. Distances between the Ingalls family's houses and those of their nearest neighbors were consistently exaggerated to emphasize the family's independence, just as their participation in community events and clubs was minimized to emphasize their self-reliance and self-discipline. For example, the Ingalls family had a young couple and their baby living with them all through the events of *The Long Winter*, but the three were left out of the novel, not only to emphasize the Ingalls family's isolation but also because they did not fit into Wilder and Lane's paradigm of cheerful, self-denying pioneers: the woman had become pregnant before marriage, and the man was lazy, shirking the tasks such as twisting hay and grinding wheat that were necessary to survival. The character of Laura undergoes a similar makeover; the Laura of the books would never skip school, as her real-life counterpart did, to try out

a new roller-skating rink that had just opened in De Smet. As Lane wrote to Wilder in 1938, "The truth is a meaning underlying theme; you tell the truth by *selecting* the facts which illustrate it" (p. 78). The books emphasized the truths of personal responsibility and political individualism even at the cost of omitting and changing facts.

Fellman devotes the majority of the book to the ways in which the "Little House" series and Wilder's messages have been disseminated at home, in the schools, and in the culture at large. Through numerous letters, testimonials, and interviews with elementary school librarians and teachers, she dates the early popularity of the series to teachers' and librarians' discovery that the "Little House" books were books that children actually wanted to read, combining as they did the adventure stories that boys craved with the domestic stories popular with girls. Compounding the popularity of the books was their adoption as texts for teaching history through classroom activities, their inclusion in the basal readers common from the 1950s through the 1990s, and beginning in the 1970s, the success of the television series *Little House on the Prairie*. All of these factors spurred the current boom in Wilder-related commerce from the development of house museums to the merchandising of books, dolls, and souvenirs and the proliferation of fan clubs and web forums. Although Fellman states at the outset that *Little House, Long Shadows* focuses on the popularity of the series rather than on the responses of its resisting readers, she also analyzes the novels' highly problematic racial attitudes toward Native American and African American characters, bringing a historian's perspective to bear on the events that Wilder omitted from the Native American scenes in *Little House on the Prairie*.

Yet the book's principal subject is the effect of Wilder's individualist values, which Fellman sees as paving the way "for Reagan's and succeeding conservative politicians' messages" (p. 235). For example, in keeping with Wilder and Lane's hatred of the New Deal, positive views of government assistance are absent from the novels, even though the Ingalls family benefited when the state of South Dakota paid for Mary's education at the college for the blind in Iowa. Instead, throughout the series, Wilder depicts the government as the source of harmful interference with the pioneer spirit, from the Ingalls family's loss of its farm to the illogical regulations that prevent Almanzo from legally filing a claim under the Homestead Act. Given Wilder's emphasis on traditional values, on the self-supporting nuclear family, on the ineptitude of government, and on individual responsibility, argues Fellman, by the 1980s Americans were primed to accept conservative views of laissez-faire capitalism and the superiority of nuclear families at the same time that they rejected the necessity of funding social support programs.

Fellman's conclusion about the political effects of Wilder's books,

although provocative and persuasive, is not entirely convincing, given the other cultural factors that contributed to the Reagan revolution. Yet the reader's doubts about the conclusion are ultimately a minor issue in this important book—one that recognizes the political potential of Wilder's work in ways not discussed by previous critics. As Fellman amply demonstrates, the series maintains its emotional hold on the culture for reasons that have to do as much with the way in which the novels are written—the vivid sensory descriptions, “how-to” passages that unpack the mysteries of churning butter or building a cabin, a rebellious and resourceful heroine (Laura), and the evocation of family “coziness” in a dangerous world—as with their political themes. *Little House, Long Shadow* provides a valuable perspective not only on the missing historical context for the series but also on the ways in which the truths it tells have influenced contemporary views of the imagined past that the series represents.

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*PICTURING A DIFFERENT WEST: VISION, ILLUSTRATION, AND THE TRADITION OF CATHER AND AUSTIN*, by Janis P. Stout. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007. 368 pp. \$40.00.

Any new book by Janis P. Stout is a cause for celebration, particularly among those whose scholarly interests are focused on women writers. Over the past two decades, Stout's contribution to feminist scholarship has been nothing short of astonishing. In her latest effort, *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Cather and Austin*, Stout focuses on three separate but interrelated ideas outlined in the preface: Willa Cather and Mary Austin's experience with Western landscapes, their personal participation and investment in the choice of illustrations for their books, and their re-vision of the importance of gender in the art and literature of the American West. The conversation regarding gender, art, and the American landscape is important and has been carried on for decades. It is one that women artists and writers agree needs to continue. In her article, “Feminism, Women Writers and the New Western Regionalism: Revising Critical Paradigms,” Krista Comer argues that “Western criticism is saddled with male-centered, white-centered and pre-contemporary aesthetic ideals which disable it on questions of gender and race.”<sup>1</sup> That Cather and Austin and other women who wrote about the West need to be included in this discussion is also an area of consensus among women writers and artists. Janis Stout's participation in the discourse is welcome indeed. Unfortunately, *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Cather and Austin* is overly speculative and equivocates rather