

## Review of My Antonia by Willa Cather – January 2022

We were surprised to learn that this had been a popular book with students when set as a GCSE text and also surprised that it had been pronounced "the greatest romantic novel to come out of America" by the critic H.L. Mencken. We none of us could agree with this verdict but did find it a rich novel in many ways.

The last of the Great Plains Trilogy, Cather is at her best writing about what she knows: the endless monotony of the Nebraskan prairie with its colourful and resourceful inhabitants, the early settlers, and the harshness of their lives. Thus, we learn about the day-to-day domestic life of the settler community, farming practices, camaraderie and neighbourliness, religious beliefs, snakes and the rigors of the extreme weather conditions. Against this back-drop Cather peppers her tale with fireside horror stories, quite possibly true, including of a pair of brothers(?) who abandon a bride and groom to the wolves on a sleigh journey and a husband who murders his wife. There is a strong sense of lawlessness in the newly established communities but coupled with a moral and social code which is at times cohesive but can also be stifling.

We loved the many lyrical passages describing the landscape but were far less convinced by its main characters. These are Jim Burden, who arrives on his grandparents' farm in Nebraska having been orphaned, and Antonia, the eldest daughter of a Bohemian family. the Shimerdas, who have unwisely moved to Nebraska hoping for a better life. They are duped into paying too much to the owner of the dug-out and land that they move to, and Antonia's father, who has been a musician in his homeland is eventually overcome with homesickness and hopelessness and takes his own life. This part of the tale is graphically dealt with but sympathetically and colours Antonia's future life.

Willa Cather seems to have been ambivalent about her own sexuality and the depiction of the relationship between Jim and Antonia does not convince. We only ever see Antonia through Jim's eyes, since he is the narrator of the story, and therefore never have any idea of her inner life and feelings. It is as if she has been mythologised and is always just out of our reach. Jim himself also seems shadowy, especially as an adult. At the end of the novel when Jim meets Antonia again after a gap of 20 years, by which time she has a husband and 11 children, Jim confides in one of her boys that he was "very much in love" with Antonia in his youth. Yet he has done nothing to pursue her as a lover, accepting the social norms of his upbringing and "getting on" while she has struggled with much personal tragedy. At the end of the novel Jim tells us that "whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past". Somehow this did not ring true or compensate for his neglect.

As a recommendation for a reading group we gave it 3 out of 5, as it did provoke a lively discussion, but as a recommendation for friends we couldn't give it more than 1.

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