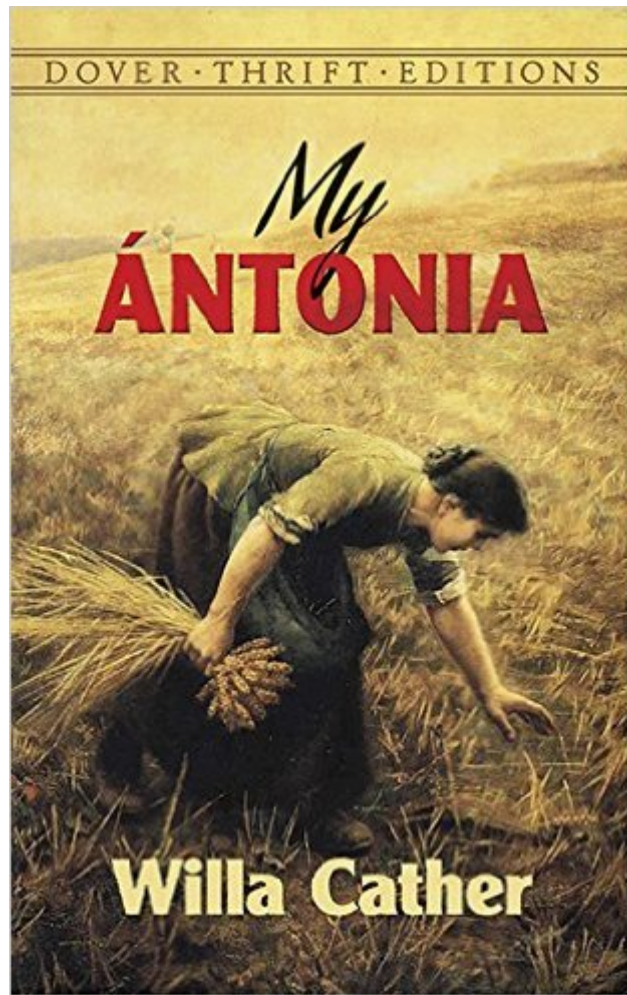


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My *Á*ntonia (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

My Ántonia evokes the Nebraska prairie life of Willa Cather's childhood, and commemorates the spirit and courage of immigrant pioneers in America. One of Cather's earliest novels, written in 1918, it is the story of Ántonia Shimerda, who arrives on the Nebraska frontier as part of a family of Bohemian emigrants. Her story is told through the eyes of Jim Burden, a neighbor who will befriend Ántonia, teach her English, and follow the remarkable story of her life. Working in the fields of waving grass and tall corn that dot the Great Plains, Ántonia forges the durable spirit that will carry her through the challenges she faces when she moves to the city. But only when she returns to the prairie does she recover her strength and regain a sense of purpose in life. In the quiet, probing depth of Willa Cather's art, Ántonia's story becomes a mobbing elegy to those whose persistence and strength helped build the American frontier.

Book Information

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Age Range: 11 and up

Grade Level: 6 and up

Customer Reviews

When Willa Cather was writing "My Antonia," she visited her friend, the journalist and war correspondent Elizabeth Sergeant, grabbed an old apothecary jar filled with flowers, set it in the center of an antique table, and explained: "I want my new heroine to be like this--like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides. . . . I want her to stand out--like

this--like this--because she is the story."This anecdote (recounted in James Woodress's biography of Cather) sums up almost exactly the technique that makes her novel both unique and unusual. Instead of writing the story from her heroine's point of view, or from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, Cather instead creates a bystander, the likeable and somewhat innocent Jim Burden, who has written down a series of memories where his and Antonia's lives intersect; "My Antonia" is a biography through the mask of autobiography. While this is Jim's story as much as it is Antonia's (she is barely mentioned at all in Book III), we are ultimately studying a much-loved thing of beauty from "all sides"--from the distance separating it and the observer. Although "My Antonia" relates a number of exciting, sentimental, horrifying, and even scandalous incidents (none of which will be divulged here), Cather very deliberately chose to write a character novel rather than an action story. Many of the book's pivotal "events" happen offstage; we learn what has happened only when Jim hears about Antonia or runs into her at a gathering or stops by her home. Such a detached approach is a departure from that used by many of the American naturalists (e.g., Dreiser, Lewis) writing during this period, yet her book is surely a model of realism. As Jim writes when he notes his reluctance to visit Antonia when they are both grown, "Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again." As with all of Cather's novels, the prairie town of Black Hawk (which, is of course, Cather's hometown of Red Cloud), is populated with a variety of hirelings and homesteaders, dreamers and pretenders, romantics and scoundrels. (Cather seldom sketched a character as downright wicked as the would-be rapist Wick Cutter.) But none of the townsfolk outshine either the affectionate, if platonic, rapport between Jim and Antonia or the unforgettable portrayal of Antonia herself.

When I went to write the review of Cather's work, I was surprised to find that most of the reviews were written by high school students who were required to read the book. The strengths of "My Antonia", in my opinion, would not be obvious to most teenagers. Taken at face value, as a fictional story of the struggles of Bohemian immigrants to the mid-west, the story has merits which probably underlie its popularity among secondary teachers. However, that is not what makes this book special. Simply put, both the characters and setting of this novel are beautiful. Cather clearly loved the land she was writing about, and her passion for the farm country of her youth flowed through her writings. Her narrator, Jim, reveals the life of the immigrant Antonia, his childhood friend. Though most of the book is about their childhood together, it is written from Jim's view as an adult. This is tremendously important, as Jim's observations are clearly bear a mark of maturity that would be out-of-place if the book were written from the point-of-view of a child. Perhaps this is what many

teenagers miss. Few of them have experienced the profound bittersweet feelings adults have when looking back upon their youth. These emotions were entwined through the novel from beginning to end, forming a scaffold upon which the story was told. To miss them is to miss everything that makes this novel great, rather than just historical fiction.

In 1882, when author Willa Cather was nine years-old, her family left their home in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, and moved to Nebraska, near the settler country in Red Cloud where they farmed a homestead. Ms. Cather, often thought of as a chronicler of the pioneer American West, frequently drew on her memories of prairie culture and her own personal experiences. She wrote about the themes closest to her heart. Of primary importance was the drama of the immigrant struggling to survive in a new world, epitomized here in "My Antonia." In this extraordinary novel, Miss Cather weaves together the story of Antonia Shimerda, an immigrant girl from Bohemia who represents the optimism, determination and pure grit that newcomers to America needed to make a successful life, and that of American-born Jim Burden, our narrator. Burden, a successful and cultured East-coast lawyer, is returning to his childhood home in Blackhawk, Nebraska for a visit. On the long train ride, he reminisces with an unnamed friend about the place where they had both grown up and about the people they knew - especially their dear friend Antonia, "who seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." When young Jim Burden was orphaned at age ten, he left his native Virginia to live with his grandparents on their farm, just outside of Blackhawk. At almost the same time that Jim arrived, the Shimerda family settled on their land. Mrs. Shimerda had argued effectively for a move to America so that the children, especially Ambrosch, the eldest son, would have the chance to make a better life for themselves, with more possibilities of moving up in the social hierarchy and of acquiring wealth. The Bohemian newcomers were the Burden's closest neighbors. Fourteen year-old Antonia Shimerda, the eldest daughter became a close friend of Jim's. He was immediately drawn to her warmth and friendliness. When Antonia's father, a sensitive, refined man, discovered that Jim was educated he asked the boy to teach his daughter to speak English. "Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Ñn-tonia!" he told/asked Mrs. Burden. Together the two young people worked the land and explored the glorious prairie. And Antonia began to learn English. Unfortunately, Antonia's studies came to an end with her father's tragic suicide. The man missed his native land terribly and was not able to accept his family's extreme poverty or the demands of his wife and son. When he lost his only friends, he sunk into a deep depression from which he was not able to escape. After Mr. Shimerda's death, Antonia had to work even harder, performing the heaviest, most physically demanding chores, just to keep the farm from going under.

She was not able to go to school with Jim, and began to slowly lose the refined ways she had learned from her dad. The author describes Antonia's life as Jim perceives it, and from information he gathers from others about the long periods when he did not have contact with her. Their widely different positions in society dictated their life choices and their fortunes. And their lives, their personal histories, parallel the changes and the transformation of the Great Plains. When Antonia and Jim explored the Nebraskan wilderness, it was a wilderness as far as the eye could see. "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land--slightly undulating..." And, "I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it." When Jim makes his return trip by train, years later, everything had changed. Willa Cather's prose is straightforward, the narrative is deceptively simple and crystal clear. Her characters are complex and the wonderful, richly textured descriptions of the landscape and life on the plains make reading the novel pure pleasure. The author also captures the interior landscape of her characters with great perception and sensitivity. This is a great work of fiction which depicts a people, and a place in time, which only remain on the pages of a book, preserved vividly by Willa Cather. I prefer to purchase Enriched Classics fiction whenever available. I find they offer readers more affordable editions of great works of literature with supplementary critical text. "My Antonia" contains: a concise introduction by Editor Cynthia Brantley Johnson that gives readers important background information; a chronology of Willa Cather's life and work; a timeline of significant events that provides the book's historical context; an outline of key themes and plot points; detailed explanatory notes; critical analysis, including contemporary and modern perspectives of "My Antonia;" discussion questions ideal for book club conversations; a recommended related bibliography. H.L. Mencken wrote, "No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful as 'My Antonia.'" JANA

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