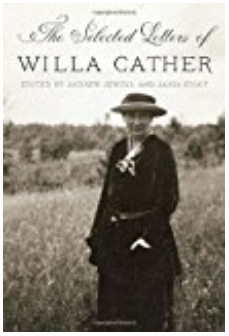
Two Ambitious Midwestern Girls: Willa Cather and Mary MacLane



For my fifteenth birthday my mother gave me Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, a novel I devoured and adored. The subject -- the life of immigrant homesteaders in early twenthieth-century rural Nebraska -- was curious and compelling for a girl growing up in 1970s suburban New Jersey. The women in her story were unusually complicated, unpredictable, and real. But what was most astonishing was the novel's first person male point of view. I'd read books by men from a woman's point of view, but the reverse seemed radical, even dangerous, as if Cather were boldly writing her way into forbidden, uncharted territory. I read more of her novels -- *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *The Professor's House*, *A Lost Lady*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* -- each a testament to her fearless ambition to fully explore her imaginative powers.

Though Cather, an intensely private person, expressly wished her letters never to be published, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* is truly a gift to literature. The 564 letters -- selected and brilliantly edited, annotated, and commented upon by scholars Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout -- span Cather's life from her teenage years to her death in April 1947. Her letters are extraordinary not because they are well written -- they are -- or because they provide luscious literary and publishing gossip from the era's most notable circles -- they do -- but because they offer a genuine view into that weird combination of devotion, drive, egotism, and self-inflicted loneliness that comprises the life of a writer. Reading her letters, we become intimate witnesses to how Cather shaped her life and how her life shaped her to become a pre-eminent American writer in her day and of all time.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Cather took a job in Pittsburgh writing for *Home Monthly*. She loved it, despite the trite copy she had to churn out. In an 1896 letter to a friend she writes: "It's a great boon just to be of some absolute use somewhere." But her aspirations are clear: "There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that's my creed and I'll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh if need be... I think I get as much good out of it as most people do out of their religions. I love it well enough to be a failure in it myself, well enough to be unhappy."

Cather regularly shared her work and her ideas with a shifting coterie of writer friends including Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Zoë Akins, Sigrid Undset, and Sarah Orne Jewett. After several very successful years as an editor at *McClure's Magazine* in New York City, Cather wrote to Jewett in 1908: "Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories, that I am a good executive and I had better let it go at that. I sometimes, indeed I very often think that he is right." Presumably her friends set her straight: over the next years Cather took several leaves of absence to write her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*.

Cather's many letters to her two publishers, Ferris Greenslet, of Houghton Mifflin, and Alfred Knopf, reveal her intense devotion to the business side of writing books and show impressive publishing savvy. Deftly playing publishers off one another, she got optimal results for her books. In a 1915 letter to Greenslet she wrote: "My old friend Mr. Hendrick, who is now with Doubleday, came to see me several weeks ago and told me such attractive things about their book-selling methods that I feel rather wistful... I was well satisfied with the advertising you gave *O Pioneers!* but I think this book [*The Song of the Lark*] ought to be pushed a good deal harder." Again to Greenslet, she wrote: "I am not wholly happy about the cover, but I shan't be stubborn about it. You've never given me a cover I've liked. I've only borne them patiently. Have you seen a copy of the English edition of *Pioneers*? I think that a de-lightful cover... I'm afraid this cover will pain me as long as the book exists. I most heartily dislike it!"

The letters teem with advice for young writers: "As one grows older one cares less about clever writing and more about a simple and faithful presentation. But to reach this, one must have gone through the period where one would die, so to speak, for the fine phrase; that is essential to learning one's business." To a professor who wanted her to contribute to a textbook: "I think it is sheer nonsense to attempt to teach 'creative writing' in colleges. If the college students were taught to write good, sound English sentences (sentences with unmistakable articulation) and to avoid hackneyed platitudinous, woman's-club expressions, such as: 'colorful,' 'the desire to create,' 'worthwhile books,' 'a writer universally acclaimed' -- all those smug expressions which really mean nothing at all -- then creative writing would take care of itself." To Blanche and Alfred Knopf she wrote one of the great truths for published writers, unfathomable to those eager to get published: "Books, alas, are like children, -- never so much fun after they grow up and are finished as they are when they are merely things to play with and all your own. I've learned to get my fun before publication."

*

If only my mother had also given me for my fifteenth birthday Mary MacLane's exuberant, uncategorizable *I Await the Devil's Coming*. I would have appreciated this diary covering three years in the life of a nineteen-year-old girl living in Butte, Montana, and I would have identified with her unruly adolescent struggle. In its rejection and defiance of the conventional, conformist adult world it resembles *The Catcher in the Rye* from a distinctively female slant. As Jessa Crispin writes in the introduction, Mary MacLane "gives voice to the voiceless. She is the usurper of the gatekeepers who say teenage girls have nothing to say."

MacLane's unwieldy prose surprises, disturbs, delights, frustrates, awes, infuriates, and overwhelms. The narrative is riddled with claims to genius -- "...there is in existence a genius -- an unhappy genius, a genius starving in Montana in the barrenness -- but still a genius" -- and fueled by MacLane's burning desire to seduce and be seduced by the devil: "May I never, I say, become that abnormal, merciless animal, that deformed monstrosity -- a virtuous woman. Anything, Devil, but that."

MacLane's vicious, hilarious portrayal of the various types gathered in Butte for a Fourth of July celebration is surely one of literature's best passages. Her depiction of the tedium of home life via six toothbrushes in the family bathroom is sheer brilliance. Highly original are her assessments of *Jane Eyre* ("that pathetic, artless little old-fashioned thing"), Charles Dickens ("extremely fond of soft, green-eyed, purring things"), and Dr. Samuel Johnson ("I can readily believe that this man never troubled himself to wash his neck and ears."). Her railings and musings, though often immature, nevertheless provide moments of wisdom: "When you are nineteen there is no experience to tell you that all things have an end;" "It takes centuries of tears and piety and mourning to move this world a tiny bit."

MacLane's book, an immediate national sensation, sold 100,000 copies in its first month. She left Butte for a more worldly existence in New York and Boston, where she made a career of being scandalous. A vocal feminist, she wrote articles on subjects such as marriage and the vote. She starred in the silent film *Men Who Have Made Love to Me,* based on her syndicated articles about her various lovers with titles such as "The Bank Clerk," "The Husband of Another," and "The Prize-Fighter." Her second and last book, *I, Mary MacLane*, written fifteen years after *I Await the Devil's Coming,* describes her dissolute life as a celebrity writer.

In *Letters*, Cather says how she was glad fame came to her rather late: with too much attention on her she might not have developed into the writer she became. One wonders if MacLane would have done better if she'd been able to hone her considerable writing skills out of the limelight until she'd gained a better handle on her craft. It is unknown whether Willa Cather ever read MacLane's runaway bestseller. MacLane's lack of discipline and excessive linguistic flourish would not have been to Cather's taste, but Cather's following insight holds as true for herself as it does for MacLane: "As long as one says 'will people stand this, or that?' one gets nowhere. You either have to be utterly commonplace or else do the thing people don't want, because it has not yet been invented. No really new and original thing is wanted: people have to learn to like new things."