

BOOK CLUB NEWS

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My Antonia, by Willa Cather

Discussion Leader: Leslie Gardiner

Pulitzer Prize-winning Willa Cather was born in 1873 on her maternal grandmother's farm in Virginia. The family moved to Nebraska in 1883 when Willa was nine years old to escape the tuberculosis outbreaks that were rampant in Virginia. Willa's father tried his hand at farming for eighteen months; then he moved the family into the town of Red Cloud, where he opened a real estate and insurance business, and the children attended school for the first time. Some of the earliest work produced by Cather was first published in the *Red Cloud Chief*, the city's local paper. She was intensely moved by the dramatic environment and weather, the vastness of the Nebraska prairie, and the various cultures of the European-American, immigrant and Native American families in the area. Like Jim Burden in *My Antonia* the young Willa Cather saw the Nebraska frontier as a "place where there was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the materials out of which countries were made...Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out".



Leslie began the discussion with "What struck you?" Comments flowed easily. A Bohemian reader was impressed by the first positive writing about Bohemians. Several readers felt they were there in Nebraska merely from the landscape descriptions. Others enjoyed the warm glow of the people that populated the novel. Readers reminisced, having read the novel when they were younger or having lived in the Midwest, enjoying nature along with the characters. Some identified in the novel themes of feminism, immigration – still relevant today. Readers who were not familiar with the setting thrilled to read about it. Some readers expressed how much there was to see in Nebraska.

Leslie then steered the discussion to the characters. Contrast Antonia and Lena. What about Peter and the Russians, the Shemeda family and the father's suicide, Jim and Antonia's relationship. It was Jim's story; Antonia was his muse. Antonia is Earth Mother; we can relate to her at every stage of her life. She was Jim's closest friend, a survivor immigrant, the personification of the landscape and immigrant experience. She was everything to Jim: sister, mother, friend. What about Cutter? What was the difference in character between the men and women in the novel? Why did Antonia stay in the country against pressure to move to the city?

Why did Willa Cather write the story in the first person and in the person of a male? Is the narrator reliable? What effect does that have on the story? As a student at the University of Nebraska in the early 1890s, Cather sometimes used the masculine nickname "William" and wore masculine clothing. A photograph in the University of Nebraska archives depicts Cather dressed like a young man and with her hair shingled, at a time when females wore their hair fashionably long. In 2013, 566 personal letters written by Willa Cather show that her most significant attachments were with women. No intimate details are revealed. Can we conclude that her perception and appreciation of the world shines with a balance of animus and anima? What do you think?

During the go-around, readers expressed delight and appreciation. Easy, excellent read. Surprised, enthralled, enchanted, loved it. The details of the Midwest brought back memories of past experience. Wonderful observations. Willa Cather was an expert observer. One reader worried about reading a "classic" but was happily surprised with the easy style, rich in description and character. The choice of book can influence discussion and mood: *My Antonia* inspired a warm glow among the readers.

Thank you, Leslie, for your glowing leadership and for the cookie treats as well. Join us next month when we will discuss *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie led by Evelyn Kain. Happy reading!

