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Book Review by Carol Iannone

## HOME ON THE RANGE

*Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilders*, by Caroline Fraser.  
Metropolitan Books, 640 pages, \$35



IF ANY LIFE SINGS OF THE HARDSHIPS AND deprivations borne by those who came before us, and the strength and endurance needed to face them, it is Laura Ingalls Wilder's. Wilder published her immensely popular "Little House" children's novels between 1932 and 1943, based on her experiences as a girl and young woman in unsettled Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and South Dakota. The series launched a long-running television show (1974–1982) under the title of the third book, *Little House on the Prairie*. The show took liberties with Wilder's stories but has delighted generations of young people, and is still enjoyed today in syndication around the world.

Born in 1867, Wilder didn't start writing until she was past 40, mostly for farm journals

and rural newspapers. She didn't produce her children's books until she was past 60, when

I began to think what a wonderful childhood I had had. How I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession. I realized that I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersman, then the pioneer, then the farmers and the towns.

Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history.... It seemed to me that my childhood had been much

richer and more interesting than that of children today, even with all the modern inventions and improvements.

Wilder wanted to preserve her father's stories and pass on her parents' virtues—"courage, self-reliance, independence, integrity, and helpfulness." These form "a golden thread" she weaves through her eight Little House novels (one based on her husband's childhood), rendered in her special purity of prose and pitch-perfect voice.

CAROLINE FRASER'S *PRAIRIE FIRES: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilders* deservedly won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. It a work of careful, intri-



cate, and painstaking scholarship that tells the sweeping history of the prairie-land Midwest in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, and of Laura's place within it. It is also a biography—perhaps a bit too thorough—of Wilder's erratic and eccentric daughter Rose Wilder Lane, who became her mother's literary mentor, editor, and collaborator, and was a well-known writer and journalist in her own right. It is moreover a biography of the prairie itself, its ecology, vegetation, climate, weather, economy, and peoples—the austere, expansive beauty and at times harrowing brutality that became part of the American literary imagination. Drawing on a huge number of public and private sources, Fraser, formerly on the editorial staff of the *New Yorker*, touches on literature, politics, music, and community life—everything related to the struggles of a rural culture rising on vast virgin land.

She highlights some of the harsher realities the Ingalls family faced that are not rendered in the novels: humiliations, financial ruin, periods of grinding poverty, cramped and undignified living quarters with undesirable people. The novels present plenty of rough and even frightening scenes, but not graphically, and always worked into a vision of stability, equilibrium, and satisfaction that Fraser cannot seem to accept. Sometimes she conveys the sense that

Wilder's books are prettified versions of rural life meant to relieve Depression-weary Americans. But she doubles back on her own criticism: the books may not be true in every detail, as Wilder and Rose would later assert, but are true in a larger sense to the experience and reality of the West. "[T]he truth about our history is in them," Fraser admits; "[a]nyone who would ask where we came from, and why, must reckon with them." Such is the power of art.

**P**ART OF WILDER'S AIM WAS TO COUNTER the representations of rural life's bleakness and meanness portrayed by such writers as Hamlin Garland and Sherwood Anderson. Though children would have to see how much tougher life was in the past, Wilder deemed some things both inappropriate for young readers and detrimental to the totality of experience she wanted to convey. Today's autobiographical works are often bent on revealing every last lurid detail, even to the point of sensationalism and the eclipse of any larger purpose. The Little House books represent the literary ethics of a different time.

In the same vein, Fraser judges harshly Laura's much loved and loving "Pa," Charles Ingalls, for a series of actions she finds morally dubious. He dodged the Civil War (how, isn't clear), showed poor judgment at times,

put his family in harm's way in wild frontier spaces, and built one of his little houses on Indian land in Kansas, using Indian lumber. Despite such deeds, however, and despite his ultimate failure to wrest a living from the land, Pa emerges in both the books and, willy-nilly, even in Fraser's narrative, as an admirable figure (along with his wife, Caroline, "Ma"), who withstood some of the harshest trials a human could undergo, including the loss of one child and the blindness of another.

Again and again, after arduous physical exertions unimaginable to those challenged by a summer without air conditioning, natural catastrophes undid his hopes. He persevered in the face of enormous obstacles, disasters, diseases, misfortunes, failures, and sorrows, and never stopped working and fiddling and singing and loving his family and guiding them where he could. It seems petty, even ungrateful, to tick off his errors. And once again, Fraser's criticism doubles back, since it was precisely the risks he took that provided Laura with the childhood she later recalled with luminous appreciation. "The family spent little more than a year on the Kansas prairie," Fraser writes, referring to the time in Indian territory, "but it shaped her temperament and outlook for the rest of her life. That year made her who she was."

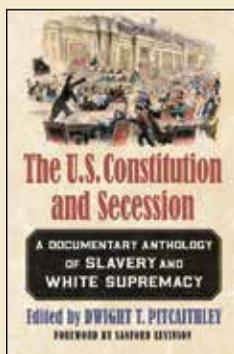
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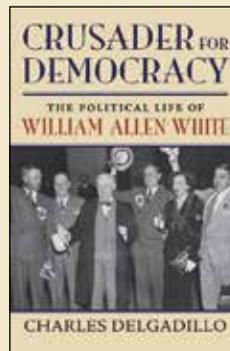
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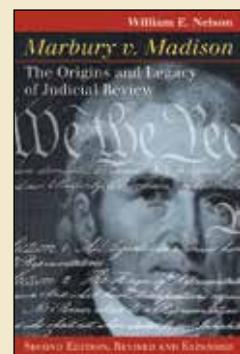
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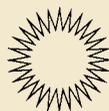
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**W**ILDER'S CHILDHOOD WAS A TIME when people kept on in uncomplaining stoicism. The "Black Robe" Belgian Jesuit missionary, Pierre-Jean De Smet, who gave his last name to the South Dakota town which forms the setting for the last four books of the series, found himself "more baffled by white settlers than the Indians," writes Fraser.

He described them as a "strange people," undeterred by lethal obstacles placed in their paths by climate, weather, or disease. "Nothing frightens them," he wrote wonderingly to his brother. "They will undertake anything. Sometimes they halt—stumble once in a while—but they get up again and march onward."

They created towns on the prairies, however skimpy and scattered they might be. Settlers were building a culture, a civilization, and Laura Ingalls was part of that. She did not reproach her parents, neither judging them nor inviting judgment. One is impressed with how much real life corresponds to the novels. At times it seems Fraser wishes the settlement of the plains never happened—that it would have been more just and ecologically sensible to have left it to the Indians.

She also wishes to qualify the individualism and initiative that the Little House series highlights and to question their place as defining elements of the American character, since both Laura and Rose became staunch opponents of the New Deal. (In fact, Rose Wilder Lane, along with Isabel Paterson and Ayn Rand, are sometimes considered the triple inspiration of the libertarian movement in the United States.) Fraser points out that Charles took state assis-

tance (in one instance, two barrels of flour after a Biblical-scale plague of locusts had eaten everything that grew on the prairie, and practically everything that didn't grow, besides), but this hardly undercuts the overall picture of the Ingalls and Wilders' enormous self-reliance. Rose was the more fanatically anti-socialist of the two, but Laura, who had helped support her family from the age of nine, was firm in her conviction that New Deal America was changing for the worse, and she refused to take Social Security. Government intervention and caretaking, she believed, sapped people's independence and vigor in facing life's vicissitudes. (The philosopher Eric Hoffer once observed that he never heard a person pity himself until the onset of the New Deal).

**F**RASER RESPECTS THE LITTLE HOUSE achievement but can't quite accept its radiance. Her last pages contain this surprisingly reductive summary of young Laura's days on the prairie:

There was joy—riding ponies, singing hymns, eating Christmas candy—but it was fleeting. There was heroism, but it was the heroism of daily perseverance, the unprized tenacity of unending labor. It was the heroism of repetitive tasks defined by drudgery. Cooking and eating the same fried potatoes, day in and day out. Washing dishes in dirty water. Twisting hay with hands so cracked they bled. Writing with a blunt pencil on a cheap tablet.

I was rather stunned to come upon this at the end of the book. This is not my sense of Laura's life at all, even after reading Caroline Fra-

ser's extensively detailed account. And I don't think it accurately portrays the Little House books either. Yes, there are ecstatic moments that necessarily have to pass, but Wilder's joy is not fleeting, but deep and abiding, tried and tested, and found resilient and capacious, redolent with gratitude and contentment.

Fraser's ambivalence about the Little House books is reflected in her response to the recent action of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association. The ALSC has removed Wilder's name from the award originally established in her honor in 1954, when she was 87 years old, in recognition of "the lasting contribution which [her] books have made to literature for children." The present-day ALSC cites "anti-Native and anti-Black sentiments in her work," which, it maintains, "includes expressions of stereotypical attitudes inconsistent with ALSC's core values of inclusiveness, integrity and respect, and responsiveness." In an article in the *Washington Post*, Fraser accepts the charge of racism and does not object to the erasure of Wilder's name. She does argue that her work should be read, but "critically." Referring specifically to *Little House on the Prairie*, she commends it not so much for its literary virtue, it seems, but because "[n]o white American should be able to avoid the history it has to tell." It is not as tutorials in white guilt, however, but as superlative works of literature that Wilder's books continue to matter in the first place.

Carol Iannone is editor at large of *Academic Questions* and writes on literature, education, and culture.

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