

# 1919: CHICAGO

Introduction by L. Brent Bohlke

*Henry Blackman Sell (1889-1974) was literary editor of the Chicago Daily News from 1916 to 1920. He then went on to edit Harper's Bazaar (1920-26), served in the Roosevelt administration during World War II, was editor of Town and Country magazine (1949-72), and returned to Harper's until his death in 1974. While at Harper's he made the decision in 1925 to publish Anita Loos's Gentlemen Prefer Blondes in six installments, which began its crazy success story.*

*In Chicago he was a part of the literary scene that brought the Windy City to the forefront and included such people as Carl Sandburg, Floyd Dell, Ben Hecht, Burton Rascoe, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and others. The literary pages of the Chicago Tribune and Daily News rivaled their New York counterparts.*

*Sell visited New York and interviewed Cather at her apartment for his "A Page about Books and the People Who Write Them." He was certainly one of the first to call Cather the "Foremost American Woman Novelist." Although Sell says he learned about "her opinions on the Cather method of novel writing," his article focuses more upon her life and personality. It does show, however, that she had already formed the opinion about Alexander's Bridge which she expressed in the 1922 preface to the new edition of her first novel. Cather tore out the entire top half of the page containing the article and sent it to her parents (Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection).*

*A large portion of Sell's article was reprinted as a part of an article entitled "A Freedom in Her Book: Willa Cather's Life on a Nebraska Ranch May Be the Reason," which appeared in the Kansas City Times on 18 March 1919.*

# WILLA SIBERT CATHER

## To Our Notion the Foremost American Woman Novelist

by Henry Blackman Sell

*My Antonia* . . . is not only the best done by Miss Cather, but also one of the best that any American has ever done, east or west, early or late. It is simple; it is honest; it is intelligent; it is moving. The means that appear in it are means perfectly adapted to its end. Its people are unquestionably real. Its background is brilliantly vivid. It has form, grace, good literary manners. In a word, it is a capital piece of writing. . . . There is, in the ordinary sense, no plot. There is no hero. There is, save as a momentary flash, no love affair. There is no hortatory purpose, no show of theory, no visible aim to improve the world. The whole enchantment is achieved by the simplest of all possible devices. . . . Here a glimpse, there a turn of phrase, and suddenly the thing stands out, suddenly it is as real as real can be—and withal moving, arresting, beautiful, with a strange and charming beauty. . . . I commend the book to your attention, and the author no less.

—H. L. Mencken in the current *Smart Set*.

" . . . and the author no less."

Prompted by this unusual enthusiasm of the wary Mencken, I called on Miss Cather the other day in New York, and gathered there some interesting facts about her life and her opinions on the Cather method of novel writing.

Willa Sibert Cather (pronounced to rhyme with rather, if you please) is, from handshake to simple gown, honest. Her bright, plump face shines with determined sincerity. Her clear, mellow voice gives instant assurance of a square deal. As we took off our wraps in a little side room my companion whispered, "Isn't she a regular fellow? Couldn't you go to her with your troubles!"



Miss Cather's rooms are walled with books. Her chairs have an enviable quality of sittableness. Comfort, sincerity, good homely taste, a warm open fire on a cold morning, comradeship, and a decent pride in work done and in the doing are the impressions taken from a half hour in the second floor apartment, front, at 5 Bank Street. Even the address hath a substantial sound.

Willa Sibert Cather is a Virginian, an American for several generations. For the benefit of those who like to go 'way, 'way back, be it known that the Cathers came from Ireland and the Siberts from Alsace. When little Willa was nine years old her father heard the call of the big west, and left Virginia for a Nebraska ranch. No "gentleman's farm" was his ranch, but a tract in the thinly populated part of the state where the acreage of cultivated land was a mere kitchen garden beside the vast stretches of raw prairie. A sprinkling of Americans there were in this district, but most of the "near" neighbors were Scandinavians and ten or twelve miles away there was an entire township settled by Bohemians. Winter and summer, rain and shine, found the future novelist on her pony, riding and visiting the neighbors. Miss Cather feels that those youthful visits to the foreigners, her long talks, as she played and worked with them, were the greatest influence of her literary life. There she learned to know and understand the people of *My Antonia* (Ann-ton-ee-ah—stress the e—as in the Bohemian). There she learned how hard life can be. There she learned what heroism is.

Miss Cather graduated from the University of Nebraska at the age of nineteen, took a position on the *Pittsburgh Leader* (where she was telegraph editor and dramatic critic for some years). Later she gave up journalism to head a high school English department. While teaching she published a book of verse and a book of short stories. This work attracted the attention of the editor of *McClure's* magazine, and for four years she was a member of the McClure staff.

*Alexander's Bridge*, her first novel, was published in 1912. An interesting first novel, but conventional. I hazard a guess that Miss Cather would survive the shock if she should receive word that her publisher's janitor had stolen the plates of *Alexander's Bridge* and escaped to darkest Africa or some other inaccessible place. But it did bring her to the attention of a knowing writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who gave her the following excellent advice:

"Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody's else way—you will have to make it your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of stories that this or that magazine wants—write the truth and let them take it or leave it."

*O Pioneers!* was the result of Miss Jewett's urging, and there began the upward career of our foremost American woman novelist. Miss Cather's next novel was *The Song of the Lark*, a long, fine piece of writing. Her latest, *My Ántonia*, is one of the two or three outstanding novels of the last year. It is a story of the west, and the strange people among whom she lived in her childhood. As to its particular qualities, I suggest that you read again the brief of H. L. Mencken's opinion, printed above, and then get the book. To read one of Miss Cather's books is to read three and gain many pleasant hours. Her writing has that indefinable quality that we call "charm."

*Chicago Daily News*, 12 March 1919.