

WILLA CATHER: *Double Lives*. By *Hermione Lee*. Pantheon. 410 pp. \$29.95

Willa Cather's novels of Midwestern prairie life made her one of America's most popular novelists. Indeed, many of her fans came to associate the qualities of such novels as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) with Cather (1873–1947) herself: provincial simplicity, innocence, integrity, endurance. But Lee, a British critic who has written about Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, finds that Cather was “no laureate of rural America.” As Lee's subtitle, *Double Lives*, suggests, things were not as simple as they once seemed.

Cather's childhood was already half over when, in 1883, her family moved from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, a bleak land that the nine-year-old girl viewed with an outsider's eye. After college, she left the Midwest for Pittsburgh and later New York, seeking to lead the life of the “new woman” and supporting herself as a schoolteacher and journalist. The Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett, whom she met in 1909, convinced Cather that the region she had once almost despised, and its “everyday people who grow out of the soil,” could be material for the fiction she soon began writing.

Feminist and lesbian critics have claimed Cather as one of their own, even though Cather never openly expressed her sexual orientation. Lee describes the youthful Cather wearing mannish attire and signing herself “William Cather.” But she warns readers “not to collapse Cather's imaginative life into a simple matter of repression.” (Lee herself treats Cather's 44-year “Boston marriage” to Edith Lewis in a mere four pages.) What makes the gender question interesting, however, is that it seems to influence the genre question.

The struggle for the frontier was long considered an essentially male story. Lee praises Cather for “being the only woman of her time to have appropriated a ‘great tradition’ of male American writing.” Male authors like Hamlin Garland and Ole Rølvaag propounded a kind of liter-



ary Manifest Destiny, a romantic self-identification with the conquest of the continent. Cather was more interested in *Obscure Destinies* (as she titled her 1932 short-story collection). Her aim was to reveal the emotional lives of settlers rooted to one spot on the prairie. In that prairie existence, according to Cather, it was women who displayed the traditional masculine strengths and the men who were weak.

In 1923, Cather wrote that “we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished . . .” Her own pioneer experience having lasted barely a decade, she began to cast about for other subjects. Her travels to the Southwest inspired *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (1927). And in *The Professor's House* (1925), her own difficult transition inspired the story of a Midwestern boy who leaves the prairie, enjoys initial success, but finds himself increasingly at odds with the modern world. Much of her own experience Cather considered too private to write about. (She began dodging reporters, building a mountain retreat, and even burning letters and manuscripts.) In her writing, she abandoned the contemporary world for 17th-century Quebec (*Shadows on the Rock*, 1931), Old Virginia (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, 1940), and even a story of 14th-century France. Little wonder that the New Critics of the 1930s and '40s dismissed her as provincial and escapist.

Lee joins those who would revive Cather's reputation. But she does so not because of Cather's feminism but because of her art, her creation of a language uniquely suitable for American experiences and landscapes. Lee weakens her case somewhat by overstating it, by indiscriminately approving all of Cather's stories, and by characterizing this author who finally fled the modern world as a modernist “in the company of Proust, Lawrence, Eliot, and Virginia Woolf.”

History

LET THEM CALL ME REBEL: Saul Alinsky—*His Life and Legacy*. By *Sanford D. Horwitt*. Knopf. 595 pp. \$29.95

Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835 that the genius of American politics expressed itself at



the local level. A century later, Saul Alinsky appeared the living embodiment of Tocqueville's observation. In his native Chicago, he organized and prodded

into action thousands of immigrants, minorities, slum-dwellers, and juvenile delinquents. A cross between Machiavelli and P. T. Barnum, he perfected the tactics of confrontation: When one Chicago alderman proved indifferent to adequate garbage pickup, Alinsky had mounds of trash dumped in front of his tavern.

Born in 1909, the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Alinsky received his earliest education in the streets of the Windy City. Later, as a student in the University of Chicago's sociology department, he imbibed the new social-environmental understanding of urban problems. Doing field work with Italian street gangs, Alinsky respected their behavior as plausible responses to social disorganization.

In 1939, Alinsky organized the first "neighborhood council" in the Back of the Yards, as the largely Polish slaughterhouse area was called. The council helped bring John L. Lewis's Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) into the packing houses, and eventually it opened day-care and recreational centers. The New York *Herald Tribune* declared that democracy had arrived in Upton Sinclair's "jungle."

Alinsky modeled his tactics on those of union organizers and especially of Lewis, who disdained ideology and fought ruthlessly for power. Alinsky's "method" involved three stages: first, employing professional organizers to lay the groundwork; second, organizing a community around an immediate, winnable issue; and, third, turning power over to local people. "Don't do for people what they can do for themselves" was his ironclad rule.

By 1945 Alinsky was a national celebrity. When his *Reveille for Radicals* became a best seller that year, he hardly suspected that his finest days were behind him. During the McCarthyite 1950s, he lost many of his supporters and much of his funding. He again made headlines in 1963, when his Temporary Woodlawn Organization (TWO) blocked the University of Chicago from buying up adjacent black neighborhoods. TWO was an early civil-

rights organization, but Alinsky found himself being edged out of the movement by black leaders. Even though he remained as feisty as ever, lecturing and staging rallies, he died in 1972 a largely forgotten man.

Horwitt, a policy adviser for public interest organizations, provides a superb account of Alinsky's colorful life. But he struggles vainly to persuade his readers that Alinsky is not forgotten, that his legacy is alive and well. To be sure, the Catholic clergy of Chicago's slum neighborhoods always supported Alinsky, the Jewish agitator, and certainly Alinsky influenced the Catholic Church in its populist social activism. Later, when he organized Hispanic migrant workers in California, he put on the payroll a promising young man—Cesar Chavez. Nevertheless, the limitations of Alinsky's confrontational approach decrease the likelihood of his having a lasting influence.

Successful mass movements seem to require not only strategies and tactics but also ideological underpinnings. Alinsky, however, shunned ideology. His successes, the Back of the Yards Council and TWO, had piggybacked on two of the great ideological movements of the 20th century: the labor-unionism of the 1930s and the civil-rights struggle of the 1950s and '60s. Without an ideological stance, Alinsky was left organizing communities and fighting City Hall when real power—in commerce, in industry, in the media, and in politics—was shifting away from localities to a limited number of urban centers. Alinsky may have been Tocqueville's American genius, but Alinsky's America was no longer the one Tocqueville had visited.

COSMOPOLIS: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity. By Stephen Toulmin. Free Press. 228 pp. \$22.95

After two world wars, dramatic economic fluctuations, and environmental catastrophes—or, for that matter, just after the morning traffic commute—"modernity" may no longer seem the unquestionable wonder earlier generations thought it to be. In *Cosmopolis*, physicist and philosopher Toulmin attempts to understand how a world men set out confidently to control got so out of hand. His explanation—which focuses on the passion for the scientific, rational