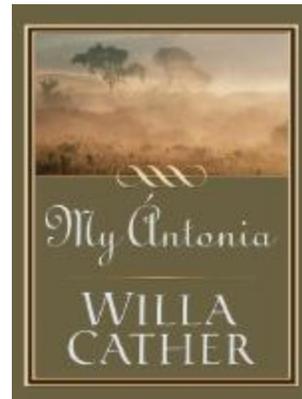


# My Antonia

By Willa Cather

## About the Book...

Widely recognized as Willa Cather's greatest novel, *My Antonia* is a soulful and rich portrait of a pioneer woman's simple yet heroic life. The spirited daughter of Bohemian immigrants, Antonia must adapt to a hard existence on the desolate prairies of the Midwest. Enduring childhood poverty, teenage seduction, and family tragedy, she eventually becomes a wife and mother on a Nebraska farm. The book is also a hauntingly eloquent celebration of the strength, courage, and spirit of America's early pioneers.



*My Antonia* tells the stories of several immigrant families who move out to rural Nebraska to start new lives in America, with a particular focus on a Bohemian family, the Shimerdas, whose eldest daughter is named Antonia. The book's narrator, Jim Burden, arrives in the fictional town of Black Hawk, Nebraska, on the same train as the Shimerdas, as he goes to live with his grandparents after his parents have died. Jim develops strong feelings for Antonia, something between a crush and a filial bond, and the reader views Antonia's life, including its attendant struggles and triumphs, through that lens.

## About the Author...

Willa Cather (1873-1947), the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of more than fifteen books, was one of the most distinguished American writers of the early twentieth century. Cather's work made her one of the most important American novelists of the first half of the 20th century. When Cather was nine, her family homesteaded in pioneer Nebraska. She was a tomboy at home in the saddle. enjoyed distinguished careers as journalist, editor, and fiction writer. Cather is most often thought of as a chronicler of the pioneer American West. Critics note that the themes of her work are intertwined with the universal story of the rise of civilizations in history, the drama of the immigrant in a new world, and views of personal involvements with art. Cather's fiction is characterized by a strong sense of place, the subtle presentation of human relationships, an often unconventional narrative structure, and a style of clarity and beauty.



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## Discussion Questions...

1. When Jim arrives in Nebraska, he sees "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." [11-12] Yet at the novel's end that landscape is differentiated. It has direction and color--red grass, blue sky, dun-shaded bluffs. We are reminded of the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and of God's parting of the heavens from the earth. To what extent is *My Antonia* an American Genesis? What are its agents of creation and differentiation?
2. One of the greatest difficulties facing the Shimerdas and other immigrant families is that posed by their lack of English, which seals them off from all but the most forthcoming of their neighbors. Yet even American-born arrivals to Nebraska find themselves set apart. What experiences do the inhabitants of this world share that are alien--and perhaps incommunicable--to people raised elsewhere? Does the shared experience of the novel's pioneers end up counting for more than their linguistic and ethnic differences?
3. What is it that makes Mr. Shimerda unable to adapt to his new home and ultimately drives him to suicide? Who or what does Cather intend us to see as responsible for Mr. Shimerda's suicide? Is he simply too refined--too rooted in Europe--to endure the harshness and solitude of the prairie? Before jumping to too easy a conclusion, consider the fact that the novel's other suicide, Wick Cutter, is a crass, upwardly mobile small-town entrepreneur. What do these two deaths suggest about the prerequisites for surviving in Cather's world?
4. From their first meeting, when Jim begins to teach Antonia English, he serves as her instructor and occasional guardian. Yet he also seems in awe of Antonia. What is it that makes her superior to him? What does she possess that Jim doesn't? What makes her difference so desirable?
5. At times Jim's feelings towards Antonia suggest romantic infatuation, yet their relationship remains chaste. Nor does Jim ever become sexually involved with the alluring--and more available--Lena Lingard. Curiously, Antonia appears to disapprove of their flirtation. And, whether he is conscious of it or not, Jim seems wedded to the idea of Tony as a sexual innocent. Following the failed assault by Wick Cutter, "I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness." [186] How do you account for these characters' ambivalent and at times squeamish attitude toward sexuality? In what ways do they change when they marry and--in Antonia's case--bear children?

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6. Just as it is possible to read Lena Lingard as Antonia's sensual twin, one can see the entire novel as consisting of doubles and repetitions. Antonia has two brothers, the industrious and amoral Ambrosch and the sweet-natured, mentally incompetent Marek. Wick Cutter's suicide echoes that of Mr. Shimerda. Even minor anecdotes have a way of mirroring each other. Where else in the novel do events and characters mirror each other? What is the effect of this symmetry and its variations?
7. For her epigraph Cather uses a quote from Virgil: *Optima dies... prima fugit*: "The best days are the first to pass." How is this idea borne out within *My Antonia*? In what ways can the novel's early days, with their scenes of poverty, hunger and loss, be described as the best? What does Jim, the novel's presiding consciousness, lose in the process of growing up? Does Antonia lose it as well? Would you agree with Virgil and Jim that the earliest days are the best and the most quickly gone?
8. Although *My Antonia* is elegiac in its tone--and has been used in high school curricula to convey a conservative view of the American past--it is also notable for its striking realism about gender and culture. Not only does the novel have a female protagonist who prevails in spite of male betrayal and abuse (and two secondary female characters who prosper without ever marrying), it also portrays the early frontier as a multicultural quilt in which Bohemians, Swedes, Austrians, and a blind African-American retain their ethnic identities without dissolving in the American melting pot. Significantly, at the novel's end Antonia has reverted to speaking Bohemian with her husband and children. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision? Do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier?