



### Representing Willa Cather

*The Divide*. Michael Bedard. Illus. Emily Arnold McCully. Tundra Books, 1997. 32 pp. \$17.99 cloth. Ages 8-11. ISBN 0-88778-407-X.

*The Divide*, a biographical story of Willa Cather's childhood, is a well-crafted work, effectively capturing the prairie landscape that was such a significant aspect of Cather's own writing. Bedard's evocative text is well-matched by the detailed realism of McCully's watercolours, which not only lend a strong sense of time and place but also subtly reflect Bedard's symbolic treatment of a land that was, for Cather herself, a potent symbol of self-discovery. The opening pages deal with young Willa's poignant leavetaking of her family home and the long train trip to her "new life" on the Divide. The illustration of a meadowlark set against a vast expanse of sky and prairie introduces a leitmotif that reappears throughout the work.

For Bedard's Cather, as for Cather herself, the meadowlark, the sky and the endless plain represent an expansion and uplifting of soul that is rooted in the prairie experience. This evocation of space is in dramatic contrast to the portrait of Willa which follows the prairie scenes. Here, Willa stands in the darkened corner of an empty room where a window strictly frames the outside world. The juxtaposition of a limiting interior and an expansive exterior is a pattern that recurs in the illustration of the crowded train compartment followed by a striking image of the train as it moves through a "flat, empty land, as bare as a strip of sheet iron." Although carefully factual in style, McCully's images effectively develop a motif of enclosure and expansion that functions symbolically to represent not only Willa's literal journey from her childhood home, but also her journey from a conventionally circumscribed childhood to the liberating experiences that made her a writer.

The story of Willa's relationship to the land is also the story of Willa's own transformation. When Willa first arrives, the "iron land" seems to reject

its human inhabitants, a rejection that is echoed in McCully's image of an austere, weather-beaten house set in a sweep of winter grassland. But with the arrival of spring, the landscape opens up to Willa and she begins to appreciate its special beauty. Again, McCully's images of bright, green fields meeting a "china" blue sky reflect this awakening. Willa comes to know and appreciate the hardy, self-sufficient immigrants who live on the land; and, on her new pony, she travels a road lined with sunflowers that the settlers had sowed on their way to the West. McCully's vividly coloured illustration of Willa on horseback, pausing on this "sunflower bordered road" effectively captures the essence of the story by suggesting that Willa, too, possesses the bright promise and spirit of the pioneers and their land.

Image and text in *The Divide* work successfully together to engage the child reader in this biography of a pioneering female writer. A young girl might well identify with the story of another young girl who came to love the harsh but beautiful land she lived in and then grew up to write about. However, as an adult reader who has read a bit of Cather's own work, I find Bedard's text does present some problems. There are times when Bedard's imagery is very close to Cather's own. For instance, the image of the land which appears to Willa "as bare as a strip of sheet iron" occurs in *My Antonia* where Cather refers to "blustery winters . . . when the whole country is stripped bare as a strip of sheet iron" (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1946, ix). Bedard describes the wind that "teased the curtains like a playful pup," an image which also appears in *My Antonia* where the wind is "impulsive and playful like a big puppy" (120). Some of Bedard's most striking phraseology also appears in Cather's work. For instance, the passage, "It was not the spring of home, but a new thing. Spring itself" is very similar to Cather's in *My Antonia*: "There were none of the signs of spring.... There was only — spring itself" (120).

When I first read *The Divide*, I was struck by the quiet power of Bedard's prose style. I felt he very effectively conveyed Willa's intense encounter with the land that was to have such an impact on her writing. When I read Cather's own work, however, I began to wonder whose language I was encountering. While the similarities I have noted would not matter to a child reader, it is important to remember that children's literature tends to have both a child audience and a more critical adult audience, particularly since children's literature has developed as an academic discipline. Although I can understand Bedard's reluctance to disturb the narrative flow of his story with quotation marks and references, a brief paragraph at the end of the work concerning the sources of his text would have been helpful to me as an adult critic and would have acknowledged Cather's own contribution to this biographical story.

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