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O Pioneers!



Synopsis

Alexandra Bergsons, the daughter of Swedish immigrants, inherits her family's ailing farm in Hanover, Nebraska, upon the death of her father. Over the years, she turns the farm into a successful enterprise. However, success has not brought peace, as passion and love intervene.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Cather published her second novel, *O Pioneers*, in 1913 at the age of 40. Together with *My Antonia* it is the novel for which she is best known. Years after writing the book, Cather wrote of it " Since I wrote this book for myself, I ignored all the situations and accents that were then thought to be necessary." The book takes place on the plains of Nebraska in the late 19th Century as the Prairie is settled by Swedish, Bohemian, and French immigrants trying to eke out a living from what appears to be a harsh, inhospitable land. The heroine of the book is Alexandra Bergson who inherits her father's farm as a young woman, raises his three sons and stays with the farm through the harsh times to become a successful landowner and farmer. The book speaks of being wedded to the land and to place. In this sense it is an instance of the American dream of a home. It also speaks of a strong woman, not in cliched, late 20th Century terms but with a sense of ambiguity, difficulty and loss. This is a story as well of thwarted love, of the difficult nature of sexuality, and of human passion. There is also the beginning of what in Cather's works will become an increased sense of religion, Catholicism in particular, as a haven and a solace for the sorrow she finds at the heart of human endeavor. Above all it is a picture of stark life in the midwest. There is almost as much blood-letting in this short book as in an Elizabethan tragedy. Cather's picture of American life on the

plains, even in her earliest books, is not an easy or simple one. Some readers may quarrel with the seemingly happy ending of the book. I don't think any will deny that Alexandra's happiness is dearly bought or that it is bittersweet. I tend to shy away from this book in favor of Cather's later novels.

Some writers are identified with a particular country or region, others with a specific period in history. Willa Cather is known for both. When I think of her, I think of the prairie states, especially Nebraska, and I think of the days of the intrepid pioneers of the prairies, struggling to make a life for themselves that was tenuous, at best. Although Cather spent only a few years of her childhood on the vast prairie lands of Nebraska, she returned to those memories again and again in her most powerful and famous fiction, such as *My Antonia* and *The Song of the Lark*. The title of one of her celebrated novels, *O Pioneers!* is rather unique in that it has an exclamation point at the end of it. Think about it: how many other book titles do you know that have exclamation points? That sense of breathlessness, excitement, and fierce determination which is conveyed in the very look of the title *O Pioneers!* comes across from the very first pages of this novel. This is the story of Alexandra Bergson and her family who risk everything they have to carve out a home in the unforgiving Nebraska landscape. Alexandra is forced at a very young age to take on the responsibility for her mother and brothers after her father dies. Before he dies, her father makes Alexandra, his most trusted child, promise to keep the farm and to make it thrive. This she does, although at a high personal cost. The novel is a short one and moves quickly from decade to decade. It begins with a touching scene involving Alexandra's youngest brother Emil, whose stray kitten is rescued by Alexandra's best friend, Carl. The moment is a sweet one, and all ends well; but this is perhaps the only time in the book that we see problems so easily and satisfactorily resolved.

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