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The Selected Letters of Willa Cather ed. by Andrew Jewell
and Janis Stout (review)

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and April Lindala. All contributors equally demand your attention. Riecki has an ear for good literature, and he has put together an impeccable collection. It is worth your time.

John Gubbins
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Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, eds., *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2013. 752 pp. \$25.00.

For some of us, Willa Cather's novels are frozen in time—junior or senior high school to be exact—when a teacher assigned *My Antonia* or *O Pioneers!* Our hazy memory may evoke a quaint Nebraska story written by a Victorian author. Expect any such preconceptions to be overturned when reading *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. As this collection makes clear, the sophisticated Pulitzer Prize—winning author fueled her literary imagination with memories of Nebraska, yet she was neither born there nor spent most of her life there. Cather lived her first nine years in Winchester, Virginia. Her father, like many breadwinners in the 1870s and 1880s, saw opportunity in the west. Drawn to Nebraska's good weather and vast prairie land for farming, he moved his wife and seven children to Webster County, Nebraska, in 1883.

The Selected Letters follows the budding writer's correspondence beginning with letters from the family farm while in high school, through college at the University of Nebraska, to jobs in Pittsburgh and Manhattan before establishing herself as a fulltime writer with a national and international reputation. Yet, Nebraska was never far from her mind or affections.

Early in her time at University of Nebraska, for example, she expressed homesickness to a friend, Mariel Gere. "I feel awfully lonesome since all you fellows are gone, and am consoling myself with French History, Gorge Eliot [sic], and endless rides over the prairies," she wrote. (We see the author's spelling and writing improve with each passing year.) At the university, Cather considered becoming a doctor and is said to have administered chloroform to a patient before an amputation. However, an English professor, impressed by a paper Cather wrote on Thomas Carlyle, submitted it without Cather's knowledge to the *Nebraska State Journal*. It was quickly accepted. Seeing her name in print was very satisfying, she recalled later.

One of the delights of reading Cather's correspondence is to see a writer

in the making. These letters reflect an ambitious young woman whose desires are often cloaked in insecurity and indecision. Charting a course, as a single woman at the turn of the twentieth century, was no easy task. Cather was disappointed in not securing the first job she wanted—a temporary teaching appointment at the university. Instead, she threw herself into several jobs in quick succession—working as editor of *Home Monthly* magazine in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1886. “The magazine is not all I could desire from a literary standpoint, it’s [sic] policy is rather namby-bamby.” She stayed a year and moved on to the *Pittsburgh Leader*, and then, in 1901, took a job teaching English and Latin at a local high school. During these restless Pittsburgh years, Cather was improving her craft by writing short stories on the side.

Her life changed dramatically when introduced to publisher S. S. McClure in 1903. Not only did McClure show an interest in a collection of stories she sent him, but he invited her to New York where he told her he would publish her collection. “I do believe you’ve got me fairly launched at last, at least it looks so,” Cather wrote her mentor, Will Owens Jones, of this encounter. She continued, “I go about with care because I have become so much more valuable to myself.” And in May 1906, she accepted an editorial position with McClure’s eponymous magazine.

During the McClure’s years, Cather corresponded with many writers, including Sarah Orne Jewett, who wrote Cather, “your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society, all Bohemia: the city, the country—in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up.” Cather was very encouraged by these words. She wrote Jewett of her ambivalent feelings about working at the magazine. “Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will be able to do much at writing stories, that I am a good executive and I had better let it go at that.”

Yet her literary ambitions never waned. She believed good writing required “heat under the words.” And, indeed, we feel this heat in her letters. The decade of the 1910s is one of great creative output for Cather. In 1913, she published *O Pioneers!* about the lives of Nebraska farmers. She needed to “get in the skin” of other people—particularly the immigrants to rural Nebraska. Her efforts in crafting this debut novel were rewarded. A reviewer in the *Chicago Evening Post* wrote that it should be recognized “as the most vital, subtle and artistic prose of this year’s fiction.” Just two years later in

1915, Cather returned to a Nebraska setting for her novel *The Song of the Lark* about a talented western woman's emergence as a great singer. In a letter to her publisher Ferris Greenslet, of Houghton Mifflin, she wrote, "It seems to have a lot of the kind of warmth and kindness that can't be made to order, and you can only get into a story when the places and the people lie near your heart." In late 1918, Cather published *My Antonia*. The *Nation* magazine's book reviewer called it "among the best of our recent interpretations of American life." Clearly, Willa Cather was finding success writing about the particulars of people and places while evoking universal themes.

Her literary correspondence widened to include Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Frost, among many others. As Cather gained mastery in storytelling and character development, she also sought more control in the making of her books. Artwork for book jackets, typefaces and illustration for the text concerned her. Marketing her books became an obsession and caused her to leave the long-established relationship she had enjoyed with Houghton Mifflin to move to the young Alfred A. Knopf. (Knopf is the publisher of this collection.)

Cather rented an apartment in Greenwich Village in the same building as her close friend Edith Lewis, a professional copywriter. The two later shared an apartment in New York for twenty-plus years. While many have speculated about Cather's sexual orientation, the topic is missing from these letters. Her affections were clear: while she cultivated warm professional relationships with men, her deepest and most intimate relationships were with women. And she remained close to her family throughout her lifetime—especially her father and brothers.

The Selected Letters is divided into sections like "Finding Herself as a Writer: 1912–1916," "Years of Mastery: 1923–1927," "The Culmination of a Career: 1940–1943," which helps the reader keep track of the passage of time. World events are often alluded to in her letters, and Cather was deeply concerned about the lead-up to the Great War. The war hit painfully close to home when her cousin, G. P. Cather died in battle in France. The boy she knew in childhood, who she found frustrating for his lack of ambition, had now been cut down in early manhood. The letters she wrote during this period are among her most poignant and profound.

She became determined to write a novel based on this Nebraska relative. More than ever she felt the weight of writing in her desire to be faithful to her cousin's life. This included a research trip to France. She called the work in progress "Claude" and carried a portfolio of pages around the

battlefields in France. To a good friend Cather wrote, “You see I absolutely know this; some of him still lives in me, and some of me is buried in France with him.” This book, eventually titled *One of Ours*, went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

In her long life (1873–1947), Cather penned twelve novels. While she broadened her canvas to write novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and *Shadows on the Rock*, set in Quebec, she always researched deeply to provide the color and detail for people and places. Cather’s letters vividly capture the artist at work over the span of six decades. And from the earliest letters to the last, there is a sparkling intensity. In a letter to her beloved brother Roscoe in 1938, wherein she grieved the death of a close friend, she wrote, “As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end.” This creative tension characterized Willa Cather’s letters and her life and makes reading her a pleasure.

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Andro Linklater, *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 496 pp. \$30.00.

This is a difficult book to review, or even summarize. While it is mainly about the development of unencumbered individual land ownership, it ranges widely in geography—from Europe to China to the Ottoman Empire to the United States to South Korea, with plenty of stops in between. It also covers a wide swath of time, from the Middle Ages to the present day. And while it is mainly about land ownership, it takes a number of side excursions, ending up with visits to the financial crisis of 2008 and issues of intellectual property. Whether all of this indicates that Andro Linklater is an erudite renaissance scholar or an undisciplined dilettante—and I think he’s a bit of both—it is quite a wild ride.

Linklater devotes much of his attention to the wide varieties of land ownership that have existed and still exist in the world. These include family and/or group ownership, such as practiced by Indigenous peoples such as American Indians. Autocratic ownership, in which people on the land enjoyed some rights but in which a dynasty or the state held technical own-