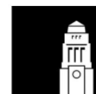

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Demystifying Laura Ingalls Wilder in Caroline Fraser’s "Prairie Fires"

Victoria Addis

Caroline Fraser | Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder | Picador | 2018 | 625 Pages

Caroline Fraser’s *Prairie Fires* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the internationally famous *Little House* books. In it, Fraser tells a story of sweeping historical significance, at once emblematic of the wider era and deeply personal. The Wilder family’s crossing of the frontier in search of a better life, which Wilder captured with nostalgic longing in her autobiographical children’s novels, is a journey that was undertaken by countless others. The Wilder family’s trials and setbacks—the blizzards, locusts, and poor harvests that were often downplayed in the *Little House* books—were the trials and setbacks of many other frontier families. The intersections between a single family’s experiences and events of wider historical importance provide a grand stage for Fraser’s portrayal of Wilder’s life, times, and enduring legacy. In beautifully unfolding prose, *Prairie Fires* presents a rich account of Wilder’s frontier childhood, personal relationships, and writing life alongside a vivid historical background. Through deep archival research, Fraser lifts the veil of myth created by Wilder’s published writings to reveal a truer account of the hardships her work concealed and the resonances of that life with the broader American experience.

Wilder, who was born in 1867 and died in 1957, lived in a time of sweeping change spanning from frontier days to the Cold War. Across this sweeping timespan, *Prairie Fires* foregrounds the ways in which key historical events of the eras in which Wilder lived interacted with the lives of her unassuming and ordinary family. Discussing the Dakota Boom, which encouraged settlers like the Wilders to seek their fortunes on the arid plains, Fraser castigates the political and media classes for encouraging farming on land scientists had warned was unfarmable. Fraser writes, “the question was whether national decisions of significant economic import, affecting thousands of citizens, would be governed by Enlightenment science or by huckster fantasy.” (Attentive readers will note that Fraser's criticism of the Dakota Boom is strikingly similar to modern criticism of climate policy and Brexit.) The Dakota Boom ended in disappointment for many, including the Wilders, who failed to sustain themselves on their parcel of land. As this one example shows, in describing the particular fortunes of the Wilders, Fraser speaks to the common experience of settlers in the West.

Looking beyond the rose-tinted picture of frontier life presented by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her autobiographical novels, Fraser reveals the extent of the hardships she and her family endured, from extreme debt to the death of her infant brother, Freddie, at just a few months old. This brutal picture is softened by intimate moments of family life and of community that are more familiar to Wilder’s readers. Fraser recounts Wilder’s admiration of her father and her husband—the latter a local hero in the town of De Smet who, at great personal risk, ventured out for supplies during a blizzard. Again, Fraser’s depiction of these relationships is perhaps closer to the reality than the public myth Wilder created. Fraser’s meticulous research unearths the less admirable aspects of these beloved characters, whose qualities, quirks and foibles are revealed through reference to letters, journal entries, and official documents.

Because of its centrality to the famous *Little House* books, the relationship between Wilder and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, receives the most attention. Lane became a professional writer before her mother, writing factually spurious biographies of famous persons such as Charlie Chaplin and Jack London. As a result of this experience, she played a vital role in encouraging and then editing her mother's writing. Lane's extensive support has even led to questions about the authorship of the Little House books, particularly from Lane's biographer, William Holtz. At several points, Fraser pushes back against Holtz, who "uncritically adopted Lane's harsh view of her mother." Fraser's book is important, in part, for the work it does to refute Holtz's arguments through an examination of the correspondence between mother and daughter, and of the manuscripts written in Wilder's hand.

As Fraser's narrative moves past the events contained within the books themselves, it arrives at the circumstances during which the first books were written and published (the Great Depression), and then on to the effect their popular reception had on the Wilders. Just as Wilder's life shaped her books, so too did her books come to shape her life. Great books, however, outlive their authors, and such is the case with the *Little House* series. Fraser's biography extends beyond Wilder's death to consider the legacy of her work, in print and on television, emphasizing the broad appeal of Wilder's stories as a testament to American perseverance and hope. Underscoring the inextricability of Wilder's life and work, this is also the portrait that *Prairie Fires*, through its historicizing impulse, presents of Laura Ingalls Wilder herself: A woman of great determination, whose life, hopes, and dreams speak to the fundamentals of the American character.