

“My Ántonia” by Willa Cather

Discussion Questions

1. The prologue is told from the point of view of an unnamed speaker, who grew up with Jim Burden and meets him years later on a train. The narrator does not resurface after the Introduction. Is this person a man or woman? Why might Cather have chosen to open the novel this way? Does the prologue set up the rest of the novel as a series of departures?
2. After the prologue, narration switches to Jim Burden, who paints the story from the eagle’s perch of adulthood. Why did Cather choose Jim, a corporate lawyer living on the East Coast, to tell an American frontier story? Is Jim a reliable narrator?
3. When first exposed to the Nebraska frontier, Jim feels overwhelmed by the environment and recalls: "Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be." How does Jim enjoy this newfound sense of being a small part of a vast universe, and how is his reverence for nature and the seasons reflected in the course of the novel?
4. In Willa Cather's other novels, the land symbolizes terrific hardships and great rewards. What is each character's relationship to the land, and how is each saved or destroyed by the relationship?
5. Many early critics complained about the novel’s lack of structure. Jim, perhaps parroting Cather’s writing process, says in the prologue: “I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people's Ántonia's name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form.” Although the narrative unfolds chronologically, the structure is unconventional with title character appearing in three of five sections. What effect does Cather produce by telling her story in this fashion? How does Cather bring the novel full circle, mirroring Jim's observation "What a little circle man's experience is?"
6. Cather contrasts characters who stay rooted to the land and those who emigrate or travel. Does Ántonia have stronger ties to Bohemia or to Nebraska? How do her feelings mirror Jim's feelings about New York and Nebraska? By the end of the novel, who seems more rooted in Nebraska, Jim or Ántonia? How are Ántonia's feelings similar or dissimilar to the feelings of other immigrants of her time? Does the shared experience of the novel's pioneers end up counting for more than their linguistic and ethnic differences? Do you think the conflict she feels is also felt by immigrants today?
7. At times, Jim's seems infatuated with Ántonia, yet their relationship does not progress romantically. Yet, after Wick Cutter’s failed assault, Jim says that "I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness." Similarly, Jim never crosses the line with the seemingly more available Lena Lingard. Why are these characters ambivalent and/or squeamish about sexuality? Do their attitudes change during the course of the story?
8. The novel is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of success. Do you think these two pursuits are one and the same in the novel? Does Ántonia achieve this kind of happiness? What is the complete, great thing in her life? Can the adult Jim ever achieve this kind of happiness?

“My Ántonia” by Willa Cather

Discussion Questions

9. Cather employs mirror events throughout the novel. For example, the novel opens with the simultaneous arrival of Jim and the Shimerda family in Nebraska. Wick Cutter's suicide at the end echoes that of Mr. Shimerda; while the circumstances of each death are different, do we think the author suggests there are prerequisites to surviving in Nebraska? What is the effect of this symmetry and its variations on the story?
10. In one of her essays, Willa Cather observed, "I have not much faith in women in fiction." Yet, Ántonia may be considered a heroic figure while other strong women populate the novel, such as Grandmother Burden, "a strong woman, of unusual endurance." What perceived defects in earlier fictional heroines might Cather be trying to redeem in this novel? Do her female characters seem nobler or better than their male counterparts? Why did Cather choose a male narrator?
11. One Goodreads reviewer describes “My Ántonia” as a novel about the various types of prisons people and/or society build for themselves. Do you agree with this idea?
12. The epigraph for “My Ántonia” is a quote from Virgil: *Optima dies . . . prima fugit* — "The best days are the first to flee." What is the significance of this quotation, and how does it relate to the last line of the novel: "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past"? 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? How is this notion of lost happiness connected to Jim's observation: "That is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great"?
13. Kathleen Norris writes in her foreword that "in many ways the world of My Ántonia is still with us, a neglected but significant part of America." Not only does the novel present 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 ethnic identities remain. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision and do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier? What relevance does the novel have today, and what does it reveal to us about our collective past?