
The life of Laura Ingalls Wilder has been widely documented, both in her own writings and by scholars and historians. The autobiographical nature of the Little House books make them irresistible for scholars looking to research and analyze the places where Wilder’s life deviated from that of the character which she created. There are many Wilder biographers—John E. Miller, Donald Zochert, and William Anderson—who draw portraits of the author’s life and examine where fact and fiction diverge. What makes Pamela Smith Hill’s Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer’s Life stand apart from other biographies of Wilder is that it is essentially a Künstlerroman (“artist’s novel). As her title implies, Hill focuses on constructing a portrait of Wilder’s growth and development as a writer and artist. The resulting study is a thoughtful and sometimes compelling portrait that will provide readers with new insight into both the Little House books and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Early chapters will have a familiar feel to readers as they trace ground covered by both the Little House books and other Wilder biographies. From the start, however, Hill presents the story of Laura Ingalls Wilder through multiple perspectives and focuses on looking at the choices that Wilder made when crafting her story for publication. Hill brings together historical research, the Little House books, correspondence by and about Wilder, and “Pioneer Girl,” the unpublished memoir that was Wilder’s first attempt at telling her life story. “Pioneer Girl” is referenced by many Wilder scholars, but Hill’s discussion of it in this context is illuminating reading, for Hill uses it to chart Wilder’s growth as a writer and storyteller.

The beginning of the biography tells the story of a young Wilder, but it also examines the places in which Wilder consciously revised parts of her story. Hill notes two key themes—westward movement and isolation—that Wilder works into the Little House books that were not present in the less successful “Pioneer Girl.” Hill remarks, “In the memoir [“Pioneer Girl”], Wilder wrote closer to the facts of her experience; in her novels, she transformed these experiences into an almost mythic kind of truth. She deliberately heightened her family’s social and physical isolation, a transformation that ultimately strengthened not just her first novel, but the remaining books in the series” (17). Likewise, Hill calls the incorporation of a theme of westward movement, “the spine, the rigid, inflexible back-
bone of the entire series” (8), and the early chapters of the biography work to make clear how Wilder rearranged and reworked parts of her story in order to nurture these themes. Hill does a nice job of shifting from text to historical record to correspondence without losing or confusing the reader as she contrasts different tellings of an event.

In addition to showing how the Little House books were crafted, this first part of the book also draws an in-depth portrait of Wilder’s childhood and adolescence. The childhood that Hill’s research reveals provides good insight into the Ingalls family, particularly to those who are not familiar with “Pioneer Girl.” As Hill herself notes, perhaps the most disconcerting piece of information is the fact that Jack the bulldog did not die peacefully shortly before the family set out for Silver Lake. Instead, he was actually given away by Pa during a horse trade (10). Tidbits like this make for interesting reading while also offering some perspective into what elements Wilder felt appropriate for a child audience and necessary to a good story. Hill brings in correspondence between Wilder and daughter Rose Wilder Lane that discusses different editorial choices and shows that Wilder had a clear vision of how her story should be told and what it should ultimately convey.

The fact that Wilder made choices at all when telling her life story is one of the major issues that scholars have with her work. Are the books fiction or autobiography? Hill refers to the texts as both autobiographical and fiction. In her introduction, she briefly addresses the question, commenting, “The greater truth of fiction, the satisfying arc of a good story, ultimately interested Wilder far more than the precise details of her own past” (3), but Hill rapidly shifts her focus to her consideration of Wilder as artist and does not engage in the debate. She does, however, engage in the second major issue concerning Wilder’s writings, the role of Rose Wilder Lane in the creation of the Little House books.

How much of the Little House books were actually written by Rose Wilder Lane? The connection between the two women has been much discussed and documented, but Hill’s portrayal works to offer insight into both Wilder’s and Lane’s perspectives. Drawing extensively from correspondence between the two women and Lane’s own published writings, a vivid picture of mother and daughter surfaces. Both an underlying tension and a desire to please each other become obvious. I appreciated Hill’s thoughtful discussion of the rapport between the women as each fought for her own artistic vision. These later chapters depict the complexities of the relationship between Wilder and Lane and the biography goes a long way toward answering the long debated authorship question. Hill’s comments in her final chapter offer a solid summation of her position:
Wilder and Lane had unique and separate voices in their fiction, even when they covered the same material. Wilder brought warmth, engagement, and energy to her books. Lane wrote with cool detachment. Her novels about the frontier settled on ideas; Wilder’s centered on characters: Laura and her family as well as the West itself. And while Wilder was indebted to Lane for her editorial expertise, Lane was indebted to her mother for the material she used in her most widely read novels, *Let the Hurricane Roar* and *Free Land*. Their artistic relationship was as deeply intertwined as their familial one. Wilder, however, was the stronger novelist, Lane the stronger editor. (192–93)

The chapters preceding this statement offer an in-depth look at the relationship between mother and daughter while also clearly illustrating Wilder’s growth and increasing confidence as a writer.

The correspondence between the women reveals Wilder’s vision for her work and the interaction between the two women in creating the Little House series. Wilder emerges as a gifted writer with good instincts who knew how to tell a story. Lane is revealed as an equally gifted editor who never seemed fully to appreciate or respect her mother’s talents. Wilder clearly valued her daughter’s contributions to her work, even going so far as to allocate ten percent of the royalties earned by the Little House books to Lane (185). Lane, despite this financial award, valued her mother’s work somewhat differently. Hill cites many letters in which Lane apologizes to George Bye, her agent, for asking him to deal with her mother’s insignificant work (138–39). Lane emerges as an egotistical woman of uncertain ethics in regard to her writing, but also as a cunning businesswoman and loving daughter. Hill’s portrayal is compelling, drawing a vivid picture of the collaboration and personalities that created the Little House books.

My only real frustration with the biography was the amount of time I spent working from the notes to the text and sometimes even to other sources to try to ascertain how Hill came to a particular conclusion. While I never doubted Hill’s assertions, I was sometimes left wishing that more of the information that she used to reach her conclusions was within the text, rather than merely in the notes. One area that was particularly lacking in this regard was the comparison of Lane’s *Let the Hurricane Roar* and Wilder’s “Pioneer Girl.” This section was fascinating reading, revealing that Wilder and Lane came close to ending up in court over Lane’s plagiarism of Wilder’s unpublished manuscript (151–52). This assertion is supported by a note referring to a William Anderson article, but the textual discussion left me searching elsewhere for more information.

Although I wished for more direct inclusion of some of the cited sources, I was also surprised by the absence of any reference to some other prominent Wilder scholars, most notably Ann Romines. Hill worked primarily
with biographers, but did refer to some critical pieces, and Romines's writings, particularly where she looks at the construction of the Little House series, could enrich aspects of the discussion just as John E. Miller's did. Despite this, Hill’s use of "Pioneer Girl" and other primary sources makes this a valuable resource in itself.

This is not a biography that presents an entirely new portrayal of Wilder's life. What made Hill's book especially interesting was her portrayal of the dynamic interplay between the character, Laura Ingalls, and the author, Laura Ingalls Wilder. This biography enriches not only the Little House books themselves, but informs existing biographies of Wilder. It is a fitting celebration of a woman who has sometimes been underappreciated as a storyteller and artist.

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Works Cited


———. "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Continuing Collaboration." South Dakota History 16 (Summer 1986): 89-143.


A rag doll leans against my laptop, complete with button eyes, yarn hair, and a calico dress. Her name is Charlotte. I made her as part of a grade school art project the same year I discovered and devoured all the Little House books. And in my Charlotte, Anita Clair Fellman would recognize a classic example of the Little House’s long shadow.