

Janis P. Stout, ed. *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. 256p.

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The volume *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World* appears in a prestigious series and includes ten essays by top-flight scholars, collected by an editor who is herself a prolific author. The contributors acknowledge the central role of material culture and daily-life artifacts in Cather's writing, be it an Indian pot gracing the canyon wall in *The Song of the Lark*, a *bol de café* in *Shadows on the Rock*, or an archeological shard in *The Professor's House*. The methodology of the collection is revealed in the incipit taken from Elaine Scarry: it attests to how the incorporation of objects in a text actually constructs an image of the text's own occulted preoccupations. That is, the thing that the text seems to create, in fact, in itself summarizes the text. Further, Janis Stout's introduction makes the method more precise, referring to Frederic Jameson's term "introjection," or the use of objects to negotiate our own narrative of desire, and describing the role of objects in Cather's texts as "shaping contexts" and as constituting "expressive traces" (Stout 2). Stout also acknowledges the influence of Walter Benjamin's call to use objects in a way that surpasses their utilitarian value, as well as alluding to the work of anthropologists who view "objects as a kind of language in a culture complex" (4). The collection, Stout points out, is revisionist because the function of material culture in Cather has not formerly been viewed as significant. This attention is long overdue, for, as Cather has her character Cécile say in *Shadows on the Rock*, objects "were...life itself" (6).

Ann Romines quilts appropriate references to various Cather novels into the fabric of her essay, showing quilting to be a form of literary embroidery or development of self within female community. Next, Jennifer Bradley's study on Cather and the "commodification of manners" discusses Cather's editorial role in fashioning (but, also, problematizing, through at times conflicting messages) consumerism through advocating prescribed postures and products in advertisements and opinion pieces in the *Home Monthly*. Park Bucker's third chapter examines Neighbor Rosicky in a partial concordance of the family's rural kitchen versus modern amenities and brand-name technological advances. In "Taking Liberties," Michael Schueth explains how Cather's name was used without her control in a mass medium for publicity (*A Lost Lady*), the implication being that a new kind of literature, in which profit margins mattered more than art, was developing. Anne Raine's "Object Lessons" analyzes *The Professor's House* for its use of open spaces and landscape to oppose

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the vogue for “urbanized” material objects or an aestheticized space designed and produced. Honor Wallace then describes “An Orgy of Acquisition,” referring often (as do many of the other contributors) to Cather’s essay on this topic, *The Novel Demeublé*, and talking about what Wallace calls a “second consumerism” circa 1920 in which women were socially schooled to express desire publicly through consumption and acquisition. Deborah Williams views Native American women and their artifactual production as constituting an “alternative aesthetic” admired by Cather in her essay “Fragments of their Desire.” In the eighth essay, Sarah Wilson narrates the role of material objects as cultural mediators primarily in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and Robert Miller performs a skilful and provocative auscultation of the glove filled with gold in *My Mortal Enemy*, suing Mauss and Durkheim as well as actual weights and measures. Finally, Mary Ann O’Farrell in “Words to do with Things,” provides an apt conclusion to an excellent collection, calling on the work of philosopher Santayana and also referring back to Cather’s *The Novel Demeublé*.

The guiding theme throughout the essays is that of women’s—and Cather’s own, in particular—insertion in domestic culture and the attendant tensions with consumerist, commodified culture. The volume is attractively presented, intelligently realized, and a valuable addition to the scholar’s bookshelf, addressing the timely topic of textual materialism in insightful and new ways. ✱