

# ***My Antonia*, by Willa Cather (1918)**

## **An Overview**

Go west, young man, and grow with the country! It was the motto, penned by journalist Horace Greeley in 1865, that defined the urge and the promise of opportunity that sent hopeful and desperate pioneers streaming from the teeming cities of the Atlantic coast toward newly acquired land in the west, taming the Great Plains along the way.

The Homestead Act, signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, encouraged this western migration by providing 160 acres of land for just a minimal filing fee and five years of residence on the land to any adult (male head of the household) citizen or any immigrant intending to become a citizen. Eventually, some 1.6 million settlers, including freed slaves and European immigrants, established small farms on homesteaded land.

The determined, hardy spirit of these intrepid pioneers is still celebrated in America today, especially in Western states. We Americans value independence, hard work, courage, and ambition, and nobody has embodied that more clearly in our national history than the figure of the pioneer trekking west to face unknown dangers in the pursuit of imagined opportunities.

What did this heroic figure look like? If you've watched any television, or read anything about this period, you're probably imagining a man who is rugged and determined, out to tame the wilderness with know-how and grit.

There's just one problem with this picture, though. Where are all the women? When it comes to our picture of a pioneer, they are usually either looking out from the interior of a covered wagon, or are toiling silently inside the log cabin.

That's where *My Antonia* comes in. Willa Cather's novel, set on the Nebraska prairie at the end of the 1800s, is an invaluable reminder that life was hard for everyone on the frontier, and that the women who made a go of it were every bit as tough-minded and independent as the men were. Antonia Shimerda faces the triple-hardships of scratching out a living on the prairie, while having to do so as a woman, all while dealing with the challenges of being an immigrant as well.

*My Ántonia* is a great reminder that the stories of heroic pioneering men would not have been possible without the strength of the women who stood beside them.

Cather's novel is also a romance, her own love story for place and a time that has passed, and a sometimes-rocky love story between immigrant and non-immigrant, between a growing boy and the girl he both admires and resents, and an equally tumultuous love for the land that sustains and envelops them all.