



The Pioneer in Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, and Mari Sandoz

by Dan Holtz

In June of 1913, Houghton Mifflin published *O Pioneers!*, and the writing career of Willa Cather, who was then 39 years old, headed in a much more fruitful direction. In September of 1928, Appleton-Century published *A Lantern in Her Hand*, and Bess Streeter Aldrich, who was then 47, soon enjoyed the financial success and reader approval of the novel that most have come to regard as her finest. Lastly, in October of 1935, Little, Brown, and Company released *Old Jules*, and the writing career of then 39-year-old Mari Sandoz took off. Aside from the similar ages of these women upon the publication of these books, other notable similarities attended their writing and release. All three women, for example, were at defining moments in their lives, and all certainly saw the critical and/or popular capital they gained from these books propel their careers in much more promising directions. All three also had chosen to write about a subject, the pioneering experience, about which they seemed, at least in part, destined to write. But although all wrote about the physical and emotional struggles and the grinding poverty of pioneering, all three used this subject to explore divergent concerns and themes that became cornerstones in their writing.

Probably more so than Cather and Aldrich, Sandoz was at a critical juncture when *Old Jules* won the Atlantic Press nonfiction prize in 1935. Although she had projected a friendly exterior during her 12 years in Lincoln that began in 1923, her impoverished, Spartan existence and the psychic scars she carried from being Jules Sandoz's oldest daughter made it difficult for her to be close to anyone there. As one acquaintance from that time said of Sandoz, "One might just as well have tried to

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befriend a porcupine.”¹

And little more than a year and a half before the acceptance of *Old Jules*, Sandoz, as Helen Stauffer puts it, ostensibly gave up as a writer and left Lincoln to return home. She was in ill health and had seen her writing make only the slightest inroads, openings not even as substantial as the tenuous two-track wagon paths carved by settlers in the vastness of the sandhills. She had labored doggedly for more than 10 years, producing more than 70 short stories, countless articles, and two books, but her writing had earned only \$325 in sales and prize money. Moreover, before she left Lincoln, Sandoz burned, with the help of three friends, the manuscripts for her short stories.² A decisive renunciation. Still, she could not stop writing, even though she now faced directly her mother’s skepticism about the practicality of a writing career and the continuing stream of rejection slips for *Old Jules*.³ A lesser person would have quit.

Perhaps a person lesser than Aldrich would have quit, as well. Aldrich’s primary challenge before *A Lantern in Her Hand*’s publication, though, stemmed not from publishers’ rejections (by 1928, she had had one novel, two collections of related short stories, and numerous other short stories published) but from crushing personal loss. Her beloved friend and husband, Charles, Cap as he was called, died unexpectedly from a cerebral hemorrhage in May of 1925, and Aldrich faced the prospect of raising four children alone and of putting them through college. Moreover, because Aldrich had settled on writing as her way to make a living, she faced the challenge of producing saleable material without Cap, her strongest supporter. As Carol Petersen, Aldrich’s biographer, puts it, she was worried. She did not know if she could produce. “Not until a little over a year after Cap’s death,” Petersen wrote, “did [Aldrich] complete another short story.”⁴ And instead of making the twice-a-day trips to the post office herself, as she had in the past, she sent her daughter, Mary, as she waited for word of the story’s acceptance or rejection by *American Magazine*.

Somewhat akin to Sandoz and Aldrich, Cather had run head on into a significant crossroads before writing *O Pioneers!*. She knew she wanted to write; she knew she wanted to be an artist; she knew she had to make a living. The problem was how to balance the three, and this

was a problem, as James Woodress explains in *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, that caused considerable turmoil. During this period, Cather was a managing-level editor for *McClure’s Magazine* and was arguably the most powerful woman in American journalism, according to Cather scholar Susan Rosowski. Her position at *McClures*, as Woodress explains, had seductive attractions—the opportunity for extensive travel, associations with brilliant, worldly people, and a very good salary in a male-dominated world—but also considerable drawbacks: namely, constant demands that impeded her writing.⁵ Moreover, Cather, as Woodress puts it, was questioning her own creative abilities. A chance meeting with the New England writer Sarah Orne Jewett in February of 1908, though, eventually led Cather to a solution, which not only helped her find herself as a writer but which also, and not coincidentally, involved pioneering.

After Cather met Jewett, the two exchanged letters from time to time, until Jewett’s death in 1909. In one letter, Jewett wrote, “The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature.”⁶ This advice was prophetic for Cather, who had struggled not only to break away from *McClure’s* but also to find that “thing” that would be fertile soil. Cather quickly came to regard the subject of her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, published in 1912, as not that kind of material. However, the memories from her connection to a pioneering past were. Even before *O Pioneers!* was published, Cather was sure that it was better than her first book and later wrote to Carrie Miner Sherwood, a Red Cloud friend, “This was the first time I walked off on my own feet . . . In this one I hit the home pasture.”⁷ In other words, writing about pioneering had come naturally.

For Aldrich and Sandoz, such writing came rather naturally, as well. From an impetus somewhat similar yet different from Cather’s, Aldrich decided to write *A Lantern in Her Hand*. For her, though, the memories of pioneering were not hers but her mother’s, yet they evidently grabbed her with a force comparable to Cather’s experience. In telling how the book came to be written, Aldrich recounted an incident in which her mother had told about pioneering experiences, the difficulties of which moved Aldrich to sympathy. Her mother, however, quickly replied,

“Why, don’t feel sorry for us. In with the hard times, we had the best time in the world.”⁸ These words, according to Carol Petersen, and the look that accompanied them became a recurring memory for Aldrich, who felt she must write a book to honor her mother and other pioneer mothers.⁹

For Sandoz, as the foreword to *Old Jules* indicates, writing about her father’s pioneering was, at least in part, a filial obligation. In the foreword, Sandoz wrote, “The book became a duty the last day of [my father’s] life, when he asked that I write of his struggles as a locator, a builder of communities, bringer of fruit to the Panhandle.”¹⁰ The book, however, also sprang from another motivation—a bone-deep empathy for pioneers and a need to portray their experience. The following statement from Sandoz supports this contention:

[Thomas] Hardy and [Joseph] Conrad fit the sandhills better than any other writers I know. There is in their work always an overshadowing sense of the futility in life. This is revealed in their novels as it is revealed in the tragic, desperate lives of the settlers whom my father brought to Nebraska. At first, I must confess, this depressed me, but as I grew older and more experienced, I came to find them a source of considerable inspiration.¹¹

As stated before, though, Aldrich’s, Cather’s, and Sandoz’s books about pioneering resulted in significantly different portrayals. Sandoz, to a reader who had queried her, commented on one important difference shortly after *Old Jules* was published. She wrote, “I am interested in your question: Have there been two strikingly different pioneer Nebraskas?” The first part of Sandoz’s reply summarizes what she believed were four great similarities in pioneer life. These include the pioneers’ desires to live in remote regions because they offered more personal freedom, yet freedom usually bought only through trial and tragedy.¹² The second part, however, delineates differences between pioneering in *Old Jules* and in Cather’s *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!*, the books that apparently prompted the question. Sandoz wrote, “. . . the problem (for the pioneers) was what one finds so superbly portrayed in *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers*—one of adjustment rather than one of staying at all at any price.”¹³ For Sandoz, this “staying at all at any price” was the problem of the frontiersman. And Sandoz, in this letter, noted the importance of

the frontier in *Old Jules*, writing that Cather’s “pioneer region” was “. . . never so close to the frontier in her time as my region was in my life. Nor was it ever so close to the frontier in any of her stories.”¹⁴

Furthermore, Helen Stauffer has noted that “the tales told and retold about Jules pictured him as a frontiersman rather than a pioneer and illustrated his significant role in developing the primitive frontier into a civilized, productive part of the United States.”¹⁵ In other words, Jules Sandoz did not just settle in new territory as a pioneer would; he pushed into the farthest reaches of Nebraska’s un-settled regions and hung on like a sandbur underneath a saddle blanket in a land whose remoteness, ruggedness, and aridity resisted development. And Sandoz’s books consistently explored the dynamics of the frontier, as she examined the political, economic, social, and natural forces that came into play as various people vied for ascendancy on the borderlands in the Great Plains and as some, as she had in her writing career, stayed on at any price.

For Aldrich, on the other hand, pioneering was, in large measure, a setting from which she could explore the importance of family and family ties, a theme that her writing repeatedly examines. The story in *A Lantern . . .* revolves around Abbie Mackenzie Deal, who becomes a universal mother-figure, akin to Antonia Shimerda. Early in the novel, Abbie rejects a young doctor’s marriage proposal, even though this offer almost surely promises a financially comfortable life. Instead, she marries Will Deal, a recently returned Civil War veteran, who within three years of their wedding, takes her from the comfortable familiarity of Iowa to a homestead on the plains of eastern Nebraska and a hard-scrabble life. Abbie’s choice of Will, rather than the doctor, although as natural to her as is her love of singing, is not made without some misgivings. As Abbie realizes, a union with Dr. Matthews will most likely guarantee her the leisure and financial freedom to pursue her dream of a singing career. However, Will, for Abbie, promises a different, more important kind of surety, which is a center of gravity, strength of character, and a true marriage partner. As Aldrich wrote, “Of all the people [Abbie] knew in the world, Will was the most understanding. He was so steady,—so dependable.”¹⁶

This steadiness and dependability vanish, though, after Will dies

from a heart attack when he is nearing 50 and Abbie is 44. The parallels between Abbie and Aldrich are too evident to ignore. For Aldrich was 44 when Cap died, and Aldrich, like Abbie, became a single mother with four children at home. Admittedly Aldrich did not experience the struggles to make ends meet that Abbie did, both before and after Will's death, but she certainly felt an emotional vacuum akin to Abbie's.¹⁷ Thus, she may have been working through her own grief when she wrote these words from the almost always taciturn Will shortly before he died. Will says:

Death. . . Death I wonder why we fear it?

With you and me . . . all we've been through together and all we've meant to each other . . . with us, it couldn't be so terrible. You are so much a part of me, that if you were taken away I think it would seem that you just went on with me.¹⁸

Tellingly, Aldrich recalled a similar sentiment in a note that describes how she began writing *A Lantern* . . . In this note, she wrote, "I prayed that if possible all those I love who have gone on might be allowed to bend over me for a moment with words of encouragement."¹⁹

With these words and those from Will Deal, Aldrich reflects on the figurative soil that she and Abbie would have to break in their widowhood. Likewise, Cather's portrayals of pioneering are similarly figurative, if by "pioneering" one means literal breaking of new soil. This contention is readily demonstrated by the structure of *O Pioneers!*, in which less than one-fourth of the pages concern actual pioneering or breaking and taming of the soil, while the remainder concern the breaking of new pathways for women. Furthermore, Cather's portrayal of pioneering in *My Antonia* follows a similar course. Only in the first book of this novel, which admittedly is considerably the longest of its five, do we see some of the typical pioneering travails. In this book, the Shimerdas live in a hovel of a dugout, suffer through the deviousness of Krajiek and the suicide of Mr. Shimerda, and struggle with the land and with establishing their homestead. As the novel works toward its conclusion, however, Cather titles the next-to-the-last book "The Pioneer Woman's Story." Here, Antonia is, of course, again working the soil after her interlude as a hired girl in Blackhawk, because she has been relegated to this circumstance through the shame of having a child out of wedlock. But although Antonia must always be understood in the

context of her connection with Nebraska's soil, this book and the one that follows it are more about figurative than literal pioneering, just as is the story of Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* For both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* more importantly concern two women who must break new soil in a world dominated by men, namely their brothers, although other men can and do appreciate their strengths of character.

Thus, in these three books by Aldrich, Cather, and Sandoz, we get varied portrayals of pioneering. The protagonists in all three—Abbie Deal, Alexandra Bergson, and Jules Sandoz—successfully endure their encounters with Nebraska's landscape and, on the whole, prevail. None of the three, however, comes through her or his respective experience without being deeply marked. But though these books converge in these ways, the roads to success for Alexandra Bergson, Abbie Deal, and Jules Sandoz are measured by different mileposts. Jules, for example, could not have been successful in a book about pioneering written by Aldrich. His poor personal hygiene, smutty stories, multiple marriages, and other eccentricities were not suitable fodder for a novel by Aldrich. Furthermore, pioneering for Aldrich, Cather, and Sandoz did not signify exactly the same thing, for each was breaking a different kind of metaphorical soil, a soil that had its counterpart in the personal life and/or writing career of each of the three. Like Abbie Deal, Bess Streeter Aldrich had to find a way to endure the loss of a beloved spouse and the uncharted territory of a relatively early widowhood. Like Alexandra Bergson, Willa Cather had to navigate through territory largely held by men, Alexandra through the rigors of production agriculture and Cather through the demands of magazine journalism and the publishing world. And like her father, Mari Sandoz had to find a way to hang on at any cost in a world that doggedly resisted her best attempts.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Helen Winter Stauffer, *Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 55.
2. Ibid, 88.
3. Ibid, 88 and 91.
4. Carol Miles Petersen, *Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 66.
5. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 204.
6. Quoted in Woodress, 220.
7. Quoted in Susan Rosowski, "Willa Sibert Cather: 1873-1947," *Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors*, (Lincoln: A Slow Tempo Press, 1991), 23.
8. Mary Streeter quoted in Petersen, 77.
9. Ibid, 77.
10. Quoted in *Old Jules*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), viii.
11. Quoted in *Song of the Plains: The Story of Mari Sandoz*, videotape (Nebraska ETV Network, 1978).
12. Helen Winter Stauffer, ed., *Letters of Mari Sandoz*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 87. In this letter, Sandoz wrote:

"Pioneer life has at least four great similarities.

First: The pioneer himself was a misfit, either by nature, inclination, or ambition, or necessity, in his home community. That is—he wanted something more than it could give him even if it didn't deny him freedom and a livelihood.

Second: All pioneer communities are, by definition, remote from the advantages of settlements.

Third: The region is untried and unfamiliar, and usually conquered only by many tragic trials and errors.

Fourth: Being "open" and "free" it is the region where conflicting ambitions have their, if not most unrestricted, at least their most undisguised manifestation, and where emotions are less restricted by the conventions of organized society, where amusements are more often group activities, as the free for all [?], picnic, house raising, etc."
13. Ibid, 88.
14. Ibid, 87 – 88.
15. Stauffer, *Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher . . .*, 11.
16. Bess Streeter Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1928), 45.
17. Petersen, 84.
18. Ibid, 170-71.
19. Aldrich quoted in Petersen, 82