

Discussion Questions- "My Ántonia" by Willa Cather

Next meeting date: Tuesday, July 13 at 6:30 p.m.

- 1.** 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." What relevance does the novel have today, and what does it reveal to us about our collective past?
- 2.** Jim states that "some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again." Does this explain why he is constantly looking at the past instead of toward the future? How is this sentiment reflected in the overall elegiac tone of the novel?
- 3.** The narrator of the prologue in *My Ántonia* is an unnamed speaker who knew Jim Burden in youth and meets him years later on a train. How do the details revealed in this prologue foreshadow the events of the rest of the novel? Cather rewrote the prologue in 1926; the version published in the original 1918 edition is included as an appendix in the Mariner Books paperback edition. What did Cather accomplish by revising the prologue, and how do you think it changed your reading of the novel?
- 4.** The main narrator of *My Ántonia* is Jim Burden, Ántonia's childhood friend, who reminisces from the vantage point of adulthood about their childhood together. Why did Cather choose Jim, a corporate lawyer, to tell this American frontier story? Is Jim a reliable narrator? What do we learn about both Jim and Ántonia from his recollections?
- 5.** Jim's first reaction to the Nebraska frontier is a sense of being overwhelmed by the environment and powerless against its magnitude. He 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?
- 6.** Just as the Nebraska landscape initially seems formless to Jim, his narrative begins in a seemingly unstructured, haphazard way. Many early critics of *My Ántonia* complained about the lack of structure and did not consider it a proper novel. The book has little in the way of a conventional plot, but it still forms a cohesive whole. What unifies the narrative? How does Cather bring the novel full circle, mirroring Jim's observation "What a little circle man's experience is"?

7. In describing Ántonia, Jim Burden remarks, "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seems to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." How does Ántonia come to represent so much of what Jim misses from his youth? Which of her qualities lend themselves to this description?

8. What drives Jim's affection for Ántonia, and what is the nature of that affection? Does Ántonia reciprocate these feelings? Is it fair to say their relationship is a romantic one? In what ways does the picnic scene at the river represent the end of Ántonia's and Jim's carefree youth?

9. What is the nature of Ántonia's feelings for her native Bohemia? Does she have stronger ties to Bohemia or to Nebraska? How do her feelings mirror Jim's feelings about New York and Nebraska? How are Ántonia's feelings similar or dissimilar to the feelings of other immigrants of her time? Do you think the conflict she feels is also felt by immigrants today?

10. As in Willa Cather's other novels, the land in many ways 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?

11. At the center of the novel is Ántonia's creativity, her harmony with her environment, and her contribution to the forging of a new country and the building of a family and a community. Near the novel's beginning, Jim defines happiness as being "dissolved into something complete and great." 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?

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"?