

A prospectus for

A Lost Lady

by

WILLA CATHER

with an introduction by Jane Smiley

and with two paper-cut illustrations by Miriam Klein Stahl



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WILLA CATHER (1873-1947) wrote *A Lost Lady* in Aix-les-Bains, France. She and her companion, Edith Lewis, traveled there in the spring of 1923 at Cather's doctor's suggestion. Cather was forty-nine and had just won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *One of Ours*. That award, and the fame and monetary success that came with it, afforded Cather luxuries few independent women could enjoy. A world-traveling novelist at the height of her talents, Cather was able to make her way in the world without support from anyone. Shortly after arriving in France she excitedly wrote her sister, Elsie Cather, saying,

Here I am, my dear, "taking the waters" as the English say. My back had been getting worse all summer, and when Dr. Litchfield was in Paris for his daughter's wedding he gave me a going over and urged me to come here and take the baths, which he said are the best in the world. . . I came down here on the grandest train in France, the Paris-Rome Express, with a private state room and it all cost nine dollars, the present fare from N.Y. to Boston!

The cosmopolitan tone of Cather's correspondence seems at odds with the more provincial atmosphere of *A Lost Lady*, which takes place in the prairie town of Sweet Water, Nebraska. As Jane Smiley states in her introduction to the book, "In some sense, the contrast between her portrayal of Marian Forrester [*A Lost Lady*'s protagonist] and her own worldly life is the epitome of the paradox that is Willa Cather."

Cather had hoped that *A Lost Lady* would be a success, following close on the heels of *One of Ours*; and it was, both critically and commercially. It was also a significant, albeit little-known influence on another famous writer: F. Scott Fitzgerald.

We know from Fitzgerald's correspondence that he held *A Lost Lady* in extremely high regard. Upon publication of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, Fitzgerald wrote a letter to H. L. Menken expressing anxiety around the book's ability to stand the test of time alongside other writers he admired: "I admit that in comparison to *My Ántonia* and *The Lost Lady* [sic] it is a failure. . . ."

He also corresponded with Cather that same year, jokingly accusing himself of "plagiarism" based on the fact that his character, Daisy Buchanan, possessed the same "charms" as Cather's Marian Forrester. Cather responded graciously, pushing aside Fitzgerald's claim of plagiarism and instead commiserating with (or, depending on how you read it, perhaps needling) him:

I suppose everybody who has ever been swept away by personal charm tries in some way to express his wonder that the effect is so much greater than the cause,—and in the end we all fall back upon an old device and write about the effect and not the lovely creature who produced it. After all, the only thing one can tell about beauty, is just how hard one was hit by it. Isn't that so?

In hindsight, Fitzgerald's anxiety seems unwarranted. Today, *The Great Gatsby* is taught in classrooms around the world, while *A Lost Lady* is overshadowed by Cather's more popular books: *My Ántonia* and *Oh, Pioneers!*. Yet while Fitzgerald's Long Island party scene and Cather's hardscrabble Nebraska are hundreds of miles apart from one another, the books share some surprising common ground.

Structurally, the two works can be viewed as pieces from the same puzzle—similar but not the same. *The Great Gatsby* follows the tragic

efforts of a successful young man who returns home to stage a reunion with his former sweetheart, while *A Lost Lady* explores the lasting impression a respectable lady makes on a boy who, as a grown and capable young man, returns to help her.

The two books also share a tight, restricted point-of-view. In *A Lost Lady*, Mrs. Forrester's life is filtered through the eyes of Niel Herbert, a much younger male character—someone who, given his age, isn't always capable of understanding the nuances of marriage, financial success and failure or sexual love. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick, an outsider, recounts the story, not Daisy, Tom, or Gatsby, the novel's primary characters. This "outsider looking in" perspective is obviously loaded for Cather, a gay woman writing in a man's voice, but also a literary technique her readers will be familiar with, as she utilizes it to great effect in *My Ántonia* and *One of Ours*.

Sexuality is an area where the two books conspicuously part ways. Unlike Daisy Buchanan, the glittering object of men's desires who is often described by critics as a cypher, or a mirage, Cather's heroine in *A Lost Lady* makes use of her femininity but remains romantically unavailable. As such, her power over the narrator is more subtle and her legacy remains somewhat vague. In the book's final pages, Cather writes of Niel:

He came to be very glad that he had known her, and that she had had a hand in breaking him in to life. He has known pretty women and clever ones since then—but never one like her, as she was in her best days. Her eyes, when they laughed for a moment into one's own, seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life. "I know where it is," they seemed to say, "I could show you!"

In the end, Marian Forrester shows Niel something more lasting than romantic love. She provides an initiation to adulthood and all the economic realities, missed opportunities and compromises that come with it. As a woman and a widow, she is forced to acknowledge and grapple with things Niel cannot. While Niel dreams about her beauty, he also craves her authority and her approval. He longs for her judgment, just as the novel's characters (and readers) judge Mrs. Forrester throughout much of the book.

Like Fitzgerald, Cather was free to travel the world, writing, publishing and doing as she pleased, while her heroines did not have such good fortune. In this light, the book can be read as a subtle, even covert, examination of both male and female double-standards.

This beguiling and influential book is an overlooked gem worth reexamining. It is perhaps not surprising that Jane Smiley calls it "the Cather work that moves me the most."

THE INTRODUCTION

Born in Los Angeles, California, Jane Smiley grew up in Webster Groves, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. She earned a BA in literature at Vassar College (1971), then an MA (1975), MFA (1976), and Ph.D. (1978) from the University of Iowa. From 1981 to 1996 she was a Professor of English at Iowa State University, teaching undergraduate and graduate creative writing workshops. In 1996, she relocated to California. She returned to teaching creative writing at the University of California, Riverside, in 2015.

Smiley published her first novel, *Barn Blind*, in 1980. Her best-selling *A Thousand Acres*, a story based on William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992. It was adapted into

a film of the same title in 1997. Her novella *The Age of Grief* was made into the 2002 film, *The Secret Lives of Dentists*.

In 2001, Smiley was elected a member of The Academy of Arts and Letters. She won the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006 and chaired the judges' panel for the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2009. In 2006, she received the Fitzgerald Award for Achievement in American Literature, which is given annually in Rockville Maryland, where Fitzgerald, his wife, and his daughter are buried.

Jane Smiley's most recent works are a trilogy of novels about an Iowa family over the course of generations.

THE ARTIST

Miriam Klein Stahl is an artist, educator, activist and the illustrator of two New York Times-bestselling titles, *Rad American Women* and *Rad Women Worldwide*. In addition to her work in printmaking, drawing, sculpture, paper-cut and public art, she is also the co-founder of the Arts and Humanities Academy at Berkeley High School where she has taught since 1995. As an artist, she follows in a tradition of making socially relevant work; as an educator, she has dedicated her teaching practice to address equity through the lens of the arts. Her work has been widely exhibited and reproduced internationally. Arion Press commissioned Stahl to create two paper-cut illustrations for *A Lost Lady*: a portrait of the author which appears on the title page, and an allée of the Lombardy poplars that Cather refers to again and again throughout her story, seemingly a metonym for her protagonist, Marian Forrester. This is Miriam Klein Stahl's first project with the press. She lives in Berkeley, California.

THE EDITION

A Lost Lady is the 117th publication of the Arion Press. Its format is small octavo, 8-⁵/₈ x 6-¹/₄ inches. Its 144 pages are printed by letterpress on 125 gsm Magnani cream laid, mould-made, from metal types cast on site for the project in the M&H Type foundry. The typeface for the text is Century Old Style with Century Expanded handset for display throughout the book. The edition is limited to 200 copies for sale with 26 lettered *hors commerce* copies reserved for participants in the project. All copies of the book are bound in boards with gray vintage Fabriano laid paper sides imprinted in two colors, blue for the titling (the same as appears on the title page author's portrait) and a light nubuck brown for the artwork. The binding is offered in two variants. 175 copies with blue cloth spines are presented in a printed card-stock chemise, and 25 variants with brown goatskin spines in a brown cloth and paper handmade slipcase with matching paper spine label. In exchange for their steadfast support, our subscribers receive a 30% discount on the standard binding and 20% on the optional variant, to which they are granted exclusive first access to purchase. The subscription price for the cloth-bound edition is \$420 (\$600 retail) and for the leather-bound edition \$700 (\$875 retail). To place an order, please contact us or visit our [online store](#) where backlisted items, and various broadsides, notecards, gift certificates and other sundries are also available.

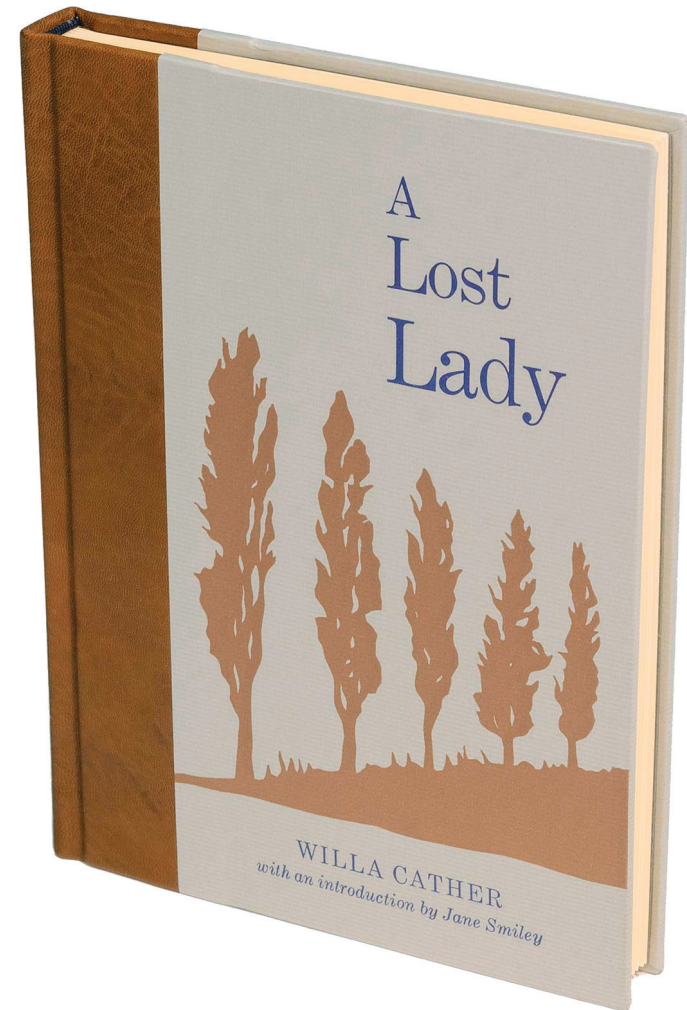
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