

PRAIRIE FIRES:

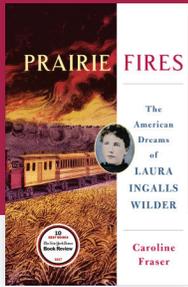
The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book by Caroline Fraser

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR READING GROUPS:

1. Thanks to the Little House books, Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood is one of the most legendary in our literature. Discuss how the factual account of Laura Ingalls's real childhood in *Prairie Fires* differs from the fiction. How does an understanding of Wilder's life affect our perception of her work?
2. Fraser writes, "Wilder made history" (page 5). How is this true, and in what ways does the biography bear this out? Discuss how women made history in earlier eras and how female historical figures depart from traditional male spheres of politics, government, and the military. How do Wilder's life and reputation differ, for example, from those of famous frontier icons such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett? How reluctant are we to acknowledge women as heroes and why?
3. Discuss the Dakota Boom of the late 1870s and 1880s. Why was it a bad idea for homesteaders to farm in Dakota Territory? Since the government knew about the arid nature of the Great Plains, why did it encourage settlement there?
4. Discuss Laura and Almanzo's courtship and early marriage. Why did they come together, and how were they compatible (or not)? How did the tensions that developed between them affect their later lives?
5. What kind of mother was Laura? How did her experience of caring for Rose compare to what we know of Caroline Ingalls's mothering skills? How did Rose respond to the tragedies of her parents' early married life—Almanzo's illness and disability, their loss of a child, the house lost to fire—and how would it affect her later life and relationship to her parents?
6. In 1894, after failing to make a go of it in Dakota Territory, the Wilders joined a mass exodus out of the region, journeying to the "Land of the Big Red Apples" in the Missouri Ozarks. How would Laura's exile from her family affect her, and why would she return to De Smet only once in the next couple of decades, for her father's death? Why do you think she did not return to see her mother or her sister Mary?



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7. Women's clubs, farmers' clubs, and book groups were crucial to the development of Wilder's writing career. Does such networking still play a central role for urban and/or rural women?
8. Discuss Wilder's development as a farm columnist—how did her writing for the *Missouri Ruralist* shape her ambitions and style?
9. Talk about how Rose Wilder Lane's return to Rocky Ridge Farm in the 1920s and 1930s affected her life. Why did she build another house for her parents, after their successful completion of their own farmhouse? What do you think the Wilders thought of the Rock House?
10. Laura Ingalls Wilder worked for ten years for the National Farm Loan Association. So why did she object so vehemently to the New Deal programs designed to help farmers? Why was federal aid acceptable for her and not for others? If you were a rural farmer in the 1930s, how would you have felt about the federal government?
11. Do you see the influence of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression in Wilder's memoir and the Little House books—and if so, how? Discuss the other, more personal events that led to her writing.
12. The way in which Wilder and Lane passed manuscripts back and forth between them has been described as a “collaboration.” It's even been called “ghostwriting.” How would you describe it? Do you know of other mother/daughter professional writing relationships?
13. How have perceptions of the Little House books changed over the years, or even over the course of your own life? How has *Prairie Fires* changed your perceptions?



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CAROLINE FRASER ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

Q. The Little House books are so ubiquitous in pop culture, many people feel like they know Laura Ingalls Wilder. How is her real life different than the one she portrayed in the books?

A. One of the reasons why I wanted to write this book is that I came to feel that “Laura” had almost been loved to death, sort of like a beloved doll or toy. Between the fictional “Laura” of the books and the even more heavily fictionalized girl of the TV show, we’ve tended to lose sight of the fact that Laura Ingalls Wilder was a real person who was complicated and intense.

She’s also someone whose life opens a window on everything from frontier history and the Plains Indian wars to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Her real life is even more remarkable than the story in her books, in some ways, which ended at age 18 with her marriage.

Q. When and why did you become interested in Wilder’s story?

A. I was a fan as a kid and read the books over and over. They were some of my favorites, especially *The Long Winter*, which I just loved. They’re so absorbing—a world unto themselves—and comforting. That isn’t true for all readers, of course, but that was my experience.

They meant a lot to me because my family came from immigrant farmers and covered wagon people—Swedes and Norwegians on my mother’s side, who farmed in Minnesota and North Dakota—and Germans on my father’s side, who farmed about 50 miles from Pepin, Wisconsin, where Laura was born. So Laura’s story felt like my story, somehow—and I know that generations of

other readers felt the same way.

I started writing about Wilder in the early 1990s, when a biography of Wilder’s daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, was published—it claimed that Rose was the ghost writer of the Little House books. I was curious and kind of skeptical about that, so I started looking at Wilder’s handwritten manuscripts. And I ended up writing a long piece about Wilder for *The New York Review of Books*. Eventually I edited the Library of America’s two-volume edition of the Little House books and found the history so fascinating I didn’t want to stop.

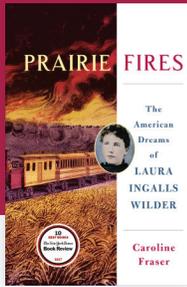
Q. Are the Little House books children’s literature? Are they under appreciated?

A. Of course they’re children’s literature, but there’s a wide adult readership too, from the kind of fans who go to “LauraPalooza”—a conference about all things Laura—to literary scholars, feminists, and historians. Whether you find them an inspiration or a provocation, they’re a part of our history.

So I think they inhabit a place in our culture that’s similar to the place occupied by Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. They may have been written for kids originally, but they’ve transcended the audience they were intended for.

Q. What was the most surprising discovery you made during your research for *Prairie Fires*?

A. There were a lot of surprises, including pretty basic things, such as the realization of the fact that Wilder—who is so strongly associated with the West—spent most of her adult life in the American South. That became very clear to me when I went to the Ozarks and Mansfield, Missouri for the first



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time. I don't think the South influenced her work, per se, but I do believe that her long exile from her family in the Dakotas helped to inspire the nostalgia for her past in the Little House books. And that was huge.

Another startling discovery was the fact that Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, was a notorious yellow journalist, who taught her mother the tricks of the trade. Lane learned at the foot of a master, Fremont Older, who was the editor of the *San Francisco Bulletin* and a friend of William Randolph Hearst's. Lane wrote the invented "autobiography" of Charlie Chaplin—he threatened to sue her when she tried to publish it as a book—as well as dubious biographies of Henry Ford, Jack London, and Herbert Hoover.

The fact that Wilder was influenced by this is shown by one of the very tall tales she told in her famous 1937 Detroit book fair speech, in which she claimed that her father was involved in hunting and executing the "Bloody Benders," who were serial killers on the Great Plains. The Benders were real, but her father's exploits weren't. It's interesting because Wilder would insist—in that speech and elsewhere—that her books (although published as novels!) were "all true."

Q. Why was Wilder's relationship with her daughter Rose so fraught?

A. Rose is just a fascinating character in her own right—colorful, driven, immensely talented and also kind of tortured. For many years, she was more well known as a writer than her mother—she wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* and a lot of national magazines. She almost bullied her mother to write the Little House books, and it's clear that they would not have been published without Rose,

her professional connections, her editing, and her guidance.

I think one of the stories within a story of *Prairie Fires* is the drama of the relationship between these two women. It's kind of unprecedented: I can't think of another mother/daughter literary collaboration like it. It was kind of a battle between the two of them over whose vision and voice was going to prevail. Rose even went so far as to write two novels based on her mother's material (which Laura did not appreciate). But it was Laura whose voice won out, because she was so authentic. And it was her story.

Their relationship suffered due to their collaboration, I think. Rose, who had lived on her parents' farm for years, ended up moving east, and didn't see her father for years before he died. There was a lot of tension there, never resolved. It's kind of ironic that the Little House books, which are so wonderful in portraying this close-knit, loving family, came from such a dysfunctional relationship.

Q. What did Wilder think about the expansion of the world of the Little House books into popular culture (movies, TV, toys, etc.)?

A. Virtually all of the adaptations for film and TV happened after Wilder died, in 1957. Wilder never owned a television, and she told a friend that she didn't like the one adaptation she saw, of *The Long Winter*.

The famous long-running TV show starring (and produced and directed by) Michael Landon didn't come along until after Wilder and her daughter were both gone. Rose's heir, Roger MacBride, optioned the TV rights several years before he ran for president, in 1976. MacBride, of course, never met and was not related to Wilder,



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and I have to think she would have been horrified at the liberties that were taken on that show. She fictionalized her life to some extent, but always tried to be true to her memories.

Wilder wasn't completely opposed to products being developed from the books—there was a plan she approved, at one point, for a clothing line tied to the books. But it never happened.

Q. Could you please talk about Laura's feelings about the land of the Great Plains and what it meant to her?

A. Laura loved wilderness, open space, solitude, and above all the prairies. And that feeling lifts the Little House books beyond mere storytelling or adventure and gives them a lot of their resonance. I've written before about the relationship between Wilder's descriptions of wildlife and wilderness and the classic American treatment of those topics in Emerson and Thoreau and Willa Cather—she's a classic part of that tradition.

Q. What was Wilder's experience with the Native Americans who shared the land with her family as she was growing up? Did this differ from conventional views of other white settlers on the plains at that time?

A. As a child, Laura clearly feared Indians and was also deeply fascinated by them. And it has to be said that she knew nothing about Indian history or culture or even much about the specific role her family played in displacing the Osage. Her adult view is made up of racist and romantic stereotypes. The Indians in *Little House on the Prairie* are caricatures, not characters. That's regrettable. But it also tells us a lot about white settlers and the prevailing attitudes.

In *Prairie Fires*, I tried to bring out some of the

historical context for white women's fear of Indians, much of which had to be related to what Wilder called "the Minnesota massacre." Now known as the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, it happened a few years before she was born but clearly influenced how whites saw Indians at that time.

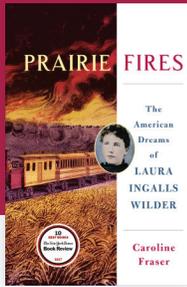
I think Wilder's attitude did differ from the standard white view in one key respect, which is that she saw the similarity between Indians and white settlers. They both had to cope with the elements, which tended to foster a peculiar kind of stoicism, which she very much admired. She admired Indians' ability to deal with whatever nature threw at you without whining or complaining or quitting. And she once said of a beautiful river on the Dakota Plains, "If I had been the Indians I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left it." Which was kind of extraordinary for a woman of her time.

Q. How did Wilder's political views evolve over time?

A. Her father, Charles Ingalls, seems to have been a Populist, a political party that championed farmers and lobbied for changes they wanted. For much of her life, she and her husband were Democrats, but when the New Deal came along, all of that changed.

In *Prairie Fires*, I describe her visceral loathing of FDR and the New Deal, which called for farmers to take land out of production and leave it fallow, and even to destroy existing crops and livestock, in order to stabilize the prices of commodities. I think most people now recognize that this had to be done, in order to do something about the economic emergency of the Great Depression. But rural farmers hated the whole thing.

I have a lot of empathy for why Wilder felt the way she did, even though I might not agree



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with it. As a result of her reaction to the New Deal, she became quite conservative, along with her daughter Rose, who would adopt a far-right position that we'd now call Libertarian. Rose is often identified as one of several women who created the Libertarian movement, along with Ayn Rand and Isabel Paterson. Wilder would remain a conservative for the rest of her life.

Q. What was Wilder's relationship with her father like?

A. Wilder adored her father, and the feeling was clearly mutual. Laura's sister Mary seems to have taken after her mother—she was quiet, patient, even pious. But Laura was more rambunctious, hot-tempered, and I think she identified with her father because they were so alike. They both loved solitude and adventure and wilderness.

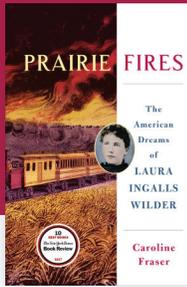
Charles Ingalls was fun-loving and musical and a great storyteller. He had an incredible gift for playing the fiddle, and though Laura never learned a musical instrument, she had an amazing recall for the songs he used to play. She was one of those people who had a song for every occasion.

And they were both gifted writers—we don't have a lot of letters written by Charles Ingalls, but the few things we do have are so moving and funny. There was one letter he wrote to his future son-in-law, Almanzo, and his brother Royal, when Almanzo and Laura were engaged—and he talks about the prairie winds and the blizzards, and how the wind makes his hair stand on end, just like in the Little House books.

Q. Was the depiction of life on the frontier in the Little House books accurate?

A. It seems to have been very accurate, up to a point. Wilder left a lot of things out, sometimes because she felt they weren't appropriate for children. In the books published during her lifetime, she never even hinted at anything having to do with bodily functions or sexuality. She would have found that distasteful. But in the long unpublished manuscript she wrote about the first four years of her marriage, she wrote about childbirth in such vivid language that the editors cut some of it before the book came out.

But she also left things out to burnish her story. She could describe vividly and memorably how her father built a log cabin or made bullets or cleaned his gun, but she ruthlessly cut entire chapters of their life that did not reflect well on her parents. When you look at Charles Ingalls's actual life, there were a lot of struggles, debts, even a kind of aimless quality—and she glossed over all of that out. She wrote the Little House books as a memorial to her parents, and she didn't want anything to take away from that. The result, of course, is that the Little House books promote this wonderful, successful image of settlement and homesteading. Much of it's accurate. But the real story is way more complicated.



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“That was such a happy supper that
Laura never wanted it to end.”

—Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*

Incorporate snacks or a meal into your book club event with these ideas
from Caroline Fraser, taken from Laura Ingalls Wilder’s writing

For a winter meal, recreate the menu from Ben Woodworth’s 1882 birthday party—this was a real party and Wilder always kept the invitation, which is on display in the Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum in Mansfield, Missouri. The party is described in *Little Town on the Prairie* and in *Prairie Fires* (p. 120):

- an orange peeled to look like a flower (very exotic & rare on the prairie in late 1800s) at every place setting
- Oyster soup with oyster crackers (obviously made with canned oysters & milk or cream)
- Potato patties (mashed potatoes formed by hand into patties & fried “golden brown”)
- “Hot, creamy, brown codfish balls”
- Tiny hot biscuits with butter
- A whole frosted cake (eaten with sections of orange) & hot coffee

For a more summery menu, go with the foods Wilder wrote about serving to her guests when she took in boarders at their town house in Mansfield. This is described in *Prairie Fires* (p. 209), drawn from Wilder’s own essay “Summer Boarders,” in *A Little House Reader*, ed. by William Anderson (and quoted below):

- Fresh salads made with “tender lettuce” from the garden, “arranged on pretty plates with a hard boiled egg cut in half to show the golden center and a little ball of cottage cheese” (which was doubtless homemade)
- “The dressing for the salads I made myself of homemade cider vinegar, mustard, sugar, an egg, with pepper and salt”
- Fried chicken
- Corn bread or white or brown bread with dishes of butter
- Pickles
- “Fresh berries, peaches or other fruit with sugar and cream”

Since Almanzo was so fond of pie, it would be fun to include one, particularly on a summer menu!