



Obscure Destinies

Willa Cather , Kari Ronning , Frederick M. Link

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The jacket of the first edition of *Obscure Destinies* announced “Three New Stories of the West,” heralding Willa Cather’s return to what many thought of as “her” territory—the Great Plains. These three stories, “Neighbour Rosicky,” “Old Mrs. Harris,” and “Two Friends,” reflected her return to the well of memory that had inspired the books that made her reputation. The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition presents for the first time the three stories in their historical and biographical context, with an interpretive historical essay and detailed explanatory notes. The textual essay and apparatus establish the definitive text and trace Cather’s changes through newly discovered prepublication versions.

Obscure Destinies Details

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Author : Willa Cather , Kari Ronning , Frederick M. Link

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From Reader Review *Obscure Destinies* for online ebook

Stephen Ryan says

I'm a big fan of Willa Cather, but this one is pretty average. It has three short stories and isn't very long and, while I appreciate the thematic connections between the stories, I didn't really feel like the characters really came alive. Neighbor Rosicky, the first story, is the best one, I'd say. Probably the only one really worth reading.

Scribble Orca says

This is a use case scenario test to see if an apparently infamous pop up screen exhorting purchase in a Jungle Environment occurs. (The title should explain the choice of book for this experiment). Thus far nothing unToward a River has occurred. Comments will contain further results after the initial saving.

Cynthia Egbert says

I have stated before that I adore stories that are character driven and I am here to tell you that this short story freak is so satiated right now! These stories are lyrical and filled with incredible characters.

Here are quotes I must remember:

"Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it in the bank, too."

"In the country, if you had a mean neighbour, you could keep off his land and make him keep off yours. But in the city, all the foulness and misery and brutality of your neighbors was part of your life."

"To be pitied was the deepest hurt anybody could know."

"Invested; that was a word men always held over women, Mrs. Harris thought, and it always meant they could have none of their own money. She sighed deeply."

Katelynn says

I love this book. It reminds me of what growing up in a small, country town is like.

Judy says

I can enjoy a short story, but it wouldn't be my first choice. When a story is well-done and the characters come alive, the shortness of the story is frustrating. I want more. Of course I had to read this book by Willa Cather, and the stories do not disappoint ... but they were too short!

Neighbor Rosicky: Rosicky, a 65 yo Czech farmer, experiences shortness of breath when doing heavy labor on his farm. The trusted Doctor tells him to leave the hard physical work to his five sons and help his wife around the house instead. The characters are all good people.

Old Mrs. Harris: Here Cather introduces three generations of females -- the grandmother (Mrs Harris), the mother (Victoria), and the daughter (Vickie). They represent three eras and the changing role of women. Three other female figures (two neighbors and a servant) contribute to the reader's understanding of the three central figures. This story is said to be semi-autobiographical.

Two Friends: A child describes the personalities and conversations of two men who inadvertently taught her a lot about adults, local politics, life in and around town, and dignity. Children used to sit quietly while adults talked (my sister and I spent many hours overhearing our parents converse with friends and neighbors), and in so doing we learned. I suspect that doesn't happen much anymore.

Cather describes her reason for choosing these two men:

I liked to listen to those two because theirs was the only 'conversation' one could hear about the streets. The older men talked of nothing but politics and their business, and the very young men's talk was entirely what they called 'josh'; very personal, supposed to be funny, and really not funny at all. ... To be sure my two aristocrats sometimes discussed politics, ... [but] in the spring their talk was usually about weather and planting and pasture and cattle. ...

I imagine that few kids in today's world are exposed to thoughtful conversation, where motives are considered, and points of view are discussed. It's the tone of the conversation that was so valued by Cather. She wrote that the two men were composites of the people who inhabited her world.

(And, during these evening talks where she was a silent third party, she studied the sky, was aware of the weather, and sometimes played jacks.)

Maughn Gregory says

"Nothing in the world, not snow mountains or blue seas, is so beautiful in moonlight as the soft, dry summer roads in a farming country, roads where the white dust falls back from the slow wagon-wheel."

From the dust jacket of this edition: "In the three stories that make up this volume Willa Cather returned with fresh enthusiasm to the Western scene of her earlier novels."

Larry Piper says

Like everything Willa Cather wrote, this book is awesome. Well, I don't know awesomeness is true of *all* her books. I've only read all of her novels and several collections of her short stories. This particular volume contains one novelette, one short novella and a short story. They all involve interactions between ordinary people in the face of a crisis of some kind and how those interactions change people's perceptions and destinies.

1. *Neighbour Rosicky* (1928) — novelette

Story about an old Bohemian farmer. He's having some shortness of breath. The doctor says it's his heart and

that Rosicky shouldn't do anymore heavy work. Rosicky started life in Bohemia (Czech). He spent two years in London in abject poverty learning to be a tailor. Then he worked in New York as a tailor and did well enough. But he missed the land and wanted to get away from the city. So, he moved to the mid West, took up farming, and formed a family in middle years. He did well enough. Five strong sons and a loving wife. A lot of this comes by way or reminiscing or telling stories around the table. Rosicky worries about his oldest son, Rudolph, who has married an American girl, Polly. But he has a heart attack at Polly's house and she immediately tends to him. He learns that Polly has a good heart and all will be well. Something like that. A lovely, if somewhat sentimental story.

2. *Old Mrs. Harris* (1931) — short novella

Old Mrs. Harris was a Southern lady, transported to the west by her daughter and son-in-law. The way she was brought up, the young people were to enjoy their youth and the old folks would run the household in the background. That's what she did. Her daughter, Victoria, was rather proud and tried to keep up appearances despite her husband's sketchy financial situation. That was fine by Old Mr. Harris, but the neighbors felt that Victoria was taking unfair advantage of her mother. Then, granddaughter, Vicki needed a bit of extra cash so she could go to college. Old Mrs. Harris had to come up with a solution that would also save Victoria's pride.

3. *Two Friends* (1931) — short story

Essentially, the two rich guys in a small western town—one ran a store and bank, the other had various cattle holdings—used to sit amicably together in the evenings and chat about this and that. The writer, a young boy observing them, used to love to sit off a ways and listen. Then one day, the two good friends had a falling out over the William Jennings Bryan/William McKinley match up and never talked again.

Jeanette says

Interesting nuggets from a time when the gold standard was changing. Cather nails the personalities of those in the family, business, or are comrades from a single town. These succinct tales nail the late middle age adults and those in old age (around 65 as detailed) while they are saying their own forms of goodbye to life.

The interactions between the people- those myriad of bonds and unspoken answers to needs (physical, mental, and emotional) are sublimely told here. Rural and small town life on the prairie of her girlhood and younger life!

These may have been exercises for further development into books or novella length? They all center upon a death. Lovely read. 3.5 star but you always want more here.

Stephen Kascht says

Three short stories in here- took me back to a simpler time. Neighbour Rosicky was my favorite, Ild Mira. Harris was good and Two Friends showed the dangers of sharing politics with a best friend.

David says

Clear, straightforward writing, but increasingly complex human relationships.

J Craig says

This is a volume best read in print.

I own a copy of Obscured Destinies in iBooks.

I read portions of the book electronically and in a library print copy.

While reading using the iPhone was convenient, reading Obscured Destinies in print created an experience.

Duane says

This group contains three rather long short stories that are vintage Willa Cather. They are set in the Great American Plains which produced, I think, some of her best stories. Similar themes thread through this group and of course they offer us the pleasure of reading one of the best American writers of the 20th century.

Katherine says

"They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn't get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as they Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too" (15).

"It was still early when the old farmer put aside his sewing and his recollections" (44).

"What Rosicky really hoped for his boys was that they could get through the world without ever knowing much about the cruelty of human beings" (60).

"Every sentence he uttered was alive, never languid, perfunctory, slovenly, unaccented. When he made a remark, it not only meant something, but sounded like something--sounded like the thing it meant" (206).

"The tone was courteous but cold; relentless as the multiplication table" (207).

"I liked to listen to those two because theirs was the only 'conversation' one could hear about the streets. The older men talked of nothing but politics and their business, and the very young men's talk was entirely what they called 'josh'; very personal, supposed to be funny, and really not funny at all. It was scarcely speech, but noises, snorts, giggles, yawns, sneezes, with a few abbreviated words and slang expressions which stood for a hundred things" (207-208).

Patricia says

Always such sad, but real stories of people and their lives. Even in the 1930's Willa Cather understood the lives and needs of women, and the roadblocks to becoming who they were meant to be.

Andy Miller says

Obscure Destinies is a collection of three novellas written late in Willa Cather's career that return to her writing roots, the Plains in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Each novella includes the twilights of the main character's lives, reflecting Cather's own stage of her life as she wrote them.

"Neighbor Rosicky" starts with Rosicky's doctor telling him that he has a bad heart, that he needs to slow down and let his grown sons take over the more demanding duties of the family farm. The story continues with observations and memories of Rosicky from others that paint a man who may not have achieved the prosperity of some other families over the years but had a warm, generous, loving family that enjoyed the bad times as well as the good. This impression is cemented by ending's telling of Rosicky's kindness to his daughter in the law who had just moved from town to live on the isolated farm with her young child and husband

"Old Mrs, Harris" alternates between narratives from Mrs. Harris's neighbor, her granddaughter, Mrs. Harris herself and a third person description of life in the small farm town, most notably a summer's church social. Mrs. Harris lives with her daughter and daughter's family and has accepted a selfless role of helping the rest of her family, hiding her own needs. The neighbor sees this and tries to do things just for Mrs . Harris. The neighbor's observations of Mrs. Harris's reaction and Mrs. Harris's internal monologue confirm the family's selfishness , Mrs. Harris's acceptance of it, and how her inner strength and generosity gave her a full life in spite of it

"Two Friends" is told by someone reminiscing about his time as a young boy in a small Kansan farm town observing the friendship of town's two leading citizens, a banker/storeowner and a rancher. The descriptions of their daily lives and interactions are Cather at her best in painting the Plains lives of the times. The narrative jolts during the 1896 Presidential campaign when their political differences end the friendship. The novella continues until both friends have died telling of the sadness of both lives after the estrangement. These novellas constitute a great read which I highly recommend
