Little House in the Big Woods Short Guide

Little House in the Big Woods by Laura Ingalls Wilder

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Overview

For many years the Little House books have been popular with young people.

This might seem surprising at first, for especially in Little House in the Big Woods, there are no villains, no major crises, and no important adventures.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of good times and enough conflict and suspense to make the book interesting. Young readers also seem to appreciate a novel made up of events that really happened and characters who really existed.

In addition, the novel offers detailed, accurate descriptions of early methods of cheesemaking, butter churning, gun care, maple sugaring, hatmaking, and many other crafts. Some readers have cooked the food and played the games Laura describes. This helps them feel closer to the frontier life of more than one hundred years ago. Some young people like to compare their lives with Laura's; others find that reading the book makes it easier to talk to members of their grandparents' generation. They realize that bygone days can provide many enjoyable stories.

Although the days of her frontier childhood are remote, Wilder describes them so vividly that readers almost feel as if they have been in the Big Woods.

She provides many details that make her characters come to life. Laura herself, the book's main character, is vibrant, sometimes naughty, and always an individual; she is someone a young reader can enjoy getting to know.

Because Little House in the Big Woods depicts the Ingalls family happy in a cozy house, safe from the dark woods and wild animals, many readers feel comfortable and secure reliving the fun the family had with very simple things, and reading about how much they loved and enjoyed one another. The book shows a happy way of life but does not preach.

Wilder does not say that others should live the way she did; she simply tells how she lived.

About the Author

Born on February 7, 1867, in a log cabin at the edge of the woods near Pepin, Wisconsin, Laura Ingalls Wilder spent her childhood as part of the great pioneering-homesteading movement in the Midwest and Great Plains. Her father's restlessness, along with hard times and some hard luck, caused the family to move several times. The first move was to the southern Kansas prairie—then known as Indian Territory—where unfortunately the Ingallses settled on land reserved for the Osage Native Americans. They decided to try Walnut Grove, Minnesota, but after a few years of farming, they suffered a grasshopper plague that wiped out the crops. In Burr Oak, Iowa, where the Ingallses were innkeepers, illness took the life of Laura's baby brother and left her sister Mary blind. The family finally settled in De Smet, South Dakota, a few scattered homesteads that they helped transform into a small town. By now, the Ingalls sisters numbered four: Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace. In De Smet, Laura endured a long, hungry winter with her family, taught school for three terms, and met Almanzo Wilder, whom she married in 1885.

The Wilders spent the first portion of their sixty-four-year marriage working their homestead near De Smet, but again hardships took their toll: fire, drought, debts, a recession, a crop destroyed by hail, the death of a newborn son, and a bout with diphtheria that permanently weakened Almanzo's health. With their daughter, Rose, the Wilders moved to the Ozark Mountains and bought Rocky Ridge Farm near Mansfield, Missouri. After years of hard work had made the farm successful, Laura became active in the community: she formed clubs, helped begin a library, wrote articles for the Missouri Ruralist, and served as poultry editor for the St.

Louis Star. Hoping to improve conditions for Missouri farm women, she became an officer of the Missouri Home Development Association and organized the Mansfield Farm Loan Association, which made low-interest loans to farmers during the depression.

Laura Ingalls Wilder's writing career did not begin in earnest until she was sixty-five years old. Rose Wilder Lane, by that time a prominent novelist and journalist, urged her mother to record her memories of the early days. Laura agreed; she wanted to preserve her father's memory and let young people know about the old days. Rose commented on her mother's manuscripts and offered advice about publishing.

The eight Little House books appeared between 1932 and 1943; these "historical novels," as Wilder called them, chronicled portions of her childhood, adolescence, and young womanhood.

The books earned wide popularity and a number of awards, including the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, established in 1954 and presented first to Wilder herself "for a lasting contribution to literature for children."

Even today, years after her death on February 10, 1957, in Mansfield, Missouri, admirers continue to visit Laura Ingalls Wilder museums and homesites in Mansfield and the other communities where she once lived. Out of a life that did not seem to have been particularly fortunate, Wilder produced books full of warmth and happiness that describe ordinary people, unimposing places, and everyday activities in loving detail.

Setting

As the title suggests, setting is extremely important in this novel; the cabin, the woods, the wild animals, and the isolation are all presented before the characters are introduced. Wilder, who moved often as a child but always remained a country girl, conveys a strong sense of place in her writing. The book describes the events in and around the Ingallses' cabin in the Wisconsin woods during the year that Laura celebrates her fifth birthday. It is the early 1870s, and the area is sparsely populated with self-sufficient farmers and woodsmen who make their own tools and find their own entertainment.

The story begins and ends in the winter, with the family cozy inside the house, watching the fire, listening to Pa's fiddle and his stories, occasionally looking out at the wind, snow, dark trees, and even the wolves that howl near the cabin. As spring approaches, this snug world opens up somewhat, and Laura's view broadens. At sugaring time the Ingallses join their extended family and friends at a party. In the summer Laura's world expands again as she takes her first trip to town. Autumn finds her among the extended family again as they do the harvesting and canning. Constantly alert, Laura takes in all her surroundings, but she seems content when winter closes in once again. Most of all, she seems to love the warm house with her father, mother, and sisters around her. Apparently this place is the secure, dependable core for her life as well as for the novel.

Of course, there is a larger world outside. The Civil War has only recently ended, and the great homesteading settlements of the Great Plains and Rockies have begun. This larger world will affect Laura's life when her family joins the westward movement. But for now, in this book, the big world does not enter Laura's consciousness. For example, she knows that her Uncle George has been a soldier and that he has become a little "wild" as a result of his army experiences. But all she really knows or cares about is that he plays the bugle and is fun to dance with.

The way of life in the book, that of simple, hardworking, morally upright people of the land, lies somewhere in the family background of many of today's readers. But it is becoming more remote from them. Wilder explains the old ways in detail so that readers get a sense of a bygone era as the novel describes old crafts, simple entertainments and gifts, and cooperation among neighbors. The novel also makes it clear that both parents and religion were stricter in those days: Sundays were grim for children of Puritan background, and on any day of the week, children were expected to do chores and to be "seen and not heard." Today's young readers may need to be reminded that such sternness and strictness were part of the standard for a strong and loving family during Wilder's childhood. Wilder also shows that standards have generally loosened between the days of her grandfather's childhood and her own.

One of Pa's stories shows that parents were even stricter and Sundays were even more intolerable in his father's youth.

Laura's emphasis on food results partly from the sensuous pleasure felt by a little girl in the presence of wonderful smells and tastes. But the emphasis is partly cultural as well: a society that cannot take food for granted celebrates when food is abundant and well prepared. In the same way, the little girl's delight in the softness, colors, and sounds of fabrics and clothes reminds the reader that Laura could not take new clothes for granted.

Social Sensitivity

For generations, librarians, parents, and teachers have recommended the Little House books as wholesome fare for young readers. Many readers still admire the virtues exemplified in these books: hard work, honesty, generosity, adaptability, endurance, resourcefulness, and humor.

Some adults may feel that the world of the Little House is so long ago and so "good" as to seem irrelevant to young people now. Although the social environment of the books is much different from today's, Laura is easy to identify with, thus bridging the time gap. The characters are all good people, yet Laura has enough inner struggles to make her seem real.

Of course, the book's main social significance, other than its presentation of a coherent set of values, is its preservation of a vanished way of life. Details about recipes, building techniques, daily life, folkways, and crafts contribute to the reader's understanding of life in a very different society.

Some readers may worry about the female role models: Ma is patient, mild, obedient to her husband, known for her tiny waist; golden-haired, compliant Mary is the model for girls. But Laura, while she sees that blonde curls and demure behavior are cultural ideals, does quite well without them. Wilder's own view was that the farm wife had always been a full partner in a business enterprise.

The tone of this book is optimistic, even carefree. The later Little House books show, along with more hardship and trouble, some awareness of social problems, such as the trouble the white settlers caused for Native Americans.

This awareness, though, is not exactly social commentary, and the books remain a straightforward account of one family trying to survive on the land.

Some readers might need to be warned of the "darkey" song near the middle of Little House in the Big Woods. Others might be bothered by the emphasis on guns, hunting, and butchering. But the matter-of-fact tone of the book is a help: it does not propose these particular attitudes or activities as ideals for every reader. It simply presents a group of people living successfully according to their values, in a culture of more than one hundred years ago.

Literary Qualities

Little House in the Big Woods begins like a fairy tale. Within a few lines, the narrator reveals a strong sense of her audience as youngsters in a different world from that of the little house. The storyteller is the older Laura—the grandmother speaking to grandchildren. But once little Laura appears, everything is viewed through her eyes and understood through her consciousness. The point of view is consistent and believable.

Other stories, usually told by Pa, punctuate the story of the Ingalls family and their year in the Big Woods. Some of these stories are about "the old days" when Laura's grandfather was young; thus the reader sees a pattern of storytelling being handed down. Pa often tells stories about animals and sometimes about the dangers out in the Big Woods. Full of detail, they move to a climax and then end quickly. The same narrative pattern is used to tell the story of the Ingallses' year in the Big Woods.

Instead of building to a single crisis, the novel is episodic. Any little crises are soon resolved, but they last long enough to lend a touch of drama.

The style is simple and matter-of-fact.

The author seems to have given some attention to making the novel easy to read, but the style is natural, not condescending; it seems appropriate to the thoughts and actions of a little girl. In fact, in the later Little House books, as Laura grows up, the style becomes gradually more sophisticated. Although Laura relates her thoughts, the book's emphasis is on action, not reflection.

Wilder's choice of detail makes her style come alive. She appeals to the senses as she describes hot, newlymade bullets, the warm fire, cool buttermilk, the taste of pig's tail, the sound of the wind crying, the shadows on the snow, the "little cheerful sounds" of dishes clattering together. Wilder uses vigorous words: "sparkling" is a favorite.

The conversations sound natural and add to the immediacy of the narrative.

Repeated contrasts also enliven the story: the snowy cold of the woods outside enhances the warmth of the fire inside.

Themes and Characters

The main characters are the members of Laura's immediate family. Charles Ingalls was apparently his daughter's favorite—and she his. In this story, Pa is rugged, hardworking, and competent.

He sets traps, shoots animals for food, plants and harvests, butchers, builds, and travels to town to sell furs. But best of all, Pa is fun to be with. Although Ma apparently takes pains to keep her little girls entertained with paper dolls and pancake men, Laura declares, "The best time of all was at night, when Pa came home." Pa roughhouses with the girls, jokes, plays his fiddle, and tells tales. He knows the girls love to be "scared" by his games and stories, even as his presence makes them feel secure. Fair and openminded, he is all for "progress," and the later books of the series reveal that he hopes for bigger challenges farther west.

Ma, a slender, graceful woman, likes things to be pretty. Despite all her housework, she takes the trouble to color and mold the butter; she gazes happily at bolts of new calico. Her china shepherdess, placed on a shelf made by Pa, presides over a civilized house. Ma is positive, firm, and versatile. She expects the girls to do their chores, and she trains them to have good character as well as to "act like ladies." In a crisis— such as the night when she and Laura meet a bear—Ma keeps her composure, but she is human enough to cry and laugh later.

Ma and Pa divide their responsibilities in a smoothly running household.

Clearly they like and respect each other.

They provide for the family and know how to survive. Resourceful in entertaining their children, Ma and Pa do everything simply but beautifully—at least in Laura's memory.

The three sisters complete the family.

While little is said of Baby Carrie, Laura and her older sister Mary are in many ways opposites. The pretty, blonde Mary is polite, obedient, clean, and neat; the brunette Laura is active and bold, sometimes unmannerly and naughty. When Pa plays "mad dog," Mary screams and shrinks away, while Laura leaps to attack.

Laura, from whose point of view the story is seen, is an intense, observant girl of five. She loves her family and tries to be good and dutiful, but sometimes she feels selfish, jealous, or fearful. She is bored on Sundays and sometimes overexcited on special occasions. All in all, she is a child with whom it is easy to identify.

Family life is one of the most important themes. The book shows the security and obligations involved in both the nuclear and the extended family. Laura performs her chores, and her parents provide a secure home for her. In addition, the entire Ingalls clan gets together when work needs to be shared; in turn for helping at sugaring and

harvesting, each clan member feels a sense of belonging and draws strength from the family unit.

Also important is the idea of survival on the frontier. Although the people of the Big Woods help one another, they do not depend on machines, manufactured objects, or outsiders for their survival.

Their everyday equipment and their entertainment are handmade. Wilder shows the delight that the Big Woods people take in their competence.

Not all is sweetness, however. Rivalry, jealousy, and competition flare up among the children. Laura envies Mary her yellow hair. At a family gathering, she and her cousin, also named Laura, argue hotly about whose baby sister is prettier. The adults, well aware of the problem, urge unselfishness and sharing. This is more than a matter of politeness: on the frontier, where cooperation is often the key to survival, such qualities are crucial.

Although the larger human community is important, the Ingallses seem to come into contact more often with animals. Their attitudes toward wild and domestic animals provide another important theme. Except for stopping her ears when the hogs are killed, Laura is not squeamish about the butchering or hunting of animals. Still, she sometimes feels sentimental about them and is glad when her father decides not to kill the deer he sees in the moonlight. Bear stories provide both comedy and a reminder that the threat of the wild is always present. Just as the house is surrounded by wolves and deer, so the story itself is framed with references to deer. The first things Laura sees at the beginning of the book are the deer carcasses hanging from the tree. One of the last scenes is that of the deer in the woods that Pa decides not to shoot.

Time is one of the most poignant themes of the book. Laura Ingalls Wilder, looking back sixty years upon a world that had vanished even before she began writing about it, memorializes that world in the "Auld Lang Syne" sung by Pa at the end of the novel. But little Laura, age five, lives in the here-andnow. As she drifts to sleep at the end of the book, she says, "Now is now. It can never be a long time ago." On the one hand, the seasonal cycle never changes: fall will always be harvest time. On the other hand, everything changes: Pa looks at new machinery and talks about progress; children grow older. The existence of these two views of time lends tension and power to the novel.

Topics for Discussion

1. How do you think Ma and Pa want Laura and Mary to act as little girls?

How do you think they want them to be as adults? What do Ma and Pa do to train them? Are there any differences between Ma's way and Pa's way of raising children? Do you think Laura's parents are too strict? Do you agree with Laura that Charley's parents are not strict enough?

Why?

2. What are the most frightening parts of the story? What keeps Laura from being afraid of all the frightening things out in the Big Woods?

3. What kinds of things make the children feel jealous of one another? How do the parents and children handle the problem? How do you feel about Laura's comment that it isn't fair that Mary is prettier, neater, and more polite?

4. Name all the ways you can think of in which the family uses animals. How do you think they feel about animals?

Do you feel the same way? Why or why not?

5. How does living in the Big Woods affect the family's activities and life together? What do the girls miss by not living in town? What do they gain by living in the cabin?

6. Compare the kinds of fun you had when you were five years old with the kinds of fun Laura has. Did you do any of the same things for fun that Laura does? What differences do you see between your kind of entertainment and Laura's? Who do you think has had more fun growing up, you or Laura?

Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Talk to an older person in your family or neighborhood about what he or she did as a child. Talk about fun and games or about working and making things. Or ask the person to tell you a story about his or her childhood. Write a report or story about something you learned from this interview.

2. Write a diary entry that Laura might have made on an important day if she had been old enough to write. For example, what would she have written after the visit to town, after the dance at Grandpa's, or after her fight with Mary?

Or write a diary entry from the point of view of Ma, Pa, or Mary.

3. Laura explains to you how she and her sisters and cousins have fun in the Little House. Try writing a letter or story to Laura, explaining how you have fun.

Remember that Laura lived a long time ago and may need to have some things carefully explained.

4. Pretend that fifty or sixty years have gone by, and you are now a parent or grandparent telling children a story of something that happened to you when you were a child. How would you start your story? What would you need to explain? Plan and tell your story.

5. Choose a scene you like in the book and rewrite it as a short play. With two or three classmates, act out the scene for the class.

6. Laura Ingalls was born in 1867, so when she celebrates her birthday in the book, it is 1872. Use reference books to find out what was going on in America at that time. If Pa had brought home a newspaper from town, what would he have read in it? Make up a page from such a newspaper: it might have a national news story, one or two local stories, perhaps some recipes or directions for making useful household objects, maybe a few games or pictures, some birth and marriage announcements, and so on.

7. Garth Williams illustrated Little House in the Big Woods, but before he drew a single picture, he read the book closely and studied Laura's life carefully. Choose a scene or character from the book, read the description carefully, and try making your own illustration— something very different from Williams's pictures but still true to the book.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Little House in the Big Woods is the first of the eight books in the Little House series. In Little House on the Prairie, the Ingalls family leaves the Wisconsin woods to settle the wide Kansas grassland. The book shows the adventures of the journey as well as the building of a new house and furniture. On the Banks of Plum Creek finds the family living in Minnesota, where the girls go to school and the crops prosper until grasshoppers destroy the vegetation. In the next book, By the Shores of Silver Lake, the family has moved to Dakota Territory.

Laura has taken on increased responsibility because of Mary's blindness and the arrival of a baby sister, Grace. The Long Winter, one of the most highly praised titles of the series, describes the blizzard-ridden winter of 1880-1881, when the new community of De Smet nearly runs out of food and fuel. Little Town on the Prairie tells of more pleasant days in the town, with an adolescent Laura completing her schooling and hoping for a teaching job. At age eighteen, in These Happy Golden Years, Laura is teaching school and being courted by Almanzo Wilder. At the end of the book, she begins her married life.

Farmer Boy, the second book published in the series, deals with Almanzo's rural New York boyhood.

Laura Ingalls Wilder fans may also wish to read these works published after her death: On the Way Home: The Diary of a Trip from South Dakota to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894 (1962), edited and with an afterword by Rose Wilder Lane; The First Four Years (1971), the story of the Wilders' first years of marriage, edited by Roger Lea MacBride from notes left by Wilder; and West from Home: Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder, San Francisco, 1915 (1974), also edited by MacBride.

Adaptations include a 1982 Broadway musical, Prairie, and a popular NBC-TV series, Little House on the Prairie, which began in 1974, starring Michael Landon as Pa and Melissa Gilbert as Laura.

Summer pageants, adapted from the books, are presented in modern-day De Smet and Mansfield. A reading of Little House in the Big Woods was recorded by Julie Harris for Pathways of Sound in 1976.

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