Little House on the Prairie Study Guide

Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* is a classic work of children's literature by one of the best-known American children's authors. Published in 1935, *Little House*, as it is commonly known, is the third in a series of books by Wilder that describe the pioneer experiences of the author and her family as they move from Wisconsin through several western territories and states, before finally settling in what became De Smet, South Dakota. (One book, *Farmer Boy*, depicts the childhood of Wilder's husband, Almanzo.) While the series is autobiographical, the so-called "Little House" books are considered works of historical fiction as Wilder altered and embellished some aspects of their lives.

Little House is set in the early 1870s, when Charles ("Pa") and Caroline ("Ma") Ingalls took their three young daughters, Mary, Laura, and Carrie, to Indian territory in what is now part of Kansas. The family left Wisconsin, the setting for the first "Little House" book *Little House in the Big Woods*, because Pa felt the area was becoming too populated and driving out wildlife. Settling on a lonely part of the prairie on the edge of the Osage Diminished Reserve, Pa believed that the federal government would soon open up the land for settlement by whites and push the Indians further west, a prospect he saw no problem with. By getting there ahead of most everyone else, he would have the pick of the land.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder tells how she and her family journeyed there and built a life. With the help of the few white neighbors in the area, Pa constructs a house and stable for their horses and digs a well. Wilder describes his process and craftsmanship in detail. After a cattle drive passes through, Pa acquires a cow and calf. To feed and support his family, Pa hunts local game and collects furs. He trades some of his furs for a plow and seeds so he can begin farming in their first full spring in the area. While the days are filled with work just to survive, there are a few moments of happiness, such as when Pa plays his fiddle, when Pa takes his older daughters to the creek and the deserted Indian camp, and when Mr. Edwards brings them Christmas presents from Santa. There are also scary moments as when sometimes-hostile Indians enter the home and take food and supplies and when the whole family falls ill with malaria.

No matter what happens to the Ingalls family, they exhibit a hardy pioneer spirit as they pursue their American dream. They essentially risk their lives for a chance at owning land in virgin territory. Though the several other white settlers in the area aid each other so they can achieve this same goal, Pa and his family have to be essentially self-reliant because these neighbors are several miles away. There is little social interaction outside of the family as well as much uncertainty because of the presence of potentially hostile Indians for significant portions of the year. In the end, however, Pa's gamble does not pay off, and the family leaves before the U.S. government can force them to. At the time, the government decided not to make the Indians leave at this time, but instead make the white settlers move out of Indian territory. The American dream of the Ingalls family has to find another home.

When *Little House on the Prairie* was originally published in 1935, it was an instant success and has remained in print ever since. Though quintessentially American, the book has been translated into at least forty languages. Despite Wilder's sometimes controversial depiction of Indians and white Americans' negative attitudes toward them, *Little House* remains an important, influential work of American literature. In *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Charles Frey writes, "In the strength of its writing, the color and variance of its lively incidents, and its deep, deep affection for the life of all being, *Little House on the Prairie* stands and will stand as writing for children that has few equals and no superiors."

Author Biography

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Born February 7, 1867, in Pepin, Wisconsin, Wilder was the second of four daughter born to Charles and Caroline Ingalls. As described in her primarily autobiographical historical fiction books, commonly called the "Little House" series, Wilder spent her childhood on the American frontier, moving from Wisconsin westward before the family settled in De Smet, South Dakota. She began writing during her childhood, beginning with themes and poetry. After marrying Almanzo Wilder in 1885, Wilder continued the practice as much as she could while raising her daughter, Rose, and helping her husband farm.

The Wilder family moved to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894. Wilder then spent most of her time working on the new family farm and volunteering. By 1911, Wilder focused attention on writing again. She began by writing essays about farm life, which were published in the *Missouri Ruralist*, and later contributed to other periodicals. Rose Wilder encouraged her mother to write about her pioneer childhood. Wilder's first effort, childhood-encompassing *Pioneer Girl*, was rejected by publishers in the early 1930s. With the aid of her daughter, Wilder rewrote the story into the well-known series of which *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) is the third volume. With the success of the books, Wilder became a widely acclaimed, popular writer. She died February 10, 1957, in Mansfield, Missouri.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: Going West

Little House on the Prairie opens with the Ingalls family preparing to leave the Big Woods of Wisconsin and move west. The family consists of Pa and Ma, and their three young daughters, Mary, Laura, and Carrie. Pa is moving the family west to Indian territory because of the increased number of people in the Big Woods, which he believes keeps away wild animals. "He liked a country where the wild animals lived without being afraid."

At the end of winter, Pa sells their house and packs most of their possessions in a covered wagon. Leaving early one morning, they say good-bye to their relatives and start on their journey. They stop in Pepin to trade furs for goods, cross a frozen lake, and spend the night in an abandoned cabin. During the night, they hear the ice breaking up in the lake—they crossed just in time.

Their journey takes many monotonous days as they travel through Minnesota, stopping to camp each night on their way to Kansas. The weather is often hard, but they cross the Missouri River on a raft. One day, Pa trades their tired horses for two quick mustangs, whom Mary and Laura name Pet and Patty. Laura's legs sometimes ache from being cooped up in the wagon, but she feels ashamed when she complains.

Chapter 2: Crossing the Creek

The family comes across a creek with high, fast-running water. Though the situation has a potential for danger, Pa decides to cross the creek at its ford. As Pa prepares the wagon for the crossing, Laura worries about the family bulldog, Jack. Pa will not let the dog ride in the wagon, but makes him swim on his own.

As the wagon enters the water, Ma drives Pet and Patty as Pa guides the horses in the water. The girls obediently lie down in the wagon. The wagon makes it safely to the other side, but Jack is missing. Pa feels bad for not letting Jack ride in the wagon, and he looks for him to no avail. The family continues their journey on the prairie without their companion and guard dog.

Chapter 3: Camp on the High Prairie

After Wilder provides details of how they camped outdoors on the prairie, Pa talks to Ma about staying in this area. One night, they hear wolves howling nearby and wish Jack was there. As Mary and Laura get ready for bed, eyes appear near the camp. It is not a wolf advancing on the camp, but Jack. They are happy to see their tired dog, finish their nightly rituals, and go to sleep.

Chapter 4: Prairie Day

After going through their morning routine while camping on the prairie, Mary and Laura explore near the wagon. They find abundant wildlife, including jackrabbits and gophers. When lunchtime nears, Mary and Laura pick flowers for Ma and return to the wagon. As they eat lunch, Laura tells Ma she wants to see a papoose now that they are in Indian territory. Ma does not want to see Indians at all. Pa returns from his own exploratory expedition with fresh game and enthusiasm for the area. He plays his fiddle and sings after they eat a satisfying meal. "When at last Laura set down her plate, she sighed with contentment. She didn't want anything more in the world."

Chapter 5: the House on the Prairie

Packing up the wagon again, the family travels for a few hours to the spot Pa has picked out for a house. It is located near a creek bottom and an old trail as well as within sight of the Verdigris River. Ma and Laura make a tent of the canvas wagon cover while Mary watches the baby. Pa spends days hauling logs up from the creek bottom, then builds the walls for a house. While building the cabin's walls with Ma's help, a log falls on her. She sprains her ankle, halting work on the cabin and stables while she recovers.

While hunting one day, Pa returns early with news that they have a neighbor only two miles away. The bachelor Mr. Edwards has agreed to help Pa finish their cabin in exchange for Pa's labor on his house. The men finish the house, except the roof, in one day. Mr. Edwards stays for dinner, then dances to Pa's fiddle playing until he goes home.

Chapter 6: Moving in

Though the house does not have a roof or floors, Pa tells them to move in for safety reasons. While the girls clean out the wood chips and Ma, Mary, and Laura move the family's things inside, Pa puts the wagon's canvas over the structure as a make-shift roof. Pa was happy with where they were. He tells Ma, "We're going to do well here, Caroline. This a great country. This is a country I'll be contented to stay in the rest of my life." Though they settle their things inside, the family still has to cook outside by campfire because Pa has not built the fireplace yet.

Chapter 7: the Wolf-pack

The day after Pa and Mr. Edwards build a stable for Pet and Patty, Pet delivers a colt. They name the mule Bunny because "it looked like a jack rabbit." One Sunday, Pa rides Patty to explore the prairie. By suppertime, he still has not returned and the family's animals are restless. Suddenly, Patty and Pa appear streaking to the family's home. He rides her there quickly because he encountered the largest wolf pack he has ever seen.

Over supper, Pa tells them they have neighbors. The Scott family lives only three miles away, while two bachelors are residing six miles farther. He also found a family from Iowa sick with "fever 'n' ague" (malaria), and had to go back to the bachelors' to get them the help they needed. It was on his way back that he encountered the fifty-strong wolf pack who surrounded him and Patty. Though nervous, Pa and the horse did not run from the pack. As soon as the wolves went into the creek bottom, Patty ran home.

After dinner, the girls go to bed. Wolf howls wake Laura up, and her father shows her the wolves, which now ring the cabin and stables. Wilder writes, "She had never seen such big wolves. The biggest one was taller than Laura." Feeling safe guarded by Pa and Jack, Laura goes back to sleep.

Chapter 8: Two Stout Doors

In the morning, Pa builds a door for their house without nails. He uses pegs in the place of nails, leather straps for hinges, and a stick for a lock. Laura helps him build the door and hang it in the doorway. The next day, they build a similar door for the barn, except that the latch is replaced by a chain, which he padlocks at night.

Chapter 9: a Fire on the Hearth

When the time comes to build the fireplace, Pa takes Mary and Laura with him when he goes to gather the rocks he needed. While Pa digs them out near the creek bottoms, the girls play nearby. Because it is warm, Laura nearly sneaks a foot in the water without her father's permission. Catching her, he tells his daughters they can only wade in shallow water, which Laura does.

In the afternoon, Pa constructs the fireplace. He uses rocks and mud to build it on the outside of the house. He starts on the chimney that day as well and completes it the next day using the stick-and-daub method the rest of the way. Once the outside is completed, he cuts a hole in the wall for the fireplace. When the mantel is done, Ma puts a little china woman they brought from Wisconsin on it. That night, Ma cooks supper in the fireplace. The family eats dinner inside on a table and log chairs that Pa quickly put together.

Chapter 10: a Roof and a Floor

Laura and Mary spend many a day doing chores and experiencing the nature outside. Ma admonishes the girls for not keeping their sunbonnets on and for "getting to look like Indians" with their tan skin. Laura wants to see Indians, and Pa promises she will sometime soon. He is now ready to put a roof and floor on the house. Pa borrows nails from Mr. Edwards to complete the roof. Pa plans on paying him back when he makes the trip to Independence, Missouri, which is forty miles away. Pa also makes a puncheon floor.

Chapter 11: Indians in the House

One day, Pa takes his gun and goes hunting. He leaves Jack chained to the stable as a guard dog. Laura and Mary try to comfort the unhappy dog. As they do so, two Indian men go into the house where Ma and Carrie are alone. Laura wants to do something and considers freeing Jack. Because Pa said not to free Jack, Mary and Laura sneak into the house. The Indians, wearing fresh skunk skins, force Ma to make them cornbread. They eat and leave.

After the Indians are gone, Ma makes corn-bread for dinner. When Pa comes home, Ma tells him what happened. As Pa skins the rabbit and dresses the hens, Laura admits to Pa that she thought about turning Jack loose. He tells Laura and Mary in a severe tone of voice to always obey because if Jack had been free, "He would have bitten those Indians. Then there would have been trouble. Bad trouble."

Chapter 12: Fresh Water to Drink

After Pa makes the bedstead, Ma stuffs the mattress with grass instead of straw tick. Their bed looks cozy when it is complete. Pa plans on building a bed for the girls later, but he builds a locked cabinet for the cornmeal and other supplies right away. He then begins digging a well. When he reaches the point where he needs help, Pa arranges for Mr. Scott to help him. Pa will help Scott build his well later on.

Every morning before the men go down into the hole, Pa lights a candle and sends it to the bottom. As long as the candle stays lit, it is safe to go down. Mr. Scott scoffs at the daily practice. One morning, Scott goes down in the well before Pa finishes breakfast. When Pa goes outside, he finds Scott passed out at the bottom of the well hole. Though Ma worries about her husband's safety, Pa goes down to get Scott from the bottom of the well while Ma helps work the rope to pull him up. Scott now believes in sending the candle down to check each morning.

The men continue to work hard day after day, digging deeper and deeper. They finally hit quicksand, then the well is full of water. "The water was clear and cold and good. Laura thought she had never tasted anything so good as those long, cold drinks of water."

Chapter 13: Texas Longhorns

One night, a cattle drive passes by the little house. Pa agrees to help the cowboys keep the cattle out of the ravines in the creek bottoms as they pass through in exchange for beef. When the job is done, Pa is given a cow and her calf in addition to beef. The family is happy to have the cow and its milk. Though the cow is still wild, Pa is able to get a tin cup's worth of milk from her that day.

Chapter 14: Indian Camp

One hot midsummer day, Pa takes Mary and Laura to the abandoned Indian camp in a prairie hollow. They find ashes from a campfire and moccasin tracks. After Laura finds the first Indian bead, Laura, Mary, and Pa spend the afternoon gathering the beads. When they go home, supper is being prepared. Mary immediately gives her beads to Carrie. Though Laura does not want to, she also gives her beads to Carrie. They make a necklace for their baby sister, but Laura is still jealous. Wilder writes, "often after that Laura thought of those pretty beads and she was still naughty enough to want her beads for herself."

Chapter 15: Fever 'n' Ague

While Ma and Laura pick blackberries, they are bitten by mosquitoes. Swarms of the pests are everywhere at night, preventing Pa from playing fiddle. First, Mary, Laura, and Pa become sick, then Ma falls with the illness, too. The family is sick for days, with aches and cold and hot flashes. When Mary cries out for water one day, Laura gets out of bed, crawls across the floor with Jack's help, and gets Mary her water.

Another day, Laura wakes up and is being given medicine by Dr. Tan, "a doctor with the Indians." The family is being taken care of by Mrs. Scott. All the settlers in the area are sick with what was called fever 'n' ague, malaria carried by the mosquitoes. Mrs. Scott is caring for all the ill families in turn, while Jack had first brought Dr. Tan into the house. Dr. Tan works for the Indians and was going to Independence, Missouri, when the dog stopped him. He is helping all the ill settlers now, too.

When Pa feels better, he retrieves a watermelon from the creek bottom. Mrs. Scott believes that the watermelons caused the sickness, but Pa thinks it was the night air that is the culprit. He eats much of the melon he retrieved with little effect on him.

Chapter 16: Fire in the Chimney

When the weather turns colder, Pa goes out hunting one day. Ma and the girls build a fire and sit inside. Ma finds the chimney was on fire outside, and she deals with the situation. Because Laura cannot help her, she goes inside to find a burning stick has rolled under Mary's skirts as she holds baby Carrie on the rocker. Laura pulls both of them in the rocking chair away from the fire, and throws the burning stick back in the fire. Ma comes in, observes what Laura did, and uses water to douse the fire inside. She is proud that Laura had saved them.

Chapter 17: Pa Goes to Town

The house feels empty when Pa leaves to go to Independence. When Mr. Edwards stops by to check on them and do the chores, Jack chases him to the top of the

woodpile. Jack has to be locked inside the house every time Mr. Edwards comes. Mrs. Scott visits on the second day and tells Ma that she hopes the rumors of Indian troubles are false. A cold wind picks up on the third day as the family worries about Pa driving back. On the fourth day, Pa comes back late in the night, after Mary and Laura try to wait up for him. He tells them about his journey, and despite the harsh weather, brings back squares of glass for the home's windows in tact. Wilder writes, "Everything was all right when Pa was there…. He would not have to go to town again for a long time."

Chapter 18: the Tall Indian

As autumn settles in, Indians ride by the house all the time on the trail. Pa says, "I thought that trail was an old one they didn't use any more. I wouldn't have built the house so close to it if I'd known it was a high road." Jack does not like the Indians and has to be chained to the house or the stable at all times. Ma also is not fond of the Indians, but Pa considers the ones that live nearby "peaceable enough."

During the early winter, Pa sets traps and catches animals for their fur. He is saving the furs to trade in the spring. One day when he has gone hunting, two Indians nearly take all the furs as well as the cornbread and tobacco. They drop the furs before leaving, much to Ma's relief. The furs are going to be traded for a plow and seeds. Later, Pa tells Laura that the Indians will be forced by the government to move west because white settlers have moved to the area.

Chapter 19: Mr. Edwards Meets Santa Claus

As Christmas nears, Mary and Laura wonder how Santa Claus will find them in Indian territory. Because of the strong creek current, it seems that neither Santa Claus nor Mr. Edwards, who has been invited to spend the day with them, will come. Despite telling them that Santa will not be coming, Ma has Mary and Laura hang their stockings before going to sleep. Mr. Edwards arrives in the morning, having swum across the creek. He brings Christmas gifts for the girls from Independence, where he claims to have met Santa Claus. In each stocking is a tin cup, peppermint candy, a little cake, and a penny. They feast that happy Christmas with Mr. Edwards.

Chapter 20: a Scream in the Night

During the winter, the wind howls all day and night. One night, they are sure they hear a woman scream. Unsure if the sound came from the Scotts', Pa goes out to check on them. It takes several hours for him to come back. When he does, he says the scream is from a panther. Mary and Laura are not allowed to go outside until Pa kills the panther. Several days of hunting the panther prove fruitless. Pa meets an Indian in the woods who indicates that he had killed the big cat.

Chapter 21: Indian Jamboree

At the end of winter, Pa goes to Independence to trade his furs. Expecting his return on the fifth day, Mary and Laura are playing outside when they hear loud, unexplainable sounds coming from the Indian camp. Though the sounds come and go, Ma keeps everyone inside except when they do chores. When Pa comes home with supplies, he tells them the Indians are having a jamboree. He also brings news from Independence: "He said that folks in Independence said that the government was going to put the white settlers out of the Indian territory," but Pa does not believe it.

Chapter 22: Prairie Fire

In the spring, Pa begins breaking up the prairie sod with his plow. He is planning to grow sod potatoes and sod corn this year. One day, black clouds near the house as a prairie fire is coming. Ma and Pa go into action to save their buildings with Laura's help. Ma fetches water while Pa plows a furrow around the house, then sets a deliberate small fire on the side away from the house. They beat the fire out with wet sacks. Their actions guide the main fire away from the house.

After the fire, Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards come to talk to Pa. They believe the Indians might have set the fire deliberately, but Pa does not think so. The number of Indians gathering in the Indian camp make Mr. Scott nervous; he thinks they might be taking action against the settlers. Pa thinks they are getting ready for their spring buffalo hunt.

Chapter 23: Indian War-cry

While Pa returns to his plowing, the Indians gathered in creek bottoms grow louder. There is yelling between the Indians. One night, Indian drums beat all night long. The Indians no longer come by, but stay together in the creek bottoms. There is a general sense of unease on the prairie. Wilder writes, "It didn't feel safe. It seemed to be hiding something." Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards talk about building a stockade, but Pa does not think it would help to display fear.

Late one night, Laura and her sisters are awakened by the Indians' war cry. Pa tells them that the Indians are talking with each other about war, but the soldiers at nearby forts will protect them. The war cries continue for many nights as the family stays inside the house every day. After the loudest night, Laura wakes up in the morning to find many Indians using the trail to go west.

A few days later, Pa goes to the Indian camps and finds nearly all of them deserted. He then meets an Osage Indian in the woods who tells him that all the Indian tribes but the Osages want to massacre the white people in their territory. An Osage leader would not let that happen, and the other tribes left. Wilder writes, "No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe the only good Indian was a dead Indian."

Chapter 24: Indians Ride Away

The next morning, the Osage Indians leave the creek bottoms and go west. Pa spies the Indian leader, Du Chêne. The family watches the Indians leave. Laura likes watching the ponies and the Indians of all ages. She makes eye contact with a papoose, and tells her father she wanted one. The family stays there the whole day, not eating supper, until all the Indians have passed.

Chapter 25: Soldiers

After the Indians leave, life continues to blossom on the prairie. As Pa plows, Ma, Mary, and Laura plant a garden. Soon, Pa is able to plant corn and potatoes on his plowed field. This activity ends when Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards inform them that the federal government is going to send soldiers to remove them from their homes, which are still in Indian territory. Pa does not want to be removed in that way, so he is leaving now and going north. He gives Scott the cow and calf, and after dinner, prepares the covered wagon for the journey north.

Chapter 26: Going Out

The next morning, the Ingalls family packs up the wagon and leaves for Independence, Missouri. As they leave, Pa says, "It's great country, Caroline. But there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day." They travel out the way they came in, stopping to camp along the way.

Themes

The Pioneer Spirit

Because Pa feels that the Big Woods in Wisconsin are becoming too crowded, he moves his family west to Indian territory. One common component of the American dream involves taking risks to achieve such success in life. Pa takes the risk because, though the Indian territory is not yet open to white settlers, he believes it will be soon. By being among the first settlers in the territory and exhibiting pioneer spirit, he puts himself and his family in position to have claim on the best land when the federal government opens it to settlement.

Living in Indian territory is not easy, as the Ingalls family finds out during the time they are there taking the risk. Some of the Native Americans in the area resent the presence of the white settlers. They come into the house and demand or steal food and supplies. At the end of *Little House on the Prairie*, the Indians prepare for a spring buffalo hunt and discuss killing the whites. While this threat does not come to pass, it makes life tense for the few settlers in the area.

Because neighbors are limited in number and the nearest town, Independence, is forty miles away, every day life is full of risks. While building the walls to the house, a log rolls on Ma. Though it is only a sprain, anything worse could have been devastating to the family. Even worse, the whole family falls ill with malaria during the summer. Their dog Jack drags a stranger to the house, Dr. Tan, who gives them medicine and helps save their lives.

In the end, Pa's gamble does not pay off. After receiving conflicting information for several months, the family learns of the government's decision that the white settlers must leave the Indian territory; they will be removed by force if necessary. Pa will not wait for this indignity, so the family leaves. Though they are not successful this time, the family is none the worse for wear and has gained a mule in the process.

Self-reliance

Another aspect of the American dream explored in *Little House* is self-reliance. Essentially alone on the prairie where he has chosen to take his family, Pa relies on himself for nearly everything and only uses the help of neighbors on a labor exchange basis. He chooses the place where they will build their home. He builds the home by himself, first with the help of his wife, then with the aid of Mr. Edwards. Pa builds the stable the same way. Though Laura helps Pa construct the doors for the house and stable, Pa himself constructs the roof. He reluctantly uses nails lent by Mr. Edwards, and he pays him back as soon as he makes the trip to Independence. Pa builds the floor and furniture by himself as well.

To support and feed his family, Pa hunts game. He collects furs to trade for goods as well as a plow and seeds. When he obtains the plow and seeds, he begins working the prairie sod. Ma, Mary, and Laura plant a garden. They also collect blackberries when they are ripe. In addition to cooking all the family's meals, Ma also does the family's sewing and makes all their clothes. The Ingalls family gets whatever it wants or needs through its own labor.

Good Neighbors

Though the Ingalls family is essentially self-reliant, they do rely on the help of others at times, and they help others in turn. This supportive action makes the American dream possible as neighbor aids neighbor, especially when a crisis is at hand. The most obvious instance of the importance of neighbors helping each other is when families fall ill.

In chapter 7, "The Wolf-Pack," Pa goes out exploring the prairie and finds a family from Iowa sick with malaria being take care of by their youngest children. Though he is late getting back to his own family, Pa goes back to other men he met earlier in the day, two bachelors, so they can care for the ill family. When the Ingalls family and other families in the area come down with the same illness later on, Mrs. Scott travels from house to house with the Indian physician, Dr. Tan, taking care of the sick.

The labor exchanges mentioned above also help everyone achieve their American dream. Mr. Edwards is a bachelor and happily helps Pa build the home and stable first so his family can have shelter. In addition to lending Pa nails to complete the roof, Mr. Edwards labors for the family in another way. He risks his life to cross the swollen creek at Christmas to deliver gifts from Santa to Mary and Laura. If Mr. Edwards had not done so, the girls would not have had much of a Christmas that year. His actions as a friend and neighbor to the Ingalls family helps make their time on the prairie endurable.

Joy in Everyday Life

No matter what happens in *Little House on the Prairie*, the Ingalls family finds joy in everyday life around them. To achieve the American dream is to endure sometimes trying, if not boring, circumstances. Though they are isolated on the prairie, the Ingalls family never complains about the tedium of every day life. Only Laura has moments of rebellion, but she is usually obedient and also consistently helps her family.

Much of the text of *Little House* consists of breathtaking descriptions of the landscape, weather, and wildlife the Ingalls experience daily on the prairie. Pa loves the big sky overhead, while Mary and Laura enjoy the antics of small animals such as gophers, water bugs, and frogs. Ma and Pa go about their daily lives without complaint or resentment; they are depicted as generally being happy where they are. There are also unexpected findings when the Ingalls explore life away from their immediate home environment.

One day, for example, Pa takes Mary and Laura to the Indian camp, described in chapter 14, "Indian Camp." On their way there, they see beautiful foliage; once at the camp, Pa points out the moccasin tracks and other remains from the Indians' last stay. Their excursion is highlighted by finding and collecting loose Indian beads. Wilder writes of the Laura finding the first bead, "She picked it up, and it was a beautiful blue bead. Laura shouted with joy." After finding the first one, the hunt for more beads define a lovely afternoon and a necklace for Carrie. While such excursions are rare in the book, they help make life on the endless prairie interesting.

Historical Context

The Frontier Era

Little House on the Prairie, and all of Wilder's "Little House" books, takes place in the era of westward expansion in the United States. By promising free land to settlers, the U.S. government lured people west. The promise began with the Homestead Act of 1862, which granted land ownership to migrants who remained on the 160 acres of claimed land and worked it for a certain number of years. Many took the government up on the offer for various reasons. For example, some settlers saw it as a means of ending a cycle of poverty or a second chance at success. Others just wanted the land for free. Either way, holding onto one's claim and surviving often brutal conditions was difficult. People had to build their homes, lives, livelihoods, and communities from scratch. They also faced social isolation during the years the farms and communities were being developed.

Despite such conditions, many Americans believed in the West and what it represented. Pa, for example, saw it as a land of possibility and escape where he could make a living away from the over-populated Big Woods. He takes a risk by going to Indian territory in or near Kansas in *Little House on the Prairie* because he has faulty information that the federal government will be opening up the Indians' land to settlers soon. By being among the first in the area, he hopes to stake the best claim. The lack of reliable, efficient communication between Washington, D.C., and the West lead to problems, however. Throughout the book, Pa wants to believe the area will be open soon, but he receives conflicting reports. In the end, the government declines to release the Osage territory and force the Indians westward. The family decides to leave before soldiers forcibly remove the settlers.

The frontier still held an attraction for Pa and others despite this particular failure in *Little House*. Westward expansion began in earnest in the early 1860s and was aided by the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad. Hundreds of thousands of people went to Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, and California in the 1870s and 1880s. For Americans, the western frontier symbolized hope, individualism, and self-confidence gained from conquering the wilderness. Some Americans were lured west not by the promise of free land but by the promise of prosperity created by exploiting virgin mineral and lumber resources. Many, however, were farmers and ranchers. Between the years 1870 and 1900, there were more acres settled and cultivated in the United States than between 1620 and 1870.

The Great Depression

Little House on the Prairie was published in 1935, at the height of the Great Depression. After the prosperous, sometimes frivolous 1920s came to an end with the stock market crash of October 1929, the United States fell into an economic depression unmatched in

the twentieth century. Between 1929 and 1933 alone, 100,000 businesses failed, and corporate profits went from $10 billion in 1929 to only $1 billion in 1933. Farm incomes also fell dramatically as lower prices resulted in less profits.

As companies went out of business, more and more Americans found themselves out of work. In the beginning of 1930, there were four million Americans out of work; by 1933, this number reached thirteen million, or 25 percent of the American workforce. Many people who had not lost their investments and/or savings in the 1929 crash often became economically devastated as they spent their funds to survive as the Great Depression lingered. Banks were also particularly unstable in this time period, and several thousand shut their doors. One of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's solutions to the economic crisis was the New Deal legislation in the early and mid-1930s. These programs helped revive the economy and put Americans back to work. They gave hope after the failed presidency of Herbert Hoover in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

There was social and cultural fallout as the Great Depression affected all Americans. Families faced serious strains as widespread unemployment affected familial relationships. People put off marriage and married couples put off having children because of the economic distress. While the divorce rate fell in the 1930s, it became more common for husbands and fathers to simply abandon their wives and families. The families that did stay together spent more time in close quarters, as there was less money for recreation. The result was often an increase in family tension. Many American also ate poorly because they could not afford to eat as well as they should, resulting in widespread malnutrition and disease.

Wilder's "Little House" series was popular when it was published in the 1930s because of what it represented in these harsh times. By looking back to a time of American triumph, promise, and prosperity, Wilder's books brought a beacon of hope to readers in these dark years. Yet Wilder herself began writing the books after the stock market crash when her family's savings were wiped out. She was looking for economic security for the entire family, as were many Americans in this time period.

Critical Overview

Since its publication in 1935, *Little House on the Prairie* has been popular with both readers and critics. Originally, one reason for it appeal to readers was a sense of nostalgia. In the mid-1930s, the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression. *Little House* looked back to a simpler, happier time and place in American history. Despite the economic problems of the 1930s, this book and other books in the series sold well.

By the 1950s, *Little House*, as well as all eight books in the "Little House" series, was considered a classic work of children's literature. Though some critics have noted inconsistencies with the story and questioned the author's sense of geography, the book has continued to be praised for how it depicted a strong sense of family and familial love at its center. Critics also praised how the family was depicted as hard working, resourceful, and courageous in the face of potential disaster.

Other critics believed that Wilder skillfully made what must have been a monotonous daily life experience quite interesting. Charles Frey writes in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, "It's surprising that the writer's skill and interest so rarely flag. The very consistency of interest and liveliness of detail, indeed, might seem almost to camouflage what must have been an often-dreary sameness of days."

While *Little House* has been beloved for generations, there also have been two major areas of debate. Beginning in the 1980s, some critics and Native Americans decried Wilder's depiction of Native Americans as well as the anti-Indian attitudes expressed by characters such as Ma and the Scotts. Of the controversy, Wayne Scott writes in the *Oregonian*, "Early settlers such as the Ingalls seem more ignorant than innocent … more destructive than pioneering. Behind the pioneering spirit depicted in the story, there was forced exodus, destruction and genocide inflicted on Native Americans." Several libraries and classrooms in South Dakota, Minnesota, and Louisiana have banned the book as a result.

Other critics have debated how much of a role Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, played in the composition of *Little House*. Some critics believe that she wrote most, if not all, of the text, that she was essentially her mother's ghostwriter. Others believe Lane was her mother's sounding board, collaborator, or just the editor as her mother claimed.

Despite such criticisms, *Little House* and the other books in the series remain important works of American literature. Complimenting Wilder's writing style, Ann Hyman of the *Florida Times Union* writes, "Wilder tells her stories of people and places and events that she experienced as she remembers them, no frills, plain storytelling, almost journalism, in the voice of her times and from the perspective of a child." In *Writers for Children*, Fred Erisman emphasizes the books' historic importance and declares, "Artistic in their artlessness, the 'Little House' books speak quietly but eloquently for the simple virtues of industry, responsibility, and family cohesiveness."

Little House on the Prairie was loosely adapted for a television series that originally aired from 1974 to 1983. The series centered on one place, Walnut Grove, Minnesota, though the Ingalls family actually moved a number of times. Despite its liberties with Laura Ingalls Wilder's series of books, the television series was an immensely popular celebration of television's version of pioneer life. The series starred Michael Landon as Pa and Melissa Gilbert as Laura. Each season, as well as several related television movies and specials, is available on DVD from Imavision.

Little House on the Prairie (2005) is a television miniseries based on the book of the same name by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Unlike the television series, this miniseries remains relatively faithful to the source, describing the young Laura's experiences living in Indian territory in the 1870s. Directed by David L. Cunningham, *Little House on the Prairie* stars Cameron Bancroft and Erin Cottrell. It is available on DVD from Buena Vista Home Entertainment.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Fellman contends that Laura Ingalls Wilder and her daughter consciously emphasize the American ideal of self-sufficiency in the Little House *books as a statement to Americans seeking relief from the Great Depression*.

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

Source: Anita Clair Fellman, "Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else," in *Children's Literature*, Yale University Press, Vol. 24, 1996, pp. 101-16.

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Hyman, Ann, "*Little House* more than children's book," in the *Florida Times Union*, June 25, 2000, p. G-4.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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