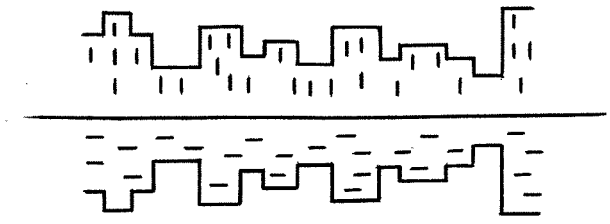
THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

WILDER WOMEN

The mother and daughter behind the Little House stories.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

In April of 1932, an unlikely literary débutante published her first book. Laura Elizabeth Ingalls Wilder was a matron of sixty-five, neat and tiny—about four feet eleven—who was known as Bessie to her husband, Almanzo, and as Mama Bess to her daughter, Rose. The family lived at Rocky Ridge, a farm in the Ozarks, near Mansfield, Missouri, where Wilder raised chickens and tended an apple orchard. She also enjoyed meetings of her embroidery circle, and of the Justamere Club, a study group that she helped found. Readers of *The Missouri Ruralist* knew her as Mrs. A. J. Wilder, the author of a biweekly column. Her sensible opinions on housekeeping, marriage, husbandry, country life, and, more rarely, on politics and patriotism were expressed in a plain style, with an occasional ecstatic flourish inspired by her love for "the sweet, simple things of life which are the real ones after all." A work ethic inherited from her Puritan forebears, which exalted labor and self-improvement not merely for their material rewards but as moral values, was, she believed, the key to happiness. Mrs. Wilder, however, wasn't entirely happy with her part-time career, or with her obscurity. In 1930, she sat down with a supply of sharpened pencils—she didn't type—to write something more ambitious: an autobiography.

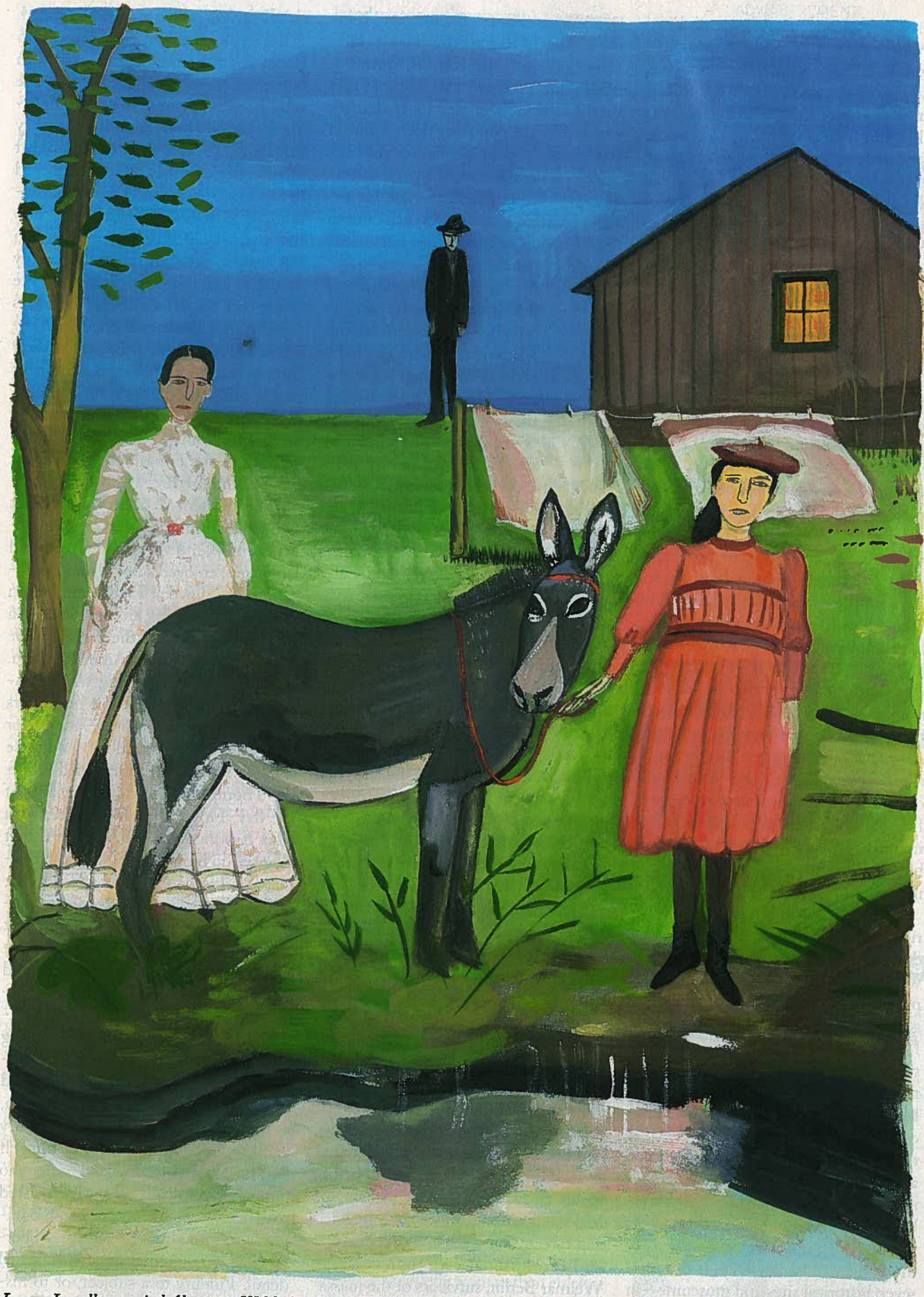
Laura Ingalls was born in the sylvan wilds near Pepin, Wisconsin, in 1867, and she grew up on the frontier, in the various log cabins, claim shanties, sod dugouts, and little frame houses that her inveterately restless father, Charles, built for his wife and daughters each time he bundled them into a covered wagon and moved on, mostly westward, in search of an elusive prosperity. While the Ingallses were living outside the town of De Smet, in what is now South Dakota, Laura met her future husband, a laconic homesteader ten years her senior. Almanzo Wilder, whom she called Manly, had raised horses as a farm boy in Malone, New York, and he owned the finest team in town—two beautiful brown Morgans. When De Smet was cut off from supplies by a winter of record cold and relentless blizzards that buried the railroad tracks, he and a friend had risked their lives to buy grain from an outlying farmer who was rumored to have a reserve. They barely made it back, in a whiteout, but they saved their neighbors from starvation.

Almanzo and Laura started courting when she was fifteen. By that time, she was helping to support her family by teaching school (she was younger than some of her students) and working as a part-time seamstress. Her elder sister, Mary, had gone blind after an illness diagnosed as "brain fever," which may have been caused by measles or meningitis. Carrie, the third-born, was thin and sickly. Grace was the baby. Laura had always been the sturdy one, pleasant-looking but no beauty, her father's favorite, and something of a tomboy who occasionally showed flashes of defiance. Almanzo was the town hero, and Laura had a rival for his affections, yet she treated him coolly. After her death, in 1957, Laura's qualms about a life like her mother's surfaced in an unpublished manuscript. Caroline Ingalls was a woman of some education and gentility who had also taught school before marrying a pioneer. (The only relics of her former life were a treasured figurine—a china shepherdess—and her love of fashion and poetry.) "Sweet are the uses of adversity" was, perhaps by default, her working motto. She rose before dawn to stoke the fire and boil the bathwater. She fed her family with whatever she had. She made all their clothes and linens, recycling the scraps for her patchwork quilts. She baked the bread, churned the butter, blacked the stove, and restuffed the pallets that they slept on with fresh hay. Even when it was twenty below, she did the washing for six people, pressing with heavy flatirons laundry that had frozen stiff. When her husband was away on some urgent survival mission (Laura recounted how he once walked three hundred miles to find work as a field hand), she fetched the wood and pitched feed to the horses, then waited up for his uncertain return, knitting in her rocker. Informed summarily that she would be packing up, yet again, to start over in a new wilderness, she protested feebly but acquiesced.

Laura waited until she was eighteen, in 1885, before she agreed to marry Almanzo. Their daughter arrived a year later. She was named for the wild roses on the prairie where she was born.

The book business, hard hit by the Depression, was cutting back drastically, and a first draft of Wilder's memoir, "Pioneer Girl," was passed over by several agents and publishers, who felt that it lacked drama. But she persisted—less interested, she later said, in the money than in the prestige of authorship—and when Virginia Kirkus, an editor of children's books at Harper & Brothers, received a new version of the material, now recast as a novel aimed at readers between the ages of eight and twelve, she bought it. That "juvenile" (as such chapter books were quaintly called), "Little House in the Big Woods," was the first volume of an American family saga that has since sold about sixty million copies in thirty-

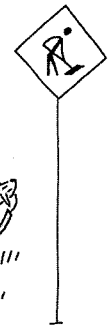
ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: MAIRA KALMAN



Laura Ingalls married Almanzo Wilder in 1885. Their daughter, born a year later, was named for the wild roses on the prairie.

three languages. During last year's Presidential campaign, when a journalist from the *Times* asked Heather Bruce, Sarah Palin's sister, about the candidate's reading habits as a child in Wasilla, she mentioned only one book, "Little House on the Prairie," the third and best known of the eight novels that Wilder published in her lifetime. It describes the Ingallses' migration from Wisconsin to Kansas, where they build an illegal homestead on land reserved for the Osage tribe, and suffer a series of Job-like tribulations: predation by wolves and panthers, a prairie fire, malaria, blizzards, menacing encounters with the Indians, and a near-fatal well-gas accident. None of it crushed their spirits or shook their belief in self-reliance, although the story ends on a bitter note—one that Governor Palin might have recalled. Charles learns from a neighbor that federal troops are coming to evict the settlers. The "blasted politicians in Washington" have betrayed them, and, without waiting to be run off "like an outlaw," he abandons the little house in a rage. In the last scene, with his family camped by its wagon in the high grass, he gets out his fiddle. "And we'll rally round the flag boys," he sings. "We'll rally once again / Shouting the battle-cry of Freedom!" Ma shushes him—it's too martial a song for the girls, who are half-asleep, but "Laura felt that she must shout, too."

In 1974, "Little House on the Prairie" was loosely adapted as a television drama, which ran for nine seasons. It was said to be Ronald Reagan's favorite program. After it went off the air, the actors reunited to make three "Little House" films. Melissa Gilbert, who played the young Laura, grew up in the role from the age of ten to eighteen, and last year she played Caroline in a musical based on the books, which opened at the Guthrie Theatre, in Minneapolis, and begins a national tour in September at the Paper Mill Playhouse, in Millburn, New Jersey. The farmhouse at Rocky Ridge now receives some forty thousand visitors annually. It is one of seven historical sites and museums—in New York, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, South Dakota, and Kansas—devoted to the series and its lore. (Last autumn, the Kansas museum, which bills itself as "The Little House on the Prairie," was sued for trademark dilution by the company that produced the series. A spokesperson for the museum—which is owned by the television personality Bill Kurtis and his sister—says that it declined a cash offer to change its name. The case is pending.)



Wilder scholarship is a flourishing industry, particularly at universities in the Midwest, and much of it seeks to sift fiction from history. The best book among many good, if more pedestrian, ones, "The Ghost in the Little House," by William Holtz, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Missouri, explores a controversy that first arose after Wilder bequeathed her original manuscripts to libraries in Detroit and California. It is the work of a fastidious stylist, and, in its way, a minor masterpiece of insight and research. Holtz's subject, however, isn't Laura Ingalls Wilder. It is her daughter and, he argues, her unacknowledged "ghost," Rose Wilder Lane.

By the time that Laura published her first book, Rose was a frumpish, middle-aged divorcée, who was tormented by rotten teeth and suffered from bouts of suicidal depression, which she diagnosed in her journal, with more insight than many doctors of the era, as a mental illness. For more than a decade, she had earned a good living with what she considered literary hack work for the San Francisco *Bulletin,* its rival, the *Call,* various magazines, and the Red Cross Publicity Bureau. She had published commercial fiction, travelogues, ghost-written memoirs, and several celebrity biographies. Charles Ingalls's granddaughter had inherited his wanderlust, and her career had given her a chance to indulge it. Much of her reporting had been filed from exotic places. She had lived among bohemians in Paris and Greenwich Village, Soviet peasants and revolutionaries, intellectuals in Weimar Berlin, survivors of the massacres in Armenia, Albanian rebels, and camel-drivers on the road to Baghdad.

In 1928, she had come home to Rocky Ridge for an extended visit with her aging parents, whose income she subsidized. They were so used to denying themselves basic comforts that they threatened to have their electricity cut off, even though they no longer needed to live so austerely, and Laura's martyrdom, as Rose saw it, was a reproach to her own way of life. "My mother can not learn to have any reliance upon my financial judgment or promises," she wrote to a sometime lover. "Where is perseverance, thrift, caution, industry—where are any of the necessary virtues? Simply not in me." She grandly spent eleven thousand dollars to build Laura and Almanzo a new fieldstone house—an "English cottage"—which they didn't want, and she bought them a Buick, which Almanzo drove into a tree.

The transformation of a barefoot Cinderella from the Ozarks into a stylish cosmopolite who acquired several languages, enjoyed smoking and fornication, and dined at La Rotonde when she wasn't motoring around Europe in her Model T is, like the Little House books themselves, an American saga. Rose's published writing was sensationalist, if not trashy, but her letters and her conversation were prized for their acerbic sophistication by a diverse circle of friends which included Dorothy Thompson, a leading journalist of the day; Floyd Dell, the editor, with Max Eastman, of *The Masses;* Ahmet Zogu, who became King Zog of Albania; and Herbert Hoover, despite the fact that he had apparently tried to suppress an embarrassing hagiography that Rose and a collaborator had cobbled together in 1920. (He hadn't yet entered electoral politics, but he was widely admired for his postwar relief work in Europe.) Hoover was not unique among Rose's subjects in deploring her fabrications. Charlie Chaplin was so incensed by them that he threatened legal action, as did Jack London's widow. Henry Ford repudiated a portrait of himself that he couldn't recognize. Laura, who publicly (and disingenuously) insisted that her stories were pure autobiography, also sometimes balked at the liberties that her daughter took with factual detail. Fidelity to a subject, or to history, was of less importance to Rose,

as she implied in a placating letter to Chaplin, than a "corking" tale. But perhaps she didn't understand the principle at stake: she had reinvented herself just as brashly.

The Wilders' life on a shrinking frontier was considerably bleaker than even the Ingallses' had been. The first decade of their marriage, as Laura later recalled, was a period of almost unrelieved calamity and failure. Their infant son died. Drought and hail destroyed their crops, and they struggled to pay the interest on their heavily mortgaged house and equipment. Then the house burned down. Almanzo had a stroke, brought on by diphtheria, and he never fully recovered from the paralysis. Virtually destitute, they embarked on a series of futile peregrinations, by train and wagon, across the Midwest, with a wretched interlude on the Florida Panhandle. In 1894, they were uprooted by one of the worst depressions in American history, and headed for the Ozarks, which had been touted by promoters as yet another promised land. They struggled for years to eke out a living from the rocky soil.

Rose was, in essence, the child of refugees. The girls in Mansfield laughed at her for her patched clothes and bare feet. The family sometimes went hungry, and Rose blamed the condition of her teeth on early malnutrition. She later recalled her parents' outward show of courage and gaiety and her own sullen pride in defying her humiliations. But she confided them to her journal, where she also complained bitterly about her mother. "No affection" heads the litany of her privations. "She made me so miserable as a child that I never got over it." Even as a grown woman, Laura belittled her, Rose said: she "hesitates to let me have the responsibility of bringing up the butter from the spring, for fear I won't do it quite right!"

William Holtz points out that Laura had been so harried by poverty and hardship—doing some of the man's work that Almanzo couldn't manage, in addition to her own—that she might not have had much left to give, except the example of self-denial. Rose herself could be grandiose and domineering. There is nothing explicit in their letters (few of Laura's survive, one a belated paean of gratitude) to suggest that Wilder merited the accusations, even though she accepted Rose's extravagant gifts and literary labors on her behalf with a sense of entitlement that was more like a child's than like a mother's. Rose, in her less aggrieved moments, could admit that Mama Bess, through no fault of her own, had the wrong daughter. Whatever their disappointments, they kept them from each other.

After high school, Rose left home to work as a telegraph operator, and in 1908 she took a job in San Francisco. Holtz isn't sure whether or not she had already met her future husband, Claire Gillette Lane, a newspaper reporter her own age—twenty-two—but they married a year later. She became pregnant only once, and lost the infant, a boy. (Later in life, she informally adopted a series of protégés whom she considered foster children; she could be a needy and controlling benefactor, but she lavished upon her wards the gifts of maternal warmth and of faith in their potential of which she herself had felt cheated.)

If Rose had reckoned on her husband as a cultivated soul mate and provider, she was quickly disabused. Gillette Lane was full of schemes for making a fortune in advertising and promotion. The young couple went on the road for several unhappy years. Back in San Francisco, in 1915, she "got rid of Gillette" ("my attitude toward men has always been essentially exploiting," she later remarked), and was hired as an assistant at the *Bulletin*. The editor, Fremont Older, a legendary newsman and anti-corruption crusader, became Rose's mentor and a "model of integrity" to her, Holtz writes, if not a surrogate father. She failed to absorb his ethics, although under his tutelage she learned not only to rewrite her copy but to accept being rewritten. In that sense, one could say that the career of Laura Ingalls Wilder began there.

Rose saw her mother as a literary apprentice, not as an artist, even though she had always encouraged Wilder's writing—first the journalism, then the juveniles; they were a less strenuous and more profitable source of income for an elderly woman than chicken farming. But, whatever art may be, the

ittle House books fulfill its purpose defined by Horace: "to entertain and inform." Mother and daughter essentially divided that labor. One has to ispect that the delicious minutiae of ie books' famous how-to chapters on iolding bullets, pressing cheese, diging a well, making a rag doll, drying lums, framing a house, and smoking a am, among dozens of daily activities, ere mostly Laura's contribution. (In ıy favorite of many Christmas scenes, ttle Grace gets an elegant new coat and ood, trimmed in swan's down; her faher shot the bird, her mother cured the kin and did most of the sewing, and her ılder sisters pieced out the lining from craps of blue silk.) It was what Laura new, loved, and had proved, in her columns for the *Ruralist*, that she could vrite about.

Rose had proved that she could romanticize whatever material she was given. She did some minor tinkering with "Pioneer Girl," but, once it was decided to fictionalize the memoir as a children's story—the idea had come from an editor who rejected the memoir—she took a more aggressive role. It varied in intensity from book to book, but she dutifully typed up the manuscript pages, and, in the process, reshaped and heightened the dramatic structure. She also rewrote the prose so drastically that Laura sometimes felt usurped. "A good bit of the detail that I add to your copy is for pure sensory effect," Rose explained in a letter.

John Miller, a thorough biographer and historian who, like Holtz, compared the manuscripts with the published texts, came to a different conclusion about the collaboration. In the introduction to his book "Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder," he writes, "Wilder demonstrated a high degree of writing competence from the beginning, and her daughter's contribution to the final products, while important, was less significant than has been asserted." (The four pages of manuscript that he reproduces arouse more questions than they settle, however. In Laura's scribbled margin notes to Rose—points of fact about geography—she misspells definite as "deffinite" and remarks that her husband "don't remember" the distance between two towns.) A concise, recent biography by Pamela Smith Hill, "Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life," is more overtly partisan. Hill accuses Rose of insensitivity to her mother's "imaginative vision," and, at times, of arrogance, condescension, bullying, self-aggrandizement, and even plagiarism. (Rose secretly wrote an adult novella of her own, "Let the Hurricane Roar," which was widely admired and sold briskly. The substance and characters were pillaged from "Pioneer Girl." Laura apparently never read the book, and considered it a betrayal.)

The cumulative evidence suggests that sometimes Laura stood her ground and sometimes she was cowed into submission, but most often she solicited and welcomed Rose's improvements. When Rose left the farm, in 1935, the editing of the five books yet to come was done by correspondence. "I have written you the whys of the story as I wrote it," Laura told her in a letter that accompanied a draft of volume four, "On the Banks of Plum Creek," "but you know your judgment is better than mine, so what you decide is the one that stands." Rose, for her part, could be an insufferable didact. She played down her authority, even as she hammered it home: "I'm trying to train you as a writer for the big market," she had told her mother in 1925. (Laura had written an article about her Ozark kitchen, which, heavily revised, had appeared in the magazine *Country Gentleman*.) "You must understand that what sold was *your* article, *edited*. You must study how it was edited, and why. . . . Above all, you must *listen* to me."

"Little House in the Big Woods" was a great success, critically and commercially. Seven months after it was published, Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover. His victory bitterly dismayed the Wilders—Rose, in particular. Shortly after the Inauguration, she noted in her journal, "We have a dictator."

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Wilders, along with other disillu-

Q

Q belonged to Q.&A.,
to questions, and to foursomes, and fractions,
it belonged to the Queen, to Quakers, to quintets—
within its compound in the dictionary dwelt
the quill pig, and quince beetle,
and quetzal, and quail. Quailing was part of Q's
quiddity—the Q quaked
and quivered, it quarrelled and quashed. No one was
quite sure where it had come from, but it had
travelled with the K, they were the two voiceless
velar Semitic consonants, they went
back to the desert, to *caph* and *koph*.
And K has done a lot better—
29 pages in Webster's Third
to Q's 13. And though Q has much
to be proud of, from Q.&I. detector
through quinoa, sometimes these days the letter
looks like what medical students called the
Q face—its tongue lolling out.
And sometimes when you pass a folded
newspaper you can hear from within it
a keening, from all the Q's who are being
set in type, warboarded,
made to tell and tell of the quick and the
Iraq dead.

—*Sharon Olds*

sioned pioneers, had briefly rallied to the incendiary populism of William Jennings Bryan. By the middle of the decade, Rose had become a follower of Eugene Debs, the union organizer and Socialist candidate for President. In her days as a bohemian, she had flirted with Communism. Laura was a Democrat until the late nineteen-twenties; after the First World War, she served as the local secretary of a national loan association that dispersed federal money to farmers, and as the chairwoman of her county's Democratic Committee. But, ultimately, both women's experience of adversity—or their selective recall of it—made them less sympathetic to the homeless and the jobless. "The Greatest Good to the Greatest Number," Rose argued in a letter to Dorothy Thompson, "will obviously be reached when each individual of the greatest number is doing the greatest good to himself."

Laura had kept in touch fitfully with her sisters, and when she began to research her childhood they sometimes provided details that she'd forgotten. Mary had died in 1928, but Grace, a farmer's wife, and Carrie, a journalist, were both still living in South Dakota—Grace and her husband receiving welfare and surplus food. Nevertheless, from Rocky Ridge, the predicament of the urban poor was a remote abstraction, and the Wilders blamed rural poverty on the Democrats' support, as they saw it, of industry at the expense of agriculture. They opposed legislation that compelled farmers to plow crops under as a strategy for price support. Miller writes that, according to Rose, Almanzo was ready to run off an agent from the Agriculture Department with a shotgun, telling him, "I'll plant whatever I damn please on my own farm." In 1943, the year that Laura published "These Happy Golden Years" (the final installment of her saga), she told a Republican congressman from Malone, New York, "What we accomplished was without help of any kind, from anyone."

The Wilders had, in fact, received unacknowledged help from their families, and the Ingallses, like all pioneers, were dependent, to some degree, on the railroads; on taxpayer-financed schools (Mary's tuition at a college for the blind, Hill points out, was paid for by the Dakota Territory); on credit—which is to say, the savings of their fellow-citizens; on "boughten" supplies they couldn't make or grow; and, most of all, on the federal government, which had cleared their land of its previous owners. "There were no people" on the prairie, Laura, or Rose, had written. "Only Indians lived there." (Hill writes that Wilder agreed to amend the sentence when an outraged reader objected, calling it "a stupid blunder." It now reads, "There were no settlers.")

In 1936, the *Saturday Evening Post* published Lane's own "Credo," an impassioned essay that was widely admired by conservatives. Her vision was of a quasi-anarchic democracy, with minimal taxes, limited government, and no entitlements, regulated only by the principle of personal responsibility. Its citizens would be equal in their absolute freedom to flourish or to fail.

Everything that Lane wrote after "Credo"—fiction or polemics—was an expression of that vision. She may have been the first to invoke the term "libertarian" (it dates to the eighteenth century) to describe the agenda of a nascent anti-statist movement of which she has been called, with Isabel Paterson and Ayn Rand, "a founding mother." To the degree that she is still remembered for her own achievements, it is mainly by a few libertarian ultras for whom her tract of 1943, "The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority," is a foundational work of political theory. (It was written "in a white heat," she said.)

The struggle against authority defined Rose's life. She railed against a mother who had infantilized her (even though she returned the favor), and at a President who, she believed, was infantilizing a free republic. ("I hoped that Roosevelt would be killed in 1933," she wrote to her agent, George Bye, who also represented Eleanor Roosevelt.) She fought a valiant losing battle for the psychic freedom necessary to write something authentic, yet she was beholden to her parents for her greatest literary successes. In 1938, Rose serialized "Free Land," a novel set on the Dakota plains, whose central character was modelled on Almanzo. It reached the

best-seller list, and a reviewer in the *Times* recommended it to the Pulitzer Prize committee. But, once Rose had exhausted her family history, her creative life was finished. Her last attempt at fiction, in 1939, "The Forgotten Man," is the story of a working-class hero whose ingenuity has been thwarted by the New Deal. When it was rejected by an editor as artless propaganda, Rose, according to Holtz, argued that she "could not write it otherwise."

By then, Lane had moved East. In 1938, at fifty-one, she bought three suburban acres near Danbury, Connecticut, and a clapboard farmhouse—her first real home. (Remodelling, she told a friend, was "my vice.") As she aged, her inner and outer worlds both contracted. She abandoned her journal and, with it, Holtz concludes, her introspection. Old friends were alienated by her increasingly kooky and embattled militance. (One of them described her as "floating between sanity and a bedlam of hates.") The F.B.I. took notice of her "subversive" actions to protest Social Security, and she made headlines by denouncing the agency's "Gestapo" tactics. She talked about reducing her income to a bare minimum, so that she wouldn't have to file taxes. During the Second World War, she found an improbable new pulpit—a column, "Rose Lane Says," in the Pittsburgh *Courier*, a progressive African-American weekly. In 1943, convinced that wartime rationing would lead only to inefficiency, she denounced it to her readers, and, to make the point that a determined individualist could live off the grid, she arranged with her neighbors to share a cow, a pig, and some chickens, and she canned the produce from her garden. Two hours from Manhattan, she was re-creating her parents' life.

The Wilders were a long-lived family. Almanzo died in 1949, at ninety-two; Laura in 1957, at ninety; and Rose in 1968, at eighty-one. She bequeathed her literary estate to Roger Lea MacBride, her "adopted grandson" and political torchbearer. (He ran for President on the Libertarian ticket in 1976.) Among the papers of mother and daughter was the draft of a novella that Wilder had mentioned in a letter of 1937: "I thought it might wangle a little more advertising for the L. H. books if I said I might write the grown up one," she told Rose. "You could polish it and put your name to it if that would be better than mine."

At some point soon afterward, Laura did set down the story of her experience as a bride and a young mother, but she abandoned it. That was the manuscript that was found after her death; in 1971 MacBride published it, without revisions, as "The First Four Years," and it is now marketed as volume nine in the Little House series. But Laura's instincts were right. The writing is prissy and amateurish; the heroine is bigoted and obsessed with money. It is too simplistic for an adult reader, and too mature for a child. In slightly more than a hundred pages, there isn't even a glimmer of the radiant simplicity that draws one to the Little House books.

Last June, Anita Clair Fellman, a professor emerita of history at Old Dominion University, in Norfolk, Virginia, published "Little House, Long Shadow," a survey of the Wilders' "core" beliefs, and of their influence on American political culture. Two streams of conservatism, she argues—not in themselves inherently compatible—converge in the series. One is Lane's libertarianism, and the other is Wilder's image of a poster family for Republican "value voters": a devoted couple of Christian patriots and their unspoiled children; the father a heroic provider and benign disciplinarian, the mother a pious homemaker and an example of feminine self-sacrifice. (In that respect, Rose considered herself an abject failure. "My life has been arid and sterile," she wrote, "because I have been a human being instead of a woman.")

Fellman concludes, "The popularity of the Little House books . . . helped create a constituency for politicians like Reagan who sought to unsettle the so-called liberal consensus established by New Deal politics." Considering the outcome of the November election, and the present debacle of laissez-faire capitalism, that popularity may have peaked. On the other hand, it may not have. Hard times whet the appetite for survival stories. ♦