

A GUIDE TO My *Ántonia*

Willa Cather

*. . . she still had that something which fires the imagination . . .
by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in
common things.*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Setting: Nebraska in the 1880s through the early 1900s; the novel covers about thirty years, from the two main characters' childhood to their middle age.

Point of View: First person narrator, Jim Burden.

Protagonist: *Ántonia* Shimerda, whose life and experiences are remembered by Jim Burden.

Conflicts: A general conflict, in Book 1, is people vs. their environment. In Book 2 the conflict is country values vs. town values. In Book 3 the struggle is internal—Jim's desire to succeed academically vs. his need to be free. In Book 4 the primary conflict is *Ántonia* vs. Larry Donovan (representing good vs. evil). In Book 5 we meet the characters after the passage of twenty years.

Resolution: The pioneers triumph over their environment. *Ántonia*, in Jim's mind, becomes identified with all that is good, beautiful, and abundantly fruitful in nature. Although the Burdens and the townspeople seem to have all the advantages at the beginning of the book, the immigrant families do very well. Jim succeeds at school and in business, but is disappointed in his marriage and has no children.

Themes: Human values are more important than material values. Remembering the past is important for understanding the present and future; the values of earlier times are worth remembering and preserving. The human spirit triumphs over adversity.

Of Special Note: The character of *Ántonia* is based on a real person that Cather knew when she was growing up in Nebraska.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This is a traditional-values novel that exalts family, hard work, community, religious tolerance, platonic love, and the pioneering spirit. *Ántonia* has a baby out of wedlock, and that situation is difficult for her. There are two suicides that are treated as wrong, foolish, and wasteful. The strength of this famous novel lies in its

portrayal of the triumph of the human spirit and of the enduring power of love and friendship.

BACKGROUND

Immigration. The great wave of Czech (Bohemian) migration to the United States came as a result of famine and revolution in the 1840s. In 1862 the U.S. Congress passed the Homestead Act which gave a 160-acre plot of land to anyone who lived and worked on it for five years. In the 1880s and 1890s thousands of immigrants came to the prairie states of Iowa, Kansas, the Dakotas, and Nebraska to stake their claim to the free land. Many immigrants were cultured, well-educated people who, like Mr. Shimerda in *My Ántonia*, found life in the new world incredibly difficult.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Jim Burden, narrator of the novel. We see *Ántonia* through his memories.

Grandmother Burden, mother of Jim's father. She is a loving, religious, intelligent person.

Grandfather Burden, dignified, quiet, generous man, highly religious and respected.

Mrs. Shimerda, *Ántonia*'s mother, a disorganized, faultfinding wife and mother, a poor housekeeper, recently immigrated with her family from Bohemia.

Mr. Shimerda, *Ántonia*'s father, a cultured, kind, and gentle musician, easily cheated.

***Ántonia* Shimerda**, the main character, lively, eager, and intelligent; fourteen years old at the beginning of the novel.

The Harlings, family that *Ántonia* first works for in Black Hawk.

Lena Lingard, *Ántonia*'s friend, a Norwegian hired girl who becomes a dressmaker.

Larry Donovan, dishonest train conductor who becomes engaged to *Ántonia*.

The Cuzaks, *Ántonia's* family; **Anton Cuzak** is her husband; their ten children are **Rudolph, Ambrosch, Jan, Anton, Leo, Charley, Anna, Yulka, Nina, and Lucie.**

PLOT

Introduction. An unidentified speaker, most likely the author herself, meets one of the two **main characters**, Jim Burden, on a train. They recall *Ántonia*, the central figure of their childhood. Jim, successful in business but unhappily married, reveals that he has been writing down what he remembers about *Ántonia*. The speaker says she would like to read his account. Jim delivers his manuscript in New York. He titles it “My *Ántonia*.”

Book I: The Shimerdas

Chapters One–Three. The three-year period covered by Book I begins as the narrator, Jim Burden, ten years old and recently orphaned, describes his train journey to his grandparents’ farm near Black Hawk, Nebraska. The conductor tells him of an immigrant family with a girl about his age who are going to the same destination. We share Jim’s delight in the prairie **setting**, which plays a major role in the novel. Later we meet the new immigrant family, the Shimerdas, who are living in little more than a cave. Finally, we meet *Ántonia*.

Chapters Four–Seven. Jim and the lively *Ántonia* become good friends. In these chapters and in the other chapters in Book I we witness the deepening relationship between the children Jim and *Ántonia*. The memories of these days will be with Jim always and explain *Ántonia's* great influence on Jim even when they are separated by years and by their very different lives. One of the memorable episodes in this part of the story is Jim’s encounter with the rattlesnake in Chapter 7. The serpent, described in terms suggestive of evil, has entered this Edenic **setting**.

Chapters Eight–Ten. Another famous story-within-a story is told in Chapter 8: *Ántonia* is the narrator of this horrifying tale, set in wintry Russia, about a wedding party pursued by wolves. Two of the Russian immigrants in the area, known to the children, were with that party. They escaped only because one of them threw the bride and groom to the ravenous wolves.

As winter comes, the Shimerdas’ conditions worsen. When the Burdens visit the family in their cave, they find them using one coat and all their food frozen. We feel the contrast between the Burdens’ cozy **setting** and the harsh conditions the Shimerdas are in **conflict** with.

Chapters Eleven–Thirteen. The Burdens enjoy a country Christmas and take presents over to the Shimerdas. Mr. Shimerda visits the Burdens to thank them. It is clear that he loves the warmth and security of the Burdens’ house. After Christmas *Ántonia* and her mother visit, and Mrs. Shimerda demands one of Grandmother’s cooking pots. Jim begins to feel less sympathetic towards the Shimerda family; there seems to be no end to their needs.

Chapters Fourteen–Sixteen. In a tragic scene Ambrosch Shimerda comes over in the night to tell the Burdens that his father, after dressing carefully, has killed himself. There is much concern about the effect of the suicide on the family, but it is Jim’s grandmother who senses that the loss will be hard on *Ántonia*, her father’s favorite, who is now “alone in a hard world.” The Burdens go to the Shimerdas’ cave that night and Jim, left alone, feels that the spirit of Mr. Shimerda is with him. Mrs. Shimerda insists that her husband be buried at the crossroads, a place that Jim says became the spot most dear to him.

Chapters Seventeen–Nineteen. The Shimerdas’ situation improves. When spring comes, the neighbors help them build a new log house. *Ántonia*, now fifteen, works beside Ambrosch in the fields. She, more than any of the others, mourns her father. She has little time for Jim, and when he begins to go to the country school, they grow even further apart. The Shimerdas continue to seem ungrateful and filled with resentment. There are quarrels, but the two families are reconciled. In July the harvesters work under the burning sun. *Ántonia* tells Jim she prefers working outdoors. On one rainy night he asks her why she can’t always be nice. She tells him that things will always be hard for her and her family. Things, she says, will always be easier for Jim than for her.

Book II: The Hired Girls

Chapters One–Three. Jim is 13 when Book II opens. The Burdens move to a house near the edge of Black Hawk and rent their farm to Widow Steavens, who can give them news of *Ántonia*. When Jim’s grandmother hears that Ambrosch has been hiring out his sister to work in the fields, she gets *Ántonia* a job working for the Harlings, a family in Black Hawk. Jim describes the large Harling family in loving detail. *Ántonia*, now called Tony, enjoys working with Mrs. Harling.

Chapters Four–Five. Tony makes friends with Lena Lingard, a hired girl who is working for the town dressmaker. Her character is a **foil** to *Ántonia's*. Lena also has had a hard life, but, unlike *Ántonia*, she already has a “reputation” and is attractive in a seductive way. She enjoys going to the hotel and likes to tell Jim about the goings-on there.

Chapters Six–Nine. Jim describes winter in Black Hawk. He is drawn to the warmth and color of the Harlings’ house. Tony seems to be very happy there and tells stories to the children. One chilling story features a tramp who kills himself by jumping into a threshing machine. Jim gives the life history of Blind d’Arnault, a man who plays the piano “barbarously and wonderfully” at the hotel. With spring comes a dancing pavilion with classes and a place for the young people to dance. The dances bring the town boys and the hired girls together. Jim describes the social situation in Black Hawk. The young men are attracted to the hired girls, but the townspeople look down on these girls, who come from

poor immigrant families. Jim suggests that the hired girls are more fun-loving than the town girls.

Chapters Ten–Eleven. Things change for Antonia. She loves the dances and becomes popular with the men. One of the young men, Harry Paine, tries to kiss her after a dance. She slaps him, but Mr. Harling blames her for having a free-and-easy reputation. He tells her she must quit going to the dances or leave his employ. Tony goes to work for Wick Cutter, a wealthy, hypocritical merchant.

Chapters Twelve–Fourteen. Jim, now a high school senior, loves to spend time with Tony and her friends. He complains how narrow and colorless most of the other townspeople are. He sneaks out to the dances and often sees Tony there with Larry Donovan, a railroad man. Tony encourages Jim to go away to school, to make something of himself. When his grandparents find out he has been going to dances, they become angry, so he promises them he will stop. He takes extra classes to prepare for college and gives the class oration, which is a great success with Mrs. Harling and the hired girls. Jim takes one important holiday from studying when he goes with Tony and her friends on a picnic by a river in the country. Jim and Tony talk lovingly about Tony's father. Tony tells him that she will never forget her own country. The other girls join them and talk about the hard lives they lead at home and their aspirations for the future. Jim tells the girls the famous story of Coronado's search for the Seven Golden Cities. As the sun sets on this idyllic day, an important **image** of the novel, a plough left standing in the field, appears in the distance, "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun."

Chapter Fifteen. Book II ends with a distressing event. The Cutters take a trip to Omaha, leaving Tony alone in their home. She is afraid to stay alone, so Jim agrees to sleep in her bed while she stays at the Burdens' house. Cutter and Jim both get a surprise when Cutter returns unexpectedly. Cutter beats up Jim, who runs home, unaccountably angry with Tony. Jim's narrow-mindedness and immaturity are clearly revealed in this chapter. He worries about what people will say.

Book III: Lena Lingard

Chapters One–Three. The **setting** moves to Lincoln, Nebraska, where Jim spends his freshman year at the university. He is a successful scholar but is often preoccupied with memories of the places and people of his past, **symbolized** by the plough against the sun. Lena, who now has a dressmaking shop in Lincoln, comes to visit Jim. She gives him news of his friends back in Black Hawk. Tony, now working at the hotel, is engaged to Larry Donovan, whom no one else seems to like or trust. Jim thinks often of the Latin saying (which is one of the novel's **themes**): *Optima dies . . . prima fugit*. Now he knows that the best days are the first to flee.

Chapter Four. Jim spends so much time with Lena that his schoolwork suffers. He feels he may be spoiling Lena's chances for a successful marriage, but she tells

him that she does not intend to marry anyone. Her easygoing attitude toward men and her self-interested goals are a contrast to Tony's. Jim's friendship with Lena has caused him to grow up a little and perhaps appreciate Tony even more. At the end of this book, Jim is nineteen. To his surprise his grandfather agrees to let him finish his college work at Harvard.

Book IV: The Pioneer Woman's Story

Chapter One. Two years have gone by, and Jim is about to start law school. Home for a vacation, he hears that Tony has been abandoned by Larry Donovan. They never married. She lives at home with her baby and works like a "drudge" on Ambrosch's farm. Lena, in contrast, has "kept her head" and, after becoming the leading dressmaker in Lincoln, has gone to San Francisco to open a business there.

Chapters Two–Three. At a photographer's shop Jim sees a picture of Tony's baby. He goes to visit Widow Steavens, still living on the old Burden farm, and she gives him the details about Tony's preparations for marriage, her journey to Denver (to meet Larry Donovan), and her subsequent return to the Shimerdas' house. Widow Steavens contrasts Tony and Lena, lamenting that the good, principled one has come to grief. She also says that Tony is a natural-born mother.

Chapter Four. Jim visits Tony. They talk about what has happened to them since they last saw one another. She tells Jim that she could never be happy in the city; she hopes to live and die in the country. Jim tries to tell Tony how much she has always meant to him. He tries to explain that in some ways she is a part of him. When he leaves, he says that he will someday return. Although Tony's life has been hard, she knows she belongs to the land and she will never be happy away from it. He leaves the land and finds happiness only in his memories of it.

Book V: Cuzak's Boys

Chapter One. Twenty years pass. This last book serves as a **resolution** for the events in the novel and for the characters. Jim knows that Tony married a poor man and has a large family. He puts off visiting her because he is afraid to see her aged and broken by hard work and disappointment. But when Jim visits Lena, she tells him that she thinks Tony is happy, so he travels to Nebraska and sets off for the Cuzak farm. He is delighted to find Tony "battered but not diminished." She has ten handsome and delightful children. They are proud of Tony and are a closely knit and happy family. Jim tells the boys he was once in love with their mother. To Jim, Tony is a kind of earth-mother figure, a "rich mine of life."

Chapter Two. Jim meets Tony's husband, Anton. More fluent in Bohemian than in English, Anton obviously loves Tony and the children deeply.

Chapter Three. Jim reluctantly leaves Antonia and her family to spend a disappointing day in Black Hawk. Most of the people he used to know there have moved

away. He wanders off into the countryside to the place where the railroad tracks used to be, remembering the night he arrived in Nebraska. He knows that the tracks have been the road of destiny for both him and *Ántonia*. He regrets what they have both missed but takes comfort in the thought that they share a precious past.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is **setting**. All of the events in the plot, including the conflicts, develop from the setting. (Its focus on the frontier life of the prairie makes this novel an excellent adjunct to social studies courses in U.S. history.) Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating the Historical Background

Students may want to talk about Cather's vision of pioneer life and compare it with other fictional accounts or historical reports of frontier life. Some possible areas for investigation:

- comparing prairie life in Nebraska with pioneer days in another state (perhaps their own)
- researching and presenting the music and/or dance of the time
- researching who and what were there before the "pioneers": American Indian tribes and what happened to them

2. Personalizing the Immigrant Experience

Discussion groups might focus on the experiences of various immigrant groups, perhaps the group they belong to or whichever groups are in the majority in their area. You might suggest the following discussion questions or activities:

- comparing immigrant experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- discussing attitudes toward immigrants at various times in U.S. history, including our own time
- writing a specific immigrant's journal entry: "A Day in the Life. . . ." Students may want to invent a journal entry for an ancestor who was an immigrant.
- researching and perhaps dramatizing the experiences of "unwilling immigrants": slaves, for instance

3. Extending the Novel

To extend the novel, develop questions and activities like these:

- At what points in the story might Jim have changed the course of his life by taking a decisive action? Write the new scene or a new ending for the novel.

- Discuss Cather's opinion, as revealed in this novel, of the following topics: The academic life; the joys of rural living; families with many children. Tell why you agree or disagree with her.

MEET THE WRITER

Willa Cather (1873–1947) was born in Virginia, the oldest of seven children. Her father brought his family to the prairie town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, when Cather was nine years old. Rebellious against small-town conventionality, Cather was a nonconformist as an adolescent, but she was also an outstanding student. She read widely, studied Latin and Greek, and absorbed the varied cultural heritages of her immigrant neighbors. Her ambitions turned toward writing when she attended the University of Nebraska. By the time she graduated, she had become a regular contributor of reviews, poetry, and stories for newspapers throughout Nebraska. After 1912, when she published her first novel, she devoted herself full time to the writing of fiction. She received many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in literature, for her work.

Cather said that in writing *My Ántonia* she decided to "make up my story of the little, everyday happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone's life and happiness." At another time she said, "Life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember."

READ ON

Willa Cather, *Oh, Pioneers*. A young Swedish immigrant, Alexandra Bergson, creates a prosperous farmland out of raw prairie. A uniquely American epic, this novel features a strong female character who, like *Ántonia*, represents the essence of the pioneer spirit.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Washwoman." A portrait of a unique character from the old country.

N. Scott Momaday, "Riding Is an Exercise of the Mind." Memories of the evocative beauty of the Southwest.

Bernard Malamud, "The First Seven Years." A love story set in New York City's Lower East Side and featuring Jewish immigrants.

Hugo Martinez-Serros, "Distillation." A short story about a parent's love.

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