

This is the first in-depth biography of Willa Cather in thirty years, and the first ever that fully integrates her life and work. The author of such classics as *Death Comes to the Archbishop* and *O Pioneers!* was a complex, passionate and gifted woman trying to forge a new kind of identity for herself as a woman and artist before there were adequate models for this kind of self. *Voice* is the metaphor Cather used to describe her attainment of literary identity and authority, a complex attainment for a woman writer who at first viewed femininity and creativity as incompatible. O'Brien asks two central questions: How did Cather pass through a stage of male identification when she adopted male dress and posed as William Cather to become the first woman writer who created the first strong, autonomous and successful women heroes in American literature? How did she move from a literary apprenticeship she later associated with Jamesian imitation and inauthentic speech to a literary maturity in which she took the road home to her Nebraska past? The book makes full use of biographical and literary materials that have been slighted in previous biographies: Cather's personal and professional correspondence, family letters and documents, photographs, and the early short stories as well as the major fiction. This is the first biography to deal openly and seriously with her lesbianism, exploring the importance of female friendships in her life and work and assessing the impact Cather's need to conceal her sexual identity had on the creative process. O'Brien draws in particular on new psychoanalytic theories that stress the importance of the mother-daughter bond to the formation of female identity. The book concentrates on Cather's childhood, adolescence, young womanhood and lengthy apprenticeship, with references to later biographical and literary patterns which are used to illuminate the early years. This is a fascinating portrait of how someone becomes a writer.

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