



The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist

Edited by Amy Mattson Lauters. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

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For those of us who grew up watching *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983) and reading the books that inspired the television series, there is something indescribably comforting and reassuring about the stories told by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Played by Melissa Gilbert, Laura Ingalls was one of the few television heroines during the 1970s and 1980s.

The tales of childhood innocence into experience, of adventure in the wilderness, of achievement in the classroom, and of townspeople and farmers who believed in generosity, community, and commitment to family were significant to a generation of television viewers and reinforced a particular worldview. It is well known that Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote a series of books, one of which is entitled *Little House on the Prairie*, although it is less well known that her daughter Rose helped her edit them. Even less well known is that Rose Wilder Lane herself produced a significant body of writing.

A former journalist and editor of *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist*, Amy Mattson Lauters describes her delight when she learned that “baby Rose” in the final book of the *Little House* series had been a writer and a journalist. In graduate school, she formally began to explore the life and work of Rose Wilder Lane. Now, as an assistant professor in the Department of Mass Communications at Minnesota State University in Mankato, Lauters has produced a collection that is especially valuable to those interested in history, journalism, literature, regionalism, and women and gender studies.

Although Lauters raises the tantalizing idea that Lane belongs in the company of other women literary journalists, she does not develop her argument as well as she might. Lane’s journalistic articles and essays, commentary and editorials, and personal reflections suggest that she is capable of great range but do not necessarily make a case for the book’s subhead, *Literary Journalist*.

In the nine-page introduction, two pages are devoted to the complex and often perplexing genre that stymies those of us who debate the place of American naturalism and realism, memoir, novels based on fact, and other literary movements and genres in art journalism, creative non-fiction, literary journalism, and literary nonfiction. Lauters lists several characteristics of literary journalism: One, many literary journalists once worked for newspapers and magazines;

two, what they write is often factually verifiable; three, their writing emphasizes narrative and literary techniques; and four, their writing suggests a larger or universal truth. Although these characteristics are present in the writing of many of those considered literary journalists, they do not constitute an exhaustive or even comprehensive list, and hence Lauters's claim that Lane is a literary journalist is unconvincing.

This is not to say, of course, that *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* does not stand on its own as a compelling contribution to the study of women writers who have been overlooked. Among other things, Lane was a novelist, political essayist, and short story writer. Her commentaries and editorials dealing with historical events and women's issues are colorful and compelling.

From articles in *Sunset* magazine in 1918 to those in *Woman's Day* in 1965, Lane addresses American mythologies such as freedom from government interference in our personal lives, individualism, and self-reliance. Lane writes about having been an extra in a Douglas Fairbanks film. She interviews film producer and director D. W. Griffith. She writes about women with families during wartime. In addition, Lane worked as a ghostwriter for business and political celebrities such as Henry Ford and Herbert Hoover, respectively.

In a study that is useful in classes in American culture, literary journalism, popular culture, and women's issues, Lauters draws from work Lane produced for *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Sunset*, *Woman's Day*, and other publications. One of the highlights of *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* is an article about Vietnam written when Lane was seventy-eight years old.

Those who have read the *Little House* books or watched the television series loosely based on the narratives are already familiar with a few facts about Rose Wilder Lane. Born December 5, 1886, in De Smet, South Dakota, Lane was the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo Wilder. She lived for a time with her aunt, Eliza Jane Wilder Thayer, also featured in the television series *Little House on the Prairie*. Rose Wilder met and married Claire Gillette Lane in California, although the marriage was a difficult one. Lane was eighty-one when she agreed to report on international affairs for *Woman's Day* and died in her sleep the day before she was scheduled to depart.

Lauters asserts that Lane made great strides as she developed as a writer, publishing "biographies, travelogues, political commentary, news features, short fiction stories, fiction novels, documentary novels, history, and how-to features." (8) "The sheer volume and variety of her work makes it difficult to place her into any one category as a writer, but emphasis has been placed in previous scholarship on her fiction writing and on her political commentary," (8) Lauters writes. She argues that Lane's articles taken as a whole "shade in a rainbow of genres that is the signature of a literary journalist." (9)

The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane is divided into eight sections, making further reference to Lane's experimentation and facility with various genres unnecessary. Section one, "Mrs. Lane Goes to Hollywood," includes three essays for *Sunset* magazine; section two, "Mrs. Lane Writes About the War," includes an article for *Sunset* and one for *Ladies Home Journal*; and section three, "Mrs. Lane Writes for the Red Cross," includes "The Children's Crusade," a heartfelt analysis of the plight of families in Europe after World War I, and "Mother No. 22999," an article about maternal health. Both of these articles for the Red Cross were published in *Good Housekeeping*.

Section four, "Mrs. Lane Writes From Abroad," provides travelogues for *World Traveler* and

Harper's. Section five, "Mrs. Lane Writes About Herself," includes an article for *Cosmopolitan*, compellingly entitled "I, Rose Wilder Lane, Am the Only Truly HAPPY Person I Know, and I Discovered the Secret of Happiness on the Day I Tried to Kill Myself." Section six, "In Mrs. Lane's Opinion," is a collection of editorials about everything from cultural constructions of masculinity to how women can become more politically engaged. Section seven, "Mrs. Lane Writes From the Heartland," and section eight, "Mrs. Lane's Final Work," take the reader from the American Midwest to Vietnam.

Lane's writing often is descriptive and engaging. Her personal voice—even in her news features and even when she is not writing in the first person—is obvious: "After all, studio children are what their mothers make them, as all children are." (17) Leads are often brief and powerful, as in an article for *Sunset* magazine: "It all happened because Douglas Fairbanks is a philosopher." (24) Women's issues are at the heart of many of Lane's articles, as in the first sentence of a paragraph in "The Girls They Leave Behind Them": "There is no normal girlhood left in the civilized world. Women today are in the swirl of the world-wide whirlpool; they have been swept from safe moorings of home and habit as ruthlessly as their sweethearts and brothers." (33)

Lane's description, while spare and direct, is often evocative. The essay "The Children's Crusade" begins: "In the houses on that pleasant American street, it was not necessary to look at the clock to know that it was noon." (48) Lane's personal journalism, too, is descriptive and is peppered with vulnerability and candor: "When we were married we would be happy ever after. The numbers of persons who are not happy, though married, should have suggested to us that there was a flaw somewhere in our reasoning. But it didn't. We were married, and we were not happy." (94)

The collection includes a few references that suggest Lane reflected on the nature of writing. In an essay for *The Writer*, Lane states, "Fiction writing is essentially an auto-hypnotic process. No story is real to the reader unless it is real to the writer, and the only experience which we know to be unreal but feel to be real is a dream." (100)

A committed and meticulous scholar, Lauters has much to contribute to the discourse on women and media, and whether or not Lane's writing can be characterized as literary journalism is in some ways unimportant. There is no doubt that Lane merits inclusion in this and other collections about women writers who are traditionally overlooked. As Lauters writes:

Each of the stories reprinted here was chosen because it in some way reveals the inner woman behind the text, reveals her particular truths, and encapsulates a watershed moment for her or for the times in which she lived. Together, printed in more or less chronological order, the articles here tell the story of a writer whose first priority, at times, was to put food on her table; a writer whose philosophies stiffened and strengthened into principles that infused all of her work, fiction and nonfiction alike, with American values as she viewed them; and a writer who assumed the mantle of custodian to Americanism through women's arts. (9)

Lauters's characteristically descriptive and compelling prose and her investment in making Lane's contributions known to the reading public make *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane* a distinct treasure.