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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Willa Cather did not want her novels to be read as veiled autobiography, but *My Ántonia* (1918) parallels many of her life's experiences. Many literary scholars argue that Jim Burden is Willa Cather. For example, Jim and Cather both left Virginia as young children and lived on the Nebraska prairie. Cather's family then moved to Red Cloud a year later; Jim's family moves to the fictional town, Black Hawk. Cather gave her high school graduation speech, as does Jim; then they both studied at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. After graduation, they leave Nebraska for the east: Jim to study law at Harvard; Cather to work as editor at *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh.

In addition, many of the characters in *My Ántonia* are based on people Cather knew. Most importantly, Ántonia Shimerda is drawn from a Bohemian immigrant, Annie Sadilek (later Pavelka). Cather taught Annie to speak English as they played together on the prairie. After the first terrible winter, the Cather and Sadilek families moved to town, where Annie became a "hired girl." Despite Cather's many travels, she and Annie remained friends until Cather's death in 1947.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD, Track One. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Copy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Willa Cather" (pp. 4-5), "The Model for My Ántonia Shimerda" (p. 9), and "Cather and Her Other Works" (pp. 12-13). Divide the class into groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned.

### Writing Exercise

Read the last paragraph of Chapter One aloud to your students, which describes Jim's first glimpse of the Nebraska Divide as he travels by wagon at night. Ask your students to write about a life changing moment from their childhood.

### Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, the Introduction (pp. 3-6) and Book One, Chapters 1-7 (pp. 9-42). Ten-year-old Jim Burden arrives in Nebraska at the same time as 14-year-old Ántonia Shimerda. Make a chart that describes several similarities and differences about their arrivals to a new land.