

The New York Times

The Perfect Antidote to Trump

Willa Cather knew what made America great.

Bret Stephens

July 19, 2019

When I was in high school I read Willa Cather's "My *Ántonia*" and loved it for the love story it told. This week, I borrowed my daughter's copy and read it again. It turns out to be a book for our times — and the perfect antidote to our president.

The novel, set mostly in late 19th-century Nebraska, tells the story of *Ántonia* Shimerda — the first name is pronounced *An'-ton-ee-ah* — the eldest daughter of a family from Bohemia, in what would now be the Czech Republic. The Shimerdas are immigrants who know very little about farming. And Nebraska isn't yet the global breadbasket it would later become.

"There was nothing but land," Cather writes. "Not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."

Ántonia's family sets out to make the country, alongside immigrants named Pavel and Peter, Otto and Ole, Lena and Yulka. In 1888, the Nebraska State Journal noted that "the great west has received the largest share of the immigration which has poured into this country since the last census was taken," roughly doubling populations in the Western states.

These were the people who made the Midwest great. Their English, on arrival, was generally poor or nonexistent. Their skills were often ill-suited to the needs of the places to which they came. Their religious beliefs were not those of their American neighbors. They were accused of being clannish, and they were not always grateful to be here.

"He not want to come, nev-er!" *Ántonia* says of her father, after the young American narrator in the story opines, "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home." That sounds familiar.

The immigrants came, for the most part, because they were fleeing hard circumstances, much as immigrants from Central America do today. But they also came because our borders were practically open until 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was shamefully passed.

Otherwise, the American dream was available to anyone who could pay a 50-cent tax (about \$12 in current dollars) and was not a "convict, lunatic, idiot or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge." The Immigration Act of 1891 slightly expanded the list of proscribed persons, but not by much, and went out of its way to welcome political asylees.

To fourth- or fifth-generation Americans who now say their ancestors came here legally, unlike today's undocumented workers, that's largely because the getting in was easy. Today, the average wait-time for an immigrant visa is about six years and can stretch past a decade, according to the Cato Institute's David Bier — time desperate people usually don't have.

What hasn't changed is that immigrants, on the whole, succeed. "Foreign farmers in our county were the first to become prosperous," Cather's (grown-up) narrator notes. "After the fathers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbors — usually of like nationality — and the girls who once worked in... kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own." Yet many of the locals saw them as "ignorant people who couldn't speak English." That sounds familiar, too.

To read "My *Ántonia*" more than a century after its publication is a reminder of the timelessness of America's bigotries, whose loudest and most dangerous champion sits in the White House.

But, more powerfully, Cather's novel is a story of a country that can overcome prejudice. The narrator's grandfather offers succor to the destitute Shimerdas, forgives them their debts, puts petty quarrels aside, and consoles them in their grief. After *Ántonia*'s father commits suicide, he prays "that if any man there had been remiss toward the stranger come to a far country, God would forgive him and soften his heart."

It's in such moments that "My *Ántonia*" becomes an education in what it means to be American: to have come from elsewhere, with very little; to be mindful, amid every trapping of prosperity, of how little we once had, and were; to protect and nurture those newly arrived, wherever from, as if they were our own immigrant ancestors — equally scared, equally humble, and equally determined.

That's the "real America" that today's immigrant-bashers, starting with the president, pretend to venerate and constantly traduce. You don't have to favor sanctuary cities and the abolition of ICE to be on the right side of this debate. But you do have to recognize that the newest immigrants have as much claim to the country and its lawful freedoms as any other American. That would certainly include Minnesota's Representative Ilhan Omar, whose rights must be defended every bit as vigorously as many of her views should be opposed.

That we have a president who doesn't believe this, and a party bending constantly to his prejudices, is a stain on the United States. We can erase it by recalling what we're really about, starting by re-reading "My *Ántonia*."