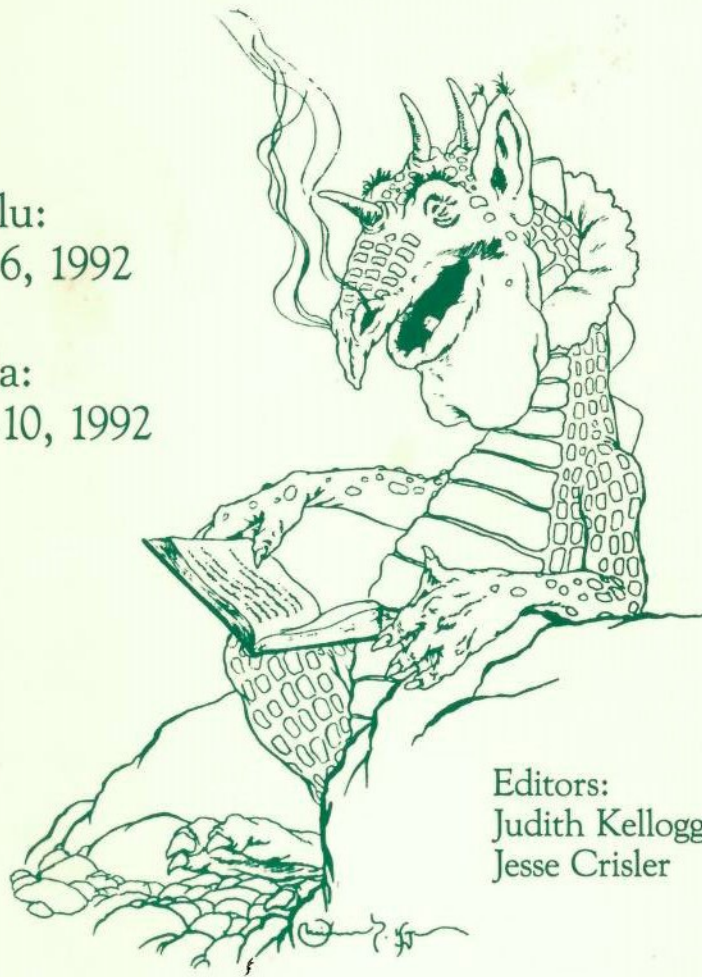


# Literature & Hawaii's Children

Stories as Bridges  
to Many Realms

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## Taming Wilder Territory

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MANY PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED to learn that Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote “The Little House” series when she was over 60. Instead of drawing on the supposed wisdom of age, why did she choose to return to a child’s perspective, recreating her memories in the form of children’s books? In the 1937 Detroit Book Fair Speech the author stated that the surprising success of the first book had made her realize “what a wonderful childhood” she had had: “Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American History. That the frontier was gone and agricultural settlements had taken its place when I married a farmer” (Wilder and Lane 217). She saw her own childhood as having been “much richer and more interesting than that of children today even with all the modern inventions and improvements” (Wilder and Lane 217). She explicitly wrote the stories to compensate future children for the direct experience of wild places no longer available to them.

Although the vast majority of American children now live in cities, children’s literature remains heavily pastoral. Our crowded industrialized landscape makes a Wordsworthian childhood extremely rare, but Romantic myths about children and nature persist in our imaginations. Parents pursue “natural” modes of childbearing and childrearing. But the relentless destruction of vegetation by suburban and urban developers indicates how little we actually understand or care about children’s contact with living things. Teachers are being asked to instill ecological values and to provide environmental education just as budgets for field trips, art and music classes are being cut. In the school as recycling center, students are more likely to spend time reshuffling synthetic products—like styrofoam trays in cafeterias—than planting trees on Arbor Day. In the era of working parents and Toys R US, homeroom teachers are frequently the only adults who encourage and assist children in making things with their own hands. They understand the value of the process as well as the product of what children make.

Outside of school, children over the last fifteen years have lost the freedom to play outdoors. Issues of safety have become paramount to parents who carpool

their kids to lessons, zoos, and children's museums. Current statistics indicate more hours are spent watching T.V. than attending school, and Nintendo—although slightly more interactive than television—simply extends the time kids spend in vicarious pursuits rather than in learning about their world and themselves through direct experience. Even their play is now largely co-opted by grown-ups in commercial enterprises like Gymboree and Chuckee Cheese—or privatized by parents in little leagues with adult imposed rules. McDonald's, seeing playspace as commercial real estate, is now building playgrounds as a primary product with hamburgers in a secondary position.

Since grown-ups now determine not only the books children read but also design and dominate where they dwell indoors and outdoors—from day care centers to theme parks—it is essential to learn about children's creative relations to outdoor space and living things. Wilder's environmental autobiography provides such a study: with a child's sensual experience of place and space at its core, it builds a bridge to our frontier past, capturing an essential truth about ourselves. As George Eliot put it, "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it" (48).

At the turn of the century Edith Wharton observed that "the American landscape has no foreground and the American mind no background." In describing a childhood of the 1870s, Wilder aligns the child's sense of infinite space and lack of historical awareness with the frontiersmen's sense of the vast, unpeopled spaces of the West. The restless pressing forward of the pioneer, Pa's conviction that "It's better further on," is like the child's eagerness for the future, a hunger for what's next. Both see the land or the moment ahead as Promise, as glorious possibility, as a Paradise waiting to be embraced. When the family leaves the little house on the Kansas prairie behind, Laura doesn't feel sad. She "felt all excited inside. You never know what will happen next, nor where you'll be tomorrow when you are travelling in a covered wagon" (*Prairie* 327). Despite the hardships of pioneer life, whether Laura lives in the big woods of Wisconsin, the Indian Territory in Kansas, by the banks of Plum Creek in Minnesota or on the Dakota prairie, each site is powerfully realized through the child's eyes as vast, lonely, even forbidding in its unpredictability, but always stirring, alive, and uniquely beautiful.

In 1890 when Laura was 23, the frontier as a moving line of settlement disappeared on census maps (Jacobs 470). The golden promise of the unending prairie receded and with it a romantic expectation which Wordsworth described in 1805 as youth itself—the power of hope, of expectation and desire, "And something evermore about to be" (VI, 543). Telling stories to children—who embody our future—or writing from their vantage points are ways adults have always had of responding to cultural crisis. Many works which have been considered children's classics—*Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), *Robinson Crusoe* (1714), *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Huckleberry Finn* (1885)—were written out of a need to

make sense of rapid change. A contemporary of Laura Ingalls Wilder told her illustrator, Garth Williams, that he remembered each transformation of De Smet, North Dakota, since the first claim shanties: "Those stories are more than just stories for us. They are our lives, we lived them" (420).

Another writer who saw the frontier disappear and mourned the loss of fastnesses—or remote locales—is Mark Twain. Unlike Twain, however, Wilder could not isolate her female protagonist on a raft, link her to a runaway slave, or resolve her future by letting her light out for the territory alone. Laura's development had to be realized in other ways—through the direct encounter with wilderness which she shared with her family, especially with her father, Charles Ingalls (1836–1902), "a renowned hunter, trapper, and woodsman" (Anderson 20). Like Huckleberry Finn, Laura chafes against domestic obligations and genteel restrictions. Unlike her sister, the blond, ladylike and "good" Mary who sews beautifully and sits without fidgeting, Laura loves to run on the prairie, sunbonnet streaming behind her, ride ponies bareback, leap off haystacks, submerge her body in the raging waters of Plum Creek, and slide on the ice of Silver Lake at night. The intensity of her desire for an Indian papoose—which Pa promises she will see once they get to Indian Territory—epitomizes her craving for the physical freedom she identifies with wilderness, savage people, and wild animals.

The conflict she experiences growing up between this restless yearning and her sense of obligation to duty is well-expressed in a moment when Laura sees the "whole enormous prairie" as "a green carpet flowered with spring blossoms":

Big girl as she was, Laura spread her arms wide to the wind and ran against it. She flung herself on the flowery grass and rolled like a colt. She lay in the soft, sweet grasses and looked at the great blueness above her head and the high, pearly clouds sailing in it. She was so happy that tears came into her eyes.

Suddenly she thought, 'Have I got a stain on my dress?' She stood up and anxiously looked, and there was a green stain on the calico. Soberly she knew that she should be helping Ma, and she hurried to the little dark tar-paper shanty. (By 271)

Before she takes on the name of Wilder, wildness and wilderness excite Laura just as Pa's fierce eyes do in their earliest game, "Mad Dog," which they play in the *Little House in the Big Woods*:

Pa would run his fingers through his thick grown hair, standing it all up on end. Then he dropped on all fours and growling, he chased Laura and Mary all around the room, trying to get them cornered where they couldn't get away. (35–36)

Whereas Mary is too scared to move, Laura evades the mad dog: "with a wild leap and a scramble, she went over the woodbox, dragging Mary with her." Pa then exclaims that though Laura is little, she's "as strong as a little French horse."

Pa's epithet is the first reference to Laura's strong identification with and attraction to horses—their courage and beauty, their unfettered movement, prancing dignity, fluid power and alertness. The word "wild" is repeated throughout these books and is expressive of Laura's deepest impulses, the love of adventure and the stories Pa tells. Like him, "She would rather go on and on, to the very end of the road, wherever it was" (By 35).

Recognizing their temperamental affinity, Pa tells Laura: "you and I want to fly like birds. But long ago I promised your Ma that you girls should go to school. You can't go to school and go West" (By 126). This hard truth imprisons Laura as an adolescent and compels her accommodation to town life. After Mary goes blind, she must become a schoolteacher at age 15 and earn money for the family in the only way open to her. Ma's determination that her girls will "have schooling and lead a civilized life" (By 209) finally reins in Pa's restless drive and reckless nature along with Laura's.

Laura knew how he felt for she saw the look in his blue eyes as he gazed over the rolling prairie westward from the open door where he stood. He must stay in a settled country for the sake of them all, just as she must teach school again though she did so hate to be shut into a schoolroom. (*These* 139)

The final books show the compromise she made with the domesticating and civilizing forces in her life: to send Mary to college she becomes a schoolteacher and moves to town. But she marries a man with the courage and independence of Pa. Initially attracted to Almanzo Wilder because of the beautiful horses he raises, she agrees to become a farmer's wife because it is the closest she can get to the free spirit she treasured as a child. Before she marries, though, Ma says, "Sometimes I think it's the horses you care for more than the master" (*These* 216). Laura responds shakily, "I couldn't have one without the other" (*These* 216).

The directness and unconscious irony of a young girl's point of view enabled Wilder to articulate contradictory strains of American character—the Puritan as well as romantic response to wilderness—which shaped her development and the frontier's. Of our 17th-century heritage, John Cech has said:

The Puritan mythos feared the dark, whether it was the literal wilderness beyond the settlement or the inner, uncharted regions of the psyche. The highly rationalized, deterministic doctrines that prevailed in early colonial life, and that have shaped attitudes in America for centuries, associated whatever was unknown (bizarre, or foreign) with the potentially diabolical . . . this antipathy would have included children, whose unpredictable behavior could not be explained or accounted for. (4)

The female child, like an infant Eve or virgin West, constitutes a particularly dangerous and seductive Other. The Protestant ethic embodied by Ma's rules of behavior defines the process of female acculturation for Laura as she grows up in the American West: children should be seen and not heard; parents and teachers

must be obeyed; girls must wear sunbonnets and corsets, and not tan their skin. Holiday rituals which reinforce family solidarity require patience and sometimes painful self-sacrifice.

Wilder's later books are sadder than Twain's comic and escapist ending to *Huckleberry Finn*: they dramatize the cost of growing up and the self-restraint demanded by Ma's "civilized" ideal of domestic womanhood. The gradual shift in settings from frontier to town life evokes nostalgia, conjuring how the pristine territory Pa loved slips away. But the series also gains spiritual vitality and complexity because of the tension between Puritan and romantic attitudes and the idyllic and demonic aspects of wilderness they reflect. Laura acquires self-discipline and inner strength from learning with her family to confront the dark forces of nature—from howling wolves to dehumanizing blizzards.

Therefore, despite the authority of parents and traditions of civilization enacted in harsh settings, nature itself brings a rough democracy which empowers the young because it equalizes everyone, parents and children included. The wild setting subjects everyone to the same hazards and powerful physical experiences. In this rugged ethos, the child learns early the meaning of independence, of not being beholden to others at the same time that she discovers how to wrest a living from the earth with her own hands. Laura Ingalls Wilder never sentimentalizes the hardships of this life. Her editors at Harper and Bros. requested that the title of *The Hard Winter* be changed to *The Long Winter* (1940) to accommodate the sensitivities of young readers (Anderson 60). She changed the title but the record of the Ingalls' struggle to survive the frigid cold and starvation of De Smet during seven months of 1880 still makes harrowing reading. Although it is not recorded in the books, feisty Laura at 13 wrote a poem on her school tablet which showed where she stood:

We remember not the summer  
For it was long ago  
We remember not the summer  
In this whirling blinding snow  
I will leave this frozen region  
I will travel further south  
If you say one word against it  
I will hit you in the mouth. (Anderson 63)

The books are full of this bouyant spirit of self-determination. The claim to go where and when one wants expresses what it means to be American. Today there is a great deal of yearning for this mythos. Politicians sell us the frontier—telling us we've still got the pioneering spirit or claiming we've lost our heritage—but both refer back to rural nostalgia, the intense longing for amber waves of grain which invests our nation. Willie Nelson is a cultural hero, and as the family farm dies out, movies like "Country" become its elegy. But our hunger for sim-

plicity and direct experience is abused by watching the “Little House” series on TV. Isolation, hard physical work, nurturing the slow growth of plants and animals, elemental existence are not telegenic.

In their immense attention to physical details, Wilder’s books unlike television make us alert to the remarkable details of life. A broom or tin cup, observed through the eyes of Laura, who must “see out loud” (By 113) for the blind Mary, is a miracle of human resourcefulness:

... a boughten broom! There seemed no end to the wonders in this house. This broom had a long, straight, perfectly round, smooth handle. The broom part was made of thousands of thin, stiff, greeny-yellow bristles. Ma said they were broom straws. They were cut absolutely straight across the bottom, and they curved at the top into flat, firm shoulders. Stitches of red string held them tight. This broom was nothing like the round, willow-bough brooms that Pa made. It seemed too fine to sweep with. And it glided over the smooth floor like magic. (On 127)

Simply seeing at all is recognized by these texts as a richness beyond all others—one never to be taken for granted. Laura, eating breakfast after the three-day blizzard, enjoys noticing the shanty’s windows change from “white blur of madly swirling snow” (Long 38) to “yellow-glowing window-panes” (Long 46). Observing such a homely nuance in bare surroundings—the single room they spend the winter in—is, like eating itself, deeply satisfying and an essential act of survival. It shows, as all the stories do, how much can be learned by paying attention, not just to vast empty spaces but also to the hidden wilderness which resides in the sap life of plants, droplets of water—nail points that come through the roof “fuzzy with frost” (Long 121)—or the secret skills and peculiar instincts of animals. The thick mud walls which the muskrats build for their house just before the epic blizzards of 1880 tip off Pa to move his family into town.

Environmental psychologists and urban designers acknowledge how little we know about what causes different children to gravitate to certain locales in quest of comfort, security, excitement, community, self-awareness or beauty. Louise Chawla, citing the lack of a theoretical framework in developmental psychology to address this issue, suggests that children’s sense of the non-human world reflects their animism:

Our society has not been structured to admit that nature may provide more than material necessities . . . what does it mean, for example, to say that a place is felt to be alive? What are the conditions and effects of this experience? What happens when a natural habitat is loved? (19)

As Edith Cobb notes in *The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood* (1977), children’s perceptions are immediate and holistic, acutely sensitive to the sensations of a locale (23). “As adults, we are preoccupied with living,” states Loren Eisely. “As a consequence we see little.” When Wilder said that she wrote the



books because she wanted children to understand more about the beginning of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it, she is not just telling about history or recognizing, as psychologists have, the importance of myths, legends and stories in their development. She is also demonstrating that children see nature more deeply than adults.

When Laura finally sees the black eyes of an Indian baby in the penultimate chapter of the *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), the impact of those eyes on her life—“as black as the night when no stars shine” (308)—is unforgettable. It expresses the intensity of her longing for freedom beyond the confinements of her own life and the autonomy she finally earned for herself as a writer. Carl Jung saw the appearance of the infant archetype, like the papoose, in dreams, myths or stories as a positive sign. He thought it signalled in individuals or societies a primal force representing “the strongest, the most ineluctable urge in every being, namely the urge to realize itself” (98).

In the wake of the Los Angeles riots, the New Age film *Grand Canyon* now seems prophetic, showing how fear, uprootedness and spiritual hollowness cut across lines of class and race in South Central and Beverly Hills. To counter this pervasive dread, spreading like smoke from the L.A. fires, the movie offers two archetypal images—the child and nature—which turn out to be closely related if you think about them. The awesome spectacle of the Grand Canyon—because it makes a grownup feel tiny and insignificant again—is reminiscent of childhood and restores a sense of being part of something greater than oneself. A jogger’s discovery of an Hispanic baby abandoned in suburban shrubbery is serendipitous, a divine coincidence which telegraphs a living future: a baby can be found, like Moses in the bullrushes, and, against all odds, survive the treacheries and violence of Los Angeles’ deadly war zone. Both archetypes—canyon and baby—speak to the human need to see ourselves as part of nature—from which we have become divorced by the accumulation of material goods and by the despoilation and toxic gridlock of urban cityscapes.

Americans characteristically have seen wilderness as something which must be cut down, tamed or controlled to advance civilization. Many people are now persuaded that if civilization is to survive, we must rescue the environment. Children inevitably gain prominence and overlap in our minds with nature as our sense of this endangered planet becomes acute. Children for us *are* the last frontier—embodiments of existences without bounds. They provide us with a perspective on the exotic, the unknown, on what Gaston Bachelard calls “antecedence of being” (108). Far from marginalizing her work in the “ghetto” of juvenile literature as some have suggested (Mowder 18), Wilder draws us forward as well as back by framing her memories as a children’s book. She knew that with the frontier gone, loving wild things can only be cultivated in childhood. Young eyes like Laura’s still help us to see things grow—up close, down low, far away—not as background to something else, but as the root, pith and core of our existence.

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