

Return to the Little House

Laura Ingalls Wilder 1867-1957



Seeing the far west of the United States is a sobering experience. Crossing the Utah high deserts, long miles of empty but beautiful landscape stretch out to even higher mountains in the distance. Occasionally, there are narrow green strips which indicate water. Staring at the formidable physical barriers, the same questions occur again and again. How did those ill-equipped pioneers cross this land? How did they endure the heat and cold? Why did they do it? At the magnificent Arches National Park, there is a national monument: a small weathered log cabin. In the early nineteenth century, a pioneer settled by the creek and built this home. It is like the little house on the prairie where Laura and her family spent a night with only a quilt for a door, the wolf pack sitting in a circle around the half built cabin, howling. Time to put Mr Bush out of one's mind and wonder about the other Americans and their history.

As the first book in the *Little House* series was published in 1932, there must have been many generations who have enjoyed the books. The question is: are they relevant now? Although available in the States and on Amazon, they are less obviously available in Britain. It seems to me, however, that they still have certain

values. They are an historical record of a particular kind. Such records by women are fewer than those by men and those from the viewpoint of a child are rarer still. They are also about sustainability and survival. At the height of the Cold War, the wife of an American airman attended our Children's Book Group event. "You know," she said, "if that four minute warning goes, I shall grab the *Little House* books as I go down into the shelter. They are survival guides as good as any." I think she was right. They are not only full of real, practical detail about living off the land, there is also a spirit there that you would need to get you through. There is also a third reason. They depict a family life where the children are real players. They have to be. They contribute and they matter.

This is not to say that these books are without problems. At various times, questions have been raised about accuracy, gender and race. As far as accuracy is concerned, Wilder never claimed that this was a complete and exact record of her family's life. She said, rather, that she was writing historical fiction, based on true events. She also said quite deliberately that she was conscious of writing for children and that certain things were omitted. I am personally intrigued

by the endurance of Mrs Ingalls, married to a restless, pioneering spirit. No saucepans are thrown in the *Little House* books but we have a good idea of what the woman was like – which brings us to the criticism of the books on the grounds of gender.

Yes, there are details about sunbonnets and other ladylike practices which concern Mrs Ingalls but even a casual reading of these books shows the importance of the mother. We see her strength and resourcefulness, bringing up her small children in the complete wilderness. For long periods, Pa is not even there and the children's lives depend on their mother's courage and good sense. Their father knows it and finally agrees to their settling in a town where the girls can be educated as his wife wishes. Laura herself is the archetypal, feisty heroine. This is a story of the nineteenth century and we do see Laura and her sisters being socialised in a nineteenth century way but the lesson today's girls will take from these books will not encourage them to become simpering females glittering in pink. We can leave all that to modern books.

The criticism on the grounds of race relate chiefly to *Little House on the Prairie*. When we read that Pa is going to take up a claim on "the Osage Diminished Territory" (land traditionally belonging to the Osage peoples) we are all too aware of the history. But this is Laura's story and she is describing events which happened when she was extremely young so it is not told from the Osage point of view. For balance, we must look elsewhere. When Pa realises that the Washington bureaucracy has made yet another error in their dealings with the Native Americans, he takes his family out of the territory. It is a year of their lives lost but, as Ingalls sees it, the more honourable course. Less mentioned is a reference to one of the of nineteenth century entertainments in *Little Town on the Prairie*. It is only one event, mentioned in passing, but a minstrel show is no longer acceptable. The books come up against the problem common to historical records. Do you pretend such things never happened or do you record honestly, however unpalatable the facts? Parents and teachers who know what their children are reading have an opportunity here.

None of these criticisms have affected the hold these books can have on the imagination. They are iconic in the States. Laura grows from a not always obedient child to an independent young woman with a career and family of her own. As she grows, the Ingalls move from pioneer family to townspeople. Their history must reflect that of many American families. So what might make these books worth reading for the rest of us? They are powerful stories; they are stories of a girl's life brought to a satisfactory conclusion, of a family where children are empowered, of the demands and challenges of the pioneer life, of the natural world, of danger and courage. Read on.

Little House in the Big Woods

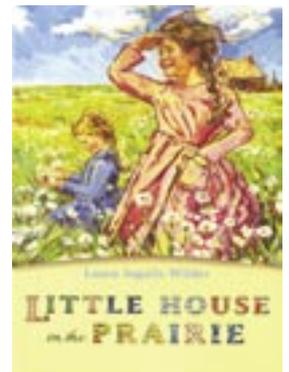
The story starts in the big woods of Wisconsin where Laura was born in 1867. Charles and Caroline Ingalls already had one daughter, Mary. They had friends and family within a reasonable distance and many of Laura's memories come from communal events when neighbours gathered to help each other. There is a picture of the richness of the woods, teeming with wild animals. These are robust books. If you do not get your own food, you will



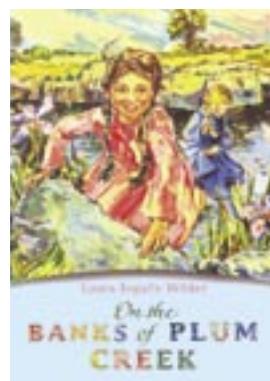
gets her red mittens and a home made doll for Christmas.

Little House on the Prairie

This is the most complete picture of pioneer life. Finding the big woods "too crowded", Pa takes the family to Kansas in a covered wagon. One night, Laura wakes in the new, unfinished cabin to find her father standing by the window with his gun. They have only a quilt for a door. It is typical that Pa does not send her back to bed. He lifts her up to watch the pack of wolves, seated in a circle round the cabin. "See how his coat shines," he says of the biggest and Laura has full confidence in her father. This is a story of survival in an isolated location and the dangers come in many forms: ordinary injury, fire in the wooden house and what is now known to be malaria. Then there are the Osage whose land this is. Laura understands this but is protected from full knowledge of what is going on. She is only fascinated by the still, upright strangers and delighted by the ponies and the small, dark-eyed children who stare at her as intently as she stares at them. The story ends as they leave their hard-won house and return to the wagon, leaving the door on the latch.



On the Banks of Plum Creek



This is the book in which we at last see Laura as a schoolgirl. Carrie is the baby now and Ma is glad to be nearer other people in Minnesota. They live first in a dug-out by the creek while Pa builds them a house – with "sawn boards and glass windows"! The history of the country could almost be traced through Laura's homes. Town can now be reached in a single day and the girls go to school so the story becomes one of friendships and rivalries. Laura shows more of her strong character as she avenges herself on the class snob, Nellie Olsen. This year, Laura receives real presents from the Church tree at Christmas and it is a shock to realise that these are Mission gifts from Minister's parishioners in the east to the poor settlers out west. We know they have very

little in material terms but Laura leads an enriched life. Like her, we have not realised that the family is poor. Grasshoppers ruin the first crops, forcing Pa to go elsewhere to earn money. Ma and the girls have an exciting and dangerous time when he is away. They fight prairie fire wheels in summer and face blizzards in winter but they cope. When Pa returns and takes down his fiddle to play to them, Laura is secure.

By the Shores of the Silver Lake

The family have had a hard time. Scarlet fever has exhausted them and blinded Mary. Ma also has baby Grace to care for and doctor's bills to pay. Pa is offered a job in Dakota, working for a railroad contractor and so we see another aspect of how the west was opened up. Laura, always wanting to know, goes to see the teams of men creating the railroad. Despite the wildness of the men, the guns, the lawlessness, when Mary and Ma long for Plum Creek, Laura cannot agree. Like her father, she would like to go even further west. She loves the wild sky, the birds over the lake, the high grasses and the great stillness. The teams move out as winter begins and the family begins to think about staking a land claim, for others are coming out to settle, too. Soon there will be a town.

The Long Winter

This story reads like a drama, consistently constructed to keep us glued to the characters and concerned with their fate. Laura is still a country girl, unused to many people and finds the town difficult to cope with, although it is still tiny. Pa has a property there, however, and when the weather begins to worsen in an unprecedented way, they move into De Smet for safety. Then begins seven months of endless, blinding blizzards. Gradually, they have to ration the food and fuel runs so low, they live around the stove. Their one hope is that the supply train will get through, but that hope is crushed. Day after day, the cold deepens. On Christmas day, they have a tin of soup and use the last of the kerosene. Our interest is held by the fact that every simple act becomes fraught with danger. The house is soon half-buried and like their neighbours, they are starving. There is a rumour that a farmer, at least forty miles away, had a good harvest that summer and two young men, one of them Almanzo Wilder, decide to go and bring some back. There is a thrilling account of their journey, falling through deep snow, travelling in a white-out, without landmarks, watching for the next blizzard as it approaches. This is the sort of book that demands that the ending should not be revealed.

Little Town on the Prairie

The family are settled on their homestead claim and the nearby town of De Smet has grown. There are shops and businesses and social life is becoming more important to her as Laura grows. They celebrate the Fourth of July in town and the speeches make interesting reading, from how the battle for independence was won to 'the crimes of the King'. There is also young Almanzo Wilder there, with the best-looking horses in town. The family is saving up to send Mary to a College for the Blind and, helped by Laura's earnings, she is at last able to go. Laura does not see this as an imposition; family is everything. She studies and works at the same time. On the wider scene, the dreadful Nellie Olsen is still around, now teacher's pet and with her eye on Almanzo.

The old enmity resurfaces and leads to a truly dramatic scene in the classroom. Mary is an example of a 'good' girl, common to Victorian girls' books. Laura is something different. She is often ashamed of her fierce and independent behaviour but there is something in her that cannot be crushed. The book ends with her receiving her Teacher's Certificate and with Almanzo inviting her to ride behind those wonderful horses.

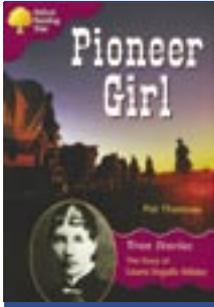
These Happy Golden Years

The last book in the sequence starts when Laura is nearly sixteen, but already a teacher. We get a good picture of a rural school: dinner pails, the improvised blackboard and the prime importance of arithmetic and spelling. A visit from relatives reveals a lesser known hazard for settlers – fighting the American Army who wants to move them on. As Laura grows up, her personal courage is obvious whether helping Almanzo break his horses or relishing the ferocious prairie storms. She understands her father's longing for uncharted country but her mother has insisted on the girls completing their education. Almanzo come around more and more so this final book in this sequence is the story of Laura growing up and finally marrying Almanzo. Laura remains the same independent spirit and the competent Mr Wilder and she are well-suited. She starts her new life in another little house, not unlike her first but now, people have luxuries like glass in the windows.

Laura's story was continued by Wilder and *The First Four Years* was found in manuscript among her papers after her death but it is a very different kind of book. Her daughter said that when Almanzo died she seemed to have lost her desire to write. She left her tribute to him, however in *Farmer's Boy* which is the story of Almanzo's boyhood in New York State. She died herself, aged ninety, in 1957.

On one of her visits home, Mary says to Laura, "I never see things so well with anyone else." Perhaps her need to describe everything to her sister laid the foundations for the detailed, observational writing which enables us to see a child's life in the nineteenth century American west so clearly.

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