

The politics of *Little House*

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Having grown up with the *Little House* books, I found [Christine Woodside's essay on their anti-New Deal ideology](#) completely fascinating:

For a decade already [Rose Wilder] Lane had milked various snippets from her parents' lives for short stories. Now she saw an opportunity for her mother [Laura Ingalls Wilder]. Pioneer struggles could eerily mirror the struggles of the Great Depression, and Lane thought Americans were ready to hear about covered-wagon childhoods. After magazines rejected Wilder's real-life account, Lane began reworking some of the memoir into what would become the first children's book, "Little House in the Big Woods."

Published in 1932 by Harper & Brothers, the book was praised by book critics for its honesty and caught the interest of readers nationwide. The Junior Literary Guild, a national book club, paid them an additional fee to print its own run. The income crisis at the Wilders' ended. In the shadow of the crash, tales of overcoming great adversity resonated, and the editors wanted more.

Wilder and Lane responded with their now-famous sequels. From the start, there was tension between their approaches. Wilder argued for strict accuracy, while Lane, the seasoned commercial writer, injected made-up dialogue, took out stories about criminals and murder, and—most significantly—recast the stoic, sometimes confused pioneers as optimistic, capable people who achieved success without any government help.

Laura Ingalls Wilder never got used to Lane's heavy rewrites, but the evidence suggests that on the main approach, playing up toughness in adversity, she agreed with her daughter. Both women believed fervently that the nation in the depths of the Depression had become too soft. In 1937, Wilder wrote Lane that people's complaints about having no jobs made her sick.

Woodside, who's working on a book about Wilder and Lane, goes on to highlight specific instances where the daughter upped the *Freedom!! Markets!!* ante on the

mother's drafts. She also points out that "the impoverished Ingallses never could have gone to Dakota Territory without a government grant" (by way of the federal [Homestead Acts](#)).

When I saw Woodside's essay, the first thing I thought of was [this wonderful Eula Biss essay from a few years ago](#). Biss too sees *Little House* as political:

When I return to *Little House on the Prairie* now as an adult, I find that it is not the book I thought it was. It is not the gauzy frontier fantasy I made of it as a child. It is not a naïve celebration of the American pioneer. It is the document of a woman interrogating her legacy. It is, as the scholar Ann Romines has called it, "one of our most disturbing and ambitious narratives about failures and experiments of acculturation in the American West."

In that place and time where one world was ending and another was beginning, in that borderland between conflicting claims, the fictional Laura, the child of the frontier, struggles through her story. She hides, she cowers, she rages, she cries. She asks, "Will the government make these Indians go west?" and she asks, "Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—" but then she is cut off and told to go to sleep. . . .

Laura Ingalls Wilder loved the land enough to know exactly what had been stolen to make her world. "If I had been the Indians," she wrote in her 1894 diary, as she looked out over a river and some bluffs in South Dakota, "I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left it."

Biss then [compares](#) on-the-prairie to a diverse neighborhood on Chicago's far north side, where some white residents have a dose of the pioneer's unfounded fear.

So is *Little House* a celebration of human ingenuity unfettered by big government, or a complex and unflinching look at the author's own participation in the American project of Native American erasure? Or, you know, a series of interesting stories for children?

These aren't mutually exclusive options. And I don't think *Little House* is simply a Rorschach test for any reader with deep thoughts about the pioneer legacy, either. There's a lot in those books. One more provocative essay and I may just have to go back and read them again.