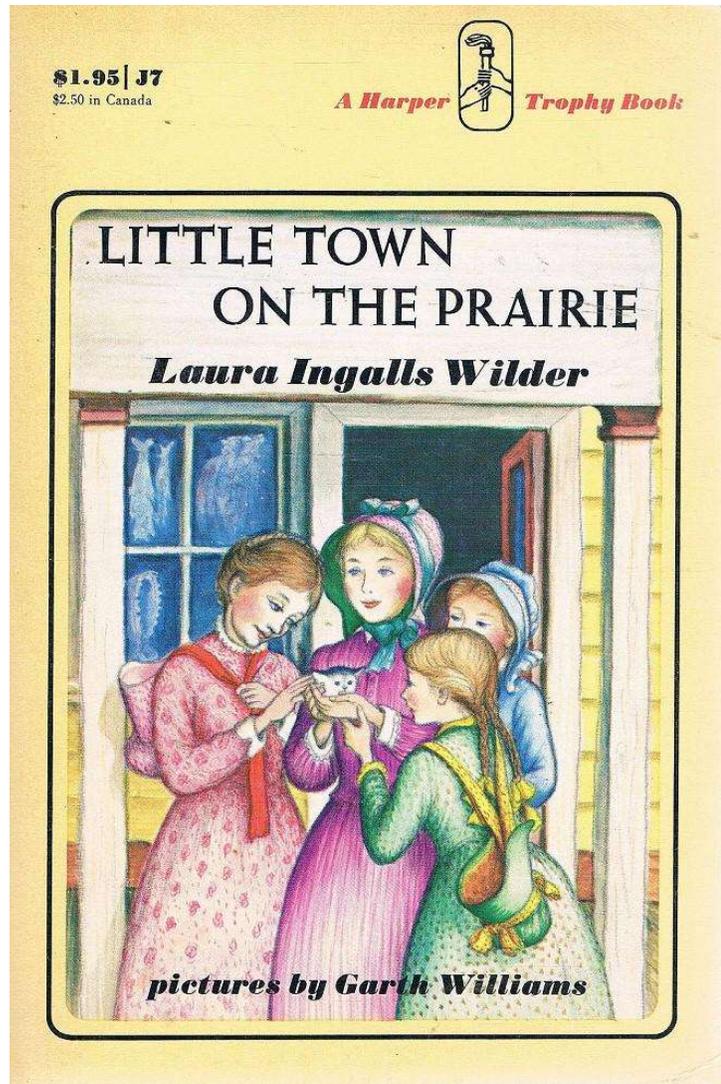


Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957):

*Little House on the Prairie* series (1932-1943)



The recent publication of *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* by Caroline Fraser (2017) has made plain that Wilder was xenophobic and racist. [Disclaimer: I have not yet read the book, but followed the live reading by @AnaMardoll, beginning November 25, 2017.] But in her novels of pioneer life my child self found an example of a heroine who is not always sunny-tempered, who has conflicts with other girls and even with teachers, yet who also is part of a tight-knit family and expected to play a significant part in its physical and economic well-being. She has substantial household chores; she earns money by sewing shirts and by teaching. Her physical strength is something to be proud of: Pa approvingly comments

often that despite her small stature, she's "as strong as a little French horse." (As a small kid myself, called "Shrimp," etc., this was heartening.)

This physical strength comes into play when she defies a teacher whom she feels has wrongly punished her younger sister, Carrie. Carrie's school bench is not securely fastened to the floor, and as she and her benchmate work, they absently rock. The sound irritates the teacher, who orders Carrie and Mamie to stop work and rock the seat harder. Mamie flounces off to another seat and sickly Carrie tries but can't rock the bench. The teacher bullies her, and Laura, aflame with indignation, says, "Miss Wilder, if you want that seat rocked faster, I'll rock it for you!" Miss Wilder, perhaps unwisely, agrees at once. Laura sits next to Carrie and rocks the seat so hard that none of the other schoolchildren can work, the teacher can't be heard over the thumping, and the bench is unmoored from the floor. The Garth Williams illustration (Chapter 14, "Sent Home from School," *Little Town on the Prairie*) conveys the anger and the energy of this scene. Although the girls are sent home from school in disgrace, Ma and Pa do not punish them. I relished the rebellion and the physical defiance of Laura in this scene; perhaps I also envied Laura for her parents' reactions, as my parents, both teachers, usually took the teacher's side in any conflict I had at school.