



Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend

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Although generations of readers of the Little House books are familiar with Laura Ingalls Wilder's early life up through her first years of marriage to Almanzo Wilder, few know about her adult years. Going beyond previous studies, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder* focuses upon Wilder's years in Missouri from 1894 to 1957. Utilizing her unpublished autobiography, letters, newspaper stories, and other documentary evidence, John E. Miller fills the gaps in Wilder's autobiographical novels and describes her sixty-three years of living in Mansfield, Missouri. As a result, the process of personal development that culminated in Wilder's writing of the novels that secured her reputation as one of America's most popular children's authors becomes evident.

Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend Details

Date : Published May 31st 1998 by University of Missouri (first published May 1998)

ISBN : 9780826211675

Author : John E. Miller

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, History, Adult

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From Reader Review Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend for online ebook

Nancy Moffett says

This was a disappointingly dull reflection on Laura's life, which was a life full of adventure and triumph over adversity. I found the author condescending and judgmental towards the old fashioned values that gave her success. The level of control she exercised over her daughter Rose's life was imagined without any evidence other than Rose's whiny letters. I'm not convinced.

?Kimari? says

I'm in the middle of moving house and behind schedule with book reviews, so I'm going to cheat and borrow a bit from my review of Prairie Fires.

Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder is more than just a biography of Laura Ingalls. It encompasses U.S. history, politics, and social commentary from Laura Ingalls birth in 1867 to her death in 1957. If the book had ended with the Wilder's move to Rocky Ridge Farm, it would have been a 4 star read. Unfortunately, the remainder of the book (Parts 5 - 9) spend too much time focusing on Rose Wilder Lane and her unbalanced behavior, which I found far less interesting.

You might also enjoy:

Nonfiction

- ★ The World of Laura Ingalls Wilder - highly recommended
- ★ Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder
- ★ The Selected Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder
- ★ The Children's Blizzard (about the blizzard in The Long Winter)

Fiction

- ★ Caroline: Little House, Revisited
-

Kim says

i'm a "Little House" freak, so naturally I liked it. Seemingly very well-researched (could this be a thesis-book?) the book was a bit dry and dull (as was life probably in early 1900), but it did paint the true picture of Laura Ingalls Wilder- a hardworking, simple farm woman with incredible strength and faith in her and her family's ability to "make it" wherever they went. Inspirational, really. If only I have half the fortitude Laura did, perhaps the age of sixty five isnt too old to become an author.

The Book Maven says

Hmmm. I am not sure what to make of this book. I guess the thing that I would tell potential readers is: be careful when you read a biography about someone you idolized. When you learn of their clay feet, it can be very disappointing.

In addition, after reading the *Little House* books hundreds of times, this biography seems lackluster at best. The first part of the book basically summarizes LAW's life, but offers very little that is new, particularly if you have read her books or were aware of other biographical details: the big "twists" are that she had a little brother who died very early in life, her childhood was much more nomadic than her books let on, her parents' families intermarried a great deal, and another couple passed the Long Winter with them in their DeSmet town house. Oh yeah, and Nellie Oleson is based on three people that LAW knew in her childhood. The second half of the book is almost more of an account of LAW's tempestuous relationship with her (possibly bipolar) daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. In fact, I would say that the second half of the book is equally a biography of RWL's life. This is the part of the book where facts become increasingly plentiful, much more clear, and better established...however, the ultimate disappointment is that the book does not give information as to the rest of RWL's life after her mother died. And given that the book becomes more and more about RWL in the second half, this is not only disappointing to the reader but shoddy writing and scholarship on the part of the author.

Kressel Housman says

Given the classic status of the *Little House* series, I shouldn't have been surprised to discover that it's become a popular topic amongst literary historians, especially in the Midwest. Two professors at the University of Missouri have taken up the question of the influence of Laura's daughter Rose on the series. Professor William Holtz argues in his book *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* that Rose ghostwrote the series. This book, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, is a rebuttal of his argument, contending that while the book couldn't have come about without Rose, Laura wrote the bulk of it. I read this one first because I prefer that position, but had I known that it was actually written in response to Holtz's book, I might have done differently.

My preference for crediting Laura isn't just emotional. The books portray the Ingalls family as valuing education almost above all else. They study in the house through *The Long Winter* and they scrimp and save just to put Mary through the College for the Blind. Of course, if you accept that Rose ghostwrote the series, you can argue that that's just part of her invention, but I think the historical facts point otherwise. Charles Ingalls was not just a simple farmer and carpenter; he ended up holding political office in De Smet. A visit to the website of the Vinton School for the Blind (which still exists) will tell you that its most famous graduate, Mary Amelia Ingalls, was a top student. As an adult, Carrie worked in the newspaper business in South Dakota. And most significantly, Laura began her own writing career as a columnist for a small-town newspaper much like the one Carrie was working for. Her articles are collected in *Little House in the Ozarks: The Rediscovered Writings*, which is essential reading before embarking on this book. It's a fresh new way to experience Laura's voice.

As I stated above, the author, Professor John E. Miller, makes it clear that Rose was pivotal in the development of the series. She became an author before her mother did, and aside from actually editing the books, she was the one who put her mother in touch with agents and publishers. The relationship between mother and daughter, however, was anything but smooth. As much as Laura represented home life and simplicity, Rose bucked tradition and sought out adventure. She had quite an interesting life, and I am looking forward to learning more about it in *The Ghost in the Little House*. I could not help but conclude,

though, that not only wouldn't the books have come about without her, they wouldn't have come about if she had settled down and had a family. Laura never had grandchildren, but with Rose, she had the series.

I noticed that several other Goodreads reviewers found that all the historical background in the book made it dull. Well, one reader's boredom is another's education. I think it adds tremendous depth to consider how Laura wrote these books during the Great Depression, and that *The Long Winter*, the ultimate story of triumph over hardship, was published in 1940, the beginning of the war years when rationing was to become a reality for all Americans. The book may not be entertaining, but it's not meant to be. It's meant to enrich our understanding of how one pioneer girl became one of America's most beloved children's authors.

Kiirsi Hellewell says

This was an interesting book to read...I learned a lot about Laura and her family. That said, at times it was very dry, and there were several places where information from a previous paragraph was repeated entirely--or even contradicted in a few places. I sometimes felt fairly confused.

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

Really good...until Rose grew up. Seriously, I mean it. The author did his stuff and churned out a delightful biography, but I think he really wanted to write a literary biography. If the title tells his intent, it was to describe how an ordinary girl with no apparent writing goals ended up being the children's author of the day, maybe of all time. And he couldn't. Or didn't, anyway.

He did well with the history of her early life but I wanted more about the places, people and times. When you can't find letters or diaries to flesh out a portrait, you have to fall back on newspapers, magazines, and other writings of the times...but I can't see he did much of that. He just relayed the history; well-written, enjoyable, but not deeply satisfying. I prefer reading the annotations in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*.

When Laura's writing career became the focus, it was clear he wanted to dig deep and see how in the world she pulled it off. Where did she start as a diarist, and how did she progress to a master storyteller? Did her non-fiction articles get editorial help, and if so, how did that develop her writing? Why were some characters included and others suppressed? How did three real-life girls become one Nellie Oleson? How much of the book was written by Rose? (Almost none; it seems, but she clearly had an influence.)

He tried to answer all these questions and more, but he didn't have a lot of first-hand material about Laura Ingalls Wilder--no diaries, not many letters except travel journals. However, he had plenty of material about Rose Wilder Lane and *her* writing career--and that's what he included. A lot of it. Her thoughts, feelings, personal angst, and anger at her parents.

Fine. I get that. It's what made her a writer. But it's not what made *Laura Ingalls Wilder* a writer.

All bellyaching aside, it's a good book. I just wish it had been titled, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder lane: The **Women** Behind the Legend*.

Beth A. says

I loved the little house books, and really enjoyed learning more about Laura's life and how she came to write the books. I was a bit disappointed to see the difficult relationship she had with her daughter, Rose. Much of the personal information in this book is from Rose's perspective, because Laura didn't journal or save records like Rose. Rose did her editing and worked for varying amounts of time -days to months- on different books. It's funny how Rose's writing was more famous at the time, but Laura's is what's endured. I think Laura Ingalls Wilder was a remarkable woman, and an amazing storyteller.

Michelle says

I actually didn't finish the book. It was interesting in the beginning as it detailed some of the differences between real life and Laura's fiction life. The book started to lose my interest once it got to the point where they relocated to Mansfield. To be fair, I don't know much about that point in Laura's life, because that is where the books stop, so that may be part of why I lost interest.

Terry says

I am one of those girls who obsessed over the "Little House" series of books. In fact I STILL read them, from time to time. So I must admit I read this book with a secret hope of it feeling like reading another, new, "Little House" book. It is a very interesting book, EXHAUSTIVE--sometimes to its detriment (LOTS of precise amounts of money spent on pounds of flour and percentages that certain towns grew in population between 1880 and 1910 and so on). It also makes very clear that Laura's daughter, Rose, had a HUGE hand in starting the series and shaping it over time. Sort of like Sylvia Plath beginning Ted Hughes' career for him. Anyway, an interesting read. Also I felt a lot of sorrow for Rose Wilder, as she had a very frustrating relationship with her parents and felt very unfulfilled as a writer and a creative person in the world. I think she was born ahead of her time. Too bad she ended up an archconservative, but, see what a bad relationship with your parents can drive you to? Heh.

Tracy says

A decent biography that focuses on her daughter Rose almost as much as it does on Laura, mainly because Laura left behind very little documentation in the way of personal letters or diaries, whereas Rose left many diaries and letters behind when she died. It's a little bit frustrating, because we know factual things about Laura, but anything that hints at what her personality or thoughts were like is through the lens of Rose's perceptions of her (which were often volatile and negative). This book seems to be a response to The Ghost in the Little House, which I haven't read, but which asserts that Rose was actually the ghostwriter of the series. Miller isn't willing to draw that conclusion, although he does acknowledge that Rose did heavy editing on most of the books. Overall, Miller's attitude is rather protective of Laura. Other books I have read about her lately were willing to be slightly more critical of her.

Kathy Kramer says

I felt that this book did a good job of presenting the facts and presenting Laura Ingalls Wilder as a human being. I thought that this book also did a good job of showing the dynamic between Laura and her daughter Rose without taking sides. The book also presents an even-handed answer to the "authorship" question raised by William Holtz's *Ghost in the Little House*.

Josephine says

With apologies to the probable majority of people reading this, for the people who haven't heard of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House Series: it's a series of eight books written in the late 1930s and early 1940s about a girl growing up in the United States Midwest between 1867 and 1885, following approximately the European expansion west into what had hitherto been Native American land. The series begins with the main character's early childhood in "the Big Woods" in Wisconsin, and follow her family's moves West ending up in De Smet, South Dakota (check this!) where Laura, in her late teens by the end of the series, meets and marries one Almanzo Wilder. *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, by John E. Miller, covers her childhood years briefly, but picks up in greater detail with her marriage and later life.

The Little House books are ostensibly Laura's own biography. Hopefully it does not (really) come as a surprise to any adults familiar with the series that while the author stuck reasonably closely to her own life, the books themselves are fictionalized to a great extent. They're not in libraries' fiction collections by mistake. Many of the changes serve only to streamline the story line. Some are minor--the children's ages were advanced by a couple of years, the cause of Mary's blindness is uncertain though not scarlet fever as described in the books, a couple of moves were conflated—but Laura changed or eliminated a number of what I could consider major items. Some were for dramatic effect, such as altering Jack's fate to serve as a demarcation between childhood and adolescence leading up to maturity and adulthood; in the books, Jack dies of old age in the beginning of *On Silver Lake* while in reality he had, several years earlier, gone on with another family out to homestead while the Ingalls remained on Plum Creek. She was also a bit fuzzy in the novels about Almanzo's age—the real Almanzo was ten years older than his wife, but in the novels he is merely "older" than she. I suspect this wide an age gap may have been more common or acceptable in the nineteenth century, when the man might feel the need to prove himself able to support a family before marrying. Laura, when writing for children, clearly felt it better to make the husband and wife closer in age to suit modern couples.

According to this biography and others², Laura left out a number of items that didn't suit her agenda of promoting and promulgating the All-American Ethos of Hard Work, based on a nation of self-sufficient independent farmers working for themselves. The fact that the family was fairly poor should come as no surprise to anyone who has read the books, but they weren't always farmers, much less independent. Laura did mention Pa's carpentry work to augment the family income, but Ma and Pa also ran a hotel in Burr Oak between farming stints during what would have been the Plum Creek years, and operated a butcher shop during this same time. Laura also did not mention her little brother, Freddie who was born while the family was on Plum Creek, as he died so shortly thereafter that he played no part in the family's later fortunes.

Overall it's a nice modern addition to the literature about Laura Ingalls Wilder³—a bestselling children's author even seventy years after her books' publication. . Her novels may serve as a gentle introduction to a

period and place in American history with no wars or other significant events, and so therefore not much written about, but aren't wholly factual about Laura's own life. For all their flaws, not least racism, the Little House series is deservedly still part of any self-respecting public or school library's collection of historical fiction. Consider this a folksy biography about a footnote author who lives on through her fictionalized memoirs, worth adding to collections which don't have any of the earlier biographies, or where demand would indicate a need for something more up to date.

1I hope she will forgive the familiarity, as that's how nigh onto the third generation of readers regards her; I'm sure Laura herself would by far prefer Mrs. A.J. Wilder...

2I'd want to double check for confirmation.

3there were several biographies written in the mid-1970s when the television show was airing

Michelle Llewellyn says

If you're looking for a good read about the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder, there are better ones out there than this one. I would recommend

Laura Ingalls Wilder: a biography by William Anderson

Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder by Donald Zochert

I felt the author's own opinion detracted from the real facts and too much focus was centered on Laura's relationship with Rose. Except for the bit about another family living with the Ingalls during the Hard Winter, Miller has nothing new to add that wasn't already covered by the other two biographies I'd already read.

Laura says

Contrary to some of the other reviewers, I think this a good if not great biographical reference for the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Unlike the other "Laura" biographies, this one has the most insightful historical contexts. The historical context spans all of Laura's life from her earliest days in Pepin Wisconsin, to her life in Kansas, Walnut Grove, Burr Oak, De Smet, Missouri and everywhere in between. The book tells of the people and events surrounding Laura particularly within the location she was at the time, and in turn gives insight into how this shaped Laura's life experiences. There are also many relevant facts in this book such as: the fact that Laura was a loan officer for a Missouri bank, she once ran for political office, she died the year that a satellite first went into space, etc. I would not pass over this Laura Ingalls book as the narrative is fine throughout and detailed. It feels like a captivating history book. It reads as non-fiction, which it technically is anyway!
