Much of the world knows Nebraska through the literature of Willa Cather. Because her characters were often based on the Nebraskans she encountered in her early years, her books and stories invite us to see ourselves as others see us—whether we like it or not.

Roscoe Pound didn’t like it one bit when Cather excoriated him as a pompous bully in an 1894 “character study” published by the University of Nebraska. She said: “He loves to take rather weak-minded persons and browbeat them, argue them down, Latin them into a corner, and botany them into a shapeless mass.”

Laurie Smith Camp has served as Nebraska’s deputy attorney general for criminal matters since 1995. Camp was chief of the Attorney General’s Civil Rights Section from 1991 to 1995; general counsel for the Nebraska Department of Corrections from 1980 to 1991; and in private practice from 1977 to 1980.

If Nebraska’s preeminent lawyer and legal scholar fared so poorly in Cather’s estimation, what did she think of other members of the bar?

The Good:

In “A Lost Lady,” Judge Pommeroy was a modest and conscientious lawyer in the mythical town of Sweetwater, Nebraska. Pommeroy advised his client, Captain Daniel Forrester, during Forrester’s prosperous years, and helped him to meet all his legal and moral obligations when the depression of the 1890’s closed banks and collapsed investments. Pommeroy appealed to the integrity of his clients, guided them by example, and encouraged them to respect the rights of others. He agonized about the decline of ethical standards in the Nebraska legal profession, and advised his own nephew to become an architect: “I can’t see any honorable career for a lawyer in this new business world that’s coming up. Get into some clean profession.”

In Cather’s short story “Clemency of the Court,” the young criminal defense attorney was the only person to show any kindness to the central character, Serge Povolitcky. After Serge confessed to the ax-murder of a farmer, the lawyer “fought day and night” for him.

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In “One of Ours,”8 an unnamed judge in the mythical town of Frankfort, Nebraska, heard charges of disloyalty levied against Nebraskans of German descent during World War I. He presided with an informal, practical demeanor, demonstrating respect for the defendants, control of the proceedings, and a resolve to keep peace and order in the community.9

The Bad:

In her short story “The Sculptor’s Funeral,”10 Cather mercifully placed the mythical town of Sand City across the Nebraska border into Kansas. The town lawyer, Jim Laird, was not really bad. The whole town was bad. The people were greedy, envious, abusive, and really bad. The whole town was bad. The lawyer did not consider his job done at the close of trial, but accompanied his client to the state prison, offering words of encouragement, not knowing that his client would meet with a fate worse than execution.7

Jim Laird missed his best friend’s funeral, because he was too drunk to attend.11

The Really Ugly:

Ivy Peters was ugly. His nickname, “Poison Ivy” described both his appearance and his character:

His face . . . was red and the flesh looked hard, as if it were swollen from bee stings, . . . or from an encounter with poison ivy. [His] red skin was flecked with tiny freckles, like rust spots, and in each of his hard cheeks there was a curling indentation, like a knot in a tree-bole,—two permanent dimples which did anything but soften his countenance. His eyes were very small, and an absence of eyelashes gave his pupils the fixed, unblinking hardness of a snake’s or lizard’s. His hands had the same swollen look as his face, were deeply creased across the back and knuckles, as if the skin were stretched too tight. He was an ugly fellow, Ivy Peters, and he liked being ugly.

“I came back here to practice, and I found you didn’t in the least want me to be a great man. You wanted me to be a shrewd lawyer—oh, yes!”
Footnotes

1 Nebraska set the stage for Cather’s “O Pioneers,” “My Antonia,” “A Lost Lady,” “One of Ours,” “Lucy Gayheart,” and “Obscure Destinies,” as well as many of her short stories, including “The Bohemian Girl,” “On The Divide,” and “Eric Herrmannson’s Soul.” Although Jim Burden, the narrator in “My Antonia” was a lawyer, the novel did not focus on his career.

2 Cather was born in Virginia in 1873 and moved to Webster County, Nebraska, at the age of nine. She graduated from the University of Nebraska, and moved from the state in 1896, returning often for prolonged visits until her death in 1947. She credited the first 15 years of her life as the most influential and important for her literature.

3 It is presumed that Cather wrote The Hesperian article in retaliation for Pound’s disapproval of her friendship with his sister, Louise. The article caused a rift between Cather and the Pound family.

4 1923.

5 Forrester’s character was patterned on the life of Red Cloud banker and businessman, Silas Garber, who served as Nebraska’s Governor from 1875 to 1879.

6 1893

7 Although the prison in “Clemency of the Court” was a den of torture, Nebraska’s penitentiary was described much more favorably in Cather’s 1913 novel, “O Pioneers!”

8 1922.

9 In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, “One of Ours,” Cather described the anti-German fervor in Nebraska during World War I, which ultimately led to the adoption of the “official language” amendment to the Nebraska Constitution (Neb. Const., art. I, Section 27) in 1920. The amendment was declared unconstitutional in Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S. 390 (1923), but was retained in the constitution by voters in the 2000 election.

10 1905.

11 In her 1902 short story, “The Treasure of Far Island,” Cather described a Nebraska criminal defense attorney, also in serious need of the Lawyers Assistance Program.

12 1919.

13 1915.