

### "O PIONEERS"

*O Pioneers*, by Willa Sibert Cather, is quite as local in theme and in characters as any volume that Mr. Fox ever wrote. It is a study of the struggles and privations of the foreign emigrant in the herculean task of subduing the untamed

prairie land of the Far West and making it yield something more than a starvation income. Miss Cather has an unquestioned gift of observation, a keen eye for minute details and an instinctive perception of their relative significance. Every character and every incident in this slow-moving and frankly depressing tale give the impression of having been acquired directly through personal contact, and reproduced almost with the fidelity of a kodak picture or a graphonola record. And yet the net result strikes one, on second thought, as rather futile. The story opens practically at the death-bed of a middle-aged Swede, prematurely worn out with his vain struggle against inclement weather, the failure of crops and the burden of mortgages. He leaves behind him some incompetent sons and one splendid, dauntless amazon of a daughter, Alexandra, who dedicated her youth and strength and beauty to the hopeless drudgery of carrying on the task that had slain her father. We get brief glimpses of her early blunders and discouragements; the grudging help and secret antagonism of her brothers, and the departure of her young neighbour, who, although a lad several years her junior, was the only person who gave her sympathy. Now, the story of how Alexandra fought her battle and won it might have been well worth the telling; but this is precisely the part of her history which Miss Cather has neglected to chronicle. Instead, she has passed over it in leaps and bounds, and when we once more meet Alexandra, it is in the midst of prosperity, with all her brothers save the youngest happily married, her land increased by hundreds of acres, all yielding fabulous harvests, and Alexandra herself on the threshold of her fortieth year, and, with all her success, keenly conscious of the emptiness of her life, the craving for the love of husband and of children. Of course, it requires no keen guess-work to foresee that the young neighbour of her youth will ultimately return and the discrepancy of their ages will be forgotten. But somehow the reader cannot bring himself to

care keenly whether the young neighbour returns or not, whether Alexandra is eventually happy or not,—whether, indeed, the farm itself prospers or not. The conscious effort required to read to a finish is something like the voluntary pinch that you give yourself in church during an especially somnolent sermon. The book does have its one big moment; but it is due to an incident that lies outside of the main thread of the story. Alexandra's youngest brother falls in love with Marie Shabata, the wife of a big, hot-tempered Bohemian; and one night the two forget discretion and are found in the orchard by the infuriated husband, who wreaks prompt vengeance. The swift, sharp picture which follows has a touch of Maupassant in it.

He did not see anything while he was firing. He thought he heard a cry simultaneously with the second report, but he was not sure. He peered again through the hedge, at the two dark figures under the tree. They had fallen a little apart from each other, and were perfectly still—no, not quite; in a white patch of light, where the moon shone through the branches, a man's hand was plucking spasmodically at the grass.

But this incident, perfect as it is by itself, lies outside the main story, outside the history of the conquest of prairie land. And for that matter, the whole volume is loosely constructed, a series of separate scenes with so slight cohesion that a rude touch might almost be expected to shatter it.