

# Who really authored the Little House books?



PHOTO BY BETTY LOVE

Laura Ingalls Wilder, purported author of the Little House books, signing copies of her books for schoolchildren in 1952.

## 'Libertarians on the Prairie,' groundbreaking work of literary detection, to be launched in Guilford Oct. 4

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**GUILFORD** For most of us, the Little House books, written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, conjure up images of a horse and buggy jouncing through fields, of a crackling fire in a one-room log cabin, of one family's indomitable spirit in the face of hostile Indians, hungry wolves and devastating grasshopper plagues.

Not entirely so for author Christine Woodside, who will mark the release of her myth-busting new book, "Libertarians on the Prairie," at the Hyland House in Guilford on Tuesday, Oct. 4.

For Woodside, who at 17 was summarily rejected for an internship at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Missouri and has been gripped ever since with "an urge to know the real Laura," as she writes, the Little House books are something more.

According to the Deep River resident, the series is infused with a distinctly libertarian message, inspiring its readers to follow the movement's ideals of self-reliance, independence and the limited need for government.

Just as fascinating, perhaps, is her contention that it was not Laura Ingalls Wilder who "recast the stoic pioneers" as "people who achieved success without government help," as Woodside, the editor of Appalachia Journal, puts it, but that her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, did the lion's share of the writing.



PHOTO BY ELLEN FINNIE  
Christine Woodside author.

Though it's hardly a new revelation — a book asserting that Rose had been involved in the writing came out in 1993 — Woodside masterfully captures the behind-the-scenes story of two strong-willed women locked in an uneasy, but interdependent, enterprise.

Each had strengths that complemented the other's, as Woodside shows. Laura, who began in her early 60s with the modest aspiration of recording her parents' early days in Wisconsin for her family, brought authenticity — "the quality of Pa's voice, which the fires he's burning in the wheat field have made raspy," for example. She brought local parlance; she brought the knowledge of how to dig a well, make a rag doll, and smoke a ham.

A widely read author in her own right, Rose dutifully typed up Laura's rough drafts, but not verbatim. As Woodside meticulously demonstrates, she romanticized the ma-

terial, omitting anything that didn't drive the narrative, reordering scenes and adding slick turns of plot to heighten drama.

Together, they delivered manuscripts from 1932 to 1943 with "so distinctive a folk flavor" that editors barely touched them. Their instincts were spot on. Each Little House book in turn won resounding success, both critically and commercially.

Still, even as she basked in authorial fame, enjoying "the joyous problem of responding to fan mail and receiving visitors," Laura was chafing at the "liberties that her daughter took with factual detail," Woodside writes. Rose's extensive rewriting of her prose also left Laura feeling usurped.

Meanwhile, Rose, while growing impatient with her mother's limitations as a writer, "had no choice" but to work on another draft of "The Long Winter." As Woodside put it, "she was locked in and had to rewrite this book."

That Rose may have also "envied the general adulation for Laura and the Little House books while her own work slid into obscurity," as Woodside writes, didn't matter in the end. Readers were clamoring for more, "yearning to know what came next," forcing the two to maintain their uneasy collaboration.

With the 1953 reissuance of all the Little House books in a uniform size and new illustrations, the series, as well as its standard-bearer, had become

a phenomenon far larger than Rose and Laura.

It's likely that "the eager public" that lined up for entry to view Laura's effects at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum, founded three months after her death in 1957, would have revolted against any suggestion that the icon and grass-roots goddess might not be all they believed her to be. After all, Woodside said, her own views on the authorship are still held by some Wilder devotees as "controversial."

Of course, the revelation of Rose's involvement doesn't seem to have dimmed their enthusiasm, with an estimated 40,000 fans visiting the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum each year.

Even still, said Woodside, who met many die-hard followers at the annual Laurapalooza festival this summer, "the story of Rose Wilder Lane is definitely on their minds."

In the end, though, it's safe to say that the legions of children cracking open the timelessly popular "Farmer Boy" or "On the Banks of Plum Creek" for the first time don't care who wrote them. What's important, Woodside writes, is that "somehow these two women, mother and daughter ... came together, and made the Little House books."

*An event to celebrate the release of "Libertarians on the Prairie" takes place at the Hyland House, 84 Boston St., Guilford, from 5-7 p.m., Oct. 4. The event is open to the public.*