

BOOKS

Minnesota plays significant role in PBS documentary about Laura Ingalls Wilder

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Minnesota roots show in a new "American Masters."

By Neal Justin (<https://www.startribune.com/neal-justin/6370468/>) Star Tribune |

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Just about every Midwestern state wants to claim Laura Ingalls Wilder, the renowned author who moved a dozen times during her childhood. But a new PBS documentary gives Minnesota the strongest bragging rights.

"Laura Ingalls Wilder: From Prairie to Page," which premieres Tuesday, emphasizes her time here so much that Twin Cities Public Television was recruited as producing partner for a film that is part of "American Masters," the long-running series that has earned 28 Emmy awards.

"It's very gratifying to be associated with a brand like that," said Michael Rosenfeld, TPT's vice president of national productions. "I think we were a good partner, not only because of our geographical backyard, but because we do work of such high caliber."

The 90-minute film, narrated by Victor Garber and featuring Tess Harper as the voice of Wilder, spotlights plenty of local figures, from well-known writer Louise Erdrich to the less familiar Stan and Hazelle Gordon, owners of the Plum Creek dugout where the Ingalls family lived from 1874 to 1876.

Director Mary McDonagh Murphy also interviewed several of the cast members from "Little House on the Prairie," the beloved 1974-83 TV drama set in Walnut Grove, Minn.

Murphy also went out of her way in a virtual news conference this summer to praise Kate Beane, director of Native American Initiatives at the Minnesota Historical Society, for her contributions.

Channeling Laura

Melissa Gilbert, who played young Laura on the series and Ma Ingalls in a musical version that premiered at the Guthrie Theater in 2008, said the timing of the documentary couldn't be more appropriate.

"I can tell you that since March, since the world and our nation in particular have been dealing with this pandemic, I began hearing more and more on social media from people saying, 'I am re-watching "Little House on the Prairie." It is bringing me so much comfort. I am finding my way through,'" Gilbert said during an interview in July.

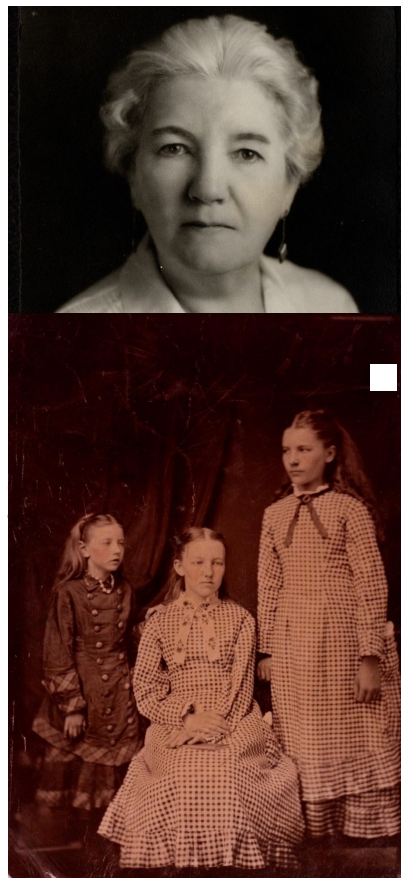
"I think this extraordinary documentary is going to be, again, another source of great comfort and a reminder of where we came from. I mean, these are people who built the nation and a reminder that it's only done with community and love and understanding. If we could do that in the 1860s, we can make it through this."

Wilder's ability to find sunshine in the darkest times is a primary reason her "Little House" books have sold more than 60 million copies since the first one came out in 1932 when she was 65. Children from multiple generations continue to envy the adventures of a young girl who somehow managed to have a blast without indoor plumbing or a smartphone.

"I just thought Laura was incredibly fun, spunky, spirited. She actually reminded me a lot of myself at that time," said Gilbert, who currently lives on a farm in the Catskills with her husband, director/actor Timothy Busfield. "But there's also the way she wrote her descriptions of life and food, and games and sights and sounds, the world around her. They were so vivid. I could see myself there. It really got my imagination stirred up."

Murphy, with the help of TPT crew members, made sure to capture footage of youngsters channeling Laura at various tourist sites, including Plum Creek and Pepin, Wis., before the virus struck.

"You see these girls at the homestead, dressed in their little gingham outfits and they come on these pilgrimages because they feel they know her and know something about her childhood and want to be connected to it," Murphy said.



(https://cdn.vox-cdn.com/uploads/chorus_asset/file/22200934/ows_76)
LIW HISTORIC HOME AND MUSEUM, MANSFIELD, MO.

Carrie, Mary and Laura Ingalls circa 1879

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Racial attitudes

But the movie doesn't shy away from some darker aspects of Wilder's books, most notably its negative depictions of Native Americans. In 2018, the coveted Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, presented by the American Library Association, was renamed the Children's Literature Legacy Award to distance itself from the author's "complex legacy" of racial attitudes in some passages.

In the film, author Roxane Gay shares her difficulty embracing the novels due to their use of words like "darkies" and describing a scene in which Pa entertains the family in blackface.

Lizzie Skurnick, an expert on young fiction, doesn't defend Wilder's viewpoints. But she also doesn't believe in ignoring her work.

"Sometimes we think of things as being read in view of current culture, but there were abolitionists during slavery," Skurnick said during an online news conference. "There were people who thought what was being done to the Indigenous nations was wrong. There were complex views then, as well, whether Laura was aware of them or not.

"It is not so much that things have changed, but depressingly that things are the same," she added. "But we can learn things from every era, including the era Laura lived in and the era we live in now and what kind of people we choose to be right now, without diminishing her luster."

New insights

The film also spends a considerable amount of time exploring just how much Wilder relied on input from her daughter, Rose.

There is ample evidence that her only child, who would go on to help found the American libertarian movement, was an uncredited collaborator who thought being associated with children's literature would damage her reputation as a journalist and serious novelist.

"It's a new insight on the way those books were created," Rosenfeld said. "It's very arresting if you grew up on them."

Older fans may get caught up in the mystery, but for younger viewers who are just starting to crack open "Little House in the Big Woods" or discover the series on cable TV, this documentary will mostly intensify their obsession with the young pioneer.

"I think ultimately these are stories about a happy family through thick and thin, and that means a lot to people," Murphy said. "This has been said of Atticus Finch, too, but everybody wants a father like Pa. Most people don't have one. I think that's really part of the allure, which is no matter how awful life was, you know, at the end of the day they were together and all was kind of right with the world."

Laura Ingalls Wilder: From Prairie to Page

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: TPT, Ch. 2

Neal Justin covers the entertainment world, primarily TV and radio. He also reviews stand-up comedy. Justin is the founder of JCamp, a non-profit program for high-school journalists, and works on many fronts to further diversity in newsrooms.

njustin@startribune.com 612-673-7431 nealjustin