

3.21 Reading Like Marilyn Monroe for a Month

Angourie (host)

Before I begin, I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Angourie (host)

Hello, and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast and book club for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

Angourie (host)

I grew up watching Marilyn Monroe films. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was one of my favourite movies as a kid, and still holds a lot of nostalgia for me today. I had a 1920s-themed birthday party when I turned 13, and we all watched *Some Like It Hot*. I also remember watching *All About Eve* when I was too young to get it, and being exceedingly entertained by *How to Marry a Millionaire*. In primary school, we had to do a presentation about a famous person and I chose Marilyn Monroe.

Marilyn's legacy continues on, sixty years after her death. She is still a symbol of sex, glamour and beauty. She wasn't America's sweetheart, but America's blonde bombshell. Even now, watching her onscreen, I am completely captivated by her. Sure, she has an affected voice and a self-conscious walk, and sometimes she delivers a line with the emphasis on the wrong word, but she is so luminous I just can't help but watch her.

Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson in 1927 in Los Angeles, California, to a single mother. She never knew her father, and seldom saw her mother after she was placed in the foster care system from an early age. Just after her sixteenth birthday, she dropped out of high school to marry the 21-year-old boy next door, James Dougherty. She began modelling in 1944 and signed with a modelling agency in 1945, defying her husband's wishes to go into the entertainment business. They divorced in 1946. In an interview for *Life* magazine in 1962, Marilyn says, quote:

'When I was five, I think, that's when I started wanting to be an actress. [...] I didn't like the world around me because it was kind of grim, but I loved to play house. [...] Some of my foster families used to send me to the movies to get me out of the house and I'd sit there all day and way into the night. Up in front, there with the screen so big, a little kid all alone, and I loved it.'

Coming from a modelling background and skyrocketing to fame after playing beautiful chorus girls and entertainers, poor Marilyn was placed into the box of sexy dumb blonde. But Marilyn always

wanted to be taken seriously, both as an actress and as a person. In a 1960 interview with Georges Belmont she says:

[the following is a crackly recording of Marilyn talking]: *'I would like very much to be a fine actress. A true actress – that's what I mean by "fine". A real actress.'*

She was dedicated to her craft and committed to educating herself through books. She was an avid reader, and throughout her career was photographed with books – sometimes books on acting, sometimes American poetry, and even James Joyce's *Ulysses*. She had a desire to improve and transform herself, frequently taking notes on acting, things to research, and goals she wanted to achieve. Around 1955 she wrote in a notebook, quote:

*'must have the discipline to do the following –
[...] work whenever possible – on class assignments – and always keep working on the acting exercises.
[...] if possible take at least on[e] class at university – in literature –'*

Having read more about Marilyn's life, it's clear that she was a very insecure person. She constantly doubted herself. And her self-doubt drove her to work extra hard to prove her capability to her colleagues, the American public, and herself. She worked closely with acting coaches throughout her career, and searched for reassurance in them and herself. In around 1951 she wrote in her journal:

*'Fear of giving me the lines new
maybe won't be able to learn them
maybe I'll make mistakes
people will either think I'm no good or laugh or belittle me or think I can't act. [...] afraid director won't think I'm any good.
remembering when I couldn't do a god damn thing.'*

I wonder if her determinism for self-education was fuelled by a desire to prove herself to the American public. As she writes in that quote, she didn't want to be laughed at, or belittled, or dismissed. But maybe I'm being reductive to her character. From reading accounts from the people who knew her personally, Marilyn was just a person who was curious about the world. She knew she could access a world of information and knowledge through books.

In 1999, Marilyn's personal library was auctioned off, and in 2010 the list of books purchased was released to the public. I think someone's personal collection of books reveals a lot about them as a person, regardless of whether they read them or not, or even if they didn't purchase the books themselves. So when I discovered this complete list of Marilyn's books, I was immediately intrigued. Most of her collection was dedicated to American literature: writers like Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Twain. She also had an extensive collection of poetry from Poe, Whitman, and DH Lawrence. Of course she owned a few works by her third husband, Arthur Miller, famous playwright, but also a whole collection of modern American plays from writers such as Tennessee Williams and Norman Corwin. She owned a large number of nonfiction and reference books on topics such as art, politics, philosophy, mythology, health, and religion, specifically Judaism, which she converted to once she

married Arthur Miller. It's clear she read broadly and critically, with copies of guides to reading the classics.

So naturally, you can see where I'm going with this. I decided to spend a month reading books from Marilyn Monroe's personal collection. But where to begin with choosing? The list is very long – over 400 books. So, first I had to comb through and check off the ones I had already read, which wasn't many. But the handful I had read included *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – a copy of which she reportedly gave her second husband, Joe DiMaggio, after their wedding – and *The Short Novels of Colette*, who wrote the *Claudine* series which I absolutely love. So, when choosing which, I wanted to read books that interested me personally, of course, but also books that Marilyn had most likely read herself. Because I don't know about you, but I certainly haven't read every single book I own on my bookshelf. I also wanted to choose a few that were representative of the collection she had as a whole.

So, to begin with, I wanted to choose something written by an American author, since so much of her collection was dedicated to great American works of fiction. But I also wanted to choose something written by a woman, because most of her collection consists of books by great American male writers. So when I saw *My Ántonia* [note: I pronounce 'Ántonia' incorrectly here, it should be an-te-NEE-ah, not AN-TONE-eeeah. I fix my pronunciation when I talk about the book later on] by Willa Cather, I decided to put that on my list. *My Ántonia* is an American classic written in 1918, and is apparently often part of English curriculums in school. It was also a convenient choice because we own a copy of it at home and my dad has read it and enjoyed it.

Another female author's name I recognised on the list was Carson McCullers. I studied *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers in year 11 and I really loved it. The Carson McCullers book from Marilyn's collection was not *The Member of the Wedding*, however, but *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which I haven't read. I also knew that there was a personal connection between Marilyn and Carson – they had lunch together in 1959, with Marilyn's husband Arthur Miller. Years later, Miller said he didn't think Marilyn had read any of McCullers' works, but she may have seen the stage adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, which ran from January 1950 to March 1951. So, I wonder if she bought *The Ballad of the Sad Café* before meeting McCullers, or after. I wonder if she ever read it. Anyway, I want to read it because I've been meaning to read another McCullers after liking *The Member of the Wedding* so much.

And finally, as I mentioned, Marilyn was an avid reader of poetry. At the end of the article I read that listed all the works in her collection, there was also a list of works that weren't in the collection, but it had been said that Marilyn had definitely read them. Among that list was a work that I own and have been meaning to read for some time now, and that's *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke was an early 20th Century German poet, and though this is not a collection of his poetry, it's a collection of letters he wrote to a fan of his. According to the list that I consulted, Marilyn was seen reading *Letters to a Young Poet* on the set of *All About Eve* – quite early on in her career. Unfortunately I couldn't find any citation or any evidence of this, but she did own a copy of Rilke's selected poems, so I'm just trusting this source.

So I had chosen my three books, I had a month of doing nothing, and I was ready to read like Marilyn Monroe.

[fade in: soft piano music in a minor key]

The Ballad of the Sad Café by Carson McCullers, published in 1951

[fade out: soft piano music]

Carson McCullers was an American writer from Georgia, who wrote a number of novels and short stories about life in the deep south. Her style is described as 'Southern Gothic' and she often writes about loneliness and being a misfit. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is not, as I previously thought, a novel, but in fact a novella, published alongside a six short stories. Here's the synopsis for the novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

[fade in: that same soft piano music]

Miss Amelia is a spirited, unconventional Southern woman who runs a small-town store and, except for a marriage that lasted just ten days, has always lived alone. Then Cousin Lymon appears from nowhere, a little, strutting hunchback who steals Miss Amelia's heart. Together they transform the store into a lively, popular café. But when her rejected husband Marvin Macy returns, the result is a bizarre love triangle that brings with it violence, hatred and betrayal.

[fade out: piano music]

The Ballad of the Sad Café is a very quiet and insular story, with lots of descriptions of the landscape of the South, and these closed off characters who feel disconnected from each other and the world. Amelia Evans is the driving force of this story, but she is so stoic and silent, that I feel we never really got to know her or understand her. She almost never spoke, and was often in dialogue scenes that were overshadowed by louder and more charismatic characters. But she still had this incredible looming presence throughout the story, and she was the one who grounded it.

This is a story about love, but also about isolation, and how isolation can be found and experienced even within love. In fact, McCullers argues that loneliness is an inherent part of being in love. She describes love as a one-sided affliction that causes more suffering than it does joy. She writes, quote:

'[L]ove is a joint experience between two persons, but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer.'

Nothing in McCullers' world is left pure and wholesome – even love. She isolates all her characters, even when they're tangled up in love triangles. She scrutinises and exposes everything, taking no prisoners and pulling no punches. And what you're left with is the gritty truth that just leaves you heart-broken. She is not kind to her characters, and in the case of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Miss

Amelia Evans gets an unhappy ending. I feel like the tone of this novella cannot be captured better than the title itself. It truly feels like a Ballad – a subtle, emotional, lyrical story about a sad café.

So after the novella, there are six short stories published in this collection, and the first short story is called *Wunderkind*. It's about a young pianist who has been told from a young age that she is a prodigy, and how she struggles with the pressure to live up to that label. This was one of the first short stories McCullers ever wrote and published, at the age of 19, and it was based on her own experience of playing piano as an adolescent. In this story, she really captures the pressure of playing an instrument and feeling like you have to live up to the expectations placed upon you. I think playing an instrument can be such an emotional and vulnerable experience, and McCullers illustrates it perfectly.

The second story in the collection is very short, only six pages, and it's called *The Jockey*. It follows, you guessed it, a jockey, who walks into a restaurant on the day of the Kentucky Derby – which is the most famous horse-racing event in the US – and he confronts three men sitting a table: a bookie, a trainer and a rich man. The story is just one scene, just one setting, just one conversation. I didn't really get this one, nor did I like it as much. From what I can gather, it's a story about class in America. We've got these three powerful, rich men who own the horse, arguing with the poor man who actually does the work, the jockey. I don't like horse racing and I don't know a lot about it, so this story didn't really do much for me. I think the tension in it comes from the subtlety, but this one was so subtle that I didn't really pick up on it.

The third story was one my favourites: *Mrs Zielinsky and the King of Finland* [correction: the story is actually titled *Madame Zielinsky and the King of Finland*]. This one follows Mr Brook, who hires acclaimed musician and composer Mrs Zielinsky to work in the music department at the college. And he begins to notice strange things about Mrs Zielinsky and the things she says and does, and he believes her to be a compulsive liar. But everything kind of gets turned on its head in the last paragraph, and the audience is left not really knowing what to believe. Mr Brook is a character trying to make sense of Mrs Zielinsky's eccentricities, and he bends the narrative to fit his idea of the truth. This story explores, in a very subtle and insular way, how we may perceive truth and madness. I won't spoil it, because if you're going to read a short story from this collection, it should be this one. It's so short, and you can find it online – I'll link somewhere to read it in the show notes for you [note: This story is actually not available to read for free online, but *Wunderkind*, my other favourite of the collection, is available, and I've linked it on the blog] – and it just displays McCullers' exceptional story-telling. Again, she touches on themes of loneliness, isolation, trying to find human connections, but this story is also a foray into the weird and grotesque – something that comes back in *The Member of the Wedding*.

The fourth story is titled *Sojourner* and is, again, a very short one exploring those same themes of loneliness and lost connections. Here we're following John Ferris, who is in New York after going to Georgia to the funeral of his father. He has one day left in New York before he flies back to Paris, where he now lives, and he by chance happens to see his ex-wife, Elizabeth, on the street. They reconnect and he spends an evening with her and her new family. This one was very sweet and sad, and explored the concepts of time and travel and lost love. It reminded me of a kind of reverse *Lost in Translation*, with our main character feeling alone and out of touch in a country he's actually from. This short story feels like a vignette – just a snapshot of a very sad man's life, and the ways in which he feels lost and fragmented. It's quite lyrical and beautiful, and focuses less on the weird.

Unfortunately, the last two stories in this collection were my least favourites. *A Domestic Dilemma* was the penultimate story, and it's about a man whose marriage is disintegrating due to his wife's alcoholism. Again, it's a small vignette of this family's troubled life – how the husband tries to talk to the wife, how they try and hide their problems from their children. It's a very sad story, but for some reason it didn't connect with me as much. There seemed to be a lot of philosophical musings, but not much plot, and I didn't really understand what the point was. And then the final story was called *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*. In this story, a young boy walks into an all-night café and an old man sits him down and tells him his philosophy on love. I didn't think the message was very clear, nor was the set up very original or intriguing. Again, here we had elements of the grotesque – you know, this strange old man, the poor young boy, and the stingy owner of the café who watches the whole encounter. I think I might have to read this one again in order to fully understand it, but on a surface level it just wasn't my favourite.

And so with those short stories, *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories* was done. So, what to say about it? You know, how do I think this book relates to Marilyn's life? What can we glean from her life knowing that this was a book she kept on her bookshelf? Well, a common theme in most of McCullers' work is loneliness. This type of loneliness can take many forms: in a man meeting up with his ex-wife, a girl overwhelmed by the title of 'prodigy', a woman who runs a sad café and finds herself in a love triangle. McCullers writes about loneliness in love, loneliness in your hometown, loneliness in your family. And I think this definitely relates to Marilyn's life. Growing up, Marilyn didn't have a family. She didn't have anyone to take care of her. She married the next-door-neighbour at sixteen to avoid being sent back to the orphanage. All throughout her life, she was someone who craved connection, and pursued a career that depended on it. Eve Arnold was a photographer who worked with Marilyn a few times throughout her life, and was the stills photographer on Marilyn's last completed film, *The Misfits*. In her book, *Marilyn Monroe*, Arnold writes of her experience working on the film:

'It is interesting now [...] to go through the contact (proof) sheets. There must be a dozen instances of her touching, hugging, sitting on laps. With the advantage of hindsight, it seems like a cry for help.'

I think loneliness in love is something McCullers does really well. That quote about the lover vs. the beloved, and how each of her characters is still yearning for something even though they appear to have it. And from what we know of Marilyn's relationship with her third husband, Arthur Miller, it appeared to be very similar. In 1956, Marilyn and Arthur were living in England while Marilyn was filming *The Prince and the Show Girl*. During this time, Marilyn discovered Arthur's diary and very read unflattering things he had written about her. As a result of this, their relationship became strained and tense, which was reflected in Marilyn's personal writings from the time. She writes, quote:

'I guess I have always been deeply terrified ~~at~~ to really be someone's wife since I know from life one cannot love another, ever, really.'

Whenever I read that quote, my heart just breaks for Marilyn. And it fascinates me how much this echoes McCullers' own thesis on love in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Marilyn says: 'One cannot love another, ever, really'. McCullers says: '[The lover] feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing.'

Marilyn's marriage to Miller was her third and final marriage, and the longest of the three – but it's clear from what she wrote that she still felt disconnected from him. All Marilyn ever wanted to be was a part of something. And even though Hollywood offered that, they were also cruel and unforgiving. She received bad reviews, she was hounded by photographers and haunted by tabloids spreading lies, and everyone had an opinion on her high-profile relationships. I can imagine she might have felt loved by everyone and no one at the same time.

McCullers appeared to be a lonely woman in love, as well. She married aspiring writer Reeves McCullers at age 20, but throughout her life she pursued relationships with a number of women. Her most well-documented relationship was with Swiss writer, journalist and photographer Annamarie Schwarzenbach, but McCullers' love was not reciprocated. Carson McCullers divorced her husband for a time, but then they remarried. Three years after their remarriage, she attempted suicide, and eight years later, in 1953, her husband committed suicide through an overdose of sleeping pills. McCullers went through so much trauma in her relationships, and it's clear from the themes of her works that she often felt like a misfit and an outcast. She writes about solitary women, often rejects from society, dealing with unreciprocated love.

There's a collection of photographs from the lunch with Marilyn Monroe and Carson McCullers. And there's one photograph in particular that really intrigues me. The dining table is set for lunch, and at the head of the table sits Danish author Isak Dinesen, sipping champagne. The back of a suited man is visible in the left foreground – possibly Arthur Miller – and on the far side of the table, a man is filling up Marilyn's champagne glass. Everyone is seated and ready for the lunch to begin, but what about Marilyn and Carson? Well, they're sitting next to each other, and Carson is giving Marilyn a hearty kiss on the cheek. Marilyn is smiling broadly with her eyes closed. It's a moment that fills me with questions. What prompted this kiss from McCullers? Surely introductory kisses had been done by this point? And she doesn't strike me as the type to suck up to Hollywood movie stars. We can only guess at the context of this kiss, but I love this photo so much because it makes me hope that in this moment, these two lonely women who hadn't become any less lonely in their fame, found a connection with each other.

[fade in: soft piano music]

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke, published in 1929

[fade out: soft piano music]

Rainer Maria Rilke was a late 19th Century and early 20th Century Austrian poet. He's very famous for his poetry and his influence in the Bohemian art scene in the early 1900s. *Letters to a Young Poet* is exactly what it says on the tin – between 1902 and 1908 Rilke had a correspondence with Franz Xaver Kappus, a young officer cadet who aspired to be a poet. Kappus was attending a military school in Austria, the very same one Rilke had attended ten years earlier. And it was through a professor at the school that Kappus was able to get Rilke's address and write him a letter. The result was a correspondence of ten letters from Rilke to Kappus, which was published in 1929, three years after Rilke's death.

I first encountered Rilke as a side character, or 'personality', if you will, when I read *Being Here: The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker* by Marie Darrieussecq. This is a biography of Paula Modersohn-

Becker, a German painter who lived at the same time as Rilke. In fact, she was best friends with his wife, Clara, and painted a portrait of Rilke during her career. In turn, Rilke wrote a poem about Paula after she died, called *Requiem for a Friend*. The representation of Rilke as a side character in this female painter's story was quite a fascinating and unusual way to be introduced to him. My impression of him from that book was that he was a selfish and presumptuous man, obsessed with artistic and interesting women such as Paula and Clara, but not really willing to know them or understand them properly. He was the original softboi, if you will. So it was strange and confronting to read his side of the story – his musings on life and love and art. I didn't find myself exasperated with his ego, like I was when I read *Being Here* – in fact I really enjoyed his writing. He has an extraordinary gift of expressing a distinct and unique feeling in a few, well-chosen, lyrical words. And he has some wonderfully inspiring things to say on creativity and life and letting the two come together to make art. He writes, quote:

'Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer.'

That being said, I took everything he said with a grain – no, rather a handful – of salt. For all the awareness Rilke has of himself and his creative process, he lacks it in the context of the wider world. His thesis seems to be advocating for solitude – one must be completely in touch with oneself to create good and meaningful art. He advises, quote:

'...keep growing quietly and seriously throughout your whole development; you cannot disturb it more rudely than by looking outward and expecting from outside replies to questions that only your inmost feeling in your most hushed hour can perhaps answer.'

But how many hushed hours does one get in a day? Who's paying the bills, Rilke? Who's looking after the baby? Who's doing the cooking and then the washing up? Oh, the women, of course. Because they don't need to create art. For more on this topic, read *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. The biggest kick in the guts, I think, was when Rilke wrote this in a letter to his wife while he was off in Italy being poetic, quote:

'I already feel my solitude again a little and suspect that it will deny me nothing if I hearken to it with new strength.'

So, while his wife was at home, taking care of their baby daughter, he was seeking solitude in Italy and writing home saying how wonderful it was to be alone and in touch with himself again. The advice he gives in his letters is perfectly wonderful if consumed in a vacuum, but real people don't live in a vacuum. Children must be cared for, food must be cooked and clothes must be washed.

At the same time, however, I do recognise that living and creating practically was not the point of Rilke's advice or musings or lifestyle. He was an early 20th Century Bohemian, caught up in the romance of suffering and pain and loneliness and love. He was living in the time of Rodin, whose writhing figures looked like they were emerging out of solid rock, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – a gothic novel about the ethics of excess and sin and strong – and I mean *strong* – homoerotic overtones. The turn of the Century was, for European artists, a time of innovation and

exploration – for more on this read *The Children's Book* by A. S. Byatt – and so of course Rilke would be thinking in absolutes: the artist's ideal life or practice or routine. And in his particular case, all his hushed hours and solitude, away from his wife and daughter, actually resulted in his poetry, which brought in money.

I can imagine young Marilyn reading and loving this book – poring over Rilke's beautiful prose describing how an artist may approach creating good work. This inward look is a theme that comes up in Marilyn's own writings – both her script notes and her little scraps of journaling. She even wrote some of her own poems. In his letters, Rilke promotes solitude – learning how to be comfortable in being alone, and even how to harness that solitude and turn it into something creative. I can imagine that, for Marilyn, who had grown up alone in the world, this would have been a comforting notion. Here was a famous and well-regarded poet telling her that her solitude – however involuntary it was – was actually an asset to her creative process. All throughout her life, Marilyn struggled with her mental health. She went through the process of psychoanalysis, and references what it was like in her personal writings quite frequently. Around 1955, when it is assumed she began psychoanalysis, Marilyn wrote, quote:

'feel what I feel within myself that is trying to become aware of it – also what I feel in others not being ashamed of my feeling, thoughts – or ideas'

Now compare this to Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

'What goes on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love; you must somehow keep working at it and not lose too much time and too much courage in clarifying your attitude toward people.'

When I look at these two quotes side by side, I see a troubled young woman trying her best to heed the advice of a confident man doling out sage advice on his high horse. A man who couldn't have possibly known or understood the hardship of the receiver of his advice – a man with no self-awareness and no concept of the phrase 'easier said than done'. And yet, what Rilke writes at the end of his eighth letter makes me eat my sour words. And it makes me think that, for all his preaching about finding solitude to create, Rilke, too, craved connection and understanding, just like Marilyn. He writes, quote:

'Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words.'

[fade in: soft piano music]

My Ántonia by Willa Cather, published in 1918

[fade out: soft piano music]

Willa Cather was an American writer born in 1873, and is most famous for her novels depicting frontier life on the Great Plains, informed by her own experience growing up in rural Nebraska. *My*

Ántonia is Willa Cather's final book in the 'prairie trilogy'. It is the most highly acclaimed of the three, and you don't have to have read the first two to understand this one.

I enjoyed this book, it did a lot of things that I liked, but I spent the whole time waiting for the other shoe to drop. And that's through no fault of the book, it's my fault for expecting something from it and not receiving that. And that's because I think every synopsis I've read of this book has been misleading, and has failed to capture what this book is really about. Because this story is not really about *Ántonia*. It's about Jim Burden, our narrator, who fondly remembers his friendship with *Ántonia*, but also introduces us to the wider community of farmers, immigrants, and children in the area. It's about a web of connections – every single character knows someone who knows someone who knew that person who just moved to town. It's about immigration, with many of our central characters coming from Eastern Europe. *Ántonia*'s family is from Bohemia – now modern-day Czech Republic – Jim recounts teaching *Ántonia* English and listening to stories from his friends about their home countries. But, according to Jim Burden, our narrator, *Ántonia* is at the core of all of this. She is the grounding, central figure of his life – and everyone else's life – growing up on the Nebraskan Great Plains.

Memory runs through this novel, both thematically and in the way it's written. The whole novel is told in hindsight, an adult Jim Burden recollecting his childhood and reflecting on his friendships and relationships. At every stage of the story, Jim is yearning for the past. When he moves to rural Nebraska at six years old, he misses his home. When he moves from rural Nebraska to the small farming town of Black Hawk, he misses playing on the fields with *Ántonia* and teaching her English back on his farm. Then when he moves away from Black Hawk to go to university, he wishes he were still there, hanging out with his neighbours, the Harlings, and *Ántonia*, who was their hired girl at the time. And every person he talks to, as well, is reminiscing. The immigrants he meets reminisce on their homeland, and tell him stories of what it was like. The old wives tell stories of people in the town, the children tell stories of forgotten legends of the adults. *My Ántonia* is a story comprised of layers upon layers of stories. Because Jim Burden's reflection on his life isn't the only framing narrative voice. Oh, no – Jim's story is further framed by the fictional introduction. It begins, quote:

'Last summer I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa in a season of intense heat, and it was my good fortune to have for a traveling companion James Quayle Burden – Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West. He and I are old friends – we grew up together in the same Nebraska town – and we had much to say to each other.'

End quote. This unnamed author continues to relate her encounter with Jim, as he asks her, quote: 'impetuously, "Why [she] [has] never written anything about *Ántonia*.'" End quote. The author replies that she had always felt other people had known her better than she did – Jim Burden being one of them. The author agrees to write down everything she knows about *Ántonia*, as long as Jim Burden does the same. A few months later, Jim shows up at the author's doorstep with a full manuscript about his relationship with *Ántonia*, and asks the author how she got along. She confesses that her project, quote: 'had not gone beyond a few straggling notes.'" End quote. Jim gives her his manuscript, and the last line of the introduction reads as such, quote: 'My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me.'" End quote.

So, here we have yet another layer of framework for this story, another voice added to the cacophony of people who influence the story at every level. If you've listened to the podcast before, you know that I love books that feature stories within stories, or analyse the ways in which stories are created and operate. So one of my favourite elements of this book is the way that it's written mimics the way memory and community function: layers of story that have passed through so many hands – or mouths, rather – that the audience cannot be sure what is true or what is fabricated. But, in the end, it doesn't really matter, because the effect that these stories have on the community is still real and palpable. One story that sticks out vividly in my mind, is a story recounted by one of the Russian farm hands, Pavel, on his deathbed. Pavel tells *Ántonia* his story, who then tells Jim, who then, in turn, tells the unnamed author who edits and publishes his book. So, this story has been told and interpreted by four different people before it gets to us, the reader. And this is also four layers of memory, each person remembering how the story either happened or was told to them. It becomes legend or folklore right before our eyes.

Another way this type of storytelling functions is to illustrate the character of *Ántonia*. Because not only do we get Jim's interpretation of who she was as a person, but Jim also recounts what everyone else says about her – the legends and the stories that follow her after they all grow up and leave Black Hawk. And this, I think, is the heart of the story. Not *Ántonia*, but rather, as the title suggests, Jim's *Ántonia*. *Ántonia* as a character is shrouded by everyone else's perceptions of her – most predominantly Jim's, because he's our narrator. And I think this is a reason this book didn't completely work for me: *Ántonia* isn't a real person. She's a collection of romantic stories in the shape of a beautiful, desirable girl. Another character, Lena, says to Jim, quote:

'I expect I know the country girls better than you do. You always put a kind of glamour over them. The trouble with you, Jim, is that you're romantic.'

End quote. And I think this quote perfectly illustrates why this book isn't a truthful depiction of a complex and dynamic immigrant woman growing up on the Nebraska prairie. Because from the synopses that I read, that's what I expected. But rather, this book is about Jim's romantic idea of a glamorous, free-spirited, manic-pixie dream girl. And the novel is aware of this, I think – there's a reason why it's called 'My *Ántonia*' and not just '*Ántonia*.' Willa Cather is aware that this is simply Jim Burden's impression of her, his biases and partialities included.

This idea of this elusive, untouchable woman, preceded by her reputation, is a motif in Marilyn's life, as well. Marilyn was, at the height of career, the biggest star in the world. And she had all of these conflicting and contrasting perceptions attributed to her. She was the poor, abandoned orphan, she was the sex symbol, she was the girl-next-door, she was the dumb blonde, she was the secret scholar, she was the happiest, most successful woman on earth, she was alone and troubled. She was a diva, she was always late, but she was generous and kind. She was an aspiring mother, but she was barren and childless. She was a devoted wife, she was always caught in a scandalous love affair. Marilyn wanted to play the title role in Elia Kazan's 1956 film *Baby Doll*, written by Tennessee Williams. She didn't get the part. In her diary, Marilyn wrote, quote:

'He said that I've become so deified as a sex symbol that public never except [sic] me as a virgin and as a nineteen/twenty year old'

End quote. She couldn't escape the public's perception of who she was. Her image and persona was packaged and transformed and reproduced for the masses, and this continues on today. Think of Warhol's Pop Art Marilyn prints, the street art in Hollywood, and how her signature style can be seen on red carpets and at Halloween parties. Marilyn's private life became public legend. Anecdotes from primary sources trickled down into newspapers, then to the general public. And, just like in *My Ántonia*, these stories were changed or miscommunicated or misremembered. Eve Arnold, in her book on Marilyn, remembers a day spent at the beach with her in 1952, and writes, quote:

'As [Marilyn] started to swim, her crowd of admirers followed suit and surrounded her. For a moment it looked as though they would drown her, they were so tightly packed around her. Someone raced to a telephone at the nearest house and called the harbour police. They arrived smartly in a speedboat and rescued her, smiling and waving to the crowd. She had set the town on its ear and loved it. The foregoing is taken from my notes, written the afternoon of the beach scene. But [...] there are conflicting memories.'

Arnold then recounts the memories of the three others present in their party that day, the first being a man named Norman Rosten, who, quote: 'remembers that afternoon gave him the chance to play hero.' End quote. He, apparently, swam into the water, pulled Marilyn away from the group and kept her afloat until they were rescued by a boat. Lou Achitoff, also present, remembers a third scenario: that a private boat rescued her from the mob. He says, quote: 'it could not possibly have been the harbour police, it would have taken them over an hour to get there'. Lou's wife, Sandy Achitoff, apparently remembers it the same way he did, and also other bits of trivia about Marilyn, like the fact that she dieted on cottage cheese and was the only one who kept their bathing suit on when they all went skinny-dipping. The discrepancies in this anecdote demonstrate how unreliable all these stories about Marilyn might be, even if they come from primary sources who were actually there at the time. And it reminds me of the way in which *My Ántonia* is constructed, these layers of memory and story-telling, and the audience's frequent questioning of what is presented as the truth.

I wonder, if Marilyn read this book, if she related to Ántonia. Perhaps she recognised a man's romantic projections onto a girl with humble beginnings who was just trying to survive in this world. Perhaps she, like me, had wished that the story was actually about Ántonia, rather than Jim's Ántonia. It saddens me to think that anything written about Marilyn will be similar to *My Ántonia* – an interpretation of her story, as told by other people. As much as any creator wishes to separate their own biases from creating and telling her story, it will be impossible. And the further we get away from her lifetime and the people who knew her, the more these stories will change, until the truth of what happened and who she was as a person, is completely lost. It's just a fact of life that, after death, you will have no control over who tells your story or how they tell it. But is it presumptuous of me to say that Marilyn had no control over her own story during her lifetime? Maybe I'm not giving her enough credit. From accounts of Marilyn's life, she knew how the public perceived her, and she even played into that. Eve Arnold writes, quote:

'The idea of the candid shot, the actress unaware, was impossible with her. [...] One photographer working with a long lens on a film set said she always knew where he was, even though he was stationed unobtrusively fifty yards from her. She would play

to his camera, and then, when tired of the game, she would drop her eyes, her signal that she had finished.'

So here, Eve Arnold is showing how Marilyn fed the camera what it wanted. The persona of Marilyn Monroe was carefully curated to advance her career. She knew if she did this or said this, she would stay relevant and successful. She took the public's perceptions of her and harnessed them in a way that worked to her advantage.

But as I write this, I realise I'm contributing to a dichotomous idea of who Marilyn was. This black and white, contradictory mindset. I've just painted her as the silent victim of Hollywood's consumerist machine, and then the proactive mastermind behind it all, who outsmarted them and used her sex symbol status to her advantage. And, isn't this the point I'm trying to make about how she was perceived? The public believed her to be either one thing or the other, not both. I have to recognise that she was a complex person who struggled with conflicts within herself, too. It's possible she was both. She was both an active businesswoman who created a public persona for financial and creative gain, but also a victim of the industry she was a part of, constantly misrepresented and misunderstood.

Strangely, this episode has coincided with a time in my life when I'm also struggling to reconcile contradictions within myself. How can I believe two opposing things about myself to be true? How do I shift my perspective so that I view myself not as irreconcilable fragments, but rather as a multifaceted whole? I didn't come into this experiment expecting to connect with it in such a personal way. I didn't expect to put forth a critical analysis and accidentally analyse myself, as well. I've always been intrigued by Marilyn's story, always wanted to understand her. And maybe the reason why I'm drawn to her story in particular, is because I want to understand something within myself. And isn't that true with any book? Any book I pick up, I'm hoping that the story will give me something that will be of value to my life. And I think that's what Marilyn was looking for on her bookshelf, too. McCullers understands loneliness in love, Rilke knows what it's like to be an aspiring artist, and Cather recognises how elusive women are created by fictions upon fictions. I hope that, within these books, Marilyn found something to connect with, some level of kinship and understanding, at a time when maybe she felt like no one in the world could possibly know what she was going through. And through this experience, I feel like I've learnt something from Marilyn, too. With the danger of sounding cliché and cheesy, I've learnt to reconsider how I think about myself. Contradictions within ourselves are still real and true and valid. In about 1951, Marilyn wrote the following poem:

*What do I believe in
What is truth
I believe in myself
even in my most delicate
intangible feelings
in the end everything is
intangible
my most precious liquid must
never spill
life force
they are all my feelings*

no matter what

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening. If this is your first time here, I create new episodes every Sunday, mostly about books and films, but also sometimes about pop culture and how all these things intersect. So, if you liked this episode, then feel free to stick around! You can subscribe on iTunes or Spotify. You can also follow me on Instagram @angourierice, or the podcast Instagram @the_community_library. On my blog, angourieslibrary.wordpress.com, you can find a full transcription of this episode, plus a list of all the works I referenced in writing this episode. I hope you are all feeling safe and happy and healthy, and reading good books. Bye!

[fade out: theme music]