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ROSE, LAURA, AND THE LITTLE HOUSE BOOKS

It may be somewhat ironic to be giving this talk when we are recognizing our “Laura” award winners. But I’m willing to bet that Rose Wilder Lane would enjoy that irony. And since I know that all of you know who Laura was, it’s Rose I want to talk about today.

A brief introduction. Rose Wilder Lane was the only surviving child of Laura and Almanzo Wilder. She was born in Dakota Territory in December, 1886, grew up in Mansfield MO (where the Wilders bought 40 acres of scrappy hill-country timberland), and left home at 18 to become a telegrapher in Kansas City. She married Gilbert Lane in 1909 (the same year my mother was born) and went on to become a reporter and feature writer—what in those days was called a “color writer” for the San Francisco *Bulletin*. She and Lane were divorced in 1918, and Rose left San Francisco for the East Coast and after that, Europe. At a time when the girls she grew up with in Mansfield were marrying, having children, and going to club meetings, she was a freelance journalist, a world traveler, an award-winning magazine fiction writer, and a novelist.

I wanted to learn about Rose because when I was a girl, I loved the eight Little House books. No, I didn’t just love them, I adored them. I took those books out to the barn and read them out loud to the chickens, loving the sound of the words, the flow of the sentences, the craft of the stories, so simple and yet so real and compelling. They were all the more interesting to me because I understood that they were the work of an elderly woman who lived on a farm and wrote her childhood stories by candlelight. One of my teachers told me that Laura was an “untaught literary genius,” and I had to agree. And since I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, I was heartened to discover that someone who hadn’t graduated high school and who had lived all her life on a farm could just pick up her pen and write such beautiful books—and get them published! Why, if she could do it, so could I. I pinned her photograph on my wall—a little white-haired lady signing her book—and vowed to grow up and write just the way she did.

It was a great shock, then, to pick up what the publisher advertised as the “ninth book” in the Little House series. It was called *The First Four Years*, and it was the story of Laura’s and Almanzo’s early married life on the South Dakota prairie. But this couldn’t be the work of the Laura whose books I had read so often that I could recite whole passages from memory! Not to put too fine a point on it: the writing was stiff and awkward, the narrative was clumsy, the characters were unbelievable. This must have been written by . . . by an imposter, I thought, using Laura’s name!

I found that book in 1972, when I was a graduate student, so I had acquired some research skills. I was eager to apply them to this intriguing literary mystery. I was going to find out who wrote *The First Four Years* and why she (or he) had been allowed to put my Laura’s name on this . . . this inferior work!

It didn’t take me long to learn the basic facts about the book. The manuscript of *The First Four Years* had been among the papers that Laura’s daughter Rose inherited when her mother died in 1958. Rose died ten years later, and the papers went to Roger Lea MacBride, Rose’s literary executor. MacBride was the one who published *The First Four Years*, with an introduction that mentioned Rose. I already knew that she was Laura’s only child. But the introduction told me things that I didn’t know: that she was among the highest paid magazine fiction writers of the 1920s and 30s; that she had written book-length biographies of Charlie Chaplin, Jack London, Henry Ford, and Herbert Hoover; that she had traveled all over Europe and the Balkans; that she was an accomplished needlewoman and the author of a famous book on American needle arts; and that she had gone to Vietnam as a war correspondent at the age of 78. She seemed to be a Renaissance woman.

And then something occurred to me. What if Rose had written *The First Four Years*, and not Laura? What if the publisher had put Laura's name on the book so it would sell better? That would account for the differences, wouldn't it?

But Roger MacBride's introduction said that the manuscript was in Laura's handwriting, so that couldn't be the answer. And when I finally managed to find a copy of *The Peaks of Shala*, Rose's 1923 book about her travels in the Albanian mountains, I could see that Laura's daughter was a highly skilled storyteller with a remarkable eye for description and a strong narrative sense. *The Peaks of Shala*, in its own way, was every bit as accomplished as the Little House books.

And that discovery led me to consider another, even more startling possibility. What if Rose had secretly written—or at least worked extensively on—her mother's stories, turning them into the Little House books and transforming her mother into a famous author. What if Laura indeed had written *The First Four Years* but without Rose's help?

What if ... what if? It was those two what ifs, back in 1972, that nudged me out of my chair and onto a four-decade-long research trail. I began to read and collect Rose's writings—not an easy matter before the Internet came along. I began to construct a bibliography and added to it whenever I discovered a new article about Rose or Laura. I began to think that what I really wanted to do was to write a nonfiction biography of Rose.

But I was teaching and doing other research, so the project went on the back burner. And then in 1992, I learned that Professor William Holtz had just done what I was thinking of doing. His book was titled *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*. I was fascinated by the depth and breadth of his research into Rose's life, and I found myself saying an emphatic yes, yes! to his arguments that Rose played a major role in the writing of the books that were published under her mother's name. And best of all, he had done what a very good biographer does: he had laid down a research trail. The notes and bibliography at the end of his book took me to the original sources he had consulted: Rose's letters, diaries, journals, and manuscripts, held in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, where they had been deposited by her literary executor. Why Herbert Hoover? Because Rose had written the president's biography back in 1919, and the two had been political allies for years.

At the Hoover Library, I got lucky. After reading Holtz's biography, I knew what I wanted: the diary that Rose kept during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. It turned out to be a Line-A-Day five-year diary, and Rose was diligent about keeping a record of her work: her magazine fiction, her work on six book-length ghostwriting projects for Lowell Thomas, and her work on the Little House books. I photocopied the diary and quite a few letters.

Working with these primary materials, I began to understand why and how the Little House books were written. In 1927, Rose was living in the capital city of Albania with her friend Helen Boylston (later the author for the Sue Barton Nurse series). Back on the farm, her mother and father both fell ill. Life was hard there: they were in their 60s and 70s and had no money other than the fifty dollars Rose sent every month. Rose and Helen went back to the farm in early 1928. There, Rose built her parents a retirement cottage that had central heating, electricity, and indoor plumbing—the old farmhouse had none of these things. Laura and Almanzo moved there, and Rose and Troub settled into the farmhouse. When the Crash came, Rose's investments were wiped out. Now, she had two households to support, but the magazine market (always her best source of income) had dried up.

That was when her mother—hoping to make a little money from *her* writing—brought her a stack of yellow tablets that contained her life story—360-some pages, handwritten in pencil for an adult audience. She called it "Pioneer Girl." Rose used this material to produce three separate pieces: two long versions and a short version. The long versions turned out to be unpublishable. She sent the short version to her author-illustrator friend Berta Hader, in New York. Berta showed it to her editor, Marion Fiery, who thought it could be turned into a children's book. Rose and Laura worked together to produce *Little House in the Big Woods*, which was published in 1932 by Harper. When the book contract

came, they were surprised to see that it had an option for two more books—and the series was born. *Farmer Boy* came next, then *Little House on the Prairie*, and the rest. Rose didn't put the finishing touches on *These Happy Golden Years*—the last book—until 1942, after the United States had entered the Second World War.

In their collaboration, Rose and Laura worked serially: Laura created a draft, referring back to “Pioneer Girl” for the overall narrative line. Rose rewrote the draft. Her mother was available to answer questions and provide more detail. But once Rose got that book into her typewriter, it was really her baby. Laura would send Rose's finished typescript to George Bye (her agent, and also Rose's agent), who would forward it to the editor at Harper. Rose's polished, publishable text led Ursula Nordstrom, a Harper editor, to remark, “None of the Wilder manuscripts ever needed any editing. Not any. They were read and then copy-edited and sent to the printer.” Oh, and Rose even checked the copyedited manuscript and page proofs for her mother.

Why were the books published under Laura's name when Rose's contribution to each book was so substantial? The reasons were complex, I think. From the point of view of the publisher, Laura—as the grownup version of the little girl who had lived on the prairie—was a much more “promotable” author than the literary team of Laura and Rose. This wasn't so true for the first generation of the series, but after Roger MacBride sold the dramatic rights to the title “Little House on the Prairie,” Laura Ingalls Wilder became a powerful, high-earning brand, and any idea that she didn't produce the books all by herself was fiercely opposed by the publisher and by MacBride and his heirs.

But Rose had her own important reasons not to put her name on the books. Laura had long had literary ambitions (she wrote farm-booster articles for a rural newspaper from 1915-1924). Rose had encouraged her for decades and she genuinely wanted to support her mother's goals. Also, Laura and Almanzo needed money, and while Rose didn't think the books would produce much income (boy, was she wrong about that!), she wanted Laura to have the ability to earn money herself. This had a payback to Rose, because if Laura earned something, Rose could reduce the amount of support she was giving them. It was “all in the family,” she said.

Rose had another reason, too. Back at that time, there was a very clear distinction between writing adult fiction and writing “juveniles.” Unlike today, juveniles were second-class literature, and Rose didn't want to be professionally connected with them, any more than she wanted to be professionally connected with the six male adventure books she ghost-wrote for Lowell Thomas.

And then there's the psychological subtext. Throughout the women's lives together, they had waged an underground mother-daughter power struggle. It was a dysfunctional family dynamic and both Laura and Rose—and Almanzo, too—suffered in it. In 1935, Rose abandoned her hefty financial investments in the farm and her costly investment of time there, and left. She never went back, except for short visits. Mother and daughter wrote *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and the rest of the books, by correspondence. Laura would mail her draft to Rose, Rose would rewrite and mail it back, and Laura would submit it.

As I was writing about this, I wondered whether Laura understood that she was participating in a full-fledged literary deception. I don't think it began that way, though. I think Laura simply believed Rose's assurances that the books were hers and that her daughter was doing nothing more than any good editor would have done. Laura may have been initially uneasy with this explanation, but she was isolated from the literary community and had no experience of authorship against which to test what her daughter told her. From this point of view, she was operating out of a naive and simplistic understanding of the full dimensions and responsibilities of authorship and an eager acceptance of the unexpected prestige (that was Laura's word for what she wanted) that came with being an “author.” I admit, however, that this explanation doesn't fully account for Laura's participation in the elaborate concealment of the collaboration from her agent and editors—and especially her copying at least one of

the published books—*On the Banks of Plum Creek*—by hand. At some point, I believe, she must have recognized that this was an unusual arrangement, to say the least.

And there's one more thing, that I think is important. The two women seem to have divided the family pioneer saga between them: Laura's name would go on the "juveniles"; Rose's would go on the adult fiction. In the middle 1930s, then, Rose used elements of the *Plum Creek* story in her popular *Saturday Evening Post* serial, "Let the Hurricane Roar." She used part of the story from *The Long Winter* in a grisly short story called "Home Over Saturday," and the Dakota setting in several pioneer stories that appeared, with O'Henry-like twists, in magazines. And most successfully, she used her father's lifestory as the basis for her best-selling novel, *Free Land*.

Rose's work is very different from the books published under Laura's name, however. The Little House series follows the stereotypic western romance storyline in which American pioneers endure many hardships but are eventually able to impose civic and domestic order on the western wilderness. True love, hard work, and family bliss win out in the end. It took a while for Rose to find her own storyline. But the short story twists are subversively unconventional. And finally, in her last novel, *Free Land*, Rose upends and deconstructs her mother's romantic narrative. Rose's protagonist, who is altogether *human*, marries the wrong woman for the wrong reasons, makes poor choices, watches his crops fail, and does not succeed in taming nature. But he still has hope, which is Rose's own personal and political storyline. For Rose, free men endowed with the spirit of stubborn persistence and unencumbered by government interference can hope to wrench triumph out of defeat—although nature will always win in the end.

So that was the source material I had to work with, and I became obsessed (that's the only way to put it) with the idea of writing about it. I had an agenda—I wanted my readers to agree that Rose should be recognized for the work she did on her mother's books—so I very strongly that my fiction had to stay close to the facts. Before I began to write in 2011, I transcribed all 83,000 words of the journal into a searchable, easy-to-manage computer file. The diary was my guide and constant companion. Along with other research materials, I used it to create the novel's timeline and anchoring themes. By mid-2012, I had a book.

Over the next few months, my agent—Kerry—shopped the proposal package and sample chapters to 35 editors. To our surprise, we got back 34 "no, sorry" responses, and one offer, from a publisher I didn't want to work with. The general feeling was 1) that the market for this novel was too small, too "niche," and not general/universal enough; and 2) that Laura's fans were not going to be happy to see this book and that there was going to be some major fan pushback. Bottom line: the numbers didn't add up, and numbers count. Since the rejections were based on editors' market assessments, it was pointless to rewrite and resubmit the package—it wasn't going to fly with them, period. Luckily, we live in new times, and it took me about five minutes to decide to self-publish *A Wilder Rose*.

I know that many of you are considering self-publishing your own work, so here's a quick summary of what happened next. I sent the manuscript to a professional copyeditor. I worked with an artist to design a cover and posted samples of the cover art online for readers to choose their favorites. I had the copyedited manuscript formatted for retail platforms: Kindle, Nook, iBook, Kobo. I worked with CreateSpace (Amazon's on-demand printer) to produce the Amazon paperback. And I got Lightning Source (an on-demand printer which distributes through Ingram) to produce paperback and hardcover editions. That was the book production—while it was going on, I was starting to market it.

The book was scheduled for launch in September and October, 2013. In July, I bought CreateSpace copies and mailed 40 to bloggers for review. I wanted the book to be purchased by libraries, so I sent 50 inspection copies to libraries. Because libraries won't buy books that haven't been reviewed by the big guys (Library Journal, Booklist, Kirkus, Publishers Weekly) I also purchased indie reviews from Publishers Weekly and Kirkus: both gave the book starred reviews in September. Let me

repeat that, because I don't want you to miss it: I *purchased* indie reviews from Publishers Weekly (about \$200) and Kirkus (\$400): both gave the book starred reviews. Kirkus also named the book to its Best Indie Fiction of 2013 and its Best LGBT 2013 list. (I'll answer questions about that, if you want.)

I joined the Independent Book Publishers Association and purchased several promotional packages: print mailings and emailings to libraries and space for the book on physical displays at book fairs. I also bought a library mailing list and mailed postcards. I worked with a blog tour agent to set up a tour, and did three Goodreads giveaways. Several months later, I did a BookBub promotion, and then did another one just last month. All this do-it-yourself promotion work resulted in enough sales to recover my investment by the end of the first quarter of the book's life.

Then some really good things happened. In March 2014, Thorndike Publishing bought the large-print rights—these are mostly for library distribution, although copies are also sold online. In July, Lake Union Publishing (an Amazon imprint) bought the reprint and audio rights. We've gone through copyedit and into cover production on that edition—no decision yet about the audio. I think they'll probably wait until they see how the sales go. The book will be published by Lake Union in March.

So that's the story. It's been a very long road, and I've learned an enormous amount about the publishing industry and about Laura and Rose and the Great Depression. I hope some of what I've learned has been helpful to you, as well.