

My Brother, Grant Wood, by Nan Wood Graham, with John Zug and Julie Jensen McDonald. Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993. xvi, 200 pages. Illustrations, chronology, index. \$16.95 paper.

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Grant Wood would have loved this book, as much for its physical appearance as for the affectionate and richly anecdotal content. The design is a small masterpiece of Woodiana, full of vignettes derived from his own illustrations and skillfully cropped photographs of his personal possessions. The paper is the color of top cream, skimmed from the milk in the cold of winter and rubbed with a mother's finger on little chapped lips. The reproductions of his best-known paintings are tinted with a golden glow that suggests a coat of old varnish and warm memories. And the cover superimposes *American Gothic*—his best-known painting and an abiding icon of American art—on a faded panorama of the Iowa landscape from which the picture now seems to have grown like an ear of yellow corn or an amber field of grain.

The book looks like a slice of Grant Wood's life in Cedar Rapids in the 1920s, when he was a school teacher *cum* decorator, an ingenious craftsman, and an artistic jack-of-all-trades who built a succession of Arts and Crafts-style cottages and studios for himself, his widowed mother, and his little sister, Nan. Warmed and faded now in the twilight of her memories, the typical Wood dwelling was decorated, adorned, and cunningly pieced together in the very style of the State Historical Society of Iowa's handsome little volume.

Outside Iowa, Grant Wood was famous for a series of depression-era paintings that hinted at satire, although the precise targets of his wit were hard for the critics to agree upon. In *American Gothic* of 1930, Nan Wood and the family dentist posed as a grim-faced farmer and his daughter guarding the front porch of a board-and-batten house in Eldon, Iowa, with a carpenter's-Gothic window upstairs, over the parlor. In *Daughters of Revolution* (1932), three anxious old crones served tea on grandma's best Blue Willow ware in front of a sepia-tinted illustration of Washington crossing the Delaware. Was Wood making fun of the narrow, God-fearing lives of Iowa farmers? Of the narrow patriotism of the DAR? Nobody was quite sure. But the style—Wood's low-key, deadpan realism, deployed in an era that prized abstraction and fancy foreign "isms" instead—meant that anybody could talk about Wood's images and recognize, perhaps, her own formidable aunt, or the storekeeper down the block who hated little boys.

Nan Wood (who died in 1990) was no art critic. But her stories about her famous brother are just as textural as his paintings. If Wood achieved a kind of universal appeal on the basis of dead-on renditions of things specific to Anamosa, Stone City, Cedar Rapids, Ames, and Iowa City, Iowa, in the 1930s, Nan Wood shows us what those particulars were and how much her brother loved them. Rickrack on aprons. Cameo brooches. A picture of a formidable aunt in the family album. Snake plants in the parlor window. The vegetables he and his mother grew to make ends meet when the family was living in desperate poverty after the death of his father. The faces of the kindly friends who helped. *My Brother, Grant Wood* paints a picture of Iowa in the years between the world wars every bit as sharp as that drawn in his images of the same place.

Nan Wood Graham tells of her brother coming home in triumph from the 1929 Iowa State Fair having won the portrait prize in the art show. But she does not dwell on the painting or the prize. Instead, she remembers the chameleon he bought there, with a little collar and chain, so it could be worn on the lapel of a coat. And the "orange shower" his pupils mounted for Mr. Wood when he had to have his appendix removed. And the "Living Picture" shows once popular in the Midwest, in which folks dressed up like figures in famous paintings and struck the appropriate poses. She remembers an era when small towns each had a bohemia composed of a little theater group, an art club, and a studio or two furnished with exotic artifacts—scraps of statuary, Turkish hangings—shipped home from hard-won summers in Europe. What Sinclair Lewis satirizes and savages in *Main Street* (1920), Nan Wood describes with a love and understanding that, in retrospect, seem equally crucial to the meaning of Grant Wood's paintings.

After Grant Wood's untimely death in 1942, Nan Wood became a ferocious guardian of the flame. In a brief foreword to the book, art historian Wanda Corn, one of his several scholarly biographers, recalls her relief when she learned that Nan both enjoyed and collected parodies of *American Gothic*. But she never really trusted the art historians who came to call. They didn't have truth on their side. They hadn't known Grant and they hadn't been there when the pictures were painted. What could they possibly know that would make a difference? *My Brother, Grant Wood* supplies the facts and the emotions, the customs, the artifacts, the sounds, and the personalities to set the record straight. Nan Wood Graham adds the love that history seldom feels.

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