

# Margaret Anne O'Connor

I met Maggie O'Connor only once, at the 2011 Willa Cather Seminar in Northampton, Massachusetts. It was my first seminar, and immersion in the intense, close-knit community of Cather lovers was thrilling and a little overwhelming. Maggie and I sat together on a bus ride to an excursion and then decided to get a cup of coffee together afterwards. Maggie suddenly said that she was tired and casually suggested we ask a nearby police officer for a ride to the coffee shop. Horrified, I lagged behind her, thinking: "You can't do that." Two minutes later, I found myself in the back of a police cruiser with a delighted Maggie. As with any text, there are multiple ways this story can be read; to me it exemplifies Maggie's charm and spontaneity as well as her unwillingness to be subordinate to arbitrary authority or convention.

Born in 1944, Margaret Anne O'Connor died on November 4, 2021, in California, her long-time retirement home.

Maggie's academic accomplishments were numerous. She completed her doctorate at the University of California, Davis and was a professor at the University of North Carolina from 1971 to 2002, initially one of only two women in the UNC English Department to occupy a tenure line. Not content with her own success, Maggie spent her career advocating for other women. She worked to increase the number of female faculty members and their representation both at UNC and in various professional organizations devoted to the study of literature. Ever mindful of her students, she also pushed to diversify the curriculum, developing UNC's first class on women in literature (which she taught at night in a residence hall) and playing a pivotal role in the founding of UNC's women's studies program in 1980. The unquestioned presence of female authors such as Willa Cather in today's college courses owes a great deal to Maggie and her generation of female academics. Maggie's professional accomplishments are almost too numerous to list: her monumental *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, published in 2001 by Cambridge University Press, is her most tangible. Its continued usefulness in the age of the internet reflects the many hours Maggie spent tracking down reviews in remote libraries and collections. Functioning as more than simply a collection of reviews of Cather's work (which would be significant enough), *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* uncovers the different literary ecosystems in which Cather's books circulated and the diverse communities that responded to her work.



Maggie O'Connor and Barney. Photograph courtesy of Ryan O'Connor.

When Maggie and I met, I had just finished my Ph.D. at UNC. She spoke eagerly and fondly of her Chapel Hill colleagues, drawing me into connection with her through them and through her into the Cather world. James Woodress, who had been her dissertation director, her peer in the study of American literature, and ultimately her neighbor in retirement, had died a short time before. Maggie's grief for him was still evident. I never met Jim, although I, along with many other scholars, have been the beneficiary of his generosity through the Woodress Visiting Fellowship (now the Nebraska Cather Collaborative Research Grants for Willa Cather Scholarship). Guy Reynolds recalls visiting Maggie and Jim at Mt. San Antonio Gardens, their Pomona, California, retirement community in 2010. Guy was intrigued by all the cultural activities on offer and the numerous retired academics buzzing around. Maggie, always eager to stretch the boundaries of her community, advised him to put his name on the waiting list; he was forty-five at the time.

Connie Eble, Maggie's colleague at UNC and great friend, remarked in a recent email, "Maggie made personal connections her highest priority. Friendships that began at an academic conference or for professional reasons became lifelong." Such a tribute strikes me as particularly appropriate for someone who studied Willa Cather, a writer whose own friendships, like Maggie's, spanned decades and continents, and whose books return again and again to our obligations to one another. I am inevitably reminded of Ántonia's words in *My Ántonia*, "Ain't it wonderful, Jim, how much people can mean to each other?"

Sarah Clere

