

COLUMNS

Measuring out life: The Beautiful Snow

If you haven't read this book yet, you should.

Written By: Leah Ward | 10:30 pm, Mar. 16, 2021



How long has it been since you last picked up the *Little House* books? Probably about 20 years for me, but I recently re-read one of them. Living roughly halfway between Walnut Grove and De Smet, I have loved thinking about life for the last two years in terms of what Laura Ingalls Wilder observed during her time on the plains.

You may recall a [story I wrote last year](#) about a new book by a southern Minnesota writer, Cindy Wilson. Her book, *The Beautiful Snow*, is meant to parallel Wilder's *The Long Winter*, which takes place during the Hard Winter of 1880-1881. Wilson researched what life was like according to historical records and newspaper articles. She found the Tracy railroad cut, where an ice blockade stopped supplies from being delivered west — a central plot point of the novel.

Recently, my book club was considering what to read next, and I ran an idea by them: first *The Long Winter*, to refresh our memories of the story, then *The Beautiful Snow*. They were game, so we've now read both books. Wilson's historical context for Wilder was even more fascinating than I anticipated!

In the introduction to the book, Wilson explains that the title *The Beautiful Snow* comes from a phrase she found over and over again in regional newspaper articles from the time.

"Used both as a descriptor and as a derisive, sarcastic term, the phrase lends itself to visions of the typesetter gritting his teeth as he placed each. Individual. Letter. Into. Place. to relay the phrase," Wilson writes.

As a longtime Minnesotan, I can relate. Remember the Great Halloween Snowstorm of 1991? I don't; I wasn't born yet, but I've heard about it so much that it feels like I remember. It seems like the Hard Winter filled a similar role in the zeitgeist of the late 19th century.

The Beautiful Snow is set up as a month-by-month look at that horrible, long, cold, snowy winter, providing context for Wilder's fictional-though-autobiographical account. Understanding the background of the railroad system, and how frontier settlers had come to rely on trains for essential supplies, makes it that much more emotional to read about the Ingalls family's stress as they learn

that the train can't make it to De Smet. Their food insecurity isn't just a dramatic story in a children's book; the settlers had real concern that they might not survive.

Wilson's research is careful and thorough, but still easy to read. She includes details that make me further appreciate Wilder's writing. I walked away from the book filled with wonder, curiosity and appreciation for my forebears.

If you haven't yet picked up a copy of *The Beautiful Snow*, I encourage you to check it out. When you're done, shoot me an email — I'd love to hear your thoughts. Then, get ready, Wilder aficionados, because Wilson is planning another book about another *Little House* novel! I can't wait.