

## Passage 2

*An enduring classic, My Antonia by Willa Cather is the unforgettable story of an immigrant woman's life on the hardscrabble Nebraska plains.*

On the afternoon of that same Sunday I took my first long ride on my pony, under Otto's direction. After that Dude and I went twice a week to the post office, six miles east of us, and I saved the men a good deal of time by riding on errands to our neighbors. When we had to borrow anything, or to send about word that there would be preaching at the sod schoolhouse, I was always the messenger. Formerly Fuchs attended to such things after working hours.

All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn. The new country lay open before me: there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands, trusting the pony to get me home again. Sometimes I followed the sunflower-bordered roads. Fuchs told me that the sunflowers were introduced into that country by the Mormons; that at the time of the persecution, when they left Missouri and struck out into the wilderness to find a place where they could worship God in their own way, the members of the first exploring party, crossing the plains to Utah, scattered sunflower seed as they went. The next summer, when the long trains of wagons came through with all the women and children, they had the sunflower trail to follow. I believe that botanists do not confirm Fuchs's story, but insist that the sunflower was native to those plains. Nevertheless, that leg-

end has stuck in my mind, and sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom.

I used to love to drift along the pale-yellow cornfields, looking for the damp spots one sometimes found at their edges, where the smartweed soon turned a rich copper color and the narrow brown leaves hung curled like cocoons about the swollen joints of the stem. Sometimes I went south to visit our German neighbors and to admire their catalpa grove, or to see the big elm tree that grew up out of a deep crack in the earth and had a hawk's nest in its branches. Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious.

Sometimes I rode north to the big prairie-dog town to watch the brown earth owls fly home in the late afternoon and go down to their nests underground with the dogs. Antonia Shimerda liked to go with me, and we used to wonder a great deal about these birds of subterranean habit. We had to be on our guard there, for rattlesnakes were always lurking about. They came to pick up an easy living among the dogs and owls, which were quite defenseless against them; took possession of their comfortable houses and ate the eggs and puppies. We felt sorry for the owls. It was always mournful to see them come flying home at sunset and disappear under the earth. But, after all, we felt, winged things who would live like that must be rather degraded creatures. The dog-town was a long way from any pond or creek. Otto Fuchs said he had seen populous dog-towns in the desert where there was no surface water for fifty miles; he insisted that some of the holes must go down to water—nearly two hundred feet, hereabouts. Antonia said she didn't believe it; that the dogs probably lapped up the dew in the early morning, like the rabbits.

Antonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known. Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me. Mrs. Shimerda grumbled, but realized it was important that one member of the family should learn English. When the lesson was over, we used to go up to the watermelon patch behind the garden. I split the melons with an old corn-knife and we lifted out the hearts and ate them with the juice trickling through our fingers. The white Christmas melons we did not touch, but we watched them with curiosity. They were to be picked late, when the hard frosts had set in, and put away for winter use. After weeks on the ocean, the Shimerdas were famished for fruit.

### Questions

Question 1: The narrator characterizes his worth to the community as a

- A. botanist
- B. teacher
- C. messenger
- D. Mormon

Question 2: Who is Dude?

- A. a local cowhand
- B. a recent immigrant
- C. the narrator's horse
- D. the previous messenger

Question 3: The narrator explains the legend of the sunflower trail, but also tells the reader that botanists say that sunflowers are native to the area. The conclusion the narrator draws is that

- A. we should put our faith in science
- B. in spite of science, we can enjoy the romantic image of the legend
- C. the Mormons took another route
- D. legends are just for children

Question 4: For the narrator, the roads to freedom were

- A. so precious
- B. just a dream
- C. through yellow cornfields
- D. sunflower-bordered

Question 5: The pioneers in this passage had a special feeling about trees: they took an intense interest in them, almost as if they were persons. Why?

- A. They were so rare.
- B. They provided important resources such as food and timber.
- C. There was so little else to look at.
- D. There weren't enough people around to care about.

Question 6: Which two adjectives best describe the narrator?

- A. observant/carefree
- B. curious/responsible
- C. adventurous/demure
- D. frivolous/mournful

Question 7: Prairie dogs and earth owls had a common enemy:

- A. each other
- B. human predators

- C. coyotes
- D. rattlesnakes

**Question 8:** According to the narrator, Mrs. Shimerda wanted Antonia to have reading lessons because

- A. she wanted Antonia to be more like the narrator
- B. curiosity was important to her
- C. education was necessary to succeed in America
- D. someone in the family should learn English

**Question 9:** Surviving in the new world of America required all of the following from immigrant families except:

- A. making friends with their neighbors
- B. setting food aside to save for the long winter
- C. learning to speak English
- D. gaining citizenship status as quickly as possible

**Question 10:** All of the following are true about Antonia except:

- A. she believed Otto about the populous dog-towns
- B. she had opinions about everything
- C. she was famished for fruit
- D. she liked to wonder about brown earth owls

### Answers

1. C 2. C 3. B 4. D 5. A 6. B 7. D 8. D 9. D 10. A

### Commentary

In Question 1, C is correct. The other choices are mentioned in the story but do not apply to the narrator. A close reading of the passage will tell you that Dude, in Question 2, must be the narrator's horse because he is the means of his traveling six miles twice a week

to the post office. Question 3 requires you to see that the narrator puts value in the legend even though he realizes it is more a fable than truth. First he tells the reader about the legend, then he brings up what science has to say, and finally, he returns to the enduring value of the legend.

The correct answer for Question 4 is found in the last sentence of the second paragraph—choice D. The comment that trees are remarkably rare on the high plains gives you the answer for Question 5. The key to Question 6 is finding a pair of adjectives that are both true. Only choice B meets this standard. For Question 7, the phrase “[rattlesnakes] pick up an easy living among the dogs and owls” in the passage tells you that the rattlesnakes prey on both dogs and owls. All of the choices in Question 8 may be true, but only D is stated explicitly in the text. In Question 9, use the process of elimination to find the right answer. All answers, except for D (gaining citizenship), are explicitly mentioned in the text. For Question 10, even though choice C is constructed differently than the other choices, it is not correct. The correct choice is A. Antonia has her own theory about the dog-towns.