

Editor's Introduction: Resuscitating Zona Gale

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Zona Gale was born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1874 and died in Chicago in 1938. Since then, we haven't heard much about this writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Miss Lulu Bett* in 1921.

Perhaps her stories are a little too sentimental. *Friendship Village* (1908), *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909), *Neighborhood Stories* (1914), and other collections of short fiction really are penetrating in their perception and pictures of small-town life, and some newspaper critics referred to *Friendship Village* as a utopia. These same critics also declared Gale "one of the foremost writers of our time" alongside the literati of the starkest realism including Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Horatio Alger, Sinclair Lewis, and Edith Wharton.

To be sure, Gale didn't dwell on the unpleasant side of human nature. One of my favorite characters in *Friendship Village* is the chatty spinster Calliope Marsh, ungrammatically pouring forth the milk of human kindness toward her neighbors.

Then social causes increasingly crept into her fiction, and she changed her views about idyllic village life, possibly stemming from her political views. As a political activist and supporter of the La Follette family, Gale joined the National Women's Party, lobbied for the Wisconsin Equal Rights Law, and became a member of the executive committee of the Lucy Stone League. In 1923, she was appointed to the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, where she served until her death from pneumonia.

This new strain of writing includes her greatest successes, *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) and *Faint Perfume* (1923), both satirical depictions of oppressive domesticity and female independence. It also produced the unpublished short story "The Reception Surprise," which argues for equal rights for African Americans.

I'm a fan of Miss Lulu, who claims power and her rightful position in her home and in society at large. She understands that it's her work that keeps the household running and that her family values her only as a servant. However, through her brief encounter with Ninian, Lulu begins to see that she possesses powers of her own, and she's able to express herself and direct her own future rather than succumb to the will of those around her.

After she wrote this novel and adapted it for the stage, there was no returning to *Friendship Village*. *Faint Perfume*, another best-selling novel, indicts medical treatments designed to heal intellectual, overly stimulated women, as does Charlotte Perkins Gilman's canonical "The Yellow Wallpaper." Leda, an unmarried New York author stricken with neuritis, submits to her physician's order to cease writing for one year and recover in her father's house in the Midwest. Unlike Gilman, who liberates her heroine, Gale allows her protagonist to silently lose her mind, art, and identity.

Why should we invite Gale into our Wisconsin classrooms? All of these texts are open access and free at websites such as [Hathi Trust Digital Library](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#), and they provide a great deal of insight into the rural communities where many of us teach. Is *Friendship Village* a century ago similar to contemporary Ingram in Rusk County, Lime Ridge in Sauk County, or another of the 400 villages around the state? Can you find current examples of Leda and Lulu in a state that only this month voted along party lines to advance the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution? How do small-town settings serve as a means of critiquing social institutions and ideas beyond the confines of the small town?

In American fiction, the small town often serves as a crucible for democracy, and just as often doesn't. Experiment with these stories and send your lesson plans and students' reactions to an upcoming issue of *Wisconsin English Journal*.