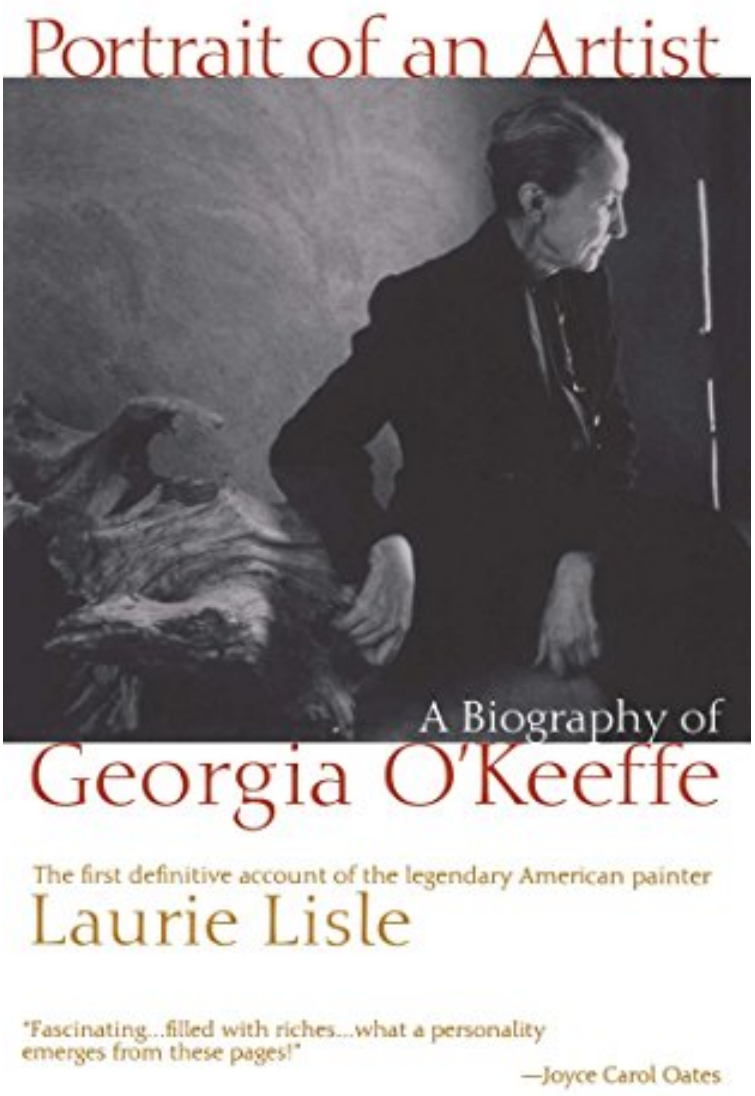
[Mobile library] File size: 77.Mb

Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe (English Edition)



Download Read Online

Par Laurie Lisle
*ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF*

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #718789 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-11-16Sorti le: 2010-11-16Format: Ebook Kindle

[Mobile library] Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe (English Edition)

Par Laurie Lisle : Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGeorgia O'Keeffe, one of the most original painters America has ever produced, left behind a remarkable legacy when she died at the age of ninety-eight. Her vivid visual vocabulary -- sensuous flowers, bleached bones against red sky and earth -- had a stunning, profound, and lasting influence on American art in this century.O'Keeffe's personal mystique is as intriguing and enduring as her bold, brilliant canvases. Here is the first full account of her exceptional life -- from her girlhood and early days as a

controversial art teacher...to her discovery by the pioneering photographer of the New York avant-garde, Alfred Stieglitz...to her seclusion in the New Mexico desert, where she lived until her death.And here is the story of a great romance -- between the extraordinary painter and her much older mentor, lover, and husband, Alfred Stieglitz.Renowned for her fierce independence, iron determination, and unique artistic vision, Georgia O'Keeffe is a twentieth-century legend. Her dazzling career spans virtually the entire history modern art in America.ExtraitChapter One: Sun PrairieLate in the autumn of 1887, the Sun Prairie Countryman, a rural Wisconsin newspaper, briefly noted that a baby girl had arrived two days before on Tuesday, November 15, in the farmhouse of Ida and Francis O'Keeffe. The birth, assisted by a country doctor in the O'Keeffe home, was the second for the young couple. The twenty-three-year-old Ida named her infant Georgia Totto for her patrician Hungarian grandfather, George Totto. Georgia, it appeared, would have Ida's dark hair, and her round face was pure Irish, like her father's. The variegated pigment of her eyes suggested the mingled bloodlines of brown-eyed maternal forebears and blue-eyed paternal ones.Georgia was born into a rapidly industrializing world. The country's longest suspension bridge, linking Brooklyn to Manhattan, had recently opened, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris was still under construction, due to be completed in two years. The American government in Washington, under the reformist leadership of President Grover Cleveland, was attempting to exert some control over capitalist monopolies and to bring order to the grim, oppressive factories where immigrant laborers often erupted into violence and strikes. But in the western part of the country, the last great Indian war was still to be fought against federal troops.Little of this turmoil affected the pastoral life on the Sun Prairie farm, however. It remained like farm life everywhere, suspended in a timeless ritual governed by the rhythms of nature. The newborn baby was kept indoors during the long, dark, icy northern winter. When the snow finally melted, the sunlight became warm, and the prairie was touched by the bright green of spring, Georgia was carried outside for the first time. She was placed on a handmade patchwork quilt spread on the new grass and propped up by pillows. Those very first moments of seeing in the brilliant sunlight became indelibly etched in her memory: She precisely remembered the quilt's patterns of flowers on black and tiny red stars as well as the startling blond looks of her mother's friend.Yet another perception during those minutes in the pool of yellow sunshine was not so pleasant. Georgia, less than a year old, was acutely aware that two other children playing on the patterned quilt were getting all the admiration. One of them was her older brother, Francis Jr., two years old, the firstborn child with dark Totto eyes, who was adorable in his mama's eyes. When he was born, weighing a plump ten and a half pounds, it had been heralded as a grand event by the Countryman. As Georgia crawled around the cotton quilt, she felt a sharp sting of neglect. "Why doesn't anyone think I'm beautiful?" she recalled wondering many years later. She squirmed off the quilt, she remembered, and was impatiently thrust back onto it.Georgia's was a uniquely American heritage -- three of her grandparents were immigrants, and the fourth was descended from one of the earliest colonists in the New World. Her O'Keeffe grandparents had settled in Sun Prairie first during the initial large wave of immigration to America. Pierce O'Keeffe and his wife, Catherine Mary, and other family members left for the American frontier when their family wool business in Ireland faltered. They arrived in Milwaukee through the chain of Great Lakes, then traveled directly west by oxcart for about eighty miles inland to the young settlement of Sun Prairie in the southern part of the state. In July 1848 Pierce O'Keeffe bought his first acres along the Koshkonong Creek from the federal government for less than a dollar an acre. As he turned Virgin forest into rolling farmland, his wife, Kate, gave birth to four sons: Boniface, Peter, Francis, and Bernard.The O'Keeffes began to homestead just two months after Wisconsin ceased being a territory and entered the union as a state. Meanwhile, the last of the Winnebago Indians were being driven westward as the arriving farmers cut down the thick forests, plowed the hunting trails under, and decimated the deer. More and more land was being laid out in neatly numbered lots, and roads increasingly followed the straight lines of the surveyor's measure. At the same time, railroads were inching into the newly settled regions to transport the wheat harvests and the iron ore to other parts of the country. About ten years after the O'Keeffes had settled in Sun Prairie in 1848, George Victor Totto and his wife bought land next to the O'Keeffe farm. Whereas the Irish family had emigrated to Wisconsin because of a business failure in the old country, George Totto had fled to America because of his belief in liberty. A count from Budapest, he had fought in a doomed Hungarian uprising against Austrian rule as an aide-de-camp to the revolutionary hero Lajos Kossuth. Family legend has it that Totto was ransomed from jail with the family jewels. In any case, he escaped to America and wound up in Sauk City, Wisconsin, later known as Prairie de Sac, where another Hungarian political refugee of a flamboyant stripe had bought land.Totto's wife, Isabel, prided herself on her heritage as well. One of her granddaughters later

uncovered many European coats of arms designed for both grandparents' families. Her roots, as deep as any in America, could be traced to a Dutchman who arrived in New York in 1637. Two hundred years later, one of his descendants, Charles Wyckoff , fathered Isabel and her younger sister Jane. Wyckoff, a hotelkeeper in the East, apparently had business troubles, and, after his wife died, he moved with his teen-age daughters and a new wife to Sauk City to try his luck at running a hotel on the frontier. Wyckoff hadn't been in Wisconsin long when a cholera epidemic broke out. Although he made plans to move his family out, a day before their departure he came down with the disease and died shortly afterwards.It was in Sauk City that the exiled George Totto and the orphaned Isabel Wyckoff met and fell in love. In the twenty-five-year-old Isabel's eyes, the pedigreed Hungarian patriot ten years her senior was a cut above the other marriage prospects on the frontier. Formal photographs show that Totto was a thin-lipped, rather homely man with a light brown beard and that Isabel with her long, raw-boned face, could never have been called pretty. The poise and good breeding of the tall, dark-haired girl with the eastern education appealed to the European, and in May 1855 the two were married.A year after the wedding their first child, Alletta, was born. Her birth was followed in rapid succession by those of Josephine, Charles, Ida, Leonore, and George. Meanwhile, the Tottos had moved to Sun Prairie, where the 1870 census revealed that their farm was larger and more abundant than the neighboring O'Keeffe property. But farming in the harsh midwestern climate proved too difficult for George and Isabel. In the 1870s Totto gave up and returned to Hungary, supposedly to claim his share of the family fortune. Totto may have visited his family in Wisconsin again, but he eventually died in his homeland, still worshiped, in absentia, by his daughters. Left to fend for themselves, Isabel and her six sons and daughters moved to nearby Madison in the early 1880s. The town had been a high-brow university town for more than forty years, and she must have imagined that it held better prospects for her children.Georgia's father, Francis Calixtus O'Keeffe, was around thirty when he began to drive his mother's buggy the twelve miles to Madison to court the fourth Totto child, Ida Ten Eyck, a poised, brown-eyed teenager. Frank had known Ida all his life as the little girl on the neighboring farm. Now Ida had grown tall like her mother and developed a more handsome version of her mother's dark looks. Frank was a wiry, good-natured farmer with fair Irish skin and curly hair. His schooling had stopped in adolescence when his father died and he had to help his mother and brothers run the farm. Then in October 1883, the brother closest in age, Peter, died of tuberculosis. It is likely that his brothers death startled Frank into the realization that his life was rapidly passing, because about this time he proposed to Ida.Ida's family favored the match, partly because Frank wanted to buy the Totto pastures in Sun Prairie. But Ida's two older sisters weren't married, and she had little inclination to wed and return to her childhood home of Sun Prairie, a simple farm community of a few hundred people without even a library. Ida was a serious girl who kept a diary, loved books, and dreamed of becoming a doctor. It was also commonplace at the time to avoid marriage to someone with tuberculosis in the family in the mistaken belief that the highly infectious disease was hereditary. Ida, however, was young, obedient, and fond of Frank, so she reluctantly accepted his proposal. A few weeks after she turned twenty, they were married. The Sun Prairie newspaper carried the announcement:Wedded -- At the residence of the bride's mother, in the city of Madison, on Tuesday, Feb. 19, 1884, by the Rev. J. B. Pratt, Mr. Francis O'Keeffe of Sun Prairie to Miss Ida Totto, of Madison. The contracting parties in the nuptial affair above chronicled are well and favorably known hereabouts, and the best wishes of the community are extended to Frank and his charming bride.The Tottos considered themselves to be a notch above the O'Keeffes because of their lineage and cultivation, and the wedding was entirely a Totto affair. Although Frank was a Roman Catholic, the Tottos' Episcopal clergyman officiated. And even though either of Frank's two brothers could have signed the marriage certificate, an older brother and sister of Ida's were the witnesses. Throughout their marriage Frank would appear to be in Ida's shadow, even though he was eleven years older than she. People often echoed Ida's early doubts and wondered why a woman who carried herself like an aristocrat had married a humble Irishman.After the wedding, Ida had no more time to pen her thoughts in her diary. Within six months she was pregnant, and for the next eight years she was either pregnant or nursing an infant. Interestingly, only the births of the first two, Francis and Georgia, were entered into the public record. A few weeks before Georgia's second birthday a sister was born, named Ida Ten Eyck for their mother. Sixteen months later another sister arrived: Anita Natalie, with a tiny round face and large dark eyes. And when Anita was only sixteen months old a brother, Alexius Wyckoff, was born.Ida, as a mother, above all enjoyed spending evenings and Sunday afternoons reading to her little children. In her enthusiasm for books, Mama seemed to make them come alive, Georgia recalled many afterwards, and she adored listening to the warm, glowing tones of her mothers beautiful, well-bred

voice. Since the stories were picked for the benefit of her eldest, Francis, the first ones that Georgia heard were boys' books such as James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales about pioneer days and cowboy-and-Indian adventures in the state of Texas and the New Mexico territory.Reading aloud was one of the ways that Ida showed her interest in the mental development of her offspring -- the daughters as well as the sons. Education for women was a family tradition: Her own mother had been educated in the East, her sisters had become schoolteachers, and she had joined a group of Sun Prairie women with intellectual and charitable interests who gave themselves the lofty name of The King's Daughters. Furthermore, Ida took great interest in the curriculum of the nearby schoolhouse, and the schoolteacher usually boarded with the O'Keeffes. Ida quietly had high expectations for her daughters. "Our mother had a very good opinion of herself, and she wanted all of us to be the same way," Georgia told a younger sister later. When in time mama tried to provide the girls with private schools and special lessons, she was motivated, in part, by her own disappointment at having ended her schooling too soon as well as by her desire that her daughters be able to care for themselves. Since all of Ida's daughters but one became professional women, her influence on them is evident. What's more, since they also had an extremely low birthrate -- only producing two children among the five of them -- it's likely that they also sensed her dissatisfaction with domesticity.In fact, Ida seemed to spend more time cultivating her children's minds than cuddling them in an affectionate, maternal way. That kind of mothering apparently was taken over by others in the large household, particularly by Ida's aunt, Jane Varney. Aunt Jenny, as she was known, had been a teen-aged bride when she went to California during the Gold Rush in a covered wagon. But she soon was widowed and returned to Wisconsin on a sailing ship via Cape Horn to help care for the children of her sister Isabel. When her niece, Ida, gave birth to her first child, Aunt Jenny moved to the O'Keeffe household and oversaw it with a stern eye for the rest of her life. The presence of the small, alert woman (some said a busybody) in the family freed Ida to continue to pursue her quest for self-education, and gave her the chance to visit her mother and friends in Madison frequently and even to go to the opera in Milwaukee on occasion.By the time Georgia was a four-and-a-half-year-old solemn brown-haired girl -- remembered by one of her teachers as a "little, dark-skinned, wide-eyed, spritelike child" -- she had four brothers and sisters to compete with in the struggle for the grown-ups' attention. She believed that her goodlooking older brother was her mother's favorite, and that her affectionate little sister, Ida, was the other family pet. Whether or not those perceptions were true, Georgia adapted her early behavior to them and remained convinced of them all her life. But because of the numbers of grandmothers, aunts, and uncles in the extended family, Georgia apparently got all the attention she needed, which was probably less than that required by the ordinary child in any case. "I was not a favorite child, but I didn't mind at all," she insisted many years later.Until the death of Grandmother Totto -- when Georgia, her eldest granddaughter, was six -- the girl used to visit the Totto household on the edge of Madison's Lake Monona, where her maiden aunts and bachelor uncles lived. Georgia probably knew best her Grandmother O'Keeffe, who lived on the adjoining farm until the age of eighty-five, when Georgia was almost ten. Both her grandmothers -- the deserted Grandmother Totto and the widowed Grandmother O'Keeffe -- were strong matriarchs who had kept their large families together after the loss of their men. In Sun Prairie Kate O'Keeffe was highly respected for her sharp intelligence and deeply loved for her sweet nature, according to her lengthy obituaries. The two women, along with Georgia's mother, were part of that tradition of capable frontier women: They sewed the family clothes, preserved the food, decorated the home, nursed the sick, taught the young, and, in general, nourished life in all its forms. In time, Georgia herself would be called the expression of these women's creative spirit.Born agile and alert with pretty hands, Georgia was a quiet child, who, one imagines, walked long before she talked while always intently observing everything around her. Her earliest years were spent stoically tagging along behind her brother, who was a year and a half older. Soon it was evident that she had advantages in her rivalry with him. He had weak eyes and her keen sight didn't miss a thing. She was also naturally athletic and before long she was outrunning and outclimbing him. Georgia thought about it carefully and came to the conclusion that she was better than her brother -- even if their mother preferred him.Not close to her brother and believing herself to too grown-up to play with her baby sisters, Georgia began to play apart from the other children at a very young age. A teacher who boarded with the O'Keeffes on school days and sometimes stayed over on weekends to help Aunt Jenny with the children when their mother visited Madison recalled that self-reliant Georgia required little care. "I had more to do with the younger children -- Ida, my favorite, and Anita, sweet and cute, and Alexius, never in sight." In time Georgia discovered that not being the focus of the adults' attention had its advantages. She learned that she could easily elude her great-aunt's discipline and stealthily

do the forbidden things that interested her while, at the same, time, appearing obedient.Later Georgia remembered being happy keeping to herself. Under the apple trees she invented an imaginary household with a park of clipped grass, trees of tall weeds, a shingle boat in a dishpan lake, and doll people for whom she stitched little clothes, as she vividly recalled in her book, Georgia O'Keeffe. The little girl directed her miniature-doll family to behave according to her childish rules and whims, creating a make-believe world within the confines of her actual one. It provided her with hours of fantasy as well as with the growth of a comfortable, centered place that would always be within her. This early behavior also set the pattern for relationships throughout her life. She often seemed to recoil instinctively from others and never needed anyone to entertain her. "I've never been bored," she once stated flatly when she was elderly.As the solitary hours nurtured her imagination, they also strengthened her natural inclination to have things her own way. She wanted to be distinct, only wearing white stockings, for instance, when her little sisters were not wearing theirs. "From the time I was a little girl, if my sisters wore their hair braided, I wouldn't wear mine braided," Georgia recalled. "If they wore ribbons, I wouldn't. I'd think they'd look better without it too."Although unadorned clothes or atypical friends embarrassed Georgia's sisters and brothers, she was merely kidded and her ways were tolerated. Mama and Papa pursued their separate interests and seemed to be unusually permissive about their children's behavior, as if they had no doubt about their underlying talent and motivation. For example, after Georgia's younger sister, Ida, ran away from school because she disliked the teacher, she was tutored at home. Although perhaps Georgia carried the family tendency to individuality the furthest, her brothers and sisters all became irrepressible individualists as well.It was a family in which the prevailing emotional climate appeared to be that of kindness and mildness. By virtue of being the oldest daughter, Georgia had a room of her own in the farmhouse's Victorian tower (built by her father) with large windows facing north and west. Jessie Flint, one of Georgia's playmates who spent many nights with her in the tower room, remembered that her friend was so content with her family life that she had no desire at all to visit Jessie in the village.When Georgia was grown, she recalled with pride that her father's land stretched over a great distance in the best farm country in Wisconsin. It was three and a half miles southeast of the village of Sun Prairie, so the mailman delivered the mail on horseback to the outlying farms. By the time Georgia was a toddler, her father owned four hundred and forty acres, according to an 1890 plat map, and, by the time she was teen-ager, he owned a great deal more. In order to provide for his rapidly growing household, he planted wide variety of crops, ran a dairy, and traded livestock. In fact, he traveled to the Dakotas to trade a herd horses for some "fat cattle" a few months after his first child was born, according to the Countryman. His neighbors had known him all his life and respected him as a fine farmer and dairyman as well as an affectionate family man who kept any wanderlust well in check.As Georgia became old enough to wander beyond the wide lawn around the white colonial-style O'Keeffe farmhouse, she began to discover the wonders of her father's farm. Georgia and the other children liked to play Handy Andy Over and other children's games among the milk cans and cream separators of the creamery. Its dank air, cooled by huge chunks of ice cut by creamery patrons from a nearby lake in winter, was a refuge from the midsummer heat. Georgia's father was also intrigued by the latest inventions, and he hired a man to mow his corn-fields with one of the newly invented harvesters the September that Georgia was eight.The rotation of the seasons, each with its dramatic changes, forced open all of the perceptive child's senses, and they absorbed the marvel of it all. She learned that metal stuck to her fingers in the bitter cold and that flower petals felt velvety soft. She tested the sweet spring grasses, listened to the high notes of the songbirds, and carefully observed the profusion of brilliantly colored wildflowers that appeared when the meadows thawed each year. She remembered the squares of dark, rich, moist earth where a plow had turned the soil, the patterns that were created when neat rows of green seedlings began to sprout, and the wide wheat fields that gilded the land in midsummer, the fall, the maples and oaks around the farmhouse flared red and orange, then the harvested fields darkened to autumn browns and the heavy horsedrawn hay wagons ambled toward the barn before the snow silently shrouded everything once again.The country days of her childhood, beginning with daybreak and ending when darkness fell, left Georgia with a profound feeling for the companionship of nature and an acute sensitivity to its moods. At mealtimes she used to hear serious talk by her father and his farmhands about the life-or-death power of the weather. She learned to accept even the brutality of the melodrama around her, which she came to understand as the underside of life force. Like other farm children, she found out about conception and birth at a young age, particularly since her mother went through childbirth at home five more times after Georgia was born. As a result, she grew up unashamed of her sensuality, even though she came of age in the Victorian era.Georgia gravitated to her laughing Papa, who kept his pockets full of

sweets and played Irish melodies on his fiddle. As a child, she thought him handsome, and she appropriated many of his tastes and habits, always saying that she liked him more than her aloof mother. She preferred his love of the land, for instance, to her mother's world of learning. Even after she had achieved great success among New York sophisticates, she continued to fancy that she was more like her farmer father than her cultured mother. When Georgia returned to Wisconsin in her fifties to receive an honorary degree, during the ceremony one of her old Sun Prairie schoolteachers fell into the academic procession beside her and remarked that she strongly resembled her father. "She seemed very pleased and smiled with both eyes and mouth," recalled the teacher, "and then she did look like him."Papa was a lapsed Catholic, but his bachelor brother, Uncle Bernard, used to pick up Georgia in his horse and buggy and take her to Mass at the stone sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Church in the village. She developed a childhood crush on the Catholic church, warming to parishioners -- many of them immigrants who continued to arrive in large numbers -- who crowded into the pews and spoke with the same soft brogue as her Grandmother O'Keeffe. She also liked the pools of colored light created by the high, narrow, arched stained-glass windows, the pictures of saints, pungent puffs of incense, the somber music, and the priests' colorful robes. Years later Georgia speculated that she might have overcome her intellectual reservations and converted to catholicism if the church had gotten a firmer grip on her in childhood. However, all but the youngest O'Keeffe children were baptized in their mother's Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, and most Sundays the children were taken to the simple Congregational services at the church nearest the farm.Two months before her fifth birthday, Georgia started school in the little one-room Town Hall school house, where her parents had gone, with two dozen so other children from the neighboring farms. Though she was a year younger than the other first graders, she was bright, curious, and clever -- and her education had already begun. Her imagination had been limbered by the children's classics her mother read aloud. Also, it is possible that one of Georgia's schoolteacher aunts or a schoolmistress who boarded with the O'Keeffes had already started her reading or writing. At any rate, her first day of school was undoubtedly not a fearful prospect. Only a quarter mile down her long driveway, past the high hedge across the dirt road, and surrounded by her father's land, the white clapboard schoolhouse was a familiar place. She would attend it for nine years, until she was thirteen.Her second-grade teacher recalled that Georgia excelled in the school yard, beating most of the boys in the running and jumping games. In the classroom, she was remembered as a well-behaved schoolgirl who dutifully did her lessons with ordinary ability. Since she later insisted that she had always hated school, preferring to run wild on the farm to sitting in a schoolroom, she must have been trying hard to please her mother through her obedience. Georgia later said that she was the type of self-disciplined child who liked to save the raisin in the cookie for the last because it was the best.When she was in the second grade, she was extremely inquisitive, and her incessant questions sometimes perplexed her young teacher. "When two big clouds bump together, is that thunder?" she once inquired. "If Lake Monona rose up, way up, and spilled all over, how many people would be drowned?" she asked another time. She was often dissatisfied by the inexperienced teacher's replies and indicated that she thought her teacher was a bit dumb. When an answer was particularly unsatisfactory, she used to reply evenly, "Well, I'll just ask Aunt Lola -- she knows everything."Her mother's younger sister, Leonore, a soft-spoken schoolteacher nicknamed Lola, used to spend holidays on the Sun Prairie farm. Georgia enjoyed Aunt Lola's attention, particularly at the age of seven, when her mother's attention was, once again, absorbed by the birth of a new baby, Catherine Blanche. At the end of August, in 1897, when Aunt Lola returned by train to her teaching job in Milwaukee, she took Georgia, who was nine and a half then, along for a visit. Perhaps the trip was an attempt to compensate for the fact that Papa was planning to take her older brother to Chicago in September. In any case, it was most likely Georgia's first journey outside of Madison. A few months later, when her beloved Grandmother O'Keeffe died of cancer, the loss was probably eased by the increasing closeness to youthful Aunt Lola. For Georgia it was a time of passage from her pretend dollhouse world to the actual world beyond the farm.As long as Georgia was preoccupied with her dollhouse, she did not give the grown-ups any evidence of an artistic gift. They doted on what they considered to be the real talent for drawing demonstrated by the more forthcoming little Ida. Without the adults' knowledge, however, Georgia had closely observed the illustrations in her cloth Mother Goose, in her mother's books, and in her schoolbooks. She had also struggled to draw a man with a black lead pencil on a brown paper bag and to copy pictures of exotic places out of her geography book.Both of her grandmothers dabbled in art and painted pictures of flowers and fruit in flat, naive folk styles. Two of Grandmother O'Keeffe's precisely done paintings hung in the farmhouse -- one was of two plums and the other of a moss rose. It was assumed that Georgia and her younger sisters

would also learn the ladylike art of painting. Since the country schoolteacher had little time to teach more than the three R's, the girls' mother arranged for private art lessons when Georgia was close to twelve. That winter the three oldest O'Keeffe girls spent evenings copying cubes, squares, and spheres from a standard drawing book.The next year Ida decided that her daughters were ready for painting lessons from an amateur painter, Sarah Mann, who lived in Sun Prairie. The elm-shaded village -- a cluster of tobacco warehouses, blacksmith shops, brick stores, and a high school -- was home to about nine hundred people. Georgia must have realized that art was something very special, for her and her sisters to be driven the seven miles round-trip in the buggy every Saturday afternoon. Mrs. Mann allowed them to choose illustrations to copy in watercolor, and Georgia picked subjects typical for a young girl, such as an Arabian horse and a red rose. She was being given training in realism at an age when a child quite naturally obeys rules. Shortly, however, she began to wrestle on her own with such puzzling problems as how to depict the brightness of sunshine and moonlight on the snow. Those initial experiences with colored pigment, in a medium with which she would eventually amaze the New York avant-garde, were exceedingly pleasant for her.At this time, Georgia's right-handed facility with a paintbrush and a pencil became immediately apparent, the family remembers. She progressed rapidly, executing at around the age of twelve a startlingly accurate sketch of Aunt Jenny. She cared strongly about how her pictures looked, disliking the interference when her teacher touched them up or when her mother elaborately framed them. Her mother was trying to be encouraging, perhaps imagining that her oldest daughter would, at the least, become an accomplished young lady or even an art teacher. It was unheard of for a young girl to take her training one step further and become an artist.Her mother did not know, however, that the desire to be an artist was exactly what Georgia was experiencing. One day when she was twelve, Georgia asked her friend Lena, the daughter of the O'Keeffes' washerwoman, what she wanted to be when she grew up. Lena replied that she didn't know. "Well, I'm going to be an artist," Georgia blurted out. She was surprised at the sureness of her own words, and she stood silently for a few moments, contemplating their barely perceived meaning.In retrospect, Georgia never precisely put her finger on what prompted her at such an untried age to declare her intent to be an artist. No great women artists were mentioned in her school books, she didn't know any professional artists, and she cared little for the few paintings she had seen. But, as she observed in her book, a small illustration of a comely Grecian maiden in one of her mother's books had inspired her to create something as lovely herself. "I think my feeling wasn't as articulate as that, but I believe that picture started something moving in me that kept on going and has had to do with the everlasting urge that makes me keep on painting." she wrote.What's more, she had lived with the annoying, but not painful, label of being the black sheep in the family, always being teased about her "crazy notions." As she matured, she discovered that no one minded at all when she gave her imagination free rein in colors and shapes. "I decided that the only thing I could do that was nobody else's business was to paint," she liked to say in adulthood. "I could do as I chose because no one would care."Painting had begun to fill the same need for privacy and freedom that her dollhouse once satisfied. When she told the grownups that she was going to be an artist when she grew up, they humored what they regarded as a childish ambition by inquiring what kind of artist. Since Georgia didn't know that there were different kinds of artists, the only answer she could come up with, recalling the dark, formal portraits of her greatgrandparents Wyckoff, was "a portrait painter." When one of the adults remarked that sometimes she would have to paint ugly faces, Georgia became extremely irritated and emphatically denied it. To be an artist, in her evolving concept of the term, meant that she could do as she wished.Even though the United States Senate had rejected an attempt to grant women the right to vote the year Georgia was born, she did not grow up feeling limited by her sex. From a young age she understood that it was both possible and a fine thing to become a professional woman as well as a mother. Higher education had been available to women in nearby Madison since two years before her birth, when the University of Wisconsin began to take female students. As she grew up, it is likely that her educated female relatives told her about the World Columbian Exposition, which opened in Chicago, only a day's journey away, the year she started school, and which the feminist Susan B. Anthony attended. The fair contained a Woman's Building that displayed women's handicrafts as well as a large feminist mural on the theme of the modern woman -- "plucking the fruit of Knowledge and Science" -- painted by the American artist Mary Cassatt.Also, self-assurance came to Georgia rather easily. One day she and her older brother quarreled about the gender of God. Georgia stated that God was a woman, and, when Francis scorned the idea, she went to their mother for support. When Mama's answer dissapointed her, Georgia stubbornly refused to change her mind. She calmly restated her conviction to both her brother and her mother that God was a woman. One can only suppose that it was the

existence of the strong matriarchs in her family and her growing confidence in herself that made her so insistent . At any rate, throughout her life she was unashamed of her womanhood and refused to accept the traditional role assigned to her gender.Meanwhile, the O'Keeffes had become increasingly visible and prominent in their small farm community. By the end of 1897, the weekly Sun Prairie Countryman began to round up the local news into a column fondly dubbed "O.K. Neighborhood." Its social notices were sprinkled with news of Mama's teas, her trips to Madison, and the many visitors to the O'Keeffe farmhouse. On Saturday nights, the O'Keeffe kids were likely to show up at the nearby Town Hall community center to hear the South Sun Prairie String Band or to see such entertainment as magic shows by local talent. Even at that time little Georgia O'Keeffe stood out: Once the editor published the news that she was sick and, another time, announced that she had celebrated her ninth birthday.As Georgia reached adolescence, however, the size of her extended family sharply declined. After Grandmother Totto's death, most of the Totto aunts and uncles scattered. Then after Grandmother O'Keeffe's death in October 1897, tuberculosis began to drain the life from Papa's only surviving brother, Bernard, who was still a bachelor. (His oldest brother, Boniface, had succumbed to the disease the year after Georgia's birth.) As the months passed, Bernard became weaker, until finally he moved into his brother's farmhouse, where his sister-in-law, Ida, was able to nurse him. By summer his condition had become so critical that he deeded the land he had inherited from his mother to Frank and Ida "for one dollar and love and affection bestowed." He only had the strength to scribble a small "X" on the papers, and a month later he died.Tuberculosis had stalked the four O'Keeffe brothers for thirteen years and had finally killed three of them. The winter after Bernard's death, which was more bitterly cold than usual, Frank became obsessed with the belief that consumption would strike him down as well. In February 1899, five days after his wife gave birth to another child, Claudia Ruth, the temperature dropped to thirty-four degrees below zero, and high winds made the cold far worse. Without any snow cover, the frost had gone four and half feet deep, and the well water and food stored in the cellars were freezing.Frank's dreams of escaping the tyranny of farming and the merciless weather were revived by the brutal winter. There was also an element of necessity to such dreams. A story has been told that the O'Keeffes were prohibited from operating their dairy because of the danger of contaminating the milk with tuberculosis. It was also at this time that American farmers were caught in a pinch between declining farm prices and rising machinery costs. Agrarian parties had formed to press the government in Washington to ease the farmers' plight, but when their candidate lost a national election in 1896, their defeat was signaled.Escape was now a possibility because, after Bernard's death, the O'Keeffes had become so land rich that they leased part of the farm to another farmer. Much of their acreage, bought by Pierce O'Keeffe fifty years before for a few cents an acre, was now fine farmland worth up to seventy-five dollars an acre. It had been augmented by the hundreds of Totto acres that Frank had bought from his mother-in-law six years after his marriage, so that the farm stretched several miles in one direction and was said to be as large as six hundred acres.At this time there was a man in Madison -- Chandler Chapman -- who had a business selling Virginia land to midwesterners. It's probable that the O'Keeffes saw a booklet published by businessmen in Williamsburg, Virginia, who were attempting to attract commerce to their historic but sleepy town. The booklet boasted that winters in the old colonial capital were mild and that the climate was healthy. "Come, investigate, see for yourselves, be convinced," it urged. "It is the garden spot of Virginia."Ida had always been restless on the farm, so she was interested in the idea of a move. In her eyes, lovely Williamsburg was a cultured college community, the home of the long-established College of William and Mary. By then Ida was close to forty, Frank was approaching fifty, and they had no relatives left in Sun Prairie. A new century was beginning. The couple pledged to sell the Wisconsin farm and to begin a new life in Virginia.In the fall of 1901, a few months before Georgia turned fourteen, her mother entered her in an exclusive convent boarding school on the outskirts of Madison instead of the Sun Prairie high school. That year, Sacred Heart Academy, located in an old stone estate, enrolled seventy-eight "young ladies" from as far away as California and Canada. Georgia already had repeated the eighth grade (she had started school a year early) because her mother thought she was still too young to leave home. Nevertheless, Sacred Heart represented an abrupt change from her lenient household routine, her freedom to roam over the farm, the easy schoolhouse lessons, the privacy of her own bedroom, and the security of a community in which she knew everyone. The Dominican nuns reserved the right to restrict visitors to Saturday afternoons, to inspect the pupils' own books, and to read their personal mail. Although Protestants like Georgia were excused from taking religious instruction, each girl was required to drape a black-silk lace-edged veil over her head for daily chapel and to dress entirely in funereal black on Sundays.The school catalog emphasized that since the

eye "is the most open and ready road to the mind, it should make drawing...as necessary as reading or writing." Georgia's parents paid the extra twenty dollars (on top of an eighty-dollar annual tuition fee) so that their daughter could receive art instruction in the top-floor art studio overlooking woods and one of Madison's lakes, Lake Wingra. On her first day in the studio, the pupils were given charcoal and instructed to draw a baby's hand from a white plaster cast. Georgia worked hard at her drawing and finally was satisfied. When the nun saw it, however, she scolded her for making it too tiny and too black. Since Georgia had always been treated gently at home, the unexpected criticism mortified her to the verge of tears. Consequently, she began to make her marks on paper larger and lighter to please the exacting Sister Angelique. Her strategy was successful. At the end of the school year, the nun exhibited her drawings, chose one of them -- a duck hunter aiming his rifle -- to be published in the catalog, and awarded her a gold pin "for improvement in illustration and drawing."Surprisingly, Georgia did not win one of the prestigious gold medals in art, but achieved more recognition in other areas. Enrolled in the most rigorous academic program, she won the school prize in ancient history with a grade of ninety-two, and all her other grades were good (algebra, ninety; physiography and English, both eighty-five). And despite her discomfort with the strict rules, she adjusted effortlessly in the eyes of school officials -- conducting herself with such ladylike manners that the nuns awarded her a gold medal for her excellent "deportment."It is probable that she tolerated the rules and regulations instead of rebelling for several reasons. First of all, young people at the turn of the century were expected to be well behaved, particularly someone like the eldest daughter of the dignified Ida Totto. In addition, Georgia was eager to have access to the advantages of Sacred Heart, such as the classical music concerts and the intellectually exciting classes. In fact, in years to come, Georgia lavishly praised the nuns' teaching, wryly adding that her stay with them was the only time she learned any new ideas in school.The next fall, in 1902, Georgia was taken out of Sacred Heart, and two of her younger sisters, Ida and Anita, were entered instead. Although the reason for her withdrawal is not clear, at the time it was not unusual to send a child to a private academy for only a year if tuition money was limited. Meanwhile, the children's parents, along with Aunt Jenny, Alexius, Catherine, and the baby, Claudia, left for Virginia to get settled before the older children would join them at the end of the school year.Georgia and her brother Francis were sent to live with Aunt Lola, now a beloved teacher in Madison, a city of almost twenty thousand situated on an isthmus between two lakes and dominated by a mammoth white marble state capitol building on one hill and the gold dome of the state university on another. Aunt Lola lived in the unpretentious two-story Totto family house on Spaight Street, a quiet residential street that wound around the pine-studded edge of Lake Monona. It was the first time Georgia had lived in a city, but from Aunt Lola's windows she had a fine view of the choppy turquoise-blue lake and the dark-green hills on the opposite shore.She was enrolled in Madison High School, a large Victorian edifice, with hundreds of other students. In her second year of high school, her grades were all B's in civics, biology, geography, algebra, and English -- only a little less outstanding than the year before.She recalled little about art lessons aside from a memory of the day she passed the art classroom where the spinsterish teacher in a big flowery hat was speaking. Standing in the doorway, Georgia was fascinated as the bright-eyed woman held up a jack-in-the-pulpit plant in order to let the students examine the unusual shapes and subtle shades of its interior. Although Georgia had seen masses of the wild flower in the marshy places on her father's farm, she had never studied one in an art class before. It was the first time, she claimed in her book, that it occurred to her to paint a living thing rather than to copy pictures or draw from plaster casts. The memory stayed with her, and a quarter of a century later she painted a powerful series of oils based on that very flower.When classes ended in the spring of 1903, the four eldest O'Keeffe children left Wisconsin by train to join the rest of the family in Virginia. Georgia, by then fifteen and a half, was fortunate to have spent her childhood in the farmhouse where she was born. When her parents sold the family home, she had already left home to get an education. (The farmhouse survived another seventy years until a Christmas candle ignited a disastrous fire.) When she headed for Virginia, she was an independent, self-confident, successful teenager who was ready to leave all vestiges of childhood behind. Since she had not been uprooted too soon or too suddenly, she would have a deep, strong sense of herself for the rest of her life.The most extraordinary thing about her childhood was that it was so ordinary. Perhaps because it had been neither bruising nor blissful, she was able to shrug it off emotionally and allow it to recede as a pleasant memory. She developed into a person who never looked backward with the kind of acute nostalgia painter Marc Chagall felt for the Russian village where he was born in the same year as she. After she left Wisconsin, she returned only rarely to visit, despite an invitation extended by another Wisconsinite a generation older, Frank Lloyd Wright, to join his Taliesin artists' colony

in Spring Green, and despite the wistful pleas of the people of Sun Prairie, who wanted to be thought of as more than a footnote in her history.Yet the images, ambience, and ethics of Sun Prairie had fully formed her. From time to time she spoke of herself as emerging from the soil of the American heartland like a growing plant, and she would always be uneasy in cities. She was also marked by the midwestern strain of Old World Catholicism and became celebrated for her lifelong habit of wearing devout convent-school black. Most important, she drew heavily on her observations in the natural paradise of her early farm life for much of her iconography as an artist. Another strong influence was the Middle West's democratic egalitarianism, which profoundly affected her as an artist. When she wondered at a critical point if she really had the "right" to paint as she wished, she decided that yes, freedom of artistic expression was her birthright as much as freedom of speech.In later years, Georgia realized that the most dominant and wholesome aspect of her makeup emerged from her middle western background. "The barn is a very healthy part of me," she wrote several decades later to a collector about her painting of a red Wisconsin barn. "...It is my childhood -- I seem to be one of the few people I know of to have no complaints against my first twelve years -- ." Believing that the prairies were the "normal" part of the country, she found it impossible to talk about America to those who did not know them. Once she half-joked that the East was too European, the South too tropical, the West Coast too Asian, and the Southwest merely a "playground." When she moved to New York and her rural roots appeared remarkable to the urbanites, she never lost her belief in their normalcy and her feeling of blessedness at having been born a farmer's daughter in the American Midwest.Copyright 1980, 1986 by Laurie LisleRevue de presseJoyce Carol Oates Fascinating...filled with riches...what a personality emerges from these pages!Chicago Tribune Readers will welcome what Lisle has found. The woman who emerges has extraordinary personal stature, artistic gifts, commitment to her vision.San Francisco Chronicle An excellent portrait of a nearly legendary figure.Patricia Bosworth Portrait of an Artist moved me deeply -- I can't remember when a book involved me so totally.Christian Science Monitor This O'Keeffe will shock as much as amuse, chill as much as inspire.Eleanor Munro author of Originals: American Woman Artists Laurie Lisle has given us a mortal Georgia O'Keeffe, whose human hunger and frailties, gifts and strengths enabled her to survive -- triumphantly -- a conflicted life.