

'Little House' saga: Watch out for Laura on steroids

By JOANNE CLEAVER

I was a child menace to shrubbery, thanks to Laura Ingalls Wilder. Every spring in elementary school, fresh off a winter of reading the "Little House" series — again — I'd hijack my brothers' wooden wagon and head to the bushes to attempt — again — to construct a covered wagon from stripped forsythia branches, masking tape and old beach towels. Forsythia branches in the burst of spring growth are slippery and springy, with strength far beyond the holding power of masking tape. At least that's how I explained my black eyes to my mother. No words could describe my acorn cuisine, inspired by the nut-cap tea set that Laura and Mary set on stumps for a doll's tea party in "Little House in the Big Woods."

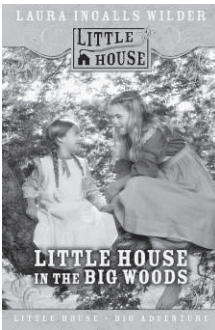
A thoughtful child would have reflected on the fruitless yield of attempting to re-create Ingalls family life. But no thoughtful child was involved, which is why my hand-stitched, blood-specked attempt at re-creating Laura's rag doll ended up looking more voodoo than can-do.

If plastic toys to go with Laura's story were available, I would have been an eager target demographic. As it turns out, I gave birth to one such target demographic in 1981. And in 1986, the very first American Girl doll catalog cur-

seyed into our living room, with its historically correct stories of girl-scaled bravery. It was Laura on marketing steroids. Exit the inquisitive girl and enter the acquisitive girl. Pleasant Rowland stirred up a business plan and some characters and founded American Girl, now owned by Mattel but still headquartered in the Madison suburb of Middleton.

Laura just couldn't compete. The pig's bladder ball she batted around the Big Woods — which were located near Pepin, Wis. — was run over by the likes of Kirsten, swinging her tiny wooden lunchbox packed with adorable little plastic bread, sausage, cheese and apple. Pretty soon, a doll subdivision sprawled across our three girls' bedrooms. Every birthday was an orgy of plot-driven accessories.

The marketing juggernaut of American Girl looked like a runaway train, and the Little House world, an abandoned wagon. To date, more than 12 million American Girl dolls and 111 million American Girl brand books have sold. A total of 55 million "Little House" books have sold. And Mattel reported \$440 million in American Girl sales for 2006.



At the Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum in Mansfield, Ohio, where Laura and her husband, Almanzo, settled, the gift shop offers a replica of Charlotte, Laura's rag doll, and a replica of Nettie, the corn-cob-wrapped-in-a-handkerchief that was Laura's first doll (and probably the one I should have tried to make).

But hollow-hearted characters borne of business plans may have their comeuppance yet. Observing the power of brand extension, HarperTrophy, the imprint of HarperCollins that publishes the Little House titles, has reverse-engineered a Little House franchise with a series of new books about Laura's extended family.

It's all enough to make the real Laura roll over in the grave she was laid in 50 years ago yesterday.

It turns out that Laura's Ma, Caroline Quiner, was born right here in Brookfield on Dec. 12, 1839, and lived there until she met and married Pa, Charles Ingalls. On the scaffolding of family letters and public records, HarperTrophy has built three books of Caroline fact-based fiction.

Ma had a ma, and she had a ma. And they get books, too. Rose Wilder Lane, Laura's daughter, who coached Laura through writing the Little House books, also gets her own series.

That adds up to five cameo portraits in the Ingalls/Wilder family tree, compared to eleven historical American Girls. Some of

original American Girl characters now have friends incarnated as dolls, so to preserve girl parity, maybe Ingalls sisters Mary and Carrie should count.

Nellie Oleson, too. She's the little mean girl on the prairie who tormented Laura and Mary. She gets her own book this fall.

Tara Weikum, HarperTrophy executive editor, is overseeing this commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the publication of "Little House in the Big Woods": new covers for the paperbacks, featuring photos, and a relaunch of www.littlehousebooks.com

Let them all spin. Girls will continue to fall in love with Laura on her own terms.

De Smet, S.D., is home to only 1,164 souls, about 10 times more than lived there when it was the Little Town on the Prairie for Laura and her family. A few years ago, my family of nearly grown-up girls (and their pa) made a detour to De Smet on the way to Rapid City.

My restless teens were more interested in moving on to Wall Drug than in visiting the grassy graves of Pa, Ma, Mary, Carrie, Grace, and Laura and Almanzo's baby son.

I made them come anyway. Together, we read the names on the headstones — the same names I'd read aloud to them years before, of people who are loved for who they were, not avatars of a market analysis that got it right.

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