

THE WAY I SEE IT

A LOOK BACK AT MY LIFE ON LITTLE HOUSE

By Melissa Anderson

Globe Pequot, 244 pages, \$22.95

CONFESSIONS OF A PRAIRIE BITCH

HOW I SURVIVED NELLIE OLESON AND LEARNED TO LOVE BEING HATED

By Alison Arngrim

It Books, 302 pages, \$25.99

Those prairie girls, they're a competitive bunch. Laura and Mary Ingalls -- well, mostly Laura -- butted heads with prissy rich girl Nellie Oleson for years on the 1970s-'80s family drama "Little House on the Prairie."

Turns out Melissa Gilbert (Laura) and Alison Arngrim (Nellie) were BFFs in real life. Gilbert wrote all about it in her 2009 memoir, *Prairie Tale*, and Arngrim corroborates it in her just-released *Confessions of a Prairie Bitch*. Neither was particularly close to nor fond of Melissa Sue Anderson (Mary), who also has written a memoir, *The Way I See It*, out last month.

Friends or not, it seems as if Gilbert is still Queen Bee, just as her character was on the show. It was, after all, Laura Ingalls Wilder who authored the books upon which the show was based. Mary and Nellie were secondary characters in those tales, and so it's fitting that Anderson and Arngrim waited a year after *Prairie Tale* came out before writing their own version of events.

Arngrim, who respectfully likens the young Gilbert to Don Corleone, writes of her "Prairie" mate: "She marched right in and introduced herself and began explaining things to us, all kinds of things: who was who, who did what, how everything worked. It was terribly surreal yet informative. Then came her stern warning, delivered with the intensity of Edward G. Robinson in the vocal range of Shirley Temple: 'And whatever you do, you watch out for Melissa Sue Anderson. She's very dangerous. She's evil, and I hate her.'"

Those may have been the fickle rantings of a pre-teen child star, but neither Gilbert nor Arngrim ever did quite warm up to Anderson like they did to each other.

A MARY TALE

Anderson, for her part, stays reasonably classy in her memoir -- to a fault. There is almost no mention of her supposedly troubled home life. (Arngrim offers up more about that in her book.) She never comes out and disses her co-stars, but rather speaks of them in concerned tones bordering on preachy, as if channeling the moral compass of Mary Ingalls.

About Gilbert, she writes: "Melissa was a clever kid. She knew what worked for her. I believe she was encouraged to act as young as she could, for as long as she could. . . . We were not particularly urged to be tight like sisters or best friends. I believe that was a good idea."

That's about as deep or detailed as she gets in *The Way I See It*. The book is boring, the writing tedious, the structure elementary. There are numerous long-ago conversations recalled, written in dialogue, as if Anderson had it all on tape or written in extremely detailed diaries. Other memories are written in an awkward script format. And in each chapter, she recounts one or two entire episodes from "Little House."

Rather than, say, applying an episode's lesson to something in her off-screen life or life in general, she simply retells the plots, start to finish. Zzzzzz.

Anderson describes herself more than once as a "serious minded kid." *The Way I See It* tells us she hasn't changed a bit, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. She survived the '70s and '80s as a kid, teen and young adult actress in Hollywood without major crisis or scandal -- at least none that she reveals in the book.

WHOA, NELLIE

Arnggrim, on the other hand, displays a healthy sense of humor and tells a much more balanced tale in *Confessions*. Perhaps it was her bohemian/ showbiz upbringing and years of therapy thereafter that contributed to her more relaxed attitude and willingness to share.

Some of the more colorful details of Arnggrim's life:

- Her father was gay and was Liberace's manager.
- Her mother was the voice of Gumby, Casper the Friendly Ghost, Sweet Polly Purebred and other cartoon characters of the '60s and '70s.
- Upon arriving in Hollywood, her family lived in the Chateau Marmont, where she watched the 1966 Sunset Strip curfew riots from her fifth floor windows.
- One of her parents' friends was Christine Jorgensen, the first person to have a publicly acknowledged sex-change operation.

The most tragic detail revealed is that Arnggrim's only sibling, older brother Stefan, who was himself a child star ("*Land of the Giants*"), sexually abused her from the time she was 6 years old to about the time she got cast as Nellie at age 11. She glosses over the therapy years somewhat, and the heartbreak it all must have caused her parents when she finally told them around age 20, but none of it goes unacknowledged. She also turned negative into positive by becoming an activist, helping to change laws involving the protection of children.

Like Anderson, Arnggrim talks about specific episodes of "*Little House*," but her recollections are more behind-the-scenes dish rather than plot summary: Katherine MacGregor, who played her on-screen mother, was a know-it-all busybody like her character, Mrs. Oleson, though not mean; Jonathan Gilbert (Melissa's brother), who played her brother, Willie, was adorable but a "mouth-breather."

One of the funnier observations that will make fans of the show chuckle is about all the running the kids on the show had to do. "Endlessly running," she writes. "Running up the hill, down the hill, running to school, running away from school. Taking turns running away from each other. Every single episode had at least two scenes involving running.

"Any chance to spend the whole morning sitting on my ass was a welcome relief, even the church and school scenes that required sitting for hours on those wooden benches."

POSITIVE THINKING

Readers who get through both books will notice a consensus of sorts: that child stardom for both women was a blessing. Anderson looks back on it all as one fantastic opportunity after another, ending, by choice, when she got married and started a family. Arnggrim says it saved her life; got her out of the house and kept her busy through what could have been many more years of sexual abuse and family dysfunction. Whatever their individual experiences were, they've embraced their inner Mary and Nellie, and lived to tell the tales.

THEY AGREE ON SOME THINGS

Melissa Sue Anderson and Alison Arnggrim's memoirs couldn't be more different, but they do have similar recollections of some of their "*Little House*" co-stars. Miss Beadle, for one. Charlotte Stewart, who played the prim and proper schoolteacher in Walnut Grove, was not quite so prim.

"She had blond hair, blue eyes, and the most radiant smile you ever saw. She was every little girl's dream of a teacher," writes Arngrim. "As soon as I saw her I wanted to run out and buy her an apple. Later, we would all nearly plotz when we found out that this smiling vision of innocence had just come from the set of David Lynch's "Eraserhead."

"Charlotte was hip and trendy and, like, totally into health food," Anderson notes.

Michael Landon was another -- although strangely Anderson refers to him as Mike while Arngrim uses the more formal Michael.

Arngrim writes about Landon's hotness and his habit of not wearing underwear. Anderson remembers seeing him smoke weed with the crew members, plus the hilarious detail that he covered up his graying hair with "Clairol Loving Care shampoo-in hair color, medium ash brown."

While both write about their love and respect for Landon, they also make it clear he had noticeable flaws. They write about his perfectionist nature, his drinking -- which never seemed to get in the way of his work -- and of their disgust when he ruined his marriage after having an affair with their stand-in, Cindy Clerico, whom he eventually married.

"I had held him up to a higher moral standard," writes Anderson. "He had really let me down. It took me a while to come to terms with the fact that he had fallen off his pedestal and was merely human after all."

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