

Melissa Gilbert left such an indelible impression as author Laura Ingalls Wilder, many fans think she actually wrote the "Little House on the Prairie" books.

Instead, the television series launched a career and provided the kind of crash course in Hollywood that helped her spread her wings as a writer, director, producer and president of the Screen Actors Guild.

"Little House," Gilbert says, "helped to form the person that I ultimately grew into."

The show's executive producer and star, Michael Landon, "demanded we be as professional as he was. Michael insisted I follow around a person from each department so that I had the understanding and appreciation of what the grips did, what the electricians did, what the craft services people did. Not only would I know how to look for people who were good at their jobs, I also had an absolute understanding that we're all equal and we're all in this as a team effort. Remove one person or one profession and the whole thing falls apart."

Now, as "American Masters" takes a look at Wilder, the author who decided at 65 to chronicle the life she led as a child, fans of the book are rediscovering the long-running television series.

Many, Gilbert says, are surprised to see how relevant the stories were.

"We started in the mid-'70s and the country was just getting out of Vietnam and we were smack in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. 'Little House,' although couched in that sweet family esthetic, was really telling some hard-hitting stories about our country in the 1970s. It served as a reminder to people then, if we could survive the settling of our country in the 1770s and 1870s, we could certainly make it through the 1970s. With the resurgence in popularity now, it's once again showing us, 'We can do this. Here are the tools.'"

'Elaborate home movies'

Although Gilbert doesn't number herself among those bingeing "Little House," her husband, actor-director Timothy Busfield, has embraced it. "He never watched it before he knew me. And now he's getting into it. He's becoming a huge Michael Landon fan. We'll be watching and he'll say, 'Look, she's so sad ...' and then he'll start to cry and we'll pause it and I'll have to tell a story about the day when we were shooting. I not only got the best game of dress-up. I also got the most elaborate home movies."

Nine when she started "Little House," Gilbert had read the first book, "Little House in the Big Woods," but didn't finish "Prairie" because she got the show's script and that became her focus.

"The series veered, but the pilot episode was very, very close to the book. In our show, the Ingalls family settled in Walnut Grove, Minn., and never left. And that's not true. They had to expand our show, so that's why it says, 'based on the books.' That's how they got the leeway to create other siblings and a husband for Mary, who never married."

Since those 10 years with the series, Gilbert has read the books multiple times and still sees their value.

Getting to live the life-with real horses, real babies and real chores-was the ultimate interactive experience.

"I loved being her," Gilbert says. "I would run into the writers room every week and say, 'What's next?' It was an absolute joy."

When Landon left the series, Gilbert became first on the show's call sheet. She followed her boss and friend's lead (even naming a son after him) and realized "love is the key to tolerance, understanding, compassion, security, community and faith."

## Not ready to say goodbye

When the venerable series was canceled, "I thought I was ready to say goodbye and I really wasn't. I was shattered and remained shattered for a long time after. It was really deep and intense grieving. I was saying goodbye to everything I knew for 10 years of my life. And it wasn't just any 10 years. It was the most formative."

Because Landon populated the set with plenty of children (many the offspring of crew members), Gilbert's experience wasn't like that of other child stars. "He made sure we focused on our schooling. It was very much a family. We all traveled together when we went on location. I didn't experience any of that stuff most child actors do. I have nothing but good memories."

While watching with Busfield, the 56-year-old mother of four says she doesn't see herself on the screen. "All I see are teeth," she says with a laugh.

While her other sons dismissed the show as a "girl's show," her youngest, Michael, who's 24, has an appreciation for the series. Because he joined her in a "Little House" stage version (Gilbert played Laura's mother in the touring musical), he gained an appreciation for the research that went into creating it. "He has a stronger attachment than his other siblings do."

Now close to Wilder's age when she wrote the books, Gilbert says she likes the idea that it's never too late to try something new.

"I've always believed in reinvention," she says. "Every few years, I throw caution to the wind and do something new. I'm willing to take chances and do new things just to see if it leads down a new avenue."