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2005

Book Review: Western Rider: Views from a Car Window

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Taylor, David, "Book Review: Western Rider: Views from a Car Window" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 207.
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Western Rider: Views from a Car Window. By Chuck Forsman. Introduction by William Kittredge. Santa Fe, NM: Center for American Places, 2003. xv + 104 pp. Photographs. \$29.95.

The history of the American West and its unique American-ness is intimately associated with our advances in mobility. Foot travel, wagon and ox, railroad, and, finally, automobile. Nothing has come to symbolize the

vastness of the West more than a stretch of two-lane highway racing arrow-straight toward the distant horizon. Robert Frank codified that image in his book *The Americans* (1959), the first photographic meditation on, among other things, postwar car culture.

The car is king but it's the interstate highway system that has truly collapsed the breadth of our nation with its accommodation of high speeds and homogeneous corporate culture. McDonalds to on-ramp in St Louis; off-ramp to Wendy's in L.A. That tendency toward sameness makes locating the unique quality of places a challenge. One has to be willing to allow for some indirectness and slow down to secondary road speeds.

Chuck Forsman's photographs manage to reveal uniqueness of place *and* point toward the serial narrative of the roadside. As he traverses the Great Plains and Intermountain West from the Dakotas to New Mexico, he attends to both the grand and the quirky, making photographs that are eloquently descriptive and formally astute. The lone figure crossing the street on the Zuni Pueblo under a brooding sky—made all the more dramatic and imposing by the gradient tint of Forsman's windshield; the clandestine photograph of a state trooper, as reflected in the sideview mirror, made after being pulled over in Montana; and the deer, a blurred apparition illuminated by headlights, crossing the road in Roundup, Montana. Forsman has used his automobile effectively as framing device and location lighting kit.

Photo essays court failure in the absence of an aesthetic and intellectual approach to create unity. Forsman manages that unity by making the driver's seat the readily identifiable vantage point of all of the images without allowing them to succumb to repetition or sameness. My only criticisms of the book are that some of its titles come across as forced and overly clever and that the edge treatment on the photographs would have been more effective had it been consistent (preferably not blurry and uneven). Those are minor issues, however. Ultimately, *Western Rider* is visual poetry that conveys the emotional essence of

the western road trip. Not the corporatized, homogenous four-lane rush, but the type of trip we might expect from the likes of Abbey or McPhee or Stegner. Very good company on the road, I'd say.

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