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Book Review: Wyoming Trucks, True Love, and the Weather Channel: A Woman's Adventure

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Kennedy's subtitle is apt, for her book narrates the education of a biologist who becomes a second-generation environmentalist, or at least what she calls a second-generation environmentalist. As a consultant, she often works in the Plains states assessing the compliance of public drinking water programs with EPA regulations. Some of these regulations are based on research done in graduate school by field experts one college generation before hers—now often field experts on teams with her. One such site she describes in the Painted Creek, near Phoenix, which she visits once yearly, and where she shows us with an artist's eye the precision required to recover the creek to its original pristine shape, including the exact order in which rocks are arranged. Other sites include several Plains states.

Kennedy tells what goes into the making of a biologist, though of course her story is unique. A plane crash killed her father when she was three. Later when she was twenty-four, she and her mother found courage enough to visit the site of the crash in North Carolina, where the two commemorate that most significant event in their lives by burying a small piece of metal in what was barely a crater. Planes figure again when members of her consulting firm find themselves grounded on September 11, 2001. Though they have rental cars, and are in North Dakota for an exit meeting, the group doesn't pay enough attention to the TV in the morning to realize they are stranded. They do finally locate routes out and call one another, relieved to find themselves home safely, Kennedy in Wyoming.

Scorning home economics and particularly the award she received in it in high school, Kennedy discovers that she loves home economics after all. She knows she loves science "because it was about life. . . . But the kernel of it all is that I like to learn, to know, to understand the world—and food, flowers, colors, angles, patterns are part of that"; and so, she discovers, home economics has its place, too, for she also loves what cooking and sewing do to help her value her relationships, her relatives, her flower garden, and her inheritances.

What she discovers in these patterns are parallels that structure her life. Her mother remarried, so she has a step-father—who remains physically somewhat distant. She herself has a relationship with a man who is divorced, and, in a similar parallel, she also has to appear distant to her partner's child when the child becomes dangerously ill. She writes of that illness with breathtaking speed and emotion.

When she talks about Wyoming, she is amused to find that no one ever mentions Wyoming on weather stations. But at the end of the book, she speaks of the wind of the High Plains, that wind that's like no other. Perhaps in reference to her geologist partner, perhaps in reference to science, and perhaps to the romance of life itself, that wind, she says, is like waves. And in the Medicine Bows she can stand on a "blasted circle" coated with gray lichen: "A coral reef of the high plains." She knows that the High Plains are simply water; water, that is, collapsed by time, a scientist might say. She has discovered that science is part of the truth, and ends the book with a metaphysical touch.

Wyoming Trucks is a lively and thoughtful autobiography, in which Kennedy balances stories epitomizing love of life, knowledge of death, awareness of loss, a keen sense of the importance of family and relationships, and the powerful need for the protection of nature.
Kennedy knows how to pace, teaches respect for life and nature, and offers an oblique sense of the metaphysical.

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