Book Review: A Great Plains Reader

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How does one describe the nature of this place that is the Great Plains? Diane Quantic and P. Jane Hafen do not attempt to answer that question in A Great Plains Reader, a marvelous collection of prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction reflecting varied responses to the land and its inhabitants. They do, however, initiate a process of discovery and inquiry that compels the collection’s reader to consider past and present, physical and psychological boundaries, and placement and displacement. And to that end, the title reflects the editors’ double concern with both product and process: to compile a set of readings on the Great Plains experience, and to invite one to become a reader of the Great Plains.

Noticeably absent from the Plains Reader is a map designating geographical boundaries. Readings fall instead under one of five broad sections—The Lay of the Land, Natives and Newcomers on the Great Plains, Arriving and Settling In, Adapting to a New Country, and The Great Plains Community—that become a method of mapping, textually, the contours of the landscape, the fluidity of boundaries, and the variety of impression and expression. Like Chimney Rock or Devil’s Tower, familiar literary figures and works serve as signposts: Cather’s “Neighbor Rosicky,” Zitkala-Ša’s “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” Sandoz’s “The Christmas of the Phonograph Records,” Stafford’s “The Rescued Year,” and Garland’s “Among the Corn Rows.” Yet like the blow-out penstemon, the text contains equally beau-
tiful works that might otherwise go unnoticed by the student for whom this collection serves as an introduction to Plains literature and can also be appreciated by a more seasoned, native reader. Works by Ron Hanson, Diane Glancy, Joy Harjo, William Allen White, John Madson, Sharon Butala, and Lois Hudson constitute just some of the hidden, rarely anthologized pieces that help trace the ecological, historical, and economic evolution of this place.

For those familiar with the expansiveness of the Plains literary tradition, A Great Plains Reader possesses some noticeable gaps. The Reader contains selections by important Canadian writers (Sinclair Ross, Robert Stead, Butala, Robert Kroetsch), but absent are any selections from Margaret Laurence or Ross's As For Me and My House, a novel whose significance matches that of Rölvaag's Giants in the Earth in showing responses to life on the prairie. And it is unfortunate that the excerpt from Wright Morris's The Home Place cannot be read as originally published—with prose and photographic text placed side by side. These, however, are minor shortcomings; and apparently aware of limitations of space and economy, the editors provide topical essays highlighting pertinent historical information and literary themes and figures as well as offering suggestions for further reading.

Quantic and Hafen succeed, finally, in providing “a sampling of... explorations into the Great Plains as a place and state of mind.” In the process, they create an object—A Great Plains Reader—that introduces its audience to a complex ecosystem, a rich narrative tradition and history, and an evolving physical and psychological landscape. But they also create a subject—a Great Plains reader—who will want not only to absorb the readings that object contains, but also to be challenged anew in thinking about the ways the land and writing about the land shape who we are.

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