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Book Review: Between Grass and Sky: Where I Live and Work

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After the publication of her first book, *Windbreak*, by Barn Owl Books in 1987, Linda Hasselstrom became a small press legend. Disseminated by word of mouth, *Windbreak* established Hasselstrom as one of the best-known voices speaking on behalf of cattle ranchers on the Great Plains. In her early books (*Windbreak* was followed by *Going Over East*, which won a Fulcrum Award in 1987), Hasselstrom’s persona was that of an articulate ranch woman, committed to the South Dakota community where she had grown up and to the land where she and her husband worked beside her rancher father.

Then her life fell apart. “I felt as though every word I had written to that point had been a lie,” she told an acquaintance, and the books that followed (*Land Circle* [1991], *Feels Like Far* [1999]) were marked by rage as Hasselstrom revised her personal history and altered her expectations. Now, in *Between Grass and Sky*, she’s achieved some balance in her writing, and also in her life.

In her introduction to *Between Grass and Sky*, Hasselstrom makes a claim for herself as nature writer: “When my writing students say they want to be nature writers, I tell them their approach is backward: first they have to learn something about nature by getting deeply involved in it.” Deeply involved, she assuredly is, in the way—recognizable by anyone with a ranching background—she knows every slope and coulee and variety of plant life on her prairie, knows every individual among the cattle bearing her brand, and knows every other living creature through close observation, right down to the mice.

If some of the essays in *Between Grass and Sky* echo her earlier work, her voice is distinct and familiar, like an old friend lecturing on cattle grazing, on garbage, on living responsibly but unsentimentally. Who but Hasselstrom could write, “I admire cows’ ability to clean their nostrils with their tongues”? Who but Hasselstrom would train her cats to hunt mice in the outlying haystacks, until “the felines would follow the pickup ruts like a line of tiny cows when I headed for the bales, trotting daintily to avoid the mud”? The Hasselstrom of *Between Grass and Sky* is by turns humorous and biting; she’ll put up with no nonsense, but she’s generous and dependable in the way of ranch folks, and she’s achieved a new equanimity. Her book is a pleasure to read.

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