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Review of It's Not the End of the Earth, But You Can See It From Here: Tales of the Great Plains

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It's Not the End of the Earth, But You Can See It From Here: Tales of the Great Plains. By Roger Welsch. New York: Villard Books, 1990. Introduction. xx + 228 pp. \$17.95.

If Roger Welsch didn't exist, a writer would invent him. He became known for a single action incomprehensible to the city-bred majority of folks: leaving a comfortable professor's life in

a Nebraska city for a farm on the arid central plains. Instead of disappearing into obscurity while academics mused on his self-destruction, he became famous writing about country ways. Still, he's sometimes seen as a mere record-keeper for a simpler way of life that is disappearing into the busy blandness of American society.

But country people are more than unsophisticated, hard-working marks for the political schemes of city slickers on both coasts. Welsh knows they are the meat and potatoes of the American way, their lives a real drama, better than the polyester plots of TV. He correctly understands the ability to laugh as a plains survival skill, as he demonstrates in "Grover Bass," but anyone who isn't also crying at the end of that tale ought to be buried, because death has set in.

Many rural writers become so absorbed in the heroic qualities of plains life that they ignore racism and sexism, or nervously excuse it and get on with their admiration. Welsh bravely writes "Racing Horses at Centralia Fourth of July," "Cal," and "LaVerne's Plan," demonstrating how plains Indians and women handle such treatment. Welsh mixes ribald humor and solemnity, politics and religion, familiar and forbidden topics with an ease that seems careless, or random; sometimes he admires people like "Luke" who make the reader a little nervous. But the final essay, "Gifts," shows his plan, and what the Plains are about. "The way we keep such gifts of life . . ." he concludes, "is to give them away." May Welsh keep giving away the secrets of the Plains for a long time, and may more people understand the gift.

Don't cringe at the book's cost; paperback binding wouldn't endure the years of re-reading you'll need. Tiny print is used for the Contents, and page numbers are hidden, but these are small flaws in a big and beautiful book.

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