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Review of *Means of Transit: A Slightly Embellished Memoir.* By Teresa Miller

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Castro, Joy, "Review of *Means of Transit: A Slightly Embellished Memoir.* By Teresa Miller" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly.* Paper 1242.
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Means of Transit: A Slightly Embellished Memoir. By Teresa Miller. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xi + 186 pp. Photographs. $24.95.

In *Means of Transit*, the narrative is always on the move. For aspiring writer Teresa Miller, her hometown of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, was a trap to be escaped, and the Plains were the boring backdrop of restless road trips with her grandmother. Craving the excitement of New York, Miller managed to break free (in her fifties) only as far as Tulsa.

Miller is an endearing narrator, gamely revealing her own pratfalls, and, as a generous enthusiast of literature, she eventually published two novels and founded a book festival and television show in order to "reel in the horizon." But the narrative's primary focus is the drama—familial and televised—that occupied the author. Painful material abounds: in Miller's early childhood her mother died, and her grandparents provided the only stability, for her attorney-father turned to sedatives, alcohol, and a succession of marriages and affairs. One stepmother beat the five-year-old Miller, while Miller's father, fearful of gossip in the town of 7,000, hushed up the abuse. In adulthood, Miller's brother, also an attorney, was convicted for drug trafficking. After Miller became a college instructor, a violent student stalked her.

Yet Miller's approach is jarringly lighthearted, as though she's distracting herself from difficult truths. "I was raised to be delightful," she acknowledges. Hard-won understanding and self-knowledge are what most readers seek from memoir, but in a preface, "Traveling Lightly in Familiar Territory," Miller writes: "self-knowledge continues to elude me, except for this new understanding—I came from a family that tried not to dwell on anything too unsettling." Miller's refusal to dwell shapes her narrative method, which privileges a succession of sprightly anecdotes over exploratory depth. Summary prevails, few scenes exist, and few sensory images ground the story. Serious episodes get short shrift: when Miller's harassment ends with the stalker's murder of his own mother, the incident earns only a page. Her father's death receives only a couple of lines. Miller travels lightly, indeed.

In the book's final section, Miller offers some reflection, connecting her excitement about celebrities to the painful gap left by her mother and comparing the pathologies of her own troubled, privileged family to those of the stalker's. She also turns at last, revealingly, to the land: "My cousin Isabel's father-in-law owned a huge tract of land on the edge of Tahlequah that used to terrify me with its wildness. I could just imagine getting lost amid the snakes and polecats lurking in the waist-high brush." *Ah*, thinks the reader. *Now we're getting somewhere*—but no. When the owner flattens the land into a subdivision, what might grieve another Oklahoman makes Miller rejoice: "I . . . marveled at how a place that had once been so fearsome for me had become a safe haven of familiarity."

It's true: when tamed, leveled, and chopped into manageable parcels, the land can offer safety. So can a life story. Readers hoping to venture into the "wildness" of Miller's interesting life will find here only the pleasures of the

subdivision: *Means of Transit* is likeable, safe, and smooth.

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