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## Review of *Set the Ploughshare Deep: A Prairie Memoir* By Timothy Murphy

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*Set the Plowshare Deep: A Prairie Memoir.* By Timothy Murphy. Woodcuts by Charles Beck. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. Woodcuts, notes, index of poems, index of woodcuts. ix + 108 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Timothy Murphy is an accomplished poet who, in mature adulthood, recently began publishing collections of his work. Four titles are listed dating from 1996. From reading his prairie memoir, one gathers that Murphy used his earlier adult life to establish a level of financial stability before devoting more of his time to literary matters. *Set the Plowshare Deep* should please a range of readers. It documents three generations of a Red River Valley family, discussing them from two points of view (the book includes a section written by the author's father, Vincent Murphy). The slightly oversized format and high quality reproductions of the Charles Beck woodcuts move the book toward the coffee-table book market. Beck's woodcuts, striking illustrations of the Red River Valley of the North, float between realistic detail and abstract patterns of shape and color.

The art works are strategically placed between the major sections of the memoir and framed by poems that begin and end each narrative section. Murphy's poems continue his use of traditional patterns of meter and rhyme, usually in short lines and often in stanza forms of his own invention. The precision of his metrical verse is duplicated by the clarity of his prose. He chronicles his family's losses as well as its successes. He describes hunting without bragging about amount of game bagged or his own marksmanship. He expresses gratitude and admiration for family, friends, and teachers who have shaped his experience and percep-

tion. His writing is especially strong in his well-detailed description of natural phenomena: snowstorms, floods, his apple orchard, hunting dogs.

Acknowledging its several virtues, I also have some reservations about the memoir. Murphy has a high regard for his own opinion and describes the last twenty-five years of his life in a style and tone that too often seem excessively heroic. He tends to depict his work as an investor in agricultural enterprise as a mammoth struggle against the mistimed powers of nature and a government that shifts from being merely inept to becoming downright malevolent toward his personal profit. He turns his poetic hand to rather slight tasks when he retells in verse the joke about the pig with a wooden leg and ends another poem with the old saw about a sore-throated colt being a little horse. He is more effective with the humorous anecdote in prose as when he mocks the county agent found crying in his office because his farmer died. Murphy has a tendency toward literary name-dropping and its related sense of accomplishment by association. Self-de-

scribed as a "venture capitalist who farms and hunts in his native North Dakota," he notes at the end of the book that he finished drafting *Plowshare* "aboard my catamaran . . . which is berthed at a marina in Key West." He makes little distinction between making a living *from* the land and living *on* the land.

Murphy's writing, both poetry and prose, is solid throughout, though it tends to be too reserved, as if in an attempt to avoid sentimentality he sometimes stops short of earned sentiment. His memoir becomes especially powerful and emotionally moving when it focuses on his affection for his grandmother, Tessie, and in his attachment to his hunting dog, Dee.

*Set the Plowshare Deep* is a beautiful book in its patterning, its prose, its poetry, and its illustration. For these reasons it deserves to be appreciated; but it remains too distant and cool to be cherished.

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