Review of *Seldom Seen: A Journey into the Great Plains* by Patrick Dobson

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Seldom Seen: A Journey into the Great Plains.

The Great Plains often are dismissed as ho-hum fly-over country lacking in significance or appeal. But in the skillfully written narrative of Seldom Seen, Patrick Dobson describes how he finds the Plains a source of emotional sustenance and, ultimately, rejuvenation. Seldom Seen is the story of the author's trek, largely by foot, from Kansas City, Missouri, to Helena, Montana. Along the way Dobson—a 32-year-old blue-collar worker seeking relief from a variety of intense personal frustrations—meets a long string of open-hearted if often dirt-poor souls and comes to find hope in what he'd largely considered a "mean and unforgiving world."

Seldom Seen stands as a heartfelt if idiosyncratic expression of affection for the Plains region. But the book is above all an exploration of self. At times it risks losing the reader by ladling out so many heavy dollops of Dobson's angst. Still, the author displays a keen literary sense, and the vignettes he presents of a wide variety of Plains locales are often vivid. Dobson ably describes significant cultural tangents such as a young Kansan's intense love of farming—emblematic of small farmers' devotion to agriculture even in the face of enormous challenges—as well as Native American bemusement at whites' mistaken stereotypes and fears.

The life lessons that Dobson finds along the way clearly provide him great comfort. Truth be told, however, these lessons tend to be ones well understood by many Americans on their own. These lessons also are ones that many religious believers find in their faith, in contradiction of Dobson's facile depiction of Christianity on the Plains not as a complex mosaic but merely as a giant blob of fanaticism.

Dobson's reoccurring encounters with the working poor provide the book with one of its central themes: the relentless exploitation of the region's common folk by what the author terms "unstoppable and sometimes sadistic..."
economic and social forces.” Dobson’s take on this issue mirrors Thomas Frank’s analysis of political culture and Barbara Ehrenreich’s approach to economic sociology.

One section with particular value is Dobson’s nuanced chapter on Yellowstone. He rightly describes it as a “garden” in which human manipulation is a powerful factor. (The analysis of artificiality is a key theme in the book.) But he ultimately finds his time in Yellowstone to be among his most valuable in understanding human nature and finding the reassurance he so desperately seeks. His experiences lead him, in the end, to offer high praise for what he regards as Yellowstone’s “damn fine” garden.

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