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Review of *My Ruby Slippers: The Road Back to Kansas* by Tracy Seeley.

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Kansas-born playwright William Inge said, “It wasn’t until I got to New York that I became a Kansan.” For English professor Tracy Seeley, it was San Francisco that did the trick.
For years she lived a life of pleasure there—grading papers in hip coffee joints, cycling through the cool fog, reveling in the progressive political climate. Her nomadic Kansas childhood was behind her, even beneath her, she thought. Then, an emotional earthquake—triggered by a cancer diagnosis and the deaths of both parents, in quick succession—forces a reckoning with mortality and sends her looking for home. But for Seeley, whose father’s wanderlust uprooted the family thirteen times by the time she was nine, home isn’t an obvious destination. So she makes it a journey.

Seeley’s memoir traverses the Kansas towns where she spent her youth—Goodland, Hays, most markedly Wichita—and meanders beyond the geography of her childhood as well. Pondering the meaning of the state, the intellectual Seeley travels northeast to learn the Bleeding Kansas years of fiery abolitionism; southeast for the coal-mining labors of European immigrants; west for the present-day social conservatism; and to the central prairie for deeply resonating encounters with Native tribal histories and ecological insight at the Land Institute.

As her mind seeks knowledge, her heart seeks understanding, and the latter guides this narrative. Forgoing a linear telling, Seeley interweaves Kansas history, topography, and politics with her private reality of the place—frequent uprootings, a philandering dad and enduring mother, an adulthood spent rejecting Kansas and the father who left for good during Seeley’s adolescence (“I became my parents’ child, carrying exile with me as a state of being, unattached to any place”). Over the course of her journey, she develops a more nuanced view of the places and people who shaped her. Kansas isn’t just a bunch of hicks, as she’d told herself, and her father wasn’t a villain. Reality, examined through the lens of a malignant breast lump, is much more beautiful and complex.

The prismatic qualities of the narrative match Seeley’s unwaveringly thoughtful and self-aware voice; she qualifies her own judgments, describes experiences with humility, and makes numerous, literal references to the meditation and Buddhist principles she values. (One exercise in the present moment, deeply experiencing the taste and texture of a raisin and then “letting it go,” provides a metaphorical undercurrent for the entire book.)

Paradoxically, for a work about place, Seeley’s story at several points moves too rapidly and with too many metaphors for the reader to feel its revelations deeply—not a flaw, perhaps, but a structural mirror of Seeley’s own lack of groundedness for much of her life. Beyond the highly personal story, though, is a commentary on the restless American spirit, the “frontier chasers” whose roots do not run deep. “Everywhere, I meet people like me,” Seeley writes, “some with more addresses than mine.”

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