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## Book Review: Flood Stage and Rising

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*Flood Stage and Rising*. By Jane Varley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. 128 pp. \$20.00.

Jane Varley's *Flood Stage and Rising* opens with what becomes the haunting echo of the narrative, "how far north should we go?" The "north" of the Great Plains impresses itself on Varley's consciousness immediately when she observes, "the land was flat. So flat it looked bizarre." In order to begin her PhD studies, she and her husband Gary move from one landscape (the lush greenery and hills of Virginia) to the rich diluvian river bed of Grand Forks, North Dakota. A Great Plains town that inspires tall tales, Grand Forks is built on the edge of the Red River, the last remnant of the great Agassiz Basin. Undeterred by such a contrasting landscape from what they have known, and ready for adventure in a new location, Varley and her husband learn both the beauty and bizarreness of life on the Great Plains.

Early on one of her colleagues remarks: "everything is big in North Dakota . . . Big floods, big sky, big view of the prairie." Charmed by this vastness as well as an uncharted sense of freedom, Varley finds this "bigness" that swallows up details on the horizon serving the tributaries of her memory for other landscapes, rivers, and dreams. True to her independent spirit, but not knowing her mettle will eventually be tested by a devastating flood, she vows early on: "I wanted to know North Dakota. And especially wanted to know the Red River." Her vow gives us the narrative force of a novel as she states: "through the story of the river, I became more aware of my own life, rising into uncharted territory."

With a poet's eye and an artist's gift for both vibrant and poignant detail, Varley takes us along on her journey ever farther "north" by evoking all the rivers of her past: the Mississippi of her childhood in Dubuque, Iowa; her college years along the Salmon River in Moscow, Idaho; her early adulthood in Craig Creek, Virginia. Interlacing flashbacks to the early landscapes of her life with her doctoral studies at the University of North Dakota, Varley creates the perfect interplay of rising tension and

rising waters fueling the experience of the great flood of 1997. Earning ultimate self-knowledge by surviving the "big" winter and endless snow of 1996-1997 which culminated in devastating flood, Varley documents the huge effort that went into trying to save Grand Forks, yet the helplessness of not being able to do anything when the Red River swelled over its banks to destroy almost all of the city. Unlike any river Varley had known growing up, unlike any flood she had previously witnessed, the Red River revealed to her in the flood of April 1997 both its beauty and grotesqueness. In a riveting narrative of lyrical imagery and documentary intensity, Varley succeeds in re-creating the unpredictable forces of nature that led up to the flood, as well as the forces of nature that rise up to defy human complacency and prove its vastness can never be controlled.

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