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Review of Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky

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Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky. By Terry Evans. Introductory essays by Wes Jackson and Gregory Bateson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. Photographs, glossary. 72 pp. \$19.95.

Prairie is the unlikely yet rather successful marriage of what a prairie looks like to a scientist and feels like to an artist. The sixty-two photographs, nine of which are black and white, are square in format and superbly printed in Japan. The imagery is divided among scientific illustrations of native grasses, insects, or mammals; expanses of sky and cloud or expanses of earth seen aerially; and landscapes. In spite of the diversity of intent and viewpoint, a sense of continuity and flow is achieved.

Close-ups of the ground, camera held parallel to it, reveal pattern in a flattened space. We are told the names of the grasses, but we do not need to know them to become entangled in their tapestry. Similarly, the earth when seen from above becomes a pattern, stronger and bolder than the grasses yet visually united. The landscapes themselves are more elusive. Evans has dealt with the problem of photographing space by making diptychs of land and sky, using the horizon to break them cleanly and precisely in two equal parts. This compositional device mimics nature by making our eye struggle between the two, keeping it moving restlessly as it seeks the dominant force. Some pairs are contrasts of color, light, and mass; others offer a mirror of subtlety.

Placement and order of the photographs encourage us to see the vast and the minute as curiously similar. A detail of bison hair and

the late evening sun striking the leafless trees on a game preserve seen far below become analogous. Scribner's panic grass and thunderclouds, juxtaposed, are equally shaped by the wind.

This book will appeal to a wide audience. The essays add to the value of the book as a scientific tool for the neophyte and also give perspective to this endeavor. A glossary gives Latin and common names of the plants depicted. Quotations from people of other times and other cultures are interspersed with images, reminding us of the timeless quality

embraced by the book. The artist's introduction, on the other hand, adds to the reader's understanding of her metaphysical concepts relating pattern to symbolism that are found within her visual statements. Medium format camera and new technology in printing unite to provide handsome reproductions that will bear up to close examination and thereby reveal the very fine detail presented to us.

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PRAIRIE FORUM

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