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Review of Great Plains Patchwork: A Memoir

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Great Plains Patchwork: A Memoir. By Marilyn Coffey. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989. Prologue, photographs. xi + 186 pp. \$21.95.

Great Plains Patchwork is an uneven, at times disturbing book, but like Grace Paley's "little disturbances" it is the moments that unsettle, that jar the reader a bit that make this book worthwhile.

Marilyn Coffey begins her book, conventionally enough, with a sketch of engaging and eccentric ancestors, leading in to the elements—used as section titles—that make up the Great Plains: Earth, Air, Water, Fire. The Earth and Air sections are more or less what one comes to expect of plains books—grasshopper plagues, dust storms, tornadoes—although when Coffey enlivens her accounts with anecdotes from family or other records, it's entertaining enough.

The energy of the book begins in Part III, "Water," when Coffey allows herself to settle down to the specific Nebraska locations and events she knows and has researched so well. An unselfconscious lyric meandering around the Republican River in southern Nebraska describes not only its beauty but the devastating effects of flood, setting up the reader for the final part, "Fire." Coffey barely remembers WW II and writes her memoir true to herself, no looking forward to What Would Happen in Vietnam, no hindsight lessons; and as a result, the effects of that time on a little girl trying to figure out what it means to be a woman is a

powerful piece of personal/universal history, what the book's been aiming for all along.

Disillusionment and terror come from disasters other than natural. Coffey's father ran a little Nebraska trucking business, not so little, however, as to escape personal attention and terrorism by Jimmy Hoffa's henchmen. For those who remember Hoffa as someone who just "disappeared," it's an excellent, personalized history lesson and a wonderful antidote to the saccharine, over-innocent fifties stories that are too much with us.

The book's final chapter is the most disturbing, not only because of its content—the Charles Starkweather and Caril Anne Fugate murder spree in 1958—but the tone Coffey adopts. I recognize some of the effects intended: to recreate the initial blasé reactions of a university student; to counteract the romance that various filmmakers have inflicted on the story; to show that Nebraska/the Midwest is as vicious as anywhere, but there's something a tad voyeuristic about the account that's troublesome. But this is not easy stuff to handle—and it makes for a riveting read.

When Coffey's book shows us specific places: Alma, Nebraska, Kearney State College, the Republican River, with specific people: Tom Coffey meeting Robert Kennedy at the Racket's Committee investigation, she foreshadows the Great Plains of the 1990s. It's vibrant, cruel, modernly materialistic and can be the kindest place on earth. We don't have to forget those old Dust Bowl stories, but maybe it's time to ease off the generalized geographical and meteorological prerequisite backgrounds, despite their metaphorical usefulness. We have a whole new place to write about, and Coffey's made her—and our—start.

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