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Review of *Too Good a Town* : William Allen White. *Community. and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America* by Edward Gale Agran

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"Too Good a Town": William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America. By Edward Gale Agran. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 240 pp. \$30.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

In *"Too Good a Town"* Edward Gale Agran demonstrates William Allen White's influence on Americans' view of themselves, especially in the 1920s and 1930s when the "sage of Emporia" was a nationally recognized cultural arbiter. A reader interested in the history of community or middle-class culture, particularly in the Middle West, would find this study useful, but it is of less value to someone more interested in the Great Plains. Occasionally Agran focuses on White's hometown,

Emporia, Kansas, as a distinct geographical location, but his primary purpose is to demonstrate White's embodiment of the town as a broader American ideal.

Agran relies on summaries of White's voluminous writings rather than on close analysis of White's version of community or his rhetoric. Since the author uses the term *rhetoric* in the pejorative sense of amplification or obfuscation, there is no analysis of White's rhetorical conventions. This is disappointing: anyone who has had the good fortune to read White's works knows that as a master rhetorician in the classic sense he used a full arsenal of rhetorical devices to persuade his readers to share his opinions. Similarly, the reader wishes for fewer, shorter summaries and more analysis of White's intimate knowledge of community—the intricate relationship between a community's historical development and the social function of townspeople and a shared culture that is an essential element in White's work, especially in his fiction.

For most of his discussion, Agran relies on White's newspaper editorials and magazine essays to the exclusion of his longer nonfiction, including his engaging studies of his contemporaries in such works as *Masks in a Pageant* and *A Puritan in Babylon*. Because White could examine his subjects more thoroughly in these longer works, their readers learn a great deal about his rhetorical range as well as America's cultural and communal context in the early twentieth century. Any study of White as a writer or commentator needs to include some discussion of them. For now, we must despair that almost all of White's delightful and thought-provoking writing is out of print and we must make do with studies like the one at hand.

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