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Book Review of *Weather Matters: An American Cultural History since 1900* by Bernard Mergen.

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Weather Matters: An American Cultural History since 1900. By Bernard Mergen. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. ix + 397 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Weather Matters is a varied collection of everything sky and weather related, from history, to poetry and art, to the monitoring and impacts of weather-related natural hazards. Mergen states the book is “about the everyday experience of weather and the ways in which those experiences are perceived, marketed, and managed.” The volume is broken into five chapters focused on talking about, managing, seeing, transcribing, and suffering weather.

“Talking about Weather” begins with a historical overview of “weather-bureau weather,” starting with the Congressional creation of a meteorological service administered by the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1870 and ending with a brief introductory discussion of today’s National Weather Service (he expands on this discussion throughout the remaining chapters). In between, Mergen discusses a number of issues related to weather and forecasting. He claims weather in conversation is the “great equalizer”—it’s a safe topic, it allows everyone to be an expert, and it doesn’t require action because there’s

nothing you can do about it. The chapter on “Managing Weather” includes topics as varied as wind and solar power; atmospheric pollution and the tragedy of the commons; the development and use of technology for monitoring and predicting weather; education; broadcast meteorology; and weather modification.

“Seeing Weather” is an eclectic collection of subjects ranging from deep ecology and the psychology of place, to the sky and weather as portrayed in a full spectrum of art media. The fourth chapter, “Transcribing Weather,” focuses on written works, primarily poetry and novels. Chapter 5, “Suffering Weather,” is the author’s account of an eight-day storm-chasing tour, which took participants from Colorado through Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Kansas. Mergen was able to see several tornadoes, which he describes as “sensual and sensuous.” Discussion of the tour is interspersed with descriptions of severe weather in general (tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, thunderstorms and lightening, etc.), other weather-related “extremes” (humidity, air pollution, heat waves, etc.) and related human health issues.

Perhaps the most surprising and interesting chapters of the book (from this reviewer’s standpoint) are the third and fourth, which discuss visual art and written accounts of sky- and weather-related topics and issues. Excerpts from poems and novels (including from the works of Ted Kooser and Willa Cather), illustrations and descriptions of photographs, paintings, motion pictures, large works of landscape art—such as the Lightning Field, a one mile by one kilometer grid of 400 stainless-steel poles in New Mexico, which Mergen claims is “spectacular during a thunderstorm”—and much more bring the personal, cultural, and regional experience each of us has with nature and weather to bear in a very real and out-of-the-ordinary way.

Mergen’s thoroughly researched volume is backed up with 50 pages of notes and an extensive selected bibliography. **Donna L. Woudenberg**, *National Drought Mitigation Center, School of Natural Resources, University of Nebraska–Lincoln*.