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A. B. Emrys

University of Nebraska at Kearney

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OPEN TO HORROR

THE GREAT PLAINS SITUATION IN CONTEMPORARY THRILLERS BY E. E. KNIGHT AND BY DOUGLAS PRESTON AND LINCOLN CHILD

A. B. EMRYS

From the agoraphobic prairie where the father of Willa Cather's *Ántonia* kills himself, to the claustrophobic North Dakota town of Argus devastated by storm in Louise Erdrich's "Fleur," to Lightning Flat, the grim home of Jack Twist in Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," much Great Plains literature is situational, placing human drama in the context of historical or contemporary setting. Isolation, fierce weather, and inherent pressures on survival remain primary, and the Plains is a character in itself that appears as a presence, whether foregrounded or ghostly, in works that cannot help

but evoke the Great Plains then and now. The Plains' presence is well documented in literary studies of major and minor Plains authors, and in overviews such as Diane Quantic's *The Nature of the Place*.¹ Much less attention has been paid to the Great Plains in popular fiction beyond the study of Western novels. Two contemporary novels, both part of widely popular series that are well received critically, demonstrate how well the Great Plains' physical situation itself, as well as its own history of bloody behavior, dialogues with classic components of horror fiction.

This receptivity to the syntax of horror enables these writers' contemporary horror thrillers to generate dialogue between their genre conventions and Great Plains' history and geography. E. E. Knight's post-apocalyptic *Choice of the Cat* (2004) chiefly dialogues with Plains past, evoking the elements of frontier and pioneer Westerns in a speculative context that also relies on Plains space. *Still Life with Crows* (2003), by the writing duo of Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, establishes a more wholly satisfying interaction with both Plains physicality and culture that becomes a narrative of healing as well as violence. Together,

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A. B. Emrys' critical work on popular fiction has appeared in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Popular Culture Review*, *Storytelling: A Critical Journal of Popular Narrative*, and *Clues: A Journal of Detection*. She teaches writing and a class on horror literature at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

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the two novels illustrate how receptive the Great Plains situation is to a variety of fiction categories.

CORN AND CAVERNS IN KANSAS

In Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child's *Still Life with Crows*, a dying small town surrounded by a thousand square miles of corn may be cursed by a past massacre, blighted by genetic plant experimentation, or simply stalked by a serial killer who is one of the town's own. This writing pair links three major narrative arcs of horror—mad science, supernatural events, and stalker/slasher murders—directly to the history and landscape of the Plains. The novels of Preston and Child offer many insider pleasures through references to the great writers of horror, and no fan could fail to recognize the opening of *Still Life with Crows*, with its sinister, rustling corn, as a reference to Stephen King. Douglas Preston confirmed to me that this is their most King-like book.²

King was one of the first modern horror writers to utilize the isolation of small towns as sites for sins of the past and for present-day terrors. Though his principal setting is Maine, King also perceived the possibilities of the Plains. His 1976 story "Children of the Corn"³ was written after King's travel through central Nebraska by car to and from Colorado where he set *The Shining*.⁴ King said in a later interview discussion of horror settings, "I also really like Nebraska. It's made a tremendous impression on me. All those wide-open spaces and that big, big sky. Very strange. Very Lovecraftian."⁵ In King's story a quarreling couple taking the back roads gets lost not far from Grand Island. They stumble across a dead town, Gatlin, whose church has been strangely transformed. This discovery is framed by ranting radio preachers the tourists have heard, as the couple deduces that the town's congregation has begun worshipping "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" and cutting down its followers at the ripe age of nineteen, as well as sacrificing any heathen trespassers they happen upon. To some extent, the story reads as a Great Plains Wicker Man.

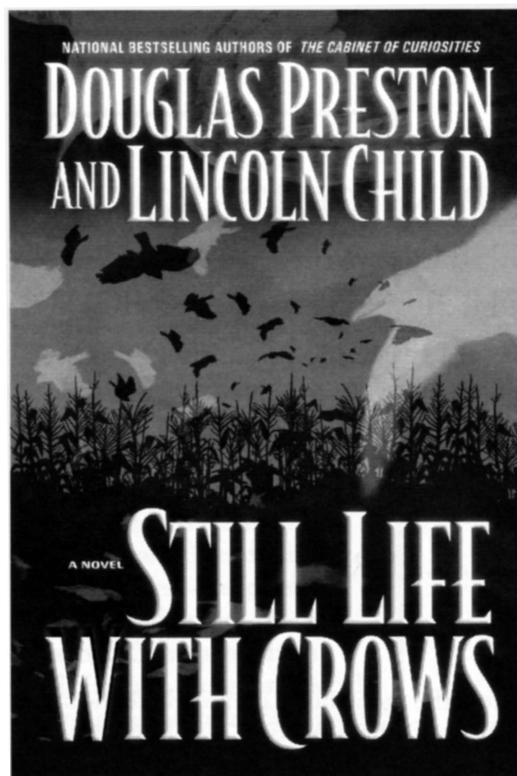


FIG. 1. Cover of *Still Life with Crows*. Reprinted by permission of Grand Central Publishing.

Its most effective scenes are chases through the almost sentient corn to a clearing where a grisly crucifixion has taken place. The corn-worship hardly rings true, however, even as a speculation about the Midwest, since conservative evangelism would be highly unlikely to take such a pagan turn. King was right to make the protagonist a tourist, since that was how King himself knew the Plains. Preston and Child adapted from this story the eerie cornfields that conceal stalkers and reveal gruesome murders in sudden clearings. They reset the story in a Kansas town far more authentically detailed than King's, while infusing it with their characteristic broad spectrum of horror plots.

Preston and Child did not pick up the religion-run-wild theme, though they make an oblique allusion to it through another King connection. In King's first novel, *Carrie*, the

title character is abused and isolated by her fanatically religious mother, who would have been at home in “Children of the Corn.” Preston and Child rescue this child in *Still Life*, in the guise of a goth girl named Corrie, whom their detective saves, in a literal sense, from a drunken but unreligious mother while also enabling her to get out of the town where she’s a rejected scapegoat. *Still Life* also resolves the situation of a second, more severely rejected and isolated child abused by fanatic purity. The double rescues develop the tale of violence into a narrative that also includes healing and resolution that eventually extends to the town as well.

Preston and Child have always written an interesting blend of the three main focuses of horror—mad science, supernatural, and stalker. The core of their novels turns out to be pursuit through labyrinthine spaces, including in other novels the subbasement of the Museum of Natural History (*Relic*), abandoned subway tunnels beneath Manhattan (*Reliquary*), and a lost Anasazi village hidden in tortuous canyons (*Thunderhead*).⁶ Their supernatural overtones turn out chiefly to have rational, if bizarre, explanations, and often function as red herrings to build suspense. Mad science has a more complex role in their books, occupying much important space in *Relic* and *Reliquary*, and much less in *Thunderhead*.

In *Still Life*, the fourth book in this linked group of novels, their plays on all three areas are intimately connected to Plains history and geography. In the dying small town of Medicine Creek, Kansas, the supernatural atmosphere stems from local violent history variously referred to as the “Medicine Creek Massacre” or “The Curse of the Forty-Fives.”⁷ This event had taken place as settlement began to roll beyond the eastern Kansas frontier. As retaliation for tribal raids during the Civil War, a vigilante group called the Forty-Fives formed in Dodge, Kansas, consisting of “murderers and crooks pushed out of settled towns.” Their cowardly attacks on the women and children of Cheyenne villages provoked a lethal counter-attack by a mysterious band of Cheyenne warriors who seemed to appear from nowhere and

disappear the same way, surprising and massacring the band of outlaws, one of whom survives to tell the tale of the “ghost warriors” and how the last-killed “Forty-Fiver” cursed the land around the mounds where the attack took place.⁸

The mystery of where the tribal warriors came from and disappeared to is something the novel’s principal detective, FBI special agent Pendergast, investigates by means of Chong Ran, a Bhutanese mental discipline that creates the past so vividly as to provide a “memory crossing” (227, 240) to the scene of the massacre. In doing so, Pendergast erases the present-day cornfields and replaces them with the Plains of the past.

First the light returned. Then the grass rolled over the landscape, virgin tallgrass prairie dotted with prairie aster, wild poppies, cornflowers, rocketweed, and lupine. Then he piled back the bronze mountains of cloud, the rocky outcrops, the shady creek wandering free across the Great Plains. Now other things began to take shape: a herd of buffalo in the far distance; shallow water pans blazing silver in the late afternoon light; and everywhere an infinite array of wild grasses, undulating from horizon to horizon like a great rippling sea of green. (228-29)

The past comes to life in his meditation, but the present Plains occupy most of the novel.

Mad science, for instance, appears in the guise of bioengineered corn. Medicine Creek is competing for an experimental site that would provide desperately needed jobs. The academic scientist in charge of the project is an obnoxious snob who ignores the dangers of the proposed planting; he makes a perfect victim in the series of grotesque killings, while his murder and the competition between towns seem to offer motive. He is, indeed, another of the characteristic speculators Diane Quantic identified as a major character group in Plains literature, who have come to the grasslands solely for profit.⁹ Here both violent, unresolved history and contemporary science as speculator contextualize and offer possible explanations for the murders.

But Plains past and present merge as the authors resolve the mysteries and reveal the horror by descending literally within the land for the final climactic stalking by and of the perpetrator. Medicine Creek is the site not only of sinister, isolating cornfields and the spooky Grow-Bain turkey plant with its "blood room"—both scenes of murder in the novel—but also of Krauss's Kaverns, a family-owned tourist attraction discovered in 1901 and fallen into obscurity. The caverns' history includes moonshine wars between rival families from rival towns that complicate the novel's present-day interactions. But simply because the townspeople have always known about the caves, they are taken for granted. Everyone in town has seen them at one time or another, generally as children, and forgotten them. When the detective's local assistant, Corrie, reenters the cavern called "The Giant's Library," "She remembered that, as a kid, she'd thought the place really *was* a giant's library" (273). Other sites within the caverns include "The Krystal Cathedral," "The Bottomless Pit," and "The Infinity Pool."

The roadside hokiness of the names helps to obscure the importance of the place until late in the book, as the detective, his assistant, and the sheriff each separately grasps the implications of place. The limestone caverns beneath the town become the final site of horror and solution as the killer stalks the sheriff and his deputies, as well as Pendergast and his local assistant. As in many a work by Poe and his disciple H. P. Lovecraft, all is revealed once we descend below, even the curse of the Forty-Fives. The caves also ironically save the town, drawing national attention not only to the killings but to the spectacular natural formation, which becomes a magnet for geologists, spelunkers, and tourists. Once its shame is revealed and cleansed, Medicine Creek revives.

To further enhance the Plains context of the climax, the final descent takes place not merely on a dark and stormy night, but during a hell's-a-poppin' force-3 Plains dust storm rages aboveground.

The dark brown wall bore down on town after town, engulfing one after the other. . . . The great mountain chain of clouds flattened against the tropopause, spreading out into a series of massive, anvil-shaped thunderheads. . . . On the underside of the storm, ugly, bulging mammatus pouches appeared: bellwethers for heavy rainfall, hail, windbursts, and tornadoes. (288-89)

The storm's description and progress occupies several pages as it becomes a metaphoric character taking part in the final stalking. It mirrors above the uncharted labyrinth below as an out-of-control force of nature.

In connecting the three driving motives of horror to the Great Plains, Preston and Child reveal an acute awareness of the history, geography, and climate of the Plains and the potential of each for violence. They, like Knight, are highly sensitive to place, and their work features an amount of description unusual in action fiction. Preston has ridden Coronado's route in New Mexico and is a member of the Long Riders' Guild, a group that has ridden 1,000 miles or more on horseback, and the two authors have traveled together to research locations.¹⁰

Still Life is the only one of their highly situational novels to be set in the Plains, yet they demonstrate considerable sensitivity to historical and contemporary nuances of place. Most notable is their classic confrontation of a town in tension with its environment. Medicine Creek is one of those Plains towns that grew up with insufficient means to sustain itself, and one that has shrunk but not yet given up. The inhabitants believe corn, evoking the Plains as garden, will save them, but in fact it is a natural formation, Krauss's Kaverns, that enables the detectives to solve the murder and the town to survive. The caverns certainly are a typical Preston and Child subterranean site, but one as perfectly organic to its setting as the museum basement in *Relic*. The overlay of tourist attraction on this natural wonder well represents human attempts to limit and control Plains vastness. At the same time, its past as a moonshine operation and its present as the secret home of a shunned child

exhibits the constrictions of small-town culture that attempt even in the present to control its residents, including the misfit goth girl, Corrie. Ultimately, these overlays fail as the newly uncovered vastness beneath Medicine Creek shifts from its dark secret to its saving grace.

SAVING THE FUTURE PLAINS FROM ALIENS

E. E. Knight's Vampire Earth series is *The Red Badge of Courage* as written by H. P. Lovecraft, one jacket quote reads. Knight himself has said he originally created this world for his gaming group, and he called it "sort of *Omega Man* as realized by George A. Romero with French Resistance flair."¹¹ He has often emphasized that his series is setting-driven. *Choice of the Cat*, the second of the series, takes place half a century into occupation by shape-shifting invaders, the Kur, who bring with them horrific alien creatures, especially the deadly "reapers," who turn out to be the origin of vampire legends. In it, the Plains, including Nebraska, have become a gulag policed by the Kur. The isolating distances provide protection up to a point through traditional western independence and summary justice, while the former capital in Lincoln is run by Kurian lords and their horrific creatures. The Kur occupy with a vengeance the role of Quantic's "speculator"; they have come literally to reap the enslaved descendents of settlers and ranchers.

A chief beauty of Knight's series lies in his vividly depicted geographical introductions to chapters in which setting shifts to a new locale, reinforcing place as character. Knight's series settings begin near the boundary waters, move to the Ozarks, and eventually range as far south as New Orleans and as far west as Oregon, with a detour to Jamaica. These several-page detailed portraits are both lyrical and dynamic, making place very much an actor in the ensuing narrative of fierce resistance, led by humans who have been physically altered by a more benevolent group of the aliens into "wolves," "cats," and "bears" with heightened senses and strength. Knight's introduction to the Nebraska Sandhills in *Choice of the Cat*

uses the common oceanic prairie metaphor to infuse a futuristic western Nebraska situation with Plains history once more.

The Sand Dunes, September: Stretching north from the Platte River is the rolling, empty expanse of Nebraska's dunes. . . . They start to the west, and like the ocean, the great rollers are found the farthest out, thousand-foot-high, wind-rounded ridges a mile across and ten miles long, almost all running east-west according to the prevailing winds. East from the great ridges are smaller hills of varying squiggled shapes but still mostly long and thin. These gradually fade off into tiny steep hillocks, as the great rollers of the Atlantic turn into the chop of the English Channel, So like little waves are these hills that the residents use a nautical term for them: choppers. . . . Game is plentiful, mule deer bound through the long grass like giant jackrabbits. . . . But the residents of the Dunes ride with rifles for reasons other than shooting game.

They hunt the minions of Kur.¹²

The "Trekkers" of the sand dunes live in nomadic wagon encampments that move with their cattle herds; they call their rolling settlements after their brands. As Knight's series hero, the half-Sioux David Valentine scouts alien activity with his "cat" partner, they attempt to warn a group of Trekkers about an impending assault on the dunes camps, who have been immune to Kurian rule through their isolation and mobility.

In the narrative of attack and defense that follows, the Trekkers literally circle the wagons, this time not against tribal warriors but turncoat "jacks" and the aliens' most fearsome weapon, the vampire-like reapers. It is here that the ready dialogue between Western formula and horror elements operates most clearly. In interviews, Knight has directly acknowledged his debt to the syntax of frontier fiction.

Probably the single genre that most influences VE [Vampire Earth] is Westerns, oddly

enough. Like Warring States Samurai stuff and Pirate-age books, Westerns (and my dystopic post-apocs) are stories of either a lawless land or one where justice is decided by the strong. There's plenty of room for your hero to be heroic in that kind of setting.¹³

John G. Cawelti, in his study of the Western's basic ingredients, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, goes further in connecting geography and Western theme.

Four characteristics of the Great Plains topography have been especially important: its openness, its aridity and general inhospitality to human life, its great extremes of light and climate, and paradoxically, its grandeur and beauty. These topography features create an effective backdrop for the action of the Western because they exemplify in visual images the thematic conflict between civilization and savagery and its resolution.¹⁴

Knight's emphasis on frontier justice and his evocation of the Sandhills reinforce each other in this dynamic section.

The Western frame of the attack sequence, in the physical context of the Sandhills as the wagon master organizes resistance, young men come of age, scouts report in, and there's even a brink-of-doom romance for Val, is recognizable to the point of nostalgia for fans of classic frontier films such as those by John Ford, even with the irony of Val's native ancestry. (Here the role of "savage" is displaced onto the aliens.) The episode is built on the classic alternating attack and pursuit narrative Cawelti identified as a staple of Western plots,¹⁵ as Val and his free-range partner fight hand to hand with the dreadful "reapers," whose joints bend backward and whose "tongue" can penetrate a skull. They are vulnerable only to beheading or otherwise severing the spinal cord, and here as in other encounters with reapers, Val's more "savage" parang, a type of machete, is as valuable as a machine gun.

The mechanics of the attack, however, clearly parallel Mad Max-style scavenged weaponry and salvaged vehicles, well suited to the isolated and wide-open Plains. Similarly, the central Nebraska train system, from McCook to Grand Island, is being used by the Kurian Order's quisling soldiers, among them a new cadre flying a "twisted cross" or swastika. Even in a future ruled by aliens, getting across Nebraska is an issue. Val and his partner assume local identities and hitch rides to gather information. It is after jumping off a train near Ogallala that Val and his companion wade the Platte and make their way to the Trekkers. Grand Island, Kearney, and other Nebraska towns are mentioned on the route.

Ultimately, the most speculative (and least Western) parts of the novel take least advantage of landscape, as they occur in the all-but-destroyed cities in eastern Nebraska. Ruins are an integral site of horror, both ruins from the past and ruins newly created, and the book's climax occurs in "the burnt out husk" of Omaha. After the wagoners' battle, Val drives an old truck from Broken Bow to the "picturesque country north of Blair" and walks into Omaha, where he finds an unexpected ally in the shell of a McDonald's within the occupied city. With this support he takes the fight directly to the Kurians in the old Strategic Air Command base at Bellevue where the twisted cross now flies, "its spiderish black and white design stark and forbidding against the blue of Omaha's skies."¹⁶

There is much enjoyment in watching the book's bravura action take place in recognizable Nebraska places, as well as in seeing the Trekkers merge the historical and futuristic Sandhills situation. Knight's palpable love of landscape revivifies the Great Plains situation to fresh effect, as well as the Western syntax to which it pays homage. His post-holocaust atmosphere, deliberately reminiscent of the Mad Max films and books such as *I Am Legend* and *The Stand* (which also has Nebraska scenes),¹⁷ evokes the isolation and monsters of horror in a seamless overlay with Westerns and the adaptable Plains situation. Many of the same elements that color Nebraska's past and

present also operate here, especially passage through wide-open space that both protects and endangers.

Knight deals much less with towns in his series. Towns and cities are controlled by the aliens and their collaborators, and so Valentine's brief sojourns in them typically end with violent escapes. Knight avoids town issues in this novel by making the Trekkers nomadic and dodges the presence of cities by destroying them. It is the landscape and its action possibilities that interest him in this series, especially the mythic frontier of Westerns that frame heroic narrative so well.

As both *Still Life with Crows* and *Choice of the Cat* demonstrate, the Plains offer a natural setting not only for realistic and historical fiction but also for speculative horror and contemporary stalker terror as well. It does so because of the ongoing dialogue between the Plains situation and familiar elements of horror, including agoraphobic as well as enclosed spaces, towns and even cities struggling to impose control on vast territory, and highway transportation systems attempting to safely bridge vast geographic isolation in which there may well be monsters and blood. Knight has matched his nomadic Sandhills ranchers to the still-resonating past of independent yet vulnerable settlers to house the freewheeling resistance fighters of a speculative future. Preston and Child have utilized the dialogue possible with the present and past Plains for a narrative of healing neglected characters and a dying town as well as for horror thrills. That these authors can do so successfully underscores the resilient and resonant situation of the Great Plains as it continues in twenty-first-century fiction.

NOTES

1. Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

2. Douglas Preston, Guest writer presentation (Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, San Diego, CA, March 23-26, 2005).

3. Stephen King, "Children of the Corn," in *Night Shift* (New York: Signet, 1976).

4. Stephen King, *The Shining* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

5. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, eds., *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King* (New York: Warner, 1988), 138.

6. Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *Relic* (New York: Tor, 1995); Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *Reliquary* (New York: Tor 1997); Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *Thunderhead* (New York: Warner, 1999).

7. Preston and Child may be referencing the Colorado Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, in which eight members of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-Four were killed along with hundreds of others in a despicably violent raid by drunken soldiers. The language of "creek massacre" and "the forty-fives" is reminiscent, but if so, the massacre is recast in time, outcome, and most importantly in their novel, place.

8. Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *Still Life with Crows* (New York: Warner, 2003), 162-63. Further citations to *Still Life with Crows* appear in parentheses in the text.

9. Diane Dufva Quantic, "They Would See Nothing: The Deep Roots of Violence on the Great Plains" (Keynote talk presented at "Death, Murder, and Mayhem: Stories of Violence and Healing on the Plains," the 34th Interdisciplinary Great Plains Studies Symposium sponsored by the Department of English, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and the Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Omaha, NE, April 16-19, 2008).

10. Douglas Preston, "Interview," November 25, 2005, in "Authors on the Web," *Bookreporter*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors> (accessed March 30, 2008); Lincoln Child, "Interview," August 31, 2004, *Hachette Book Group USA*, <http://www.hachettebookgroupusa.com/authors> (accessed March 30, 2008).

11. Rob Bedford, "Interview with E. E. Knight," May 3, 2005, *SFFWorld*, <http://www.sffworld.com/interview/107p0.html> (accessed March 30, 2008).

12. E. E. Knight, *Choice of the Cat* (New York: Roc, 2004), 187-88.

13. Bedford, "Interview with E. E. Knight," 3.

14. John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 2nd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1984), 67.

15. *Ibid.*, 94.

16. Knight, *Choice of the Cat*, 305.

17. Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (New York: Walker, 1954); Stephen King, *The Stand* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). *The Stand* utilizes corn-field scenes as horror sites in parallel to those in "Children of the Corn" and in Preston and Child's novel, as well as making the savior of the new order a little old black lady from Nebraska.