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Review of *The Big Empty; Contemporary Nebraska Nonfiction Writers* Edited by Ladette Randolph and Nina Shevchuk-Murray

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The Big Empty: Contemporary Nebraska Non-fiction Writers. Edited by Ladette Randolph and Nina Shevchuk-Murray. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xii + 302 pp. \$21.95 paper.

Ladette Randolph and Nina Shevchuk-Murray have assembled a powerful collection of essays in *The Big Empty*, so titled because some people might describe Nebraska in that manner. This text counters that perspective. Each essay writer (save one) has published one book of nonfiction, and the expertise of each is apparent. Included are writers who seem like old friends through works—Ted Kooser, Lisa Knopp, Bill Kloefkorn, Roger Welsch, John Janovy Jr., Paul Johnsgard, Joe Starita, Ruth Raymond Thone, Mary Pipher. Other voices are mixed in, and the result is a fluid collection. Topics include Native American issues, J. Sterling Morton's tree-planting efforts, growing up in an Omaha project, Solomon Butcher's photography, the Vietnam War, the process involved in mending fence, the disappearance of the buffalo, organic farming, and the commute between Omaha and Lincoln.

Fine editing skills provide an arrangement of essays in an order where topic flows into related topic without needing demarcation. Perhaps an effective subtitle could be "Everything You Wanted to Know about Nebraska but Didn't Know Whom to Ask." I've lived in this state

for thirty-five years, and throughout my read I found myself thinking, “I didn’t know that” or “How interesting.” I also found myself wishing two things: that this text—or segments of it—will be used in classrooms to further students’ knowledge of the history, sociology, and culture of the Plains, specifically Nebraska; and that I could assemble all of these authors in my living room to continue the discussion their essays have invited.

The Big Empty gives readers “The Big Picture.” It also gives a real boost to the essay

form which I believe any reader will find enjoyable throughout the text, regardless of topic. The targeted audience is the lay reader, so one need not be a biologist nor an anthropologist nor a sociologist nor a historian to enjoy the information presented. Bravo to the editors for a job well done.

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