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Review of *Twilight Innings: A West Texan on Grace and Survival* By Robert A. Fink

Paul Christensen
Texas A&M University

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Twilight Innings: A West Texan on Grace and Survival. By Robert A. Fink. Foreword by R. S. Gwynn. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006. xvi +152 pp. Notes, \$24.95.

Twilight Innings is an interesting book of essays for reasons that may go beyond the intention of Robert Fink, a poet and creative writing teacher at Hardin-Simmons University, a small, religious school in West Texas. Fink writes glowingly of his faith, the baseball games he loves to watch, the students he teaches in his "open-admissions" poetry writing seminars, his wife's accomplishments as a school counselor.

What we learn is how this part of the Southern Plains hammers people into the same shape in its tiny oasis, Abilene. They share in common the Baptist religion, patriotism, a hard-edged conservative outlook, and a distrust of new ideas. Some of these twenty-five essays look back on Fink's East Texas childhood, others recount his days as a Marine lieutenant in 'Nam; the rest are about his love of jogging, his wife's social duties, a favorite barbecue joint, summer baseball games. But they all have to do with the sense of belonging: serving country, joining in community affairs, teaching well. The Plains are wondered at, not embraced. In a message to prospective writing students, Fink notes, "When confronted with the infinite, the writer hunkers down."

What Fink doesn't say is what the hunkering leads to. There is no nature mythology in this book, no connection to Native cultural visions. This is a settlement of European descendants who have not made their peace with the environment; they live on it and preserve their customs and traditions in spite of it. In "Notebook Entries: George Newman's Guadalupe Mts. Field Trip," the focus is not on the mountain ecosystem or geology, but on the complaints of the students caught out in a rain storm who decamp early for home. In "Sunday Will Never Be the Same," Fink's whimsical instruction in Sunday school gets him fired. The piece wants to be playful, but the iron rules of church decorum seem a little ominous as he is rehired and put under another teacher's supervision.

Fink's prose can be personal and engaging; his candor is a kind of innocence as he describes his passions for soldiering, teaching, and baseball. To go around with him to his classes, his meals, his lament over a missing Coke machine is to feel an odd mixture of enthusiasm and repulsion. You might not want to live there, but this local booster of his town makes thinking about it a disturbing pleasure.

PAUL CHRISTENSEN
Department of English
Texas A&M University