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Review of *Chokecherry Places: Essays from the High Plains* By Merrill Gilfillan

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Chokecherry Places: Essays from the High Plains.
By Merrill Gilfillan. Boulder, CO: Johnson
Books, 1998. Works consulted. 127 pp. \$12.50
paper.

For fifteen years, poet Merrill Gilfillan has been driving "in long misshapen circles" through the High Plains of the American West. The result is *Chokecherry Places: Essays from the High Plains*, a collection not so much of essays as of poetic meditations on prairie landscape and fauna recalling in its intentions passages of Ezra Pound, Rainer Maria Rilke, and John Donne.

What is also impressive about this book—winner of the 1999 Western States Book Award for non-fiction—is its lack of pretense, its avoidance of highly politicized cause or preservationist polemic so common in recent prose explorations of a sense of place. As with Ezra Pound's writings about his travels in France, Merrill Gilfillan's motive is "To experience, through that devoted 'inspective en-

ergy,' the exultation imbued in that landscape and only in that landscape."

In these twelve meditations, readers share a broad range of places and their personal meanings, "glimpsed, passerine places, rootless as petrels," as the author terms them: a lunching spot in the prairie short grass, with a long view to the Bighorns, near Pine Tree Station, Wyoming; the abundant waterfowl migrations along the Platte River in Nebraska in March. Down south along the Republican River on the Kansas-Colorado line, an older Ute man hunts yellow flickertails for feathers to complete a ceremonial fan. Up on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation and in the ancient Hidasta country in the upper Dakotas, the object is to ponder the mythic power of grassy buttes and chokecherry-thick creek bottoms the author discovers and rediscovers in the oceans of grass.

Along the way, this book shares anecdotes from history, snatches of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Blackfoot songs, bits of local lore and inscribed mythology. Merrill Gilfillan will cause any reader to pause with him and wonder in lyrically sophisticated language at these places the rest of the world has passed by seldom remarking. There are a few too many listings of the names of birds—just the names without enough description—requiring a field guide to accompany the reading. Still, these prose meditations succeed in their aspirations, as Gilfillan plainly states them: "What lives in a landscape beyond the hand-to-mouth is an exultation, over and over, with that landscape, an exultation yielding, sooner or later in any population, Song."

Chokecherry Places: Essays from the High Plains best succeeds in its evocations of prairie song. These deeply personal observations of out-of-the-way places in the American grasslands combine into a rewarding, spiritually uplifting reading experience.

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