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Review of *The Last Prairie: A Sandhills Journal* By Stephen R. Jones

Ron Block

Mid-Plains Community College, rdblock@ziggy.mpcc.cc.ne.us

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The Last Prairie: A Sandhills Journal. By Stephen R. Jones. New York: McGraw-Hill/ Ragged Mountain Press, 2000. Map, bibliographic essay, acknowledgments. xii + 242 pp. \$19.95.

In *The Last Prairie: A Sandhills Journal*, naturalist Stephen R. Jones provides an informed and passionate portrait of the Sandhills of western Nebraska, "the last remaining relic of the boundless grasslands that once extended from the Missouri River to the Rocky Moun-

tains." These grass-fixed sand dunes have not only provided Jones with his subject but also a style, since these twenty essays are as graceful, diverse, and startling in their transitions as the Sandhills themselves.

A representative essay may begin in first person, emphasizing the sensual complexity of directly experiencing the Sandhills. But then by subtle shifts and turns, Jones develops his theme so that the diversity of the place unfolds. In "Grass," for example, he moves from native grasses to meadow voles. Creatures in the sod then segue into settlers in sod houses and the cultural history of settlement. Similarly, in "Night," a meditation on our loss of contact with "that mystic period between sunset and sunrise," Jones connects the mythology of stars to the migrations of fireflies. A lightning storm then provides a prologue to the remarkable dance of the evening primrose with its attending moth, where we come to rest again in sensual delight: "Through half-closed eyes I finally follow the moth's flight as it dives into the milky folds of a waiting blossom. It emerges seconds later, its fuzzy head dripping nectar and its dusky wings spewing a cloud of gold pollen. When I open my eyes fully the moth is gone and the pollen no more visible than grains of stardust."

In reading these well-researched essays, one soon discovers how appropriate each bold transition is, especially in describing a landscape of paradoxes and contrasts. Through these poetic juxtapositions, Jones can explore the biological, geological, and social interconnections that make a place like the Sandhills not only physically possible but also meaningful.

Acknowledging our transitory relationship with an environment that is itself transitional, Jones asks, "What will this area become in a thousand years--forest, grassland, or sand desert?" For a landscape as malleable as the Sandhills, that question cannot be answered. But for this moment, whether describing the small hamlet of Purdum, the dance of the grouse, or the spiritual geography of wind, soil, ancient oceans, and spring fed rivers, Jones gives a lyric voice to the interdependency not

only of species and biomes but also of stories and ideas.

RON BLOCK
Department of English
Mid-Plains Community College