

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2001

Review of *Buffalo Jump: A Woman's Travels* By Rita Moir

Sharon Butala

Eastend, Saskatchewan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Butala, Sharon, "Review of *Buffalo Jump: A Woman's Travels* By Rita Moir" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2266.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2266>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Buffalo Jump: A Woman's Travels. By Rita Moir. Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 1999. 160 pp. \$12.95 paper.

Buffalo Jump is a surprisingly good little book. I say "surprising" because it's such an unassuming, small paperback, as if its publisher didn't expect much of it; as a result, the reader may expect the same. Thankfully, I was wrong. It's a memoir, a travel document, a story about families, and a story about stories. It's a song of praise for the writer's mother and grandmother—in fact, for prairie women in general and the hardships of their lives in those generations. Unfortunately, it loses power because it tries to do so much, while nevertheless managing to be nearly always interesting. Rita Moir spent many years as a journalist, and the anecdote, the scene, is where she works best, cutting and sharpening each incident until she achieves an intensity that causes the reader to lose herself in it.

She has wanted to write beautifully, lyrically, I would say, but those many passages where she's tried to rise above the facts and the "story" were, for this reader, merely annoying in their lack of concreteness. I never really "bought" the buffalo metaphor she uses either, chiefly because it felt so wrong for my understanding of women's nature, but which is surely her point: that women, too, might have an affinity with big, powerful beasts. (She points out that a female always led the herd.)

In telling women's stories she has set herself the directive of never allowing her characters to see themselves or be seen as victims, but to emphasise instead their courage and

self-reliance in difficult and unfair situations. In doing this she has preferred not to dig too deeply into their emotions, into their *real* feelings—those of conflict and desire and despair as well as joy—and I was left with a sense of a clever, gutsy, occasionally dreamlike drifting over the surface of experience, avoiding the real pain (except for the story about her sister's cruel treatment by medical people where Moir reveals her rage at her sister's suffering, which also becomes real to the reader).

And yet despite Moir's avoidance of the "victim" narrative, it is there anyway, between the lines: the bloody unfairness of so much of women's lives, and the hopelessness of finding an adequate response in a society where everything is stacked against them. The narrative seemed to me riddled with the very pain she refuses to express directly.

Moir has written a compelling, for the most part cheerful memoir, in which she determinedly shuns the traditional line about women's lives, desires, and experiences. I applaud her for that, and for her courage, while wishing she might have found a way within that ethic that did not exclude a greater intimacy with the souls of her characters. If she had added that, this book, with its many strengths, would have gone far.

SHARON BUTALA
Eastend, Saskatchewan