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Review of *The Nature of Home* By Lisa Knopp

Jonathan Ritz

University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

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The Nature of Home. By Lisa Knopp. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xiv + 231 pp. References. \$24.95.

In this collection of personal essays, Lisa Knopp creates a constellation of various non-fiction forms, including memoir, social and natural history, biography, and travel writing, around the central subject of “home”—“what home is, how one might find it, what it means to be at home or away from home or homeless” Brief lexicon entries, consisting of an OED definition of a particular word along with the writer’s musings on the word’s relation to her central subject, serve as interludes between each of the book’s twenty-two essays. The combination of lexicon entries and essays creates a rich and resonant dialectic: an entry on the word “Citizen” is paired with an essay concerning the politics of salt marsh reclamation; “Heaven” serves as a prelude to “My Place of Many Times,” an essay about the writer’s childhood home.

The Nature of Home displays Knopp’s native gifts as an essayist, including her ability to take the most quotidian of moments—shucking soybeans on the back porch, braiding hair—and glean from them important insights about the ways we live. The most compelling part of the book, though, is the narrative account of the writer’s decision to leave a stable university teaching position and return with her two young children to southeastern Nebraska, the region she calls her “belonging-place.” In a culture that considers it commendable to leave home in order to stake a claim in the outside world, Knopp’s decision to defer her academic career in order to return to more familiar terrain comes across as a counter-cultural, even quietly subversive, resolution.

The natural and social history of Nebraska and the Plains region figure prominently in the book. Knopp weaves research into her essays clearly and compellingly, rarely overwhelming her deeper points with facts. (She nicely models Phillip Lopate’s advice, offered in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, that an essayist “graciously inform without humiliating or playing the pedantic schoolmaster.”) While her depiction of the region is generally fond, she isn’t afraid to look soberly at less praiseworthy aspects as well: The essay “Witness” provides an unflinching account of the evening an African American man is executed at the Nebraska State Penitentiary while a celebratory mob in the parking lot guzzles beer and waves racist signs. Knopp’s deep sense of connection to the region makes this cruel demonstration all the more painful and difficult for her to resolve, and provides a realization that deepens and complicates the writer’s understanding of her belonging-place.

JONATHAN RITZ
Department of English
University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown