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Review of *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* by Candace Savage

Susan Naramore Maher  
*University of Minnesota - Duluth*

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Candace Savage and her companion Keith Bell first discovered Eastend, Saskatchewan, on a journey home to Saskatoon from Cody, Wyoming. They planned a brief stopover but ended up hooked on the town, returning for further visits, and finally buying a home. In a sense, Savage has been pursuing a deeper habitation of Eastend for many years. As a recent transplant, she has sought to understand this corner of Saskatchewan across many spatial manifestations and through many layers of cultural existence. A frequent visitor to the Wallace Stegner House, immortalized in Wolf Willow, she has also worked to uproot Stegner’s literary hold on Eastend’s history, to correct his version of settlement, and to challenge what Savage calls Stegner’s “blind spots.”

The landscape around Eastend is spectacular,
and as one of the grasslands’ important scholars (see her Prairie: A Natural History, 2004), Savage provides ample information on geological, ecological, and genetic deep history of the Plains. Eastend anchors a popular T. rex Discovery Centre where visitors learn about eons of the earth’s permutations. The nearby Cypress Hills, ever changeable, fill Savage with wonder and spiritual satisfaction. Still, her book is entitled A Geography of Blood, and however resonantly powerful the juxtaposition of hills and valley through this beautiful region of Saskatchewan, Savage recognizes disturbing layers of loss and violence. Pondering a geological unconformity that marks the erasure of 30 million years, she asks a geologist “where all the lost land had gone.” A geological erasure, a provoking metaphor, compels her to consider cultural unconformities, the gaps in history that cover disturbed lives.

This part of Saskatchewan, where contact between First Nations people and Europeans led to irrevocable change in the Plains, bears the vestiges and scars of recent human history that is anything but benign. Savage’s family settled in this part of Saskatchewan, a place where many humans had lived before. “It is characteristic of the prairies that things hide in plain view,” she comments, and the marks of human passage are among those hidden objects. Stone circles that she and Keith encounter mark a “spectral village,” a slim record of history that could “have been lost . . . sans stories, in anonymous rock piles” had a farmer’s machinery displaced them. Savage is determined to uncover human unconformities and silences, stories that discomfort the progressive face of settlement mythos. The second half of her narrative incisively presents the cruel strategies of displacement that governments on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel pursued to take over country that for millennia had supported Indigenous communities. Massacre sites, resistant encampments, and modern prisons memorialize the struggles of surviving First Nations.

Sacred places continue to draw Cree, Nakoda, Siksika, and Métis people homeward to the Cypress Hills. Savage honors their stories and “home truths.” As a daughter of settlement, she hopes for connection among all people of this place. A realist, she completes her story with words of caution: “This is a story that has to be marked: To Be Continued.” Hers is a bluntly lucid account of the affective landscape around Eastend, a town that continues to inspire writers and to offer lessons that illuminate and chasten.

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER
College of Liberal Arts
University of Minnesota-Duluth