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Book Review: Teaching Places

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Audrey Whitson reaches down and stirs something deep in the soul. Her love of the land is respectful, serious, irresistible. The terrain she captures so vividly on paper as a record of her Alberta pilgrimage moves the heart of any reader who has known and loved the prairies. "The land is calling you, no matter who you are, calling you home." This book truly does call the prairie soul back to its home. Whitson's is a journey that is deeply spiritual, without being orthodox. Her spirituality is articulated as understandable and embodied; it is felt through her language and use of metaphor.

Teaching Places captures the mysticism of the wilderness and the mystery of a diverse landscape. Of particular interest is her pilgrimage to the sand dunes at Wainwright, southeast of Edmonton. Their very presence on this land evokes incredulity, wonderment, and awe. The suspense during Whitson's visit there only heightens the spiritual confrontation of the self and the soul. These meetings are never easy, but when mediated by the beauty and sometimes danger of her natural surroundings, metaphor builds on metaphor; the soul becomes the land, and the changes to the land become the work of the self on the soul. Listen to the land, and you will hear wisdom, Whitson whispers through the text.

The autobiographical content that fills a good portion of the book is not where Whitson shines. Explorations of a few compelling or inspirational characters from her family history may have yielded a more cohesive, satisfying story. One of the book's important lessons, however, is that all families—be they families of persons, flora, or fauna—are interconnected in complicated but important ways.

There is a strong undercurrent of ecological awareness throughout Whitson's writing. Through knowledge, we gain understanding, and through understanding, respect. Respect for the land, the self, the soul, and the recognition and understanding of their interconnectedness are central intents of the journey. We must protect our sacred places, we must protect our land from invasion and destruction. Teaching Places ends with a warning: pay attention. We must listen to the land, the rocks, the trees, and the animals for guidance. We are damaging what is sacred, and this sacredness

is precisely what Whitson exhibits so eloquently.

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