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Review of *Prairie Voices: Process Anthropology in Family Medicine* by Howard F. Stein

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Prairie Voices: Process Anthropology in Family Medicine. Howard F. Stein. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996. xxii+136 pp. Bibliography and index. \$55.00 cloth (ISBN 0-89789-429-4).

Prairie Voices is a volume full of surprises. From the Foreword and Preface I was expecting a deep narrative on how the author lives in and experiences the prairie world and found instead a drawn-out discussion about how the author uses poetry in his medical school practice.

Each of eleven chapters gives some glimpse of the author's understanding of the prairie and its culture. Through his poetry and stories Stein attempts to provide the reader with an appreciation of the essence of the prairie, offering a more holistic understanding. We learn about day, night, weeds, drinking coffee, functioning, dependency, weather, life and death, and other things in terms of what they mean to native Oklahomans, at least as interpreted and conveyed by Stein. His transference is at work as is ours as we read his text.

For some readers completing the book and obtaining the knowledge will be more product, for others, more process. In either case the prairie will be more real and rich in meaning. The reader receives Stein's fictions, however, not real people's narratives. Rather than having an anthropology where the researcher interprets and sums up in a standard way, we have the anthropologist's poems about prairie life. Perhaps these are just another way of summarizing and interpreting data gained from many years of participating in this culture; another way of reporting his field work. Stein, however,

sees his poems as part of his field work. He comments that this approach is different from that used in his previous work or by other anthropologists studying prairie life. I read the poems as at least on some level reporting on his cumulative knowledge based on approximately twenty years of living in Oklahoma.

Stein presents a different way of knowing the prairie. What makes this book unique is that Stein reports on how he uses poems about prairie life as a teaching device in a medical school. He argues that offering his poems to those undergoing medical training provides a safe place—a transitional zone—to allow interpretation and exchange of ideas that is unfettered from more typical medical school pedagogy. It is science and literature together.

Stein begins by presenting three vignettes to illustrate his use of a non-clinical language to explain clinical work. Poetry, Stein argues, is a way back to science when science fails. “When successful, these efforts do not merely provide an observer’s outside vantage to compliment the physicians’ indigenuous position. More profoundly, they uncover hidden cultural understandings and expectations about which the physicians themselves were only dimly aware. They reveal the culture behind the stated culture, and human nature behind both” (p. 2). The imaginative turns out to be practical, pragmatic, American. The too-often antagonistic cultures of literature and science serve each other, in Stein’s view, as self-correcting influences.

In the last chapter Stein comments on cultural relativism and multiculturalism. He questions the dominant views of American academics on multiculturalism and epistemological relativism. Stein argues that according to orthodox relativism, people who do not grow up within a particular culture cannot truly know or interpret that culture and that this is true regardless of how long one is living, immersed, or studying it. Stein’s work as presented here indicates the opposite.

In sum, this is an interesting contribution to the literature. It will be of interest to anthropologists as well as to medical school instructors and students. In processing this text, readers will come to some level of understanding about Oklahoma, prairie life, medical practice, and applied and psychoanalytical anthropology. Can Stein’s methods work elsewhere and in different disciplines? Only time will tell. **Charles B. Hennon**, *Family Studies and Social Work*, Miami University.