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Hard Grass: Life on the Crazy Woman Bison Ranch.

By Mary Zeiss Stange. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. xv + 304 pp. Photographs, resources. \$27.95 cloth.

Ranch wives have traditionally worked “off the place” to bring in needed income, and Mary Zeiss Stange may be their ultimate symbol. A professor of women’s studies and religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, she commutes home to the Crazy Woman Bison Ranch in the sagebrushy southeastern corner of Montana.

Since publishers discovered the West, readers have savored memoirs about difficult lives, and a series of personal essays about a New Jersey woman who raises bison might have sold like buffalo burgers in a tourist joint. Nowhere else, she opines, does the world turn upside down as quickly as on a ranch; characteristically, she doesn’t take the easy route of writing entertaining personal reminiscences.

Twenty years ago, Stange and her husband traded a modest New Jersey house for seven square miles of overgrazed prairie and set out to right the wrongs done to a place that had been mismanaged ecologically as well as environmentally. The restoration begins disastrously with llamas before it proceeds to success with bison. Her narration includes her own experiences, but most of her essays are serious, in-depth studies of the broader topics that constitute life in the great grasslands spreading across the interior of the country. She begins

with prehistory, analyzing the evolution of both plants and animals in the region, before moving on to the often brutal human history. She covers every imaginable subject, from the Buffalo Commons to carnivores and the problems of being a “locavore” in the sagebrush Plains. She looks at the history of the Cheyenne Natives of the region and the current interest in coalbed methane. She contemplates cows, emotional distance, gender stereotypes, mirages, hunting, privacy, weather, and the Montana Dream. Her observations and opinions are solidly buttressed with research, and she lists her primary sources.

Stange’s writing is pithy and precise. Wildlife, she says, “tends to specialize in evanescence.” She reminds the reader often that she is an outsider, but shows how thoroughly she has absorbed the lessons of the land and its people in her *Axioms of Ranch Life*, which might be posted in any western ranch kitchen. Throughout the book she comments on and illustrates painful truths about the western character: Your neighbors will help you fight fire, but they might shoot your puppy.

Wanta buy a little ranch in the West? Before you read those real estate brochures, read this book. **Linda M. Hasselstrom**, *Hermosa, South Dakota*.