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Book Review: *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: *DAKOTA: A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY* by Kathleen Norris, Ticknor & Fields, 1993, 224 pp., $19.95.

On the night I was beginning to write this review, one of the commentators on PBS's *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* said: "Soul is making a comeback." No, it wasn't an evening when they were discussing religion; it was the end-of-1993 wrap-up, and the five or so male and female commentators were talking about the mood of America. Discussion followed about what has driven Americans to this introspection—guns and violence, the state of the economy? Or are introspection and reflection congenital in the American character, thanks to the Puritans? I cannot recall that anything definite was decided on *MacNeil/Lehrer* that night, but all were in agreement that Americans are in search of spiritual answers.

Perhaps the mood of America explains some of the interest in Kathleen Norris' book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. The book is unusual—part memoir, part spiritual journal, part prose poetry, part throwback to Thoreau's *Walden*. And because the book is made up of essays interspersed with very brief "weather reports," each with a date, italicized in the book's table of contents, I was also reminded at times of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* and its brilliant preludes to stories. The weather reports in Norris' book turn a naturalist's eye to facets of the Dakota landscape from January 17 to December 7.

Several themes weave their way through Norris' book: how geography dictates mood and thought; how in-migration to a region brings outsiders who are both welcome and threatening; how small-town gossip is a sign of solidarity and even prayer; how we construct barriers to hide behind—some truths we admit only to ourselves, other truths are admitted for public consumption; how small towns dictate a particular rhythm of life and work. Through all the themes the Dakota winds blow, storms arrive, clouds mass on the horizon and disperse.

Certainly Kathleen Norris takes a considerable risk in writing about North and South Dakota, as I can attest to from a journey I made there in the summer of 1990. More than one person I talked to about my trip, an excursion to find certain important family locations and write about them, said "Too bad your roots aren't somewhere else." Or: "Is anything really out there?" When I lived in Missoula, Montana for two years, I found that people in Montana didn't tell Polish jokes, or Jewish jokes: no, they were North Dakota jokes.

Norris comes to reside in the town of Lemmon, South Dakota, because her grandparents' deaths have vacated their land and the house they built in 1923. Norris' mother grew up in the house but now lives in Hawaii; Norris herself spent summers in Lemmon, though most of her childhood was spent in exotic Hawaii. Rather than have an estate sale, with no one in the family interested except for

Norris and her husband, they leave New York City, and professional lives there, for South Dakota. Friends' reactions are similar to ones I received about my trip: are they crazy? how can they leave a great city for such a barren spot? Norris quietly states the consequences of that big move: "As it turns out, the Plains have been essential not only for my growth as a writer, they have formed me spiritually. I would even say they have made me a human being." Norris and her husband have now lived there for twenty years.

A closer look at two of the book's themes shows Norris's skill as a writer and her interesting, contemplative thinking. What Norris discovers in the Dakotas, despite the common perception of them as a desert, is a rich silence in which she finds room and space to think. She does not think of herself as an ascetic, yet she notes that "The silence of the Plains, this great unpeopled landscape of earth and sky, is much like the silence one finds in a monastery, an unfathomable silence that has the power to re-form you." With some humor, she describes a visit back to New York that shows her altered view of being in a crowd. After the 125-mile drive to an airport in Bismarck, North Dakota, two plane flights, and the grueling ground journey as one can only experience in New York (two hours waiting for luggage, another two for a train), there is a defining moment: "As I stood in this group of strangers, I was happy to be one among many, and a powerful calm came over me. I began to see each of us as a treasure-bearer, carrying our souls like a great blessing through the world. After the relative emptiness of the Plains, partaking in such a feast of humanity was a blessing in itself."

And one of the blessings she finds in the Dakotas, far from the usual New York literary scene and evening readings by poets and fiction writers, is the absence of such a scene—how it throws her back on herself. She finds the Plains people, when she works the Poetry-in-the-Schools circuit, to be receptive to poetry. They are less receptive to seeing their own lives as fertile material for writing, a point Norris makes several times. Even on the road Norris brings along her monastic vision, seeing her life at night in motel rooms as similar to that of "a monk in a cell." Another Dakota blessing? No traffic. The quiet this engenders leaves room for birdsong and the sound of wind.

One historian suggests that the key word for Dakota is "extremes." Certainly Norris finds that to be true, and she steadfastly refuses to resolve such tensions and contradictions. Here's an anecdote she tells that locates pleasure in Plains' stoicism:

> One of my favorite monastic stories concerns two fourth-century monks who "spent fifty years mocking their temptations by saying 'After this winter, we will leave here.' When the summer came, they said, 'After this summer, we will go away from here.' They passed all of their lives in this way." These ancient monks sound remarkably like the farmers I know in Dakota who live in what they laconically refer to as 'next-year country.'

Another blessing Norris celebrates is the richness of ordinary folk and their use of language: "Many farmers I know use language in a way that is as eloquent as it is grammatically unorthodox. Their speech often has great style; they never use the

wrong word or make an error in phrasing. Magnificent old words like *farrow*, common English five hundred years ago, are still in use on the Plains. I even heard an old man use *wain* for wagon, a word that dates back to the Celts. Language here still clings to its local shading and is not yet totally corrupted by the bland usage of mass media." In the desert, then, there are flowers that bloom, a metaphor Norris uses repeatedly.

Not a religious person before this long-ago move to the Dakotas, Norris has become an oblate (or associate), a formal relationship with the Benedictines, specifically with a group of sixty-five monks. Much of the book revolves around Norris' tales of religious folk she knows, educated souls who cling together, a literary community all their own, in the Plains' states. Surely her commentary on contemporary materialistic culture will strike a chord with readers:

> After my first stay in a monastery, where I saw Saturn and its ring through a telescope and watched monks tend their apple orchard and the garden that provides many of their winter vegetables, I happened to go directly to a shopping mall. It was easy to see which was the more unhealthy, otherworldly environment; which place was out of balance and which was, in fact, the most fun.

One of Norris' pleasures in small town life is how one is called to perform tasks otherwise left, in a large city, to specialists. When the pastor of Lemmon's Presbyterian church moves away, she and others in the community are called upon to preach. She finds a taste for it; another of their lay preachers surprises them, too:

> one of our elders, a housewife and proud of it, could lead a very dignified communion service. She also preached several fine devotional sermons, one on the subject of housework. What good is a desert? Well, I believe a desert is where such gifts appear.

A true sense of community arises in the Dakotas, one Norris is bound to heart and soul. As people in the Dakotas need to tell the true stories growing out of their lives, Norris also believes they need to celebrate what their real strengths are. In doing so, they may provide a model of rootedness and community. Is that part of what Americans today search for? Ironically, it may not exist in our densest places, our cities, but in the emptier states where one is called upon, regularly, and partially dictated by weather and geography, to pitch in.

PATRICIA CLARK