

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2006

## Book Review: At Home on This Moveable Earth

David R. Pichaske

*Southwest Minnesota State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Pichaske, David R., "Book Review: At Home on This Moveable Earth" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 74.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/74>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

physical growth and intellectual exploration, of redefining relationships with parents and community, and of laying the foundation for his career as a teacher, scholar, and Nebraska State Poet. Adolescence is the time for what Robert Bly aptly calls “the road of ashes,” a period of metaphorical “basement work in the kitchen” (*Iron John: A Book About Men*). Kloefkorn’s reminiscences focus on basement and earth and tedious physical exertion: excavating a foundation for the Zenda Co-op Grain Elevator one wheelbarrow of dirt at a time, or helping his father dig a basement for the floor furnace, carrying dirt out of the tunnel one calf bucket after another. “Anyone who’s ever tried it,” Bly says, “will quickly note that such bucketing is very slow work.” Don’t let the tornado on the book jacket fool you: adolescence is a time of descent into caves and coal cellars, and of monotonous, tedious, instructional, character-building hard work.

Well, okay, the memoir *does* begin with a tornado story, and it *is* full of siren calls: fancy cars, first romance, job in another town, college, and the life of the mind. And Kloefkorn does find himself answering these calls. But the marvelous—and accurate—part of *At Home on This Moveable Earth* is watching Kloefkorn realize he’s gone a little ahead of himself and then pull back to where a boy belongs at age eighteen.

Nowhere is this grounding more important than in Kloefkorn’s intellectual growth. Voices call in the forms of *The Lincoln Library of Essential Information*, French class, and poets like W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot. These voices are attractive and instructive, and copious literary allusions throughout the book remind us that author Kloefkorn is one smart cookie. But college freshman Kloefkorn must remind himself to keep his feet on the ground, forget the French (“Turning to the French is a form of suicide for the American who loves literature,” writes Annie Dillard in *An American Childhood*), and value Vachel Lindsay over W. H. Auden (“why ‘behind’?” Kloefkorn asks in his freshman composition analysis of “Musée des Beaux Arts”; nobody says “behind”; it’s

*At Home on This Moveable Earth*. By William Kloefkorn. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 207 pp. \$22.95.

In this third of a projected four-book memoir, William Kloefkorn examines his late high school and early college years, a time of

“rump,” “bottom,” maybe even “butt,” but never “behind”). Kloefkorn must listen as well to the “poems” sung by his father while excavating the basement, to the voices in pool hall and café and barber shop, to the voices of radio commercials and, in the book’s concluding story, to the voice of Dodger baseball broadcasters . . . so much more alive and useful than Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Ultimately this book, like Kloefkorn’s previous memoirs *This Death by Drowning* (1995) and *Restoring the Burnt Child* (2003), is a textbook for writers. Its eleven exemplary monologues jumpcut delightfully through time while remaining grounded in place and theme: one good story after another. It also provides useful advice on where to find proper material and voice. Christ on a crutch, even though you’re a hayseed who doesn’t know shit from Shinola, forget *monsieur* and that patient etherized on a table; give them “butt,” “boy howdy” and “John Deere green.” Meditating on the plight of Midwestern writers, Wallace Stegner once remarked, “You grow out of touch with your dialect because learning and literature lead you another way unless you consciously resist. It is only the occasional Mark Twain or Robert Frost who manages to get the authentic American tone of voice into his work.” Kloefkorn belongs *in the company of Twain and Frost* because he gets the authentic American tone of voice into his work. The joy of his poetry and of this memoir is his exploration of the familiar territory of our language and our personal and collective history.

DAVID R. PICHASKE  
 Department of English  
 Southwest Minnesota State University