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Review of *People of the Great Plains* By Peter Miller

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People of the Great Plains. By Peter Miller. Waterbury, Vermont: Silver Print Press, 1996. Photographs, map. viii + 167 pp. \$39.95.

In his introduction, Peter Miller declares of the Great Plains: "This is a metaphysical land." By the time both he and his reader, however, make their way through the visual and literary territory covered in this handsome volume, the Great Plains come to seem far less metaphysical and far more problematical a place. While Miller reinforces some of the traditional mythology of the Plains in his complementary texts and photographs—the elemental and inherent freedom of Plains life, the stubborn resilience of its people, the soul that resides in geography—he also explores the contradictions that have come in time to trouble and radically alter the character of the region.

What Miller intends in this book is an extended portrait of a landscape done both in wide-angle and detailed close-up. *People of the Great Plains* is a book of images rendered in the razor-cut clarity of black and white, but the stories contained in those images (and in the worded narratives of Miller's subjects) suggest the economic and political confusion that is the current reality of this place. Miller fights the good fight against nostalgia; the book is informed by a real tension between what he wishes the Great Plains to be and what he actually finds. His photographs and his stories inscribe an isolated, hyper-rural landscape frightfully conscious of its own mortality. Many of the voices Miller listens to in his 3000 miles of travel are gradually falling silent; we learn that several of his subjects die in the lapsed time between the recording of word and image and their publication. Dying, too, are the small towns Miller purposely goes in search of—LaSalle, Colorado; Velva, North Dakota; Turkey, Texas. A kind of morbidness informs this book, its photos and text singing a kind of elegy-of-place.

Still, Miller preserves important stories. Stark, expansive landscapes reveal the pleasures of line and curve, suggesting the

aesthetic possibilities of the Great Plains. Intimate visual anatomies of weathered faces and sinew-thin bodies—Anglo, Native American, Hispanic—delineate the history of a particular part of the contemporary Plains experience. At the same time, Miller uncovers familiar narratives of persistence and survival telling themselves over again in the vital infusions of new blood to the Plains. This peculiar demography of the Great Plains *isolato* is not an especially happy one, Miller ultimately suggests, but one compelling enough to demand its rendering into art.

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