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Review of *Dakota Circle: Excursions on the True Plains* By Tom Isern

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Institute for Regional Studies Pathmaker Series. Begun as “a collection of new reflective or creative works that address the question of identity on the Great Plains of North America,” the series intends to follow the pathways of daily living and to “help us think about who we are. . . .” Culled from his syndicated “Plains Folk” column, and augmented by further ponderings, Isern’s contribution to the achievement of this goal is significant.

By way of introduction, Isern notes that his musings are not intended “to argue fine points or push grand theses.” And while he hopes that “careful readers will notice some strong themes threaded through the work,” they are “ancillary to the main purpose of the book. The main purpose of the book is not conversion, but delight. The Great Plains are a neat place. We need to remind one another of that now and then.”

Isern’s celebration of the Great Plains is laced with a sense of optimism; survival, renewal, and a strong undercurrent of the spiritual beauty of this place we call home run through *Dakota Circle*. The volume, however, is not so much ethereal in the sense of Kathleen Norris’s *Dakota*, as it is earthly and experiential in the form of John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, William Least Heat Moon’s *Blue Highways*, or Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods*.

Along the pathway to the understanding of place that Isern provides, we meet the likes of Ernie Zahn (Velva, North Dakota), skunk trapper and coyote hunter extraordinaire; Bill Krumwiede (Voltaire, North Dakota), collector of Rumely oil-pull tractors and threshing machines; Elmer and Ardy Wilhelm (Arthur, North Dakota), fence post decorators; the Kuehn clan (Glendive, Montana), harvesters of paddlefish caviar; and the residents of Lemmon, South Dakota, loving conservators of a village of petrified wood.

Beyond the residents of the Great Plains, Isern presents the regions’s physicality. Stucco structures, creep feeders, chokecherry syrup, cable cars, round barns, and giant renderings of Vikings, gorillas, Holsteins, cowboys, Indians, buffalo, pheasants, and empty oil cans

Dakota Circle: Excursions on the True Plains. By Tom Isern. Fargo: Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, 2000. Illustrations, index. 195 pp. \$19.95.

Tom Isern’s *Dakota Circle* marks the inauguration of North Dakota State University’s

take their place alongside stories of blizzards, windbreaks, and crested wheat grass.

Although comments could be made about too frequent editing errors and infinitesimally small photographs, Isern's *Dakota Circle: Excursions on the True Plains* should find a welcome home on the book shelf of any *Great Plains Quarterly* reader and anyone interested in the pageantry of the American experience.

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