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2010

Review of *Waiting for Coyote's Call: An Eco-Memoir from the Missouri River Bluff* By Jerry Wilson

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Dixon, Mark D., "Review of *Waiting for Coyote's Call: An Eco-Memoir from the Missouri River Bluff* By Jerry Wilson" (2010). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2534.

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*Waiting for Coyote's Call: An Eco-Memoir from the Missouri River Bluff.* By Jerry Wilson. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2008. 284 pp. Map, photographs, index. \$24.95.

This book documents its author's move to the bluffs of the Missouri River valley in southeastern South Dakota and his experiences and personal reflections during twenty-five years of life there. In the spirit of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, Jerry Wilson weaves together observations about the natural and human history of the bluffs and reflections—derived from his experiences on the South Dakota bluffs and his childhood on an Oklahoma farm—about how to live ethically on the land and toward its creatures. In so doing, he fashions an intimate tapestry of the Missouri River bluffs and

woodlands that are often underappreciated in the Plains.

Each of the book's five sections is divided into four chapters—each an extended essay. The first section, "Rehomesteading the Prairie," recounts how Wilson and his family purchased forty acres of bluff land and built a geo-solar home. Section two, "Into the Woods," describes personal experiences related to woodlands, water, and darkness. The third and longest section (seventy-one pages), "All my Relatives," devotes chapters to human predecessors on the bluff, both Native and Euro-American, and the animals and plants that live there. "Prairie Home" includes reflections about snow and winter, stones, gardening, and efforts at restoring the bluff land prairie. The final section, "The Bluff and Beyond," examines practices of land degradation (especially the loss of the family farm) that Wilson attributes to the arrogance of human attitudes toward the land. In the penultimate chapter, "Battles beyond the Bluff," Wilson extends his own ethic of land stewardship to struggles over a broader array of social and environmental issues across the state and region. The book ends with a diary of observations of nature on the bluff through the course of a year.

Although Wilson portrays the bluff's natural history in vivid detail, the book's central purpose is to promote an ethic of responsible stewardship of land and respect for wild creatures. In Wilson's view, we are all invaders who leave a mark on the land. The depth and permanence of that mark will depend on whether one chooses to view the land simply as "property" to which one holds rights, or as a "possession" that carries with it the obligation to "implement sustainable practices" and leave the land "at least as healthy as when he or she acquired it . . ." As Wilson cautions, "We have but one moment to exploit the land—or to try in our feeble ways to begin to repay it for all it has given to so many who needed and took so much."

*Waiting for Coyote's Call* will appeal to Great Plains readers, particularly those familiar with the region around southeastern South Dakota. As a resident of Vermillion, just ten miles from

Wilson's bluff, I came away from the book with a deeper appreciation for the woodlands of the bluff and for the settlers who transformed the landscape (for good and ill) and attempted to eke out a living under the harsh conditions of the Northern Plains. But it will also appeal to a broader base, as the significance of the questions raised about the proper relationship of humans to the land have no geographic boundaries. In the words of Aldo Leopold, my land ethic, whether I view myself as a "conqueror" or as a "plain member and citizen" of the land will determine how I live, whether I will be an invader who leaves a lasting mark or a caretaker who will work to reduce or undo the damage done by me or my predecessors.

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