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Review of *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West* edited by Lynn Stegner and Russell Rowland

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West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West. Edited by Lynn Stegner and Russell Rowland. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. xxiii + 392 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

West of 98 is an ambitious and comprehensive collection of personal essays and poems by over sixty contributors who work to define the parameters of the American West: the vast and complex region west of the 98th meridian. As Lynn Stegner explains in the collection's introduction, the goal of the book is to offer a "Greek chorus that might define, remark upon, and otherwise characterize the West as each of [the writers] grew to know it, and equally important, the West that is still becoming." The chorus of voices featured in the collection reflects a broad range of cultural and geographical backgrounds and experiences, and many of the names will be familiar to readers of this journal: Louise Erdrich, Dan O'Brien, Ron Hansen, and Larry Woiwode to name only a few. While the contributors cover a diverse assortment of subjects related to western experience—from the meaning of grass (Erdrich), to the importance of fences (Jonis Agee), to the loneliness of the *real* cowboys (Larry McMurtry)—they all grapple with what it means to develop a sense of place in an environment as complex and challenging as the American West.

The book is loosely organized by geographical location, moving, as Stegner puts it, "the way the West was settled, east to west." Thus, the focus of the early entries is on the Great Plains states just beyond the 98th meridian; this focus then shifts to the Rocky Mountain region and the Southwest, and ultimately ends with ruminations on the Pacific Northwest and California. It should be noted here that the book is not divided into discrete sections or categories, but instead flows organically from one text to the next. Ultimately, the organizational scheme complements the overall vision of the book since this approach emphasizes the central role that place plays in the effort to define the West. The scheme also fosters the

notion that there is no true or authentic West, but instead many Wests.

Much of the first half of the book deals with writers' experiences in what might be referred to as the Great Plains states, though accounts of mountainous terrain are interspersed with essays about the grasslands. However, because it deals with issues of concern that are common to Great Plains studies—the influence and challenges of aridity, the conflict between myth and experience, the uses and abuses of natural resources, and so on—*West of 98* should be of great interest to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly*.

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