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Somewhere to Belong and Love finds You in Homestead, Iowa

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People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish, by Kathleen Schmitt Kline, Ronal M. Bruch, and Frederick P. Binkowski, with photographs by Bob Rashid. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2009. xii, 292 pp. Illustrations (mostly color), timeline, appendix, notes, illustration credits, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Gordon O. Hendrickson is retired State Archivist for the State Historical Society of Iowa.

People of the Sturgeon is a well-written history of the relationship between the people of Wisconsin's Lake Winnebago area, especially the Fox and Wolf River valleys, and the ancient freshwater lake sturgeon. The story of Wisconsin's sturgeon fishery demonstrates the value of implementing careful conservation practices to ensure the long-term preservation of a species. This coffee-table-style book looks at the role of sturgeon in Native American culture, explores the impact of sturgeon during Wisconsin's pioneer period, and details the evolution of a sport fishery dependent on careful regulation for its continued existence. Nineteenth-century exploitation, especially a demand for caviar, brought freshwater sturgeon near to extinction, but a handful of conservationists led efforts to regulate sturgeon fishing in Wisconsin. *People of the Sturgeon* documents the effort to create and enforce effective regulations to preserve the sturgeon fishery. Despite initial resistance, state regulations slowly became accepted in the Lake Winnebago area and, with the aid of citizen support organizations, lake sturgeon now prosper.

People of the Sturgeon is well written, heavily illustrated, and well documented. Sidebars throughout the book provide enjoyable stories of individuals, organizations, and traditions related to this special fish.

Somewhere to Belong, by Judith Miller. Daughters of Amana Series. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2010. 364 pp. \$14.99 paper.

Love Finds You in Homestead, Iowa, by Melanie Dobson. Love Finds You Series. Minneapolis: Summerside Press, 2010. 345 pp. \$12.99 paper.

Reviewer Jonathan G. Andelson is professor of anthropology at Grinnell College. He has researched and written extensively about the Amana Colonies.

The *Annals of Iowa* does not normally publish reviews of fiction, but as the Amana Colonies are a virtual Iowa icon, an exception was made for these two novels set in the colonies' past. This review will not deal with the literary merits of these books, but only with their relevance to Iowa history.

The Amana Colonies were established in 1855 in Iowa County by members of the Community of True Inspiration, a separatist group of German Pietists whose origins date to 1714. The Inspirationists believed that divinely inspired "instruments of God" (*Werkzeuge*) walked the earth and lived among them, conveying God's warnings, admonitions, and promises. The members accepted these "testimonies of the Spirit" as second only to the Bible as beacons for a spiritual life. Aside from the *Werkzeuge*, leadership was in the hands of lay elders. Inspirationists were pacifists, refused to swear oaths, and did not practice baptism. In 1843, in response to divine command delivered through the *Werkzeug* Christian Metz, a substantial portion of the group emigrated to the vicinity of Buffalo, New York, where they established themselves as the Ebenezer Society and adopted community of goods in imitation of the Apostolic community. Removal to Iowa, also at Metz's instigation, was completed by 1863. A mixed economy based on agriculture, manufacturing, and craft work characterized both Ebenezer and Amana. Metz died in 1867, and the last *Werkzeug*, Barbara Landmann, in 1883. In 1932 the members voted to discontinue community of goods and reaffiliate as shareholders in a joint-stock corporation, allowing private property, wage work, and private enterprise. The community's religious aspects remained substantially unchanged.

Somewhere to Belong, set in 1877, is the story of two young women, one an Amana native, the other the only child of a Chicago physician and his wife who move to Amana on a trial basis (with the permission of the elders), hoping eventually to become full-fledged members of the community. The book's chapters alternate between the two girls' perspectives on their intertwined lives, narrated against a backdrop of the conflicting attractions of life in a quiet, peaceful, religious community and life in the more exciting, more diverse, but decidedly more selfishly individualistic outside world. The plot weaves through a labyrinth of family tensions, secrets, romantic love, and Christian faith.

Love Finds You in Homestead, Iowa can be described in nearly the same terms, except the story takes place in 1894 and the main protagonists are a young Amana woman and a slightly older man who unceremoniously arrives in the colonies on a freight train out of Chicago, unemployed and accompanied by his desperately ill four-year-old daughter. The young woman is the first to see them near the depot in Homestead (one of seven villages of the Amana Colonies). She hurries them to the village physician, who diagnoses diphtheria and promptly quarantines the child, her father, and the Amana woman. A subplot of possible embezzlement by the man during his days as a bank teller in Chicago supplies the tension in this "love finds you" story.

The authors have done their history homework. Both cite the Amana Heritage Society and others for help in understanding Amana history, and there are literally hundreds of accurate historical details in both books: common property, communal dining, the village *Bruderrat* (Elders Council), the “mill race” that brought water to the Amana mills, the preference for celibacy, the one-year waiting period following an engagement, the calico dresses, the *Kinderschule* where young children were cared for while their parents worked, the sheep flock in East Amana, the presence of hired help in Amana, and the young members’ curiosity about the world outside the colonies. Readers unfamiliar with Amana will not be misled by what is in the books.

On the other hand, both authors leave out important facts. In 1877, the year of Miller’s story, the last of Amana’s divinely inspired “instruments of God” still lived and, despite her age, would have been a commanding presence in the colonies, but she is not mentioned in the novel. Also absent is any reference to the Amanans’ refusal to swear oaths, serve in the military, or baptize children (or adults), their observance of the love feast (including the office of footwashing), or their millennial expectations — all central to their religion but decidedly heterodox in terms of “mainstream” Christianity. It is as if Miller avoided anything controversial about Amana religion, even though the religious character of the community is her central motif. Miller also chooses not to deal with the historically salient issue of language (German in Amana), except to distractingly insert the occasional German word: “A gut spot, ja?” (105) or “Look at the waste of gut food” (122). Dobson is more careful about the German and includes a brief explanation of the “instruments” and Amana history near the end of the novel, although she, too, skirts the other distinctive features of Amana religion.

Because the action in both novels takes place in a single year, readers do not get any feel for Amana *history* in the sense of change through time. For that reason, the term “historical fiction” is perhaps not appropriate for either book. More accurate would be “historically situated fictional ethnography.”

The two novels are part of a literary genre dubbed “bonnet fiction” — especially nostalgic, sentimental novels about the Amish — by the publicists at Bethany House. Summerside Press describes itself as “an inspirational publisher offering fresh, irresistible books to uplift the heart and engage the mind” (4), and Bethany House, on its Web site, gives as its purpose “to help Christians apply biblical truth in all areas of life — whether through a well-told story, a challenging devotional, or the message of an illustrated children’s book.” Both novels satisfy these goals in ways that are generally respectful of Amana history.