

Summer 2012

## THE 2012 GREAT PLAINS DISTINGUISHED BOOK PRIZE

Andrew Jewell

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [ajewell2@unl.edu](mailto:ajewell2@unl.edu)

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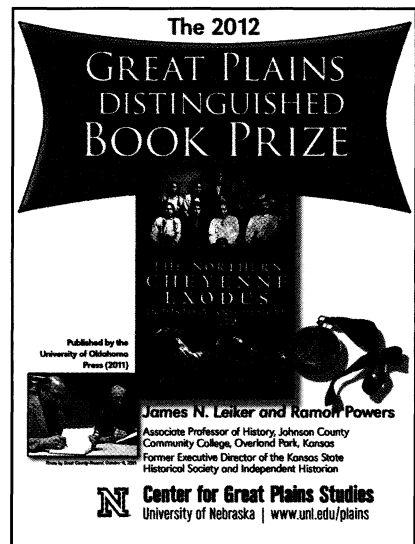
Jewell, Andrew, "THE 2012 GREAT PLAINS DISTINGUISHED BOOK PRIZE" (2012). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2804.  
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## THE 2012 GREAT PLAINS DISTINGUISHED BOOK PRIZE

ANDREW JEWELL

*EDITOR'S NOTE:* The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory, by James N. Leiker and Ramon Powers, was selected as the recipient of the 2012 Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize. I asked one of the Book Prize judges, Dr. Andrew Jewell, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, to comment on the book and the selection process.



Selecting a single book to win a prize is a tremendous challenge. There can be something unsatisfying about ranking creative scholarly works knowing there is no such thing as a sole “best” book in a group of quality titles. And yet, each year that I’ve been a part of the Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize committee, it has happened relatively easily: a book is chosen as the prize winner. The ease does not emerge from a casual attitude toward the selection. On the contrary, the many people involved with choosing the Book Prize winner take it very seriously. I also know that the ease does not come from a lack of quality books to choose from, as each year there are numerous terrific submissions that get very serious consideration for the prize. No, I think the selection of the prize-winning book has been fairly straightforward during my tenure on the committee because of both the thoughtful, systematic process by which the books are chosen and

the collegiality of the committee members and their subcommittees of readers.

In 2012, the committee chose *The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory* by James N. Leiker and Ramon Powers, published by the University of Oklahoma Press. This book stood out as a favorite among our finalists for its look at events in 1878 and 1879, when a group of Northern Cheyenne fled Indian Territory to return to their Montana homeland. During the exodus, the Cheyenne had bloody encounters with both white settlers and the U.S. Army. The events of this season have been remembered and commemorated in varied ways by the Cheyenne; by citizens of communities like Oberlin, Kansas, where more than 40 settlers died; and by various authors and filmmakers. Leiker and Powers’s book is a meditation not only on the events of the exodus, but on the way meaning has been made from the events by multiple communities over

the decades. It is a wonderful book about both an important moment in Great Plains history and about the making of history itself, of how and what we remember.

This book was the winner of the seventh Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize, which is awarded to first-edition, full-length, nonfiction books about the culture, history, and environment of the Great Plains. The process of selecting a winner is a fairly elaborate one involving multiple readers and judges. These readers come from a variety of backgrounds and are formed into subcommittees representing various disciplines relevant to the Great Plains. The members of the subcommittees read the nominated books and complete an evaluation of each, using the following criteria:

- Challenges or contributes significantly to our knowledge of the Great Plains.
- Written clearly in a manner that makes it accessible to lay readers.
- Original research with appropriate methodology.
- Citations substantiate points and direct reader to related work.
- Figures, tables, and illustrations, if present, communicate information appropriately and attractively.
- Format of book is attractive and layout contributes to ease of readability.

The finalists are then read and evaluated by the whole committee, which gathers together at the end of the process to discuss the books and decide upon a winner of the prize. This last gathering, the end of months of reading and evaluating a wide variety of books concerning the Great Plains, has not been an agonizing one. Although committee members come in with some uncertainty about which title ought

to be awarded the prize, the reading, thinking, and conversation that happens throughout the process produces a clear vision of the goals of the prize and the relative merits of each title. The final meeting sees some discussion, some disagreement, some advocacy, and maybe some compromise, but in every case it has resulted in a winner that each committee member can stand behind.

The end result is selecting a book like *The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory*, one that the committee and the Center for Great Plains Studies can point to as a fine example of excellent creative scholarship about the Great Plains. Although all of the finalists scored highly on each of the six criteria, *The Northern Cheyenne Exodus* was particularly strong as a very well-written, multifaceted narrative of an important event in Great Plains history. Its style was, more than some others, well-suited to a general readership. In addition to being thoughtful researchers and historians, Leiker and Powers are excellent storytellers, and they present their account with broad sensitivity. The authors take seriously both the perspectives of the Cheyenne and the murdered white settlers, and they respect the ways that descendants of these groups commemorate and understand their histories. The exodus of the Northern Cheyenne, the authors explain, lives on in our telling and retelling of the stories.

*The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory* is a thoughtful, compelling account of an important event in Great Plains history, but also an interesting analysis on how that event is remembered by different communities. The authors' ability to delve deeply into the varied responses to the Cheyenne Exodus demonstrates an ability to effectively engage with multiple points of view in order to tell a thorough and well-researched story.