

Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey into the American Grasslands, by John Price. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xiv, 225 pp. Notes, bibliography. \$20.00 cloth.

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One way that ecocriticism strives to distinguish the relatively new field from other types of literary criticism is its goal to connect literature and its analysis to more real-world issues. In an age when the degradation of the planet itself is only accelerating, ecocritics feel that mere intellectual arguments are more a part of the problem than a solution. Ecocriticism plays on a wider field than environmental catastrophe, however. For example, many of its practitioners believe that it is necessary to connect both self and readership to place for humanistic reasons. If literature is about the human condition, especially as it relates to living in real places, why attempt to separate the critic and reader from the author, the text itself, and both of their connections to place? John Price answers this question in *Not Just Any Land* by saying, "Let's not even try."

This is not the first attempt at a more personalized literary criticism. Sherman Paul, for example, challenged critical boundaries several decades ago with experiments in more personalized, impressionistic readings of literary works. Price tries something even more different, however. He offers not just personal feelings, but connects his literary analysis with his own quest to connect to place. A native Iowan, Price uses his study—which originated as a doctoral dissertation—to answer some of his own personal questions about his relationship to his native region, why where to live is a major life decision, the relationship between work and home, and the implications of commitment to place for environmental stewardship. Price also connects the writers themselves more intimately to the place-based writing they practice by visiting them in their home locations and interviewing them. The result is a combination of personal memoir, author interview, and literary analysis of several contemporary midwestern writers: Dan O'Brien, Linda Hasselstrom, William Least Heat-Moon, and Mary Swander.

As with a *bildungsroman*, Price's encounters on his personal and literary journey are often not the ones he thought he sought. He seems rather intimidated, for example, by Dan O'Brien's falconry and the author/rancher's philosophy that puts predation at the center of existence. But Price grows to understand and appreciate it in the course of his interview and works to incorporate it into his own ideas about place. Rancher Linda Hasselstrom gently challenges Price's academic

pursuits as inadequate to the task of place building, but Price responds with a defense of his work and a rationale for the changes in literary criticism that he is trying to enact: "That's what I'd like to see the work of writing and the academy become," he says. "One of the reasons I'm in South Dakota is to talk with writers who, just like you said, can't separate their writing from their place" (88).

In the end, Price does not manage to create a wholly new, amalgamated method. Throughout the book, the varying approaches usually remain distinct, alternating between personal memoir, author interview, and literary analysis. Those seeking a memoir may feel that the literary talk interrupts the personal exploration, and vice versa. But Price is to be applauded for his work in making the case for a more immediate and personal criticism, and the links between his methodologies do occur at times. Ultimately, he fashions a compelling new way to encourage his readers to think about their relationships with place, region, and environmental responsibility, and he offers revealing sketches of writers and their ideas about what it means to live in the plains and prairie regions.