

ecology and prairie management. The opening paragraphs of Pauline Drobney's essay are personal testimony to that effect.

It is difficult to fault a book so visually stunning, so rich in content, and so evocative in tone for falling short on the promise of its title. Yet without a perspective on public policy to balance the wonderfully textured treatment of prairie prospects contained in half of the essays, the book as a whole has an elegiac quality that tends to underscore the gulf of misunderstanding and distrust that separates humanists from resource managers when it comes to environmental policy issues.

*Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland*, by Kathryn Marie Dudley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xvi, 195 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, appendix, notes, index. \$22.50 cloth.

Reviewer Deborah Fink is an independent anthropologist in Ames, Iowa. She is the author of *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (1986); *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (1992); and *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest* (1998).

*Debt and Dispossession* is Kathryn Marie Dudley's inside account of the 1980s farm crisis and its aftermath in the pseudonymous community of Star Prairie in western Minnesota. Drawing from intensive interviews, Dudley centers the narrative on farming men and women who lived through the loss or near loss of their farms. Secondary perspectives come from local professionals who dealt regularly with farmers; cameo appearances by regional farm protest organizers provide yet another dimension. An anthropologist, Dudley draws on careful ethnographic fieldwork to counter existing assessments, both popular and scholarly, of the anatomy of the crisis.

Much has already been written on the farm crisis, and much more will undoubtedly come. The genius of this work is that the accessible presentation and gripping stories make us *feel* a measure of the tragedy and absurdity of that time and place. The drawing by the farmer Dudley calls "Dick Porter" is a masterful depiction of the farm crisis (44). Dudley not only explains the structure of the farm credit system, she uncovers the rationality and irrationality of why the system affected different farmers in different ways. She recounts the actions taken by protest organizations and explores the logic of Star Prairie's rejection of their premises. Laying out episodes of personal decisions and community responses, she reveals the tension between ideals of help-your-neighbor friendship and the competition of the capitalist system, both of which the community endorsed. An account of a farm auction and its effect on family members conveys a small measure of the sadness

of a world disintegrating. Dudley closes with a picture of a family farm that is adapting and surviving for the present. Yet the costs extracted and the surrealist vision of the future leave the reader queasy.

The 1980s saw incredible contradictions and ironies in America as a whole. Dudley lays out one after another of these contradictions as manifested in the rural Midwest. Astoundingly, farmers saw themselves as independent entrepreneurs who had escaped the control of the bosses by owning the productive property that they themselves worked. As farmer "Virgil Thompson" stated, in farming, "the security is in yourself and what you do yourself" (149). Describing the irresistible pull of farming, he said, "There's pheasants in the area and you can hear their call. . . . That's why I stay in agriculture. . . . Wealth is the sound of pheasants and the seasons changing and all the things that go with it" (146). To most observers, farmers *were* in the grip of the financial system. Moreover, pheasants are not farm animals; they are a naturalized species imported from China. Local presentations of the logical and natural are tantalizing fragments of truth cut from a complex fabric that ties the world together. Dudley leaves us to ponder the paradoxes.

The book, centered on the perceptions of Star Prairie farmers, treats differences of class, gender, and ethnicity lightly. This is appropriate in that the focus is the internal structure of the experience of the farm population: Northern European Americans have no ethnicity; everyone is middle class; family is everything. Yet there are glimpses of an underlying consciousness threatening the consensus: the pervasive contempt for being on the dole and the account of a family who modernized their home to lure a new daughter-in-law hint at other, subversive convictions. One might imagine that a slight twist of the research lens would bring another image into focus. But this is true of all research. Here we are presented with tragic betrayal experienced by people resting on a structure of belief that will not carry them through.

The dust jacket states that *Debt and Dispossession* raises questions of what it takes to be middle class in America and what kind of community is possible in a capitalist society. Not for me. The basic questions I find here have to do with the meaning of profound personal failure in America. American culture, based on winning and growing, offers few tools with which to handle the death of a dream. As Dudley concludes, the crisis revealed "Star Prairie's fundamental inability to resist—and tacit collusion with—the forces that threaten to destroy it" (165).

Dudley writes with rare skill and passion. This is a midstream account of America coming of age. Midwesterners are protagonists who may yet wrest a more satisfactory resolution, thanks to this superb contribution.

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