

## Book Reviews and Notices

*The Tallgrass Prairie Reader*, edited by John T. Price. A Bur Oak Book. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xxxi, 352 pp. Map, references, author and title index. \$25.00 paperback.

Reviewer Marcia Noe is professor of English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and editor of *MidAmerica*. She is also a senior editor of the *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, volumes 1 and 2.

"These are the gardens of the Desert," wrote William Cullen Bryant in "The Prairies" (1832). Bryant's oxymoronic characterization echoes throughout *The Tallgrass Prairie Reader*, a compendium of 42 first-person accounts of travelers, sojourners, settlers, farmers, conservationists, and ecological workers—among them 13 Iowans—who experienced and wrote about the ecosystem from 1673 to 2012. Excerpted here in the first such anthology of writings about this unique biome, they emphasize its sublimity, fragility, and, above all, multiplicity of contradictions. Thus, George Catlin describes the deadly beauty of the burning prairie; Margaret Fuller reports that the prairie's monotonously wide expanses also offer the brilliance of its crimson and gold flowers; and Francis Parkman finds that its "graceful and pleasing" vistas conceal a great deal of unpleasantness: wagons that get stuck in the mud, runaway horses, broken harnesses and axles, snakes at one's feet and tadpoles in one's drinking cup (52).

Most of the selections center on the writer's relationship to the prairie. For Aldo Leopold, it is one of respect and stewardship; for Benjamin Vogt, the prairie is a purveyor of small miracles. For Elizabeth Dodd, the prairie takes on cosmic dimensions, as she explores the nexus of Pawnee language and astronomy with the here and now of nature on the prairie, noting that it comprises "exploded stars, exhaled to the universe to fetch up in sand grains in a prairie streambed or in dead grass left standing after summer's passed" (345). For William Quayle, the prairie is a source of inspiration, delight, and wonder; and for Paul Gruchow, in one of the most eloquent and insightful pieces in the book, the prairie is a teacher that demonstrates "that our strength is in our neighbors," instructs us "to save our energies for the opportune moment," shows us how to "see the virtue of ideas not our own and the possibilities that newcomers bring," and, above all, that "there need be no contradiction between utility and beauty" (239).

Several selections focus on efforts to preserve and restore the prairie, the victim of more than two centuries of agricultural practices, introduced species, and human blunders. Lisa Knopp relates with admirable restraint the depredations inflicted by salt baron J. Sterling Morton, who failed to appreciate the virtues of Nebraska's treeless prairie and brought in hundreds of trees in his quest to make Nebraska "America's best timbered state" (287). Stephen I. Apfelbaum writes of confounding his neighbors, who can't understand why he won't let them plant corn or hunt in his apparently idle fields that are actually sown with prairie plants in an attempt to resurrect the landscape that Catlin, Fuller, and Parkman experienced. Cindy Crosby finds unexpected spiritual sustenance and community while working to restore the Schulenberg Prairie.

Throughout these accounts runs the tension between two opposing views of the prairie: should it be treated as a commodity to exploit for our own use or as a habitat to preserve and restore? Many of the prairie's earliest chroniclers emphasize its practical value as a rich resource; more recent writers, adherents of Leopold's land ethic, take the latter line. Mark Twain, waxing nostalgic about hunting excursions on his uncle's farmlands, notes that pigeons were so numerous that the hunters needed no guns; they simply clubbed them to death with sticks. By contrast, the editor of this volume, John T. Price, reflects that the plethora of wild birds lured to the prairie by the summer floodwaters of 1993 suggests "the possibility of restoration, renewal, and, at last, hope" (317).

*The Tallgrass Prairie Reader* makes for delightful recreational reading but would also be an ideal text for courses in environmental studies, midwestern and western history, and midwestern and western literature.

*We Called Him Rabbi Abraham: Lincoln and American Jewry, A Documentary History*, by Gary Phillip Zola. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014. xiv, 529 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$49.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Shari Rabin is a doctoral candidate at Yale University. She is the author of "'A Nest to the Wandering Bird': Iowa and the Creation of American Judaism, 1855-1877" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2014).

The relationship between American presidents and the Jews has been a scholarly growth area in the past decade, with studies examining the cases of George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Into this field comes Gary P. Zola's documentary history on Abraham Lincoln, gaining steam from the Civil War sesquicentennial and a growing literature on historical memory. Zola, the director of the American Jewish Archives, enthusiastically gathers and, in brief introductions