

Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair, by Leslie Prosterman. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. xi, 220 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 paper.

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This book's subtitle may encourage Iowans and other midwesterners to expect attention to their own beloved fairs, but only readers in four Illinois counties, which provided most of the information on which this book is founded, and two Wisconsin counties, where some research was also done, will be fully satisfied on that score. The fairs of Carroll, Champaign, DeKalb, and Ford Counties in Illinois are the focus of this study because, as the author very briefly explains, they exemplify several kinds of locations and environments, and because Illinois people were generously helpful. The University of Illinois made the author, who began this study as her dissertation in folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, a visiting scholar; people at the fairs contributed a great many long and richly instructive interviews.

A small portion of the book, about fourteen pages, summarizes the history of fairs from ancient Greece to present-day America. That may be helpful to people who want to review the subject quickly, or who need a guide to its standard literature. But the book is mainly about the present, not history, and gets most interesting when it describes the ways in which county fairs, at least the ones considered here, are organized and what the people who run them mean to accomplish.

The fairs described here are governed by little corporations whose shares are retained in families so tenaciously that, as an official of one fair told Prosterman, it is "extremely difficult to get any stock because nobody wants to sell it. Even though there is no monetary value to it a'tall, you see" (57). Shareholders get to elect boards of directors who make decisions, grapple with problems, and pursue money to pay for premiums, insurance, and grandstand shows; expensive performers must be paid even when rain chases audiences away.

Boards appoint managers, sometimes board members, who superintend the fairs' departments and write the premium books that list competitions and prizes. This book's thorough description of premium books includes the observation that competitions at the fairs considered here include none that are open to women only, though a few, in flower arrangements and baking, are restricted to men. The author thinks this situation results from women's increasing competition in recent years in what used to be masculine fields, notably livestock, while men need some encouragement to attempt specialties that have traditionally be-

longed to women. Men, she thinks, "have culturally higher status and also apparently lose their gender identity more easily" (100).

Competitions get decided by judges who are sometimes university faculty members. But members of the community that a fair serves "often perceive university faculty as interested only in theory or book ideas" (113) and prefer to get judges who are respected for their practical wisdom. All judges, of whatever backgrounds, must be able to do their work without alienating competitors so much that they are discouraged from further participation. Judges must also offer explanations of their decisions that are instructive to spectators who know very little about the judges' subjects as well as to the competitors. They must also keep up on criteria that change with community taste.

Taste includes aesthetic standards, which are important to Prosterman's understanding of county fairs; her argument that fair aesthetics are a century older than those that prevail in art museums was interesting enough to deserve a little more explanation. Also interesting was her recollection that a fellow academic told her that "'There's nothing aesthetic about county fairs'" (184), and her concession that "most people I interviewed or observed did not bring up the terms *art* or *aesthetics* themselves." But the fair people, reliably friendly and cooperative, "had no problem with the concepts once I had broached them" (187). Clearly the interviews were two-way streets; the author gathered ideas and offered some in return.

She also contributed, or perhaps learned, an enormous respect for the fairs. Her last few pages praise fairs because they "focus attention in a positive fashion on agriculture and rural life" (191) and are good for their communities; they are among the few institutions "where peers present their work and their ideas to their neighbors" and, in return, pay close attention to their neighbors' ideas (197). Professor Prosterman surely enjoyed her opportunity to take part in that sharing of ideas and values.

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