



PrairyErth

William Least Heat-Moon

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Robert Penn Warren pronounced Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* "a masterpiece." Now Heat-Moon has pulled to the side of the road and set off on foot to take readers on an exploration of time and space, landscape and history in the Flint Hills of central Kansas.

PrairyErth Details

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Author : William Least Heat-Moon

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Mike says

Maybe this is as close to landscape architecture as a writer can get - a "deep map" of Chase County, Kansas that touches on nearly every aspect of the terrain there: the people, the history, the vegetation, the infrastructure, and even a map detailing the watershed of the area. I need to read it several more times before I can determine if it is a five-star book. I enjoyed his "Blue Highways" book more, but I think this book might be more monumental. My favorite chapters were the ones on Osage Orange trees, his interview of Wes Jackson from the Land Institute, his attempt to sit still and just observe one section for 12 hours, and his final walk that concludes the book. I also liked how he began each section with a list of quotations that set the table for what the section would contain - this definitely added to the richness of the book. There were some chapters that were a bit frustrating - one in which he just sort of copied his notebook without editing or just quoted historical texts to make the bulk of his writing. But I can only think of two chapters where that occurred so it's forgivable given that there are 76 chapters total.

Jennie says

One of my favorite books of all time. This book greatly aided me in my transition to living in the vast middle of the United States, and helped me appreciate its beauty and storied history. I visited the region described in this book a number of times during my 5 years in the Midwest, and it was amazing to go there after reading this book. I have read and reread it.

Paul says

A deep and lasting impression of a prairie county halfway along Highway 50, where the west begins, where the author senses a pervading Americana. I love William Least Heat Moon's books, and I took my time with this one - dipping in and out over months. It is so rich and varied - it has everything. Solid and absorbing, he builds a vivid picture of the characters who live in a place like Chase, Kansas, lived there, built it, worked it, farmed it, hunted it, sold it, crashed in it, and just about every aspect you could imagine. It truly is a 'deep map'. His writing on nature and the living earth is beautiful. The chapter nearer the end on the last full-blood Kaws was extremely moving and full of sadness. This book is rich with quirky interludes and oddities. I feel like I was there with him in every corner of the place. I loved it, and it has a perfect ending. But why so few photographs?

David says

Perhaps I am lazy. Perhaps I am weak. But after 500-odd pages of this book (625 total) I really had to drop it and move-on. I need to say that I really enjoyed Blue Highways - I must have read it over a decade ago. And I have to give credit where it is due - the author's writing and style are commendable in this book. The prose is, at times, most beautiful and engaging. It was at times challenging too with a vocabulary that had me reaching for the dictionary at regular intervals. But this microscopic perusal of a single county in Kansas is

simply not, for me at least, inviting enough to entice me to finish the book. It is a shame as there is definitely something to like here. But there are too many books and too little time left me for reading.

Lee Trampleasure says

An amazing insight into a small rural county. I had the pleasure of visiting Chase County for a few days in 2006, and asked "how true" the book was. I was told that while it has its inaccuracies, the general trend was accurate (of course, the book is now about 20 years old, so things have clearly changed). If you make it to Chase County, be sure to stop by the Emma Chase Cafe in Strong City.

Kate Lawrence says

I spent 2-1/2 years reading this amazing book because I didn't want it to end. For an author to devote time over several years visiting and researching every corner of a single Kansas county, walking it, talking to the locals, and writing 622 pages about its landscape, history, and people was an elegant labor of love. His affection for the tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills, what he calls the "most easterly piece of the American Far West," permeates every page. Some readers may not like the depth, may not want to spend a whole chapter on Osage orange trees, or wood rats, or the 1931 crash of Knute Rockne's plane, or the betrayal and exile by our government of the Kansa tribe. With Heat-Moon as guide, however, the intricate is seductive; in a prose style that can soar like the hawks and harriers he describes, he shows us that the details matter. All the more so for me because I grew up within 100 miles of the county he illuminates.

He is also skilled, when the people he meets tell their stories, in getting down the cadences of their speech just right. I could effortlessly slip back to being a child, listening to old folks at family reunions spinning yarns about the past. The book answered some lingering questions I hadn't even known I had, as well as being soothing and educational. The lack of an index is a serious handicap, though, to being able to go back and reacquaint oneself with specific topics and people.

PrairyErth is a celebration of the ordinary; I found it a comfort to know that someone cares so much about an area often considered just "flyover country." If more of us slowed down and paid close attention to the ordinary, we would have a calmer, happier society.

Andrew says

What the hell is it? Travel? Environmental writing? Sociology? If I had to guess, I would say that Least Heat-Moon's response would be that it's all of the above and none of them, that all of these are unnecessary categories imposed on lived experience. And he would be correct. It's so fully integrated and freewheeling that the only thing that unifies it is its profound sense of place. Which happens, weirdly, to be a place I'm very familiar with-- Chase County, Kansas, where I spent some small section of my youth rambling about, poking around abandoned railcars and prairie hilltops. I can't say whether or not the book is "accurate" to the place simply because my memories of the place are all antique and besides, it's irrelevant whether or not his experience matches anyone else's. Which is another reason why it evades classification.

Jim O'Donnell says

This is the kind of book that you have to take in chunks. It is a phenomenal work of research and experience on a specific chunk of land in Kansas. It is an astounding book but I found that I had to read 100 pages and put it down for a week then pick it back up. I loved it.

dirt says

Kansas to most people is Kansas as the Avett Brothers describe: as nowhere as I can be. To Least Heat-Moon Kansas is an ancient sea, a prairie sea, the great prairie desert, rivers, county lines, fire, home of the Kaw southwind people, and home of the frontier settlers. The tall prairie plains are a seldom acknowledged part of our history and ecosystem. For most people, me included, Kansas is something to get through, but Least Heat-Moon takes the time to dissect, interject, and inspect what has been left derelict. He gets down and dirty to really know a place.

"...I'd come into the prairie out of some dim urge to encounter the alien- it's easier to comprehend where someplace else is than where you are- and I had begun to encounter it as I moved among the quoins, ledgers, pickled brains, winds, creek, meanders, gravestones, stone-age circles. I was coming to see that facts carry a traveler only so far: at last he must penetrate the land by a different means, for to know a place in any real and lasting way is sooner or later to dream it. That's how we come to belong to it in the deepest sense."

My one problem with this book is that it was a little too self-aware of its own existence as a book. I understand stepping out of the narrative to reflect and interject commentary, but Billy Least Heat did it a few too many times.

I am grateful for the Osage Orange/Hedge Apple tree education which has come in surprisingly handy.

Dovofthegalilee says

I dislike Kansas and that's being kind, on the other hand to thoroughly enjoy a book about a county in Kansas shows the brilliant writing ability of Least Heat-Moon. As I read on had my own fantasies of having and endless life with every county in the USA having an equally sized book by this same writer. He is gripping in a way that few are.

catherine says

I assigned this as a class text to students when I was teaching in Kansas, it was a way to help them understand that their landscape wasn't empty nothingness but had a character and history all its own. I really enjoyed this, must dig it out and read it again.

Boreal Elizabeth says

This was the first Heat Moon book I read and loved it! If you are into minute details of land and maps and people and history and society and have the patience to walk in that landscape one step at a time and can feel the wind move and know it's moving something deep inside without you really wanting it to or knowing what the result may be then this one's for you. HM takes some pretty dry material and enfuses it with deep meaning beyond the surface facts. The steady accretion of details builds to the most subtle tension and full knowing that is sort of unexplainable. I took about a year to read it bit by bit and then waited another year before I read the last chapter. I didn't intend to read it like that but I did and it seemed the exact right way for me...

Nick H says

What a great way to follow up Blue Highways. I didn't know what to expect going into this "tome" dedicated to a single county in the lackadaisical southeastern Kansas. WLHM grids up the county, and cuts into each piece like it is its own delicacy. Looking at the history, the geology, local newspapers, animals, plants, roads, railroads, tall tales, stories, buildings...you name it. On top of all, WLHM's witty sarcasm makes it feel less like homework, and more like a journey you take with him. Highly recommend, if you can fathom reading 620 pages about a single county in Kansas, which I may previously have considered in the top 2 of the most boring states.

Guido says

Non so perché, circa tre anni fa iniziai improvvisamente a leggere questo libro. Immaginai, sfogliandolo e trovando tra le sue pagine alcune mappe, e quelli che sembravano gli aneddoti di un esploratore, che si trattasse di un libro di viaggio - un genere di narrativa a me molto caro; la presenza delle mappe, poi, alimentava la mia curiosità, infantile quanto basta per lasciarmi attrarre dai disegni, dai colori della copertina, dalle parole in lingue sconosciute. Bene, questo è un libro di viaggio, ma molto singolare: William Least Heat-Moon sceglie una contea del Kansas, la Chase County, di forma pressappoco rettangolare; la suddivide in dodici zone disegnando un semplice reticolo sulla mappa, e si propone di esplorarla, un riquadro per volta. Il suo progetto lo terrà impegnato per sei anni. Ora, questo non mi avrebbe sorpreso se si fosse trattato di un territorio più vasto o dalle caratteristiche più invitanti, più adatto a divenire la materia di un narratore; ma la Chase County è vuota. La sua superficie, di estensione paragonabile a quella di una provincia italiana, è pressoché pianeggiante; ospita un solo vero centro abitato, più alcuni paesini moribondi (all'epoca della stesura del libro, gli ultimi anni '80: a questo punto dovrebbero essere abbandonati), poche strade e una ferrovia, che l'attraversano da parte a parte, come chi va di fretta. Dopotutto, a parte l'erba, non c'è niente da vedere. Tra i ranch e i paesini si contano in tutto 3300 anime. Nessun monumento, nessun museo, nessun rilievo da scalare, pochi edifici storici.

L'autore si propone di dimostrare che questo territorio non è affatto vuoto come potrebbe sembrare a uno sguardo mediocre come il mio; e ci riesce pienamente. Il sottotitolo - "Una mappa in profondità" - esprime in modo perfettamente conciso il suo metodo: viene rintracciata l'origine e la storia di tutto quel che si può trovare in quel mare d'erba: le piante e gli animali, e gli usi che ne fecero i nativi ormai quasi estinti; le pietre che servirono per costruire il palazzo di giustizia di Cottonwood Falls; i sentieri percorsi dai Kaw, sepolti dalla vegetazione; le ferrovie a cui lavorarono gli immigrati messicani; le strade e i nascondigli degli schiavi

fuggiaschi, e l'enorme fatica dei neri per veder riconosciuta non solo la loro libertà, ma anche l'uguaglianza; la sorgente che dava ristoro ai pionieri sulla via dell'ovest; i ricordi di antichi omicidi e di incidenti aerei; vecchi mulini e strade abbandonate.

Le conversazioni dell'autore con gli abitanti aiutano a comprendere la vita di un luogo che sembra particolarmente inospitale (un villaggio è, o era, periodicamente sommerso dalle inondazioni, e nonostante questo i pochi abitanti resistevano nelle loro case, pronti a tutto) e soprattutto privo di prospettive future. I ragazzi delle scuole, i contadini, gli allevatori di bestiame, i pochi proprietari di bar e negozi raccontano a malincuore di una terra che amano, ma che saranno costretti a lasciare per poter vivere. I documenti, gli aneddoti, le mappe e gli articoli tratti dai quotidiani locali contengono ulteriori tracce, preziosissime, per comprendere la strana e assurda evoluzione di una distesa d'erba che, apparentemente così vuota, è stata testimone di quasi tutta la storia degli Stati Uniti; dallo sterminio degli indigeni fino alle guerre e all'avvento delle macchine e dei metodi più moderni di sfruttamento del territorio - che, di fatto, lo danneggiano.

È importante sottolineare che queste quasi settecento pagine esistono e sono così belle grazie al talento narrativo dell'autore: questa non è semplicemente un'impresa giornalistica, non si tratta di un documentario. La prosa di William Least Heat-Moon è varia e attenta allo stile, a volte addirittura coraggiosa e sperimentale nel riversare sulla carta appunti, idee e impressioni con grande libertà espressiva, trascurando l'ordine e la punteggiatura. Sono presenti numerosi riferimenti e riflessioni di carattere storico, politico, filosofico; ognuna delle tredici parti del volume inizia con una serie di citazioni che introducono gli argomenti principali; alla fine del libro, inoltre, si trova un graditissimo omaggio a "Tristram Shandy" di Sterne. La qualità di questo libro è davvero notevole, per molti motivi, e considerarlo un semplice racconto di viaggio sarebbe un errore - anche perché, in effetti, l'autore si muove pochissimo; la sua esplorazione avviene, come dice lui stesso, in profondità: attraverso il suolo e il tempo. "Prateria" è stato per me un amico irrinunciabile in questi anni, e quando l'ho terminato mi sono sentito un po' orfano. (Ne ho comprato subito un altro, "Nikawa": non voglio restare orfano troppo a lungo.)

Mark Armstrong says

One long term side effect from reading this book: you won't be able to just blow through all those small, half-deserted remnants of towns on your road trips, annoyed that you have to slow down for a few seconds before getting back to 55. Now you will wonder, Who ran these stores? Who shopped here? Why a town here? You may find yourself circling back through town again, putting your travel schedule in peril.
