

Linda M. Hasselstrom. Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher. Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, Inc., 1987.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

In 1987, 44-year-old Linda Hasselstrom, who had previously published a collection of poems, came out with three new books that launched her literary career: a second volume of poetry, a series of journal entries covering a year's time, and Going Over East, a collection of ranching essays organized around a pickup journey with her husband, George, and her stepson, Michael, to the east pasture of the family ranch, eleven miles from their home. To get there, they had to open and close twelve gates, going both ways. This progression provides the structure for the book: twelve essays or meditations on ranching life, the land and environment, and the way people do and ought to live, sandwiched between two introductory chapters and a concluding one tying the entire volume together. With these books and another half-dozen volumes and three major edited collections of other prairie women's writings, Hasselstrom has established herself as South Dakota's most influential woman writer and one of its most important ones of either gender.

In describing the challenges, joys, ups, and downs of life on a ranch near Hermosa, just east of the Black Hills, in Going Over East, Hasselstrom also prescribes ways of living in community and in harmony with the natural world. One of her former students from her days of teaching in Columbia, Missouri, when she was attending graduate school there, wrote her to say that his fellow participants in a reading club had disliked the book because they did not believe it was true. They figured the author had made most of it up, because they could not believe anyone would choose to live and stick with a life as hard as the one she described in the book. Hasselstrom was stunned and, for a time, angry, because it had never occurred to her that people did not realize this kind of life was normal on a Great Plains ranch.

Always a poet, Hasselstrom, before switching to nonfiction and memoir-writing as her primary genres, had early on tried her hand at fiction. Unlike some other writers, she draws a distinct line between fiction and non-fiction and has always been utterly devoted to the kind of fact and truth she believes is demanded by the latter form. She approvingly quotes George Orwell on the question: "During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act." A major reason for the popularity of her work derives from her readers' sense of the authenticity of the stories she tells and the integrity with which she analyzes and pronounces upon serious questions facing people and society.

Among the themes addressed in Going Over East are the practice and economics of ranching, corporate behavior, family, interpersonal relations, ecology, plants and animals, the vagaries of weather, values like frugality, community, memory, history, change and continuity, privacy, story-telling, names, water, politics, time, efficiency, technology, and junk. Trying to fit these variegated concerns into a single volume poses a daunting task. The organization of the book around a reconstructed journey across the countryside provided a practical solution to this organizational problem.

Beyond the particular subjects Hasselstrom addresses in the book, her central interest is to illuminate (and defend) life as lived in South Dakota. Her professors at the

University of Missouri tried to woo her from life in the hinterlands and “smiled indulgently at her rural ideas,” joking that she “actually believed South Dakota was the center of the universe.” (199) To her, however, the idea was no joke. The loss to college teaching became literature’s and South Dakota’s gain. “The center of the universe *is* South Dakota,” she triumphantly affirms. (200) This statement, though, should not be taken as a simple-minded, unreflective cheerleader point of view. Hasselstrom is always thoughtful, always critical but open-minded, always probing and judicious in her hard-won insights. She understands “No single truth is possible,” (8) and she emphasizes the complexity of the ranching life. (16) She insists that it is necessary to get out of the “ivory tower” and onto the ground where real people live and struggle with the every-day challenges that make up ordinary lives. She would trade a pound of theory for an ounce of experience, fact, and practicality every time.

Her father provides a model for her kind of thinking. He knows that “someone who pays attention to the messages the natural world sends can bring cattle home the day *before* a blizzard nine times out of ten. It’s a matter of instinct, experience, self-reliance.” That is the approach Hasselstrom takes in Going Over East. She also understands that in ranching there are few rules: “You learn by doing it.” (4) This book is an effort to set down on paper a few of the things she has learned.

One of the major things she picked up from her parents—perhaps the most important lesson—was frugality. She chose to bypass life in a college environment, which would have been more financially stable, for a return to life on the ranch. She pokes gentle fun at her parents’ penurious ways (Tom Brokaw in his memoir also smiles at his parents’ penchant for saving soap, string, and other items) only to note the importance of her own junk pile and the recycling of every conceivable object on the family ranch. Her descriptions are obviously meant to be more than self-revelation. Hasselstrom believes that American society lives way beyond its means—and its needs. The personal becomes the political when she takes up the theme of ecology, which stands at the center of her whole world-view. South Dakotans, Americans, and citizens of the planet in general need to learn the lessons of simple living, she suggests. Traditional Native American culture has some valuable things to teach us, if we would only observe and listen carefully. Especially threatening and dangerous to our long-term survival on the planet is the rise of corporate farming, which sacrifices care for the land and the environment for immediate efficiency. Short-term profits, in her view, are short-sighted.

Though Hasselstrom devalues theory in favor of personal experience and practicality, she does not hesitate to draw broad lessons from her observations, which might look and sound much like theory to others. Her observations about the cycles of life and nature provide an example of this. She strikingly paraphrases nature writer John McPhee: “ecology means who’s eating whom, and when. . . . Everything, when it dies, goes back to grass and earth to feed whatever follows.” (79)

But always she subordinates broad, general pronouncements and principles for careful observations and subtle distinctions. Complexity overrides simplicity. Even ecological awareness is not an uncomplicated goal. Planting trees, for instance, is a laudable practice, especially when one has to haul water long distances to nurture them. But efforts to prevent all burning in the Black Hills have been counterproductive. She notes that “just as loving a person you don’t know can be disastrous, so can blind love of the land.” It’s possible to have too many trees or too many in the wrong places.

Disastrous forest fires in the Black Hills might happen less frequently if controlled burns were more often allowed. Thus, she advises that we “make intelligent, informed choices based on facts rather than naked emotion.” (139-40)

In the end, Hasselstrom, in addition to being a story-teller, rancher, ecologist, and observer of the human scene in general, is an ethicist. She appeals to our better natures to learn how to live with and behave toward our fellow human beings and to execute our mutual responsibilities as neighbors and public citizens. A supreme individualist, she is also a convinced proponent of community. Her most recent book, No Place Like Home: Notes from a Western Life (2009), focuses directly upon the latter theme. Linda Hasselstrom is one of South Dakota’s outstanding writers and one of its great cultural treasures.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Hasselstrom began as a poet and continues to write poetry. Do you detect a poetic impulse in her prose writing?
2. In the course of this book, she mentions about two dozen different plants and a similar number of animals. Can you give other examples of her close attention to particular details? Do you think this is an asset of her writing?
3. Hasselstrom intended to get a Ph.D. in English at the University of Missouri. Do you think she was wise not to follow through with that plan? What is her general attitude toward academics and academic programs, as expressed in this book? Do you agree with that line of thinking?
4. How would you respond to members of the book club who did not like the book because they could not believe the author was telling the truth? How important do you think it is for non-fiction authors to tell the whole truth? How much leeway would you be willing to give them in making up their stories?
5. The author writes, “No single truth is possible.” (8) What do you think she means by that, and do you agree with the premise?
6. “Any choice in this country is a balancing of the odds, and then taking a gamble anyway. No matter what you decide, the land or weather may have other plans,” Hasselstrom writes. (18) Has this been your experience? Do you think residents on the land have to be, in some sense, gamblers?
7. In the introduction, the author notes the tone of condescension or ridicule that outsiders often direct at South Dakota and other Plains residents. They’ve been called the “empty quarter,” “flyover country,” and “the outback” and have been associated with uranium mines and waste disposal sites. Have you observed or experienced similar tendencies, or do you think Hasselstrom is exaggerating the phenomenon?
8. What do you think are the characteristic qualities of West River ranchers and of South Dakotans in general?
9. How effective, in your opinion, is the narrative device of a trip through twelve gates as an organizing principle for the points the author wants to make about ranching and life in West River South Dakota? Would it have been just as effective had she simply written chapters devoted to various themes like ecology, community, and the economics of ranching?

10. Hasselstrom observes that she has a penchant for metaphor. A pile of rock becomes an occasion for her to describe the meaning of mystery. “I’m content not knowing, and surprised to be,” she writes. “Can it mean I’m becoming mature, when I don’t need to know all the answers.” (128) Are we witnessing a contradiction here—between her general curiosity about the meaning and significance of things, on the one hand, and willingness to accept that she doesn’t know all the answers, on the other? Or is this acknowledgement a sign of wisdom?

11. Is the same inclination to admit that we cannot always be in control of things operating when she abjures trying to prevent her stepson from chewing gum on their ride across the prairie, acknowledging, “I can’t change his habits in a summer”? (134) She seems to be caught in tension between a desire to change people and the world and an admission that change cannot always be had on our own terms.

12. What political party do you think she belongs to? Does packing a pistol in the pickup before they take off have any political implications, in your opinion? (13)

13. Hasselstrom seems to have an unusual interest in junk, discarded items, garbage, and animal and human waste. Or is her interest and attention unusual?

14. The author introduces the subject of Native Americans with a story about Emma, who makes and sells Indian dolls dressed in historically authentic clothing. (34) What is her attitude, in general, toward American Indians? What does she think we can learn from them?

15. Discuss the criticisms Hasselstrom has of corporate agriculture, television and mass culture in general, cities, intellectuals, consumerism, and the “throw-away society.”

16. The author insists on the importance of mutual accountability: “Many of us simply aren’t aware of the size and scope of our responsibilities to one another.” (122) What could we do to change that?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Born in Texas in 1943, Linda Hasselstrom moved to South Dakota with her mother at age six. With time out for college and other experiences, she has lived there ever since. Her mother’s marriage to John Hasselstrom and their moving out to his ranch near Hermosa when she was nine gave her her last name and, in time, the move made her into a ranch woman whose writings are closely linked to place and to the community gathered around the ranch. Graduating from the University of South Dakota with bachelor’s degrees in English and Journalism, she obtained a master’s degree in American Literature from the University of Missouri and planned to go on to obtain a Ph.D. before she returned to her beloved South Dakota. Although she did some college teaching for a time, she discovered a way to make a living at ranching and writing, and most of her published works derived directly from her experience living on the land. Her books include Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains (1987), Land Circle (1991), Dakota Poems (1993), Roadside History of South Dakota (1994), Feels Like Far (1999), Bitter Creek Junction (2000), Between Sky and Grass: Where I Live and Work (2002), and No Place Like Home: Notes from a Western Life (2009). She has also edited three volumes of writings by rural women.

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