

Kathleen Norris. Dakota: A Spiritual Geography. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

With the publication of Dakota: A Spiritual Geography in 1993, Kathleen Norris became one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of the culture of the two Dakotas and of the northern Plains in general. Contained in this endlessly perceptive and thought-provoking book are meditations on rural people, small towns, community, the land, personal identity, ethics, spirituality, regionalism, and society in general.

By training a poet and by experience an inquisitive seeker after meaning, Norris wears many hats in composing these essays, thus enabling the volume to operate at several different levels. Most obviously, there is personal biography describing her move in 1974 from New York City to Lemmon in northwestern South Dakota, on the border between the two Dakotas, in order to avoid the sale of her grandparents' farm after her grandmother's death. Instead of a brief residence there, however, she wound up staying permanently. This book is the story of her experiences as small-town resident, sometime visiting poet in the schools, fill-in Presbyterian pastor, Benedictine monastery oblate, and—mostly—professional writer. She describes her experiences being neighbor to 1,600 residents of Lemmon, where she learned to live and interact with people in ways different from those she had experienced growing up and living in Hawaii, Virginia, Illinois, and New York City, and attending Bennington College in Vermont. She became, in effect, a reporter of the people and the activities she observed. In another sense, she operates in some ways like a sociologist or cultural anthropologist, placing what she observed into broader social and cultural context. She is less of a historian, although some history is included here. In the deepest sense, she operates as an ethicist, philosopher, and theologian, asking questions like “What is the good life?” “Where is spirituality to be found?” and “How are we to treat our neighbor?”

Norris's friends in Manhattan were stunned and horrified to learn that she was actually moving out to what they perceived to be a barren waste. Had she lost her mind? But beyond providing a solution for her family's desire that the family farm where her maternal grandparents had lived and her mother had grown up not be auctioned off, her translocation from America's busiest place to one of its most remote rural areas provided several inchoate but real motives for this important and ultimately life-changing decision. After years of frequently moving about from one urban area to another, “It was a search for inheritance, for place. It was also a religious pilgrimage; on the ground of my grandmother's faith I would find both the means and the end of my search.” (93) Not incidentally, the move also provided her with material that formed the basis of her writing for several decades. As an apprentice poet, “I suspected I would find my stories,” she wrote. (11) Did she ever! Needing grounding for her work as an author, in Lemmon, South Dakota, she found it.

While growing up, she had visited her grandmother a number of times during summer vacations, so she was familiar with the place, making her something of an “insider.” Now she would try to make the place her own. As an “outsider”—a status she spends considerable time discussing in her essays—she was both at a disadvantage and at an advantage. She would never fully be part of the local community, but she brought with her alternate perspectives, enabling her to perceive things in different ways and to

make imaginative connections between it and the broader society. Most importantly, perhaps, she understood that a singular, linear way of writing about the town and the area would yield less literary fruit than a kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted way of looking at things. She refers favorably to the work of Canadian Plains author Robert Kroetsch, who adopts a “complex and often fragmented narrative style” (85) to try to encompass multiple and often contradictory realities he is trying to interpret. A number of the pieces in Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, because they were published earlier in various periodicals, are somewhat repetitive and take up themes previously discussed. Norris’s nonlinear approach to organizing and writing her material includes essays, brief notes, and prose poems in the form of “weather reports.” The result resembles the multiple colors of the spectrum that are separated by a prism as light flows through it, reminding us of the complexity and often contradictoriness of life on the Plains.

Norris calls her book a “spiritual geography.” Geography and “place,” although less important in the book than spirituality, are nonetheless profoundly important to her. She is writing about the West River (west of the Missouri River) regions of both Dakotas, which bear more resemblance to each other than does either state in its east-west configuration. This is America’s “outback” (so-called by Newsweek magazine), a harsh but beautiful landscape, characterized by vast, relatively empty spaces, hugely variable weather, harsh environmental conditions, and limits on economic enterprise. Other authors, from John Steinbeck and Gretel Erlich to William Least Heat-Moon and Ian Frazier have written compellingly about the region, but Norris makes clear in her own way how the land, the environment, and “place” matter hugely in people’s lives. The Great Plains possesses its own unique identity, but it can also be conceived of as a frontier or as a border, dividing the Midwest from the West proper. However it is viewed, people living there are distinctly aware of their minority status within the broader American culture. This has economic as well as social and cultural implications. Norris is at her best in describing and evoking the ways of living and thinking that characterize small towns like Lemmon and those surrounding it. In the broadest sense, however, we should think of the book as not merely a regional take on a distinctive piece of ground but as a broader meditation on the whole human condition.

This volume, in addition to being a geography of the imagination, constitutes an inquiry into “spirituality.” Readers in South Dakota, whose level of religiosity has been measured as being one of the highest in the United States, may find the discussion to be the most interesting part of the book. This is no objective or scholarly analysis of denominational variety or religious history but rather a highly personal and idiosyncratic discussion of the “spiritual,” broadly conceived. We learn from several of the essays that Norris has roots in the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations, that she largely abandoned formal religion for almost two decades after college before coming back to an almost obsessive quest for identifying the spiritual, that she had a brief experience filling in the pulpit of local Presbyterian congregations during a pastoral vacancy, and that she ultimately found faith in a Benedictine monastery (she further describes her religious quest in The Cloister Walk [1996] and Amazing Grace [1998]). Her self-identification as “a complete Protestant with a decidedly ecumenical bent” (91) therefore comes off as something of an understatement.

Norris is no conventional pew-sitter. Her brand of spirituality remains distinctly eclectic, representative more of her peripatetic childhood and young adult life, as well as

her education at Bennington and vocation as a poet. She sometimes seems to “try on” religions like some people try on clothes (94), but her many and deep musings on what it means to be religious, to love one’s neighbor, to recognize the holy, and to know God ultimately force readers to think much more seriously about their own notions on the topics. Her musings on gossip alone (the term derives from words originally meaning “akin to God” [72]) are worth the price of the book.

These comments only scratch the surface of the rich observations and interpretations packed in this deeply thoughtful tome. Many will want to re-read some of the essays to discover the deeper implications missed the first time through. With this book, Kathleen Norris took her place as one of the foremost interpreters of Dakota culture and as a national literary personage. In the New York Times Book Review, Verlyn Klinkenborg, calling the book “remarkable,” enthusiastically judged, “She writes as well about the dynamics of small-town American life as anyone I have ever read.” Bob von Sternberg in the Minneapolis Star Tribune praised her for having “the ear of a poet, coupled with the eye of a brilliant reporter.” This book, whether we love it or hate it, agree with it or not, stands as an important marker of our ideas about the two Dakotas.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In linking both Dakotas together in her title, Norris implies that the cultures of North and South Dakota are similar or identical. Do you think that is true?
2. Local history is often not very truthful, according to Norris. (81) She asks, “How do we tell the truth in a small town? Is it possible to write it?” (79) Discuss.
3. “The truth, the whole truth, tends to be complex, its contentments and joys wrestled out of doubt, pain, change.” (79) Comment.
4. Norris quotes Jose Ortega y Gasset at the beginning of the book: “Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.” Does this apply to you?
5. Norris writes, “More than any other place I lived as a child or young adult—Virginia, Illinois, Hawaii, Vermont, New York—this is my spiritual geography, the place where I’ve wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance.” (2) Do you feel a similar relation to place? Which is the most important one to you, and how has it affected your “spiritual geography”?
6. Moving to Lemmon was a “counter-cultural” choice for Norris. (3) How do you interpret her use of the word, and does it seem to fit what she is talking about? Does this require us to think differently about the term “counter-cultural”?
7. A central fact of the environment around Lemmon is out-migration and depopulation, a condition that afflicts many parts of South Dakota. How does what she writes help you to think about this phenomenon?
8. Norris is a writer and, of necessity, a reader, and she naturally thinks a lot about reading. She refers to it as a solitary act but also, paradoxically, as a public one and one that “deepens my connections with the larger world.” (15) How do you think about the reading that you do?
9. Too often, metropolitan residents relegate less populous regions of the country to a condition of “forgotten people in a mass-market society.” Places like Dakota may be seen primarily as places to fly over, deposit nuclear waste, dump garbage, and install missiles. (16-27) How do you view and react to these stereotypes?

10. Norris suggests that during the 1980s the Dakotas began trying to promote economic development by advertising themselves as low-tax, low-wage states with hard-working, highly skilled, and dependable work forces. (28) First of all, is this an accurate description of the strategy? If it is accurate, is it the best approach, in your opinion?

11. Norris's observation that Dakotans' inability to do much to influence big business or big government has resulted in turning the population into a sort of "underclass" (31) coincides with the notion that the region has historically been an economic "colony" to and culturally inferior to the East. (33) What truth is there in these notions?

12. People in the Dakotas seem somewhat schizophrenic in their high self-regard and in their thought that this is "God's country," while at the same time harboring feelings of uncertainty and low self-esteem. (32) Does this just reflect the usual kind of ambivalence that people maintain toward the places they live, or is there something more significant going on here?

13. Norris says she "tried on" her grandmother's Presbyterian church. (92) Have you observed this kind of activity (or perhaps have you been involved in it yourself)? What does it say about changes going on in the culture? Are Americans today more prone to "try on" political views, lifestyles, and other modes of behavior than they used to?

14. Norris presents various definitions of "sin"—failure to do concrete acts of love, failure to follow rules, etc. (97) Is her discussion on this point useful?

15. What do you think Norris means by "spirituality"? Do her discussions of it increase our understanding of the subject?

16. Norris quotes poet David Allen Evans on relations between whites and Indians in South Dakota: too often, they "live alone together." (108) Is this an accurate description, in your opinion? How might we improve the situation?

17. Norris understands how the eye can "appreciate slight variations." (156) She possesses the subtle antennae of the poet. How does her book enhance our ability to see and to be aware of the world around us in all of its variety?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Born in Washington, D.C., on July 27, 1947, Kathleen Norris grew up in Virginia, Hawaii, and Illinois. She spent many of her summers at her grandparents' place in Lemmon, South Dakota. After receiving her bachelor's degree from Bennington College in Vermont in 1969, she worked in New York City until 1974, when she and her husband, poet David Dwyer, moved to the ancestral family farm in South Dakota after her grandmother's death. While continuing to write, she served as assistant librarian of the local library and was a poet in residence for the North Dakota Arts Council. In 1986, she became an oblate of the Benedictine Assumption Abbey. She also spent two nine-months' residencies at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota. She received grants from the Bush and Guggenheim Foundations to pursue her writing. Her books include The Middle of the World (1981), Dakota: A Spiritual Geography (1993), Little Girls in Church (1995), The Cloister Walk (1996), Amazing Grace (1998), and a memoir of her time in college and early years working in New York City, The Virgin of Bennington (2001).

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