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GRAND HORIZONS

Review of: Mary Taylor Young 2002. *Land of Grass and Sky*. Englewood, Colorado: Earth Tales 160 pp.

[Twenty-ninth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

The Great Plains of North America comprises three broad longitudinal bands. From east to west, they are the tallgrass, midgrass and shortgrass prairie. This book explores these bands at their middle latitudes in the states of Nebraska, Kansas and eastern Colorado.

The tallgrass prairies have the richest soil, the greatest rainfall and of course the tallest grass cover, in the summer often higher than a person. Sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) -- wonderfully aromatic and used in traditional medicine -- is its signature plant. The midgrass prairie, the broadest of the three bands, has grass about a meter high. The shortgrass prairie, in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, has sparser, shorter vegetation, mostly no more than 30 cm high.

Very little tallgrass prairies remain today, as the fertile soil is very valuable for agriculture. During three years' residence in Kansas, I never saw the native tall grass except when I made a deliberate trip to one of the remaining patches. Somewhat more midgrass prairie retains its natural vegetation, although most has been turned to the cultivation of maize and other grains. The shortgrass prairie is poor cropland, utilized mainly for grazing. It has been the least affected of the three bands, and it is here that Young did the greater part of her wandering.

The Great Plains are a region of seasonal extremes, often very hot in summer and very cold in winter, with little to obstruct the winds that sweep over the land. I once asked a local man in the shortgrass prairie if the wind ever stopped blowing. His laconic answer -- one that he had probably given to many visitors from afar -- was "Only to change directions." There are also large fluctuations in rainfall. Many rivers and streams are dry or almost dry much of the year, then swell in the spring on their way to the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers.

Aside from seasonal and human-made changes, the prairies are naturally dynamic. Much of the eastern prairie is a fire climax, with fluctuating boundaries. Where fire has been absent long enough, the forest advances only to be lost in the next major fire. This kills the trees, while leaving the roots of the grasses intact.

Each of the 14 chapters treats a particular plant or vertebrate animal and its associated organisms, with frequent references to relationships between the plains Indians and particular plants and animals. The chapter titled "Tumbleweeds" includes a gripping second-hand account of a powerful life-threatening dust storm. Perhaps the most engaging of the animal chapters is on the black-tailed prairie-dog, a fascinating social mammal. However, the plant or animal that gives a chapter its title is sometimes more a nucleating agent -- barely mentioned -- than a theme. One can appreciate this device more if one does not insist on knowing exactly what is going on.

I came close to abandoning this book in the first chapter. I'm glad I didn't. All in all, it is well structured, although with marked lapses of focus of the sort that makes much of journalism so tiresome. It is beyond belief that Young expects the reader to care about what she was wearing at one time or another, the Bailey's Irish Cream she drank, or her dog's breed and name, among many other extraneous details. On top of this, various vapid metaphors and such statements as "God blessed [magpies] with the magical power of flight, and added beauty and grace in the bargain" are downright cringeworthy. The author missed a fine opportunity to ask, in the context of natural selection, why magpies are such graceful fliers.

Much of the book is a lament for diminishing and lost wilderness, as well as the loss of rural life as housing developments spread. Young regrets that "The Great Plains have been plowed, irrigated, overgrazed, planted with trees, depopulated of native wildlife, and built upon with cities and sprawling developments. Though native plants survive in places, no natural prairie, functioning as it evolved to function, still exists." Unlike when a forest is cut down, the physical change is not obvious to the casual observer, yet it is just as deep and lasting. Two keystone animals with major impact on the soil, have been removed: bison and prairie dog. Each has been reduced to an estimated 1-2% of its natural numbers.

There is also a long lament for the passing of the native peoples. Young shows a laudable eagerness to try the various kinds of traditional foods available to the plains Indians. I just wish she wouldn't clutter the accounts with chatty comments on how they are prepared, for example, or what modern kitchen seasons to use on a bison steak.

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