

A Tallgrass Prairie Alphabet

Claudia McGehee

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“A: Aromatic Aster.” So begins a glorious journey through the alphabet and around the prairie. This book combines lyrical words and vibrant illustrations to give children of all ages an eye-opening look at America’s heartland.

The author, who is also the illustrator, uses text and art poetically to capture the feel of the American prairie. McGehee chooses words with both alliteration and dissonance, to make the book flow perfectly from one letter to the next. Passages like “Pasque flower” let young readers hear the soft and hard sounds that different letters make.

The illustrations are what make this book a standout. McGehee is a longtime resident of Iowa, where the prairie became her inspiration. Her illustrations have appeared in books like *Weathering Winter* and *Gardening in Iowa*, but she has never dabbled in the art of picture books before this outing. These illustrations are rendered in scratchboard, which makes them seem like real art and not like the comic-book digitally-altered style found in many picture books.

The drawings capture not only the beauty of the tallgrass of the prairie, but the animals that dwell in it, the weather elements that control it, and the human emotions that come from it. The letter “E,” for example, shows the “Evening Primrose”; the illustration fully depicts the loveliness of the plant, but then goes beyond that to show a family enjoying the prairie sunset in the background, the grass blowing gently in a soft breeze, and a bird soaring peacefully in the horizon—all of which creates the feeling of prairie serenity that the plant inspires. While the book was written for children, the visually rich illustrations make it a good coffee table selection for adults as well.

The words might deter some readers at first glance. Most readers won’t know what “Aromatic Aster,” “Horned Lark,” “Dickcissel,” or “Zizia aureas” are, but thankfully the book comes with a glossary of plants in the back of the book. Here, children can learn about where the plants grow, and what time of year they’re most likely to see them. The book also introduces the different seasons of the year, as each season appears at least once in the illustrations.

This is a good book to get kids to practice the alphabet, or for older kids to read as a poem. It gives an illuminating look at the prairie landscape, which will be familiar to kids in the Midwest, and novel for kids on the coasts. *A Tallgrass Prairie Alphabet* will make all readers feel like they’re in the heartland of America.

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