FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Literary Collections

Best of Prairie Schooner: Personal Essays
Hilda Raz
Kate Flaherty
University of Nebraska Press
978-0-8032-8982-6
(September 30, 2000)

The “Best of…” anything carries with it the burden of expectation. That which claims to be above the rest is ultimately a matter of taste. Therefore, picking up and reading this collection of personal essays is somewhat similar to the approach taken by a foreigner faced with a plate of unfamiliar foods. With enthusiasm and a spirit of discovery, the traveller-reader will find that certain flavors and preparations are agreeable, while others are not.

What is appealing is the range of subjects and nuances of style and voice, from pieces about a mother’s cancer, to a young man’s homophobia and how he reacts when his identical twin brother comes out, to one about the death of a brother-in-law in a surreal shooting on the highway.

What may appear at first glance to be a deft arrangement of words and images, can also impart interesting philosophical and political content. Amidst compost, blossoms, and the ritual of harvest, Maxine Kumin writes “Around here the calves are not confined in slatted cages in the dark, chickens scratch in capacious barnyards and are not debeaked, sows farrow in full-size pens or in the open. Does it matter how they live, since they are all going to die to feed us? I think it matters mightily, not only because these uncrowded creatures need not be shot full of antibiotics to survive to marketable size, but because how we treat the animals in our keeping defines us as human beings.”

What is accomplished here, and in the best of cases, is the merging of an intimate, distinctive voice with moral and aesthetic concerns. The personal essay form allows for this in a way that is superior to other genres, though it depends somewhat upon the author finding the right reader—or vice versa.

A collection such as this one, representing sixteen accomplished writers culled over time from a respected American literary magazine, offers a hungry reader a place to start sampling.

Holly Wren Spaulding