

Set Ploughshare Deep: A Prairie Memoir

Timothy Murphy

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“All my friends have settled in mundane places like London, Rome or Singapore. Only you have chosen a truly exotic place to live.” This is what a former classmate of Murphy’s observes in a letter to the author. The location he’s referencing is the southeast corner of North Dakota, the fertile Red River Valley. It was across the state line in Minnesota that Murphy was born during the blizzard of 1951. As he wryly notes, “In our parts children are conceived at the first thaw and born in blizzards.”

A graduate of Yale, Murphy was already a published poet looking to stay in the East in academia, when a former teacher, Robert Penn Warren, the Pulitzer-award winning author, told him, “Go home, boy. Buy a farm. Sink your toes in that rich soil and grow some roots.”

This is Murphy’s memoir told in poetry and prose, of his struggles on the land his grandfather struggled with first, nearly 100 years earlier. It’s a book of childhood reminiscences interwoven with adult observations.

The seven chapters follow a uniform format: a short poem, a bit of prose explaining in more depth, another poem, more prose. Each section is preceded by photos of Charles Beck’s beautiful multi-colored woodcuts of some aspect of country living, such as sunflowers or snow geese.

Murphy starts with some of his family history, telling how his father’s parents met in the early years of this century. His redheaded schoolteacher grandmother Tessie is prominent in the book. “We were extremely close, and I was steeped in her tales of struggle. Most children told of the bad old days squirm and close their ears; but I listened, and those stories haunt me still.”

Murphy writes of hunting and his dogs, the farms he worked, his small orchard outside Fargo open to visitors, the flood of ’97, the weather and finally, the pain of losing his farm after twenty years.

His father, Vince, gets a chapter himself and tells his recollections of a generation earlier—of the threshing crew, the farm animals, how being a farm kid was different from living in town. “I never had a bicycle, but we had three Shetland ponies.”

Murphy offers this explanation for going back to his roots: “I have done so because the changing seasons lend some rhythm to a disordered life.”

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (May / June 2000)

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