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Autobiography & Memoir

The Prairie in Her Eyes
Ann Daum
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"The land, our very lives, are parched and flooded by turns, perched at the bank of the river where the

ground keeps crumbling away. And there we balance." The author is describing both her childhood and the current life she leads in the White River valley of South Dakota's south central region.

She and a sister and brother—along with 500 head of cattle—were raised on their parents' 13,000 acres, and she evokes these experiences as she meanders pointedly between the past and present. Daum describes her father's storytelling and his natural obsession with the Plains weather: "I knew how fronts rolled in from the time I could say my ABC's." She explains how he always saw the humor in things, despite being a child of the "dirty thirties," losing his own father very young and having his four-year-old brother swept away by floodwaters. "Always a trickster, he liked to scare guests by driving his Ford pickup down the steepest prairie draws—so steep we all hit our heads on the roof when he surfaced on the other side. The guests held on to the dashboard, door handles, each other."

Daum also tells of the not-so-pleasant facts of life on the prairie—the wary dance between its inhabitants and the untamed wildlife, the death of domesticated animals and innocence. She realizes she's viewing her homeplace as an outsider—one who left for schooling, but still returned for the necessary cycles of life on a farm. "Being an outsider makes me look harder, at people and places I took for granted before. I see that the prairie is beautiful, something I had always known but could now explain."

The 1990s bring drought to the region and illness to her father. The cattle are sold off and her father, getting by with canes, "takes half an hour now to walk the hundred yards to the barn." A good daughter, Daum stacks bales of straw along the path for him to sit on and rest.

After college, Daum returned full-time to the White River valley, where she now breeds

sport horses on the ranch where she grew up. This land, the prairie, is not just in her eyes—it's in her very soul in this slender but weighty first book.

Robin Farrell Edmunds