A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

10. John Madson's *Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie*

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Over a decade ago, I sat at a table in a dimly lit room with five ecologists talking about the restoration and use of degraded lands. One of them, a tropical ecologist who secretly harbored a fondness for birds and a penchant for the fiddle, blurted out, "What about those 'I' states? Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana? They are so dull and flat, we should just cover them with wind turbines." She was a trained ecologist, but she saw little value or beauty in the far-reaching fields, the rich black earth, or the wide-open sky. She wanted to plant turbine trees in an agricultural grassland.

The vitriol directed at those humble prairie states was shocking. To me, that "dull and flat" landscape represented the unique history of Potawatomi Indians and French voyageurs, and its expansiveness represented unrivaled freedom. To me, the warm, sun worshipping cornfields and postage-stamp sized remnant prairies were deeply restoring after a week stuck in a building working through cold numbers on a lifeless computer screen. To me, the 'I' states are home.

This animosity toward prairie lands was nothing new. As John Madson explains in *Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie*, the tallgrass prairie has evoked strong dichotomous reactions since American pioneers began crossing the Cumberland Gap to settle these open lands. Some settlers, like Captain Thomas Morris, viewed the miles of grasslands and marshes as "elysium." (Note that all uncited quotes are from Madson 1995.) Judge Hall described the prairie as "sloping and graceful," producing "a gaiety which animates the beholder." Others disagreed. Charles Dickens, only a brief visitor, was particularly derisive, describing the prairie as "oppressive in its barren monotony."

Unlike Dickens, Madson saw profundity in the monotony of the prairie, describing the prairie as an "infinite vault of sky in a world reduced to three immensities: the grass below, the sky above, and the single horizon beyond." Madson revealed his vision of the tallgrass prairie in 1982 when *Where the Sky Began* was published. The book spurred interested in prairie restoration and was hailed as a "classic work" when re-released in 1995, the year of Madson's death (Saikku 1995). The newer version adjoined a concluding chapter on prairie restoration to a book deeply invested in both the people and the place that is the tallgrass prairie.

In a book dominated by natural history, Madson does something rare: He sensitively reveals the human history of the tallgrass prairie. In doing so, at times Madson recalls a forgotten vocabulary. He describes the "whangleather breed of Americans" who came from the South to settle prairie, and the "real prairie pioneers" from the Northeast that settled the prairies in earnest in the 1820s and '30s.

Perhaps Madson was able to admire the hard work and unflappability of Midwesterners because he was one of them. Madson was born in 1923 to hearty grasslander stock. His father, John Madson Senior, was descended from Norwegian settlers who worked the railroad and the land. His mother was descended from a longer line of grasslanders that had done their time in both Indiana and Illinois before settling further west in Iowa. Madson features this side of the family, the Posegates, in his book. Madson describes his great grandparents, Thomas and Martha Posegate, staking their prairie claim in Iowa after taming the Grand Prairie of Illinois. He also describes them burying "a baby son along the wagon trail."

While Madson sensitively chronicled the human story of the prairie, he has also been called "a true naturalist" (Wright 2006), an instinct he honed as a boy on the prairie with a gun, and with training in wildlife and fisheries biology at Iowa State University (Trimble 1988). Madson, as a practitioner of natural history, demonstrated superb "receptivity to the more-than-human world" (see Fleischner 2001, 2005), and he focused his careful gaze equally on plants, animals, soil, and forces of nature.

In describing the fauna of the tallgrass prairie, Madson's prose ranges from a recitation of gee-whiz facts to a melancholy dirge. For example, Madson coolly described the Pronghorn with "leg bones stronger than a cow's…a heart twice as large as a sheep's and a trachea larger than a man's." Less than ten pages later, Madson's tone shifts. He reverently describes the habits of the Greater Prairie Chicken, and tells the reader, in hushed tones, of its decimation. At the end of the passage, Madson leaves the reader bereft, describing the voice of the prairie chicken as "the last fading voice of the prairie wilderness, echoing after the lost clouds of curlew and plovers, crying farewell."

Madson tempers this sense of love and loss for the prairie with a grand sense of excitement and adventure. With gusto, Madson describes "the intense winter cold" and the "sweltering prairies." He animates "an ancient warring" of subtropical and subarctic weather, with vivid images of snow plastered blanket-wool breeches and the "hell…[of] stacking straw under the blower of a steam-driven threshing machine on a July afternoon in central Iowa." He describes men and horses quitting the fields in the wake of a "dark veil" that brought drenching rains from the west, and the awe-inspiring view of a "ponderous elephant-trunk" tornado from the inside of its funnel.

Madson had a knack for penetrating deep into the heart of the prairie, its people, its fauna, its flora, and its soil. When my colleague described the dull and flat landscape of those "I" states, she lacked the benefit of Madson's insight. She saw flat land and monotonous agricultural fields, but for Madson those fields echoed yesterday's prairies. "The species have changed," Madson said, "but the essential prairie forms have not. Iowa's prairie country still produces tallgrasses in the form of corn; central Kansas grows mid-height grasses in the form of wheat; and the Great Plains is still a major producer of bovids – but in terms of cattle instead of bison."

Yet, perhaps my colleague could never appreciate those grasslands turned to fields of grain. Maybe the landscape can only be loved by "hard-goers" and those who hunger for authenticity and continuity. Madson himself, in the last lines of his book, seemed to recognize the strangeness of loving the prairie. He described that love as that of "modern man fallen in love with the face in a faded tintype."

References

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