

Best Thesis Nomination for *Threshold: A Memoir*

“Threshold” is work that is substantial not only in length—clearly the longest thesis we have received during my seventeen year in the department—but also in scope, ambition, stylistic polish, acumen, and conviction. It demonstrates Faith’s intellectual curiosity, wide-ranging interests, and the breadth of her knowledge; her work also represents a significant investment in investigating her personal past, probing regional history, and exploring narrative craft so that she might construct meaningful exploration of these issues. “Threshold” integrates investigation into family photo archives, interviews with a number of living relatives and family acquaintances, and historical research in libraries and document depositories with her knowledge in the sciences and her passion for the land. This thesis represents a sophisticated achievement, bringing the creative imagination and refined narrative talents into conjunction with a well delineated family history and with historical research to create a meaningful record of a personal past that also wrestles with timely and significant issues such as land stewardship and the nature of community.

Faith’s thesis is an excellent example of the increasingly popular genre known as creative non-fiction: taking one’s life history and experiences and processing it through the imagination; delving into the substance of the past’s significant moments; filling in the gaps with memory, research, and speculation; and creating the felt truth of a plausible past—all the while acknowledging that it is doing so. I have used parts of Faith’s thesis in my portal class on memoir this fall, as it is an excellent example of honestly integrating speculation into remembrance so that we as readers trust the voice behind it to be honest, sympathetic, knowledgeable, and dedicated to getting at the felt truth behind circumstances. The voice that emerges from “Threshold” rings true and clear; it is a born storyteller’s voice—not one spinning yarns or creating fables, but rather one that seeks to lovingly portray the past and bring the characters who compose her family to life for us. In the process, we understand the place and its people better, and witness a writer engaged in the quest for self-understanding via memoir.

Faith’s work is influenced by the writing of Loren Eisely, by her work with the Nebraska Games & Parks Commission, by her attachment to the land that has been in her family for generations, and by the knowledge of craft she has acquired in reading critical work concerning creative non-fiction. As a sixth generation Nebraskan, she has written this thesis not only to satisfy her curiosity about her personal roots, but to try to understand how that family history is tied to the historical changes in the land. She strives to recognize their role in the land’s transformation and evolution, and their contributions to the changes that progress has wrought—changes that are a product of their attitudes and efforts to survive and prosper. “Threshold” is full of compelling individual portraits—the midwife Grandma Hendricks, homely George Coburn, and the uncaring doctor who commits an unforgivable atrocity, to single out just a few—but these portraits add up to something greater in their exploration of the mindset that forged the region as it is today, one characterized by values that have led to ambivalent returns in a history of which we may not be proud and others that we might resurrect in order to arrest the fragmentation and isolation that characterize our postmodern era.

Faith’s thesis has an excellent critical introduction, melding commentary on the creative process with reflection on the art of memoir and smoothly integrating secondary criticism on the genre. The work has a

sophisticated structure, collapsing time and space and moving fluidly between different time frames with Modernist ease and associative connections to create coherence and bridge the gaps. Though the broad scope of traversing six generations is formidable, Faith is always in control, cross-referencing the genealogical background a reader needs and providing ample historical context. Her thesis is reader-friendly in providing an opening overview of the individual pieces and including a list of dramatis personae for reference as we negotiate the various stories, much as Eudora Welty does in her fictional portrait of Morgana, Mississippi, in her short story collection *The Golden Apples*, a work Faith read in a course with me. As Faith notes, her technique is one of establishing “landmarks” in the past—particular events or moments or secrets—and striving to fill out the surrounding territory, both physical, historical, and—perhaps most importantly—emotional. While she does not present a linear history, she assembles a composite portrait of the region’s history through the struggles of her ancestors, providing a sense of the danger in early encounters with the Shawnee in a compelling captivity narrative, glimpses of the settlement of the territory and its division into individual landholdings, chronicles of personal struggles to survive weather and hardship, and portraits of individuals seeking to establish the connections that might create the community needed to enhance life beyond the survival mode.



Recurrent characters and themes ultimately weave her work together as she moves across generations and sides of the family. Each chapter has a well-wrought closure, such that each one can stand on its own, yet together the chapters form and represent the sort of richer, interrelated community that Faith clearly values. Coherence is provided by her reiteration of the issues associated with these lives, such as that of rightful land ownership, the need for stewardship of the land held in trust, the spiritual connection to land itself, the connections of generations of women who forge webs of relationship, and the nature of family and community, as well as their importance in providing the glue that ultimately brings separate lives—and stories—together. These themes are what raise the multi-generational assembly of portraits beyond a mere compilation of stories and create the complex and rewarding work that becomes “Threshold.” While its primary motive may be the author’s search for part of herself in past generations, the work becomes an analysis of the historical conditions that have led to our current lives and a call for a restoration of what was valuable in that past, along with a recognition of what was and is still problematic about it. “Threshold” will, I trust, reach wider audiences: it is a refined and stylistically polished work already in publishable form, and Faith is currently working to find a publisher for it. Her thesis demonstrates how a personal history can present a microcosmic vision of a region and lead us to consider larger issues, social as well as human. This work definitely deserves to be recognized with an award, and would represent the university well at the next level of completion—and beyond—should you select it as the best UNK thesis. I learned much from it in the process of serving on Faith’s thesis committee and am extremely impressed with the result. I recommend it to you most emphatically.

-- Dr. Robert M. Luscher
October 19, 2012