

Family Like a Prairie

Threshold: A Memoir, Faith A. Colburn, independently published, 2012.

296 pp.; includes photos; 10-page list of original sources and additional reading. ISBN 1480234389; 13-978-1480234383.

“What we’ve been calling family,” writes Faith Colburn in *Threshold*, “is a stripped down version of a much richer creation. . . . like calling a field of bluestem a prairie. . . . It’s the rich diversity of grasses and forbs that makes a prairie work, just as it’s the rich diversity of parents and children, grandparents and cousins, aunts and uncles providing nourishment and support that makes a family work.”

Colburn has created something like a prairie in this ambitious book: an interwoven tapestry of eight generations of family, their lives nourished by Nebraska’s farmland. Delving deep beneath the varied plants in her family, she takes us into the skein of roots beneath the soil—and brings us home to a clearer understanding of our own ancestry.

She begins the book with a long list of characters, her family and friends who appear in the book. I once heard Leslie Silko say as she began a reading that the audience shouldn’t try to keep track of all the names immediately. “That’s not good for you,” she said. Just relax, she told us; listen and we would begin to understand the relationships. Do the same as you plunge into this book; all will become clear as Colburn begins weaving her story with the voice of her grandmother. And the real importance of the people in this book may be not that they are members of Colburn’s extended family but that they are recognizable as family belonging to everyone with ties to the prairie.

These twenty stories loop into and out of the history of one ordinary American family’s struggle to survive. Five-year-old Joseph Swope is kidnapped and adopted by a war chief. The author’s father roars up the highway with a turtle as passenger, trying to save his marriage. A singer with big bands who survived an abusive childhood falls for a soldier one enchanted evening and finds herself on a remote Nebraska farm. There are unwed mothers and lonely spinsters who disappear from family records, wild young men who drink too much: all the folks who would appear on the family tree if most of us are honest.

And we all have ties to the prairie, even if we don’t realize them; the prairie nurtured many of our ancestors and feeds many of us still. Still, but for how much longer if we don’t stop paving farmland? Fewer than one percent of Americans now farm the land and fewer still remain on small acreages, Colburn says. That’s too few to lobby successfully for intelligent farm policies that protect and conserve the land for its residents and the Americans it should feed. Agriculture is dominated now by huge corporations who treat the land and its occupiers like machines, not by nurturing communities of families.

Deftly, Colburn juxtaposes some of her own experiences with those of her ancestors to help

readers feel the reality of these stories. “The hours of twisting and slicing,” she writes and instantly I, too, could remember what it’s like to mow hay with a scythe, an experience once common to farming folks, though even most modern farmers have never handled the tool. My father used a scythe to mow areas of the yard unhandy to reach with a mechanized mower; I’ve used it just enough to feel the memory in my muscles. Colburn’s ancestors harvested up to seventeen tons of hay by hand as a cash crop. A wagon load of hay might pay for a doctor bill or Christmas presents. On their small Nebraska place, even in the drought year of 1859, the family raised five hundred bushels of corn, two hundred of buckwheat and a hundred bushels of potatoes, sold three hundred pounds of butter and tucked six bushels of beans into the cellar.



Colburn does not lecture her readers but she uses her own experiences to add depth to what the reader may bring to the book, showing us how the prairie is still as abundant as ever, despite the century’s changes. “I ingest the soil, with its millions of microbes, in the form of sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers, beans and basil. Every day I leave skin cells and shed hair on the grass.” She is the prairie as the prairie is her so that “when I walk attentively on this earth, I feel welcomed here, a part of the conscious silence of stones and the whirling fury of storms.”

“Once, Grandma mentioned in passing that there was no one left to talk to. I was a little hurt. ‘But,’ she said, ‘no one’s left who knows what I know’” That statement chilled me; even I, at the relatively young age of 69, know a great deal that no one else remembers, both specifically about my own ranch and generally about ranching. I’ve seen how younger ranchers dismiss some of the old wisdom as they find their own way to live with the land. Some change is beneficial, of course, but loss occurs everywhere. Colburn says that sometimes when her grandmother answered a question, she felt as if she was “hesitating, listening to other voices” before she answered. Perhaps she was; I find myself responding to uninformed questions or comments about ranching and the prairie with wisdom I once heard from my father or grandmother.

“In my grandma’s day,” writes Colburn, “a family was rich like a prairie.” Not only did most family members live close together, in the same community, but neighbors were woven into the blanket of helping and being helped. Of course, not all families or communities functioned well, but in recognizing their need for one another, most probably got along better than the average modern subdivision tacked onto the edge of an old ranching community. She speaks of a neighbor who washed his wife’s body, dressed her, built her coffin, and hauled her to the crematorium in the back of his pickup. That’s what she would have wanted, he said. Today, he might be arrested. We may contribute dollars to good causes but many of us have lost the sense of responsibility, the closeness, of helping neighbors face to face.

Faith Colburn is well qualified to tell this personal and universal story. She earned an MA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska-Kearney as well as a BA in journalism and political science and an MA in journalism from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She

received UNK's Outstanding Work in Fiction Award during its 2009 student conference as well as several awards from the Nebraska Federation of Press Women. In 2012, UNK chose *Threshold* as the best thesis in the College of Fine Arts and Humanities. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in several publications. While working for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission she wrote numerous articles for *NEBRASKAland* magazine. Learn more about her at faithanncolburn.com.

You might read this book for a half-dozen reasons: because you need guidance in writing your own family history; because you are interested in Nebraska rural history; because you know the author or her country; or because you want to get some sense of what your own farming ancestors' lives were like. She recalls "the smell of wheat dust and sweat and the ozone that precedes a storm and there's the clang of green beans into a metal pot while friends and family sit on chairs dragged out into the yard where it's hard to discern the border between fireflies and stars." She remembers how comfortable it was when everyone knew her name. Perhaps, she says, "we can retrieve that feeling in a new century." Whatever your reason for reading, you will come away enriched and enlightened.

--Linda M. Hasselstrom
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