2014

Not All There

Debra Marquart
Iowa State University, marquart@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs
Part of the Nonfiction Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/170. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Not All There

Abstract

A few years ago, my friend Jordan, a writer and park ranger in northern California, decided to take a month long trip to Grand Teton National Park to do some research for a book. He had worked for the park service twenty years earlier in the Tetons, so the trip was part research, part reverie, and part mournful return to the rougher mountains of his youth. He was one of those people who competed in and won biathlons—the Olympic winter sport where you ski, then shoot with a rifle, then ski some more. He liked to claim you could drop him into any unfamiliar terrain with a compass and a knife—maybe not even a knife—and expect that he’d survive as long as needed.

Disciplines
Nonfiction

Comments
A few years ago, my friend Jordan, a writer and park ranger in northern California, decided to take a month long trip to Grand Teton National Park to do some research for a book. He had worked for the park service twenty years earlier in the Tetons, so the trip was part research, part reverie, and part mournful return to the rougher mountains of his youth. He was one of those people who competed in and won biathlons—the Olympic winter sport where you ski, then shoot with a rifle, then ski some more. He liked to claim you could drop him into any unfamiliar terrain with a compass and a knife—maybe not even a knife—and expect that he'd survive as long as needed.

His whole take on the world was strange and unfamiliar to me. As a born and bred flatlander, a Midwesterner, and someone who grew up in tame farm country, not like the ranch country that existed west of the 100th meridian, I feel unsafe as soon as my car encounters the inclines of foothills. I never grew up around water, so I can't swim and am deathly afraid of water. I was never big on hiking or backpacking or camping. One time when I was around eight, I slept outside with my sisters in a makeshift tarp-tent on the far edge of our very big back farmyard, and I woke up the next morning with an earache.

As a fuzzy, red infection grew in my ear canal over the next few days and my parents hemmed and hawed about the doctor (we, none
of us, ever liked going to the doctor—doctors were for when you were taken out flat on a stretcher), my parents finally took me to the doctor and discovered that a bug had crawled into my ear and died.

Probably, the night we were camping, Dr. Goodman reasoned, as he held it up between the tips of his tiny forceps for us all to see. That was it for me—no more sleeping outside. Bugs crawl in your ear and die when you go camping!

How Jordan and I ever became friends is a mystery. But, in anticipation of his Teton trip, I bought him a *Wyoming Atlas and Gazetteer* as a kind of joke because orienteering is one of his most prized skills. Before I slipped the atlas in the manila envelope to ship off to him in California, I flipped through the pages to see what could possibly make people speak in such reverential tones about Grand Teton.

When I opened the section that focused on the north-south corridor of the Rockies containing the Tetons, I was surprised to discover that practically every glaciated range, every horn, cirque, moraine, wrinkle, valley, and rubble pile that the alpine glaciers left behind in northwest Wyoming had been named, and, in fact, bore some of the grandest names in American history—Roosevelt, Jackson, Bridger.

At the time, I was working on a memoir about growing up a rebellious farmer’s daughter on a North Dakota wheat farm. One of my working premises was that the place where I grew up was a no-place in the national imagination. One ethnographer dubbed the five-county area in central North Dakota where I grew up the “sauerkraut triangle” because it was so heavily populated with people from my ethnic group, known as Germans-from-Russia, and, presumably, if you drifted into this region as a hapless traveler, you might fall under the spell of sauerkraut’s vinegary ethers and never find your way back to the Interstate again.

*The Wyoming Gazetteer* inspired me. If some of the country’s most unpopulated and inaccessible peaks were so lovingly named—geological nuance after geological nuance—what might the DeLorme
Gazetteer have to say about the milder nooks and crannies of my own home ground, a lightly populated region, but certainly inhabited and well-used.

Not surprisingly, Barnes & Noble did not have a copy of the North Dakota Gazetteer, so I ordered it from Amazon and waited for days, anticipating its arrival, imagining all the delicious place names that people before me had coined for the topo map of my childhood.

Perhaps you already know what happened when the package came, when I ripped it from its wrapper and turned to the pages containing my hometown, my county, the township of my family land.

I found only the few names I already knew—Napoleon (town), Logan (county), Bryant (township). Highway 3, the two lane blacktop that I used to gaze at from my bedroom window and dream about escaping on, was also there.

The rest of the map was colored in with greens, brown, and tans blocking out the geographical relief of the land, the collection of concentric circle indicating small hills, black lines for roads, thin blue lines for streams. But there were few place names on the paper, nothing traced by fingers of love, mapping the curvilinear geography. The pages were full of green expanses, blank and silent about themselves.

I knew from my childhood people had lived there, worked, walked, died there. Everything imaginable and unimaginable had happened on this small piece of land, but the places must not have struck people as name-worthy—not enough to garner the attention of the DeLorme geographers anyway.

Not all there is a euphemistic phrase people in my home town used to use to describe someone who was “slow” or “developmentally disabled,” as we like to say now.

In my hometown, there was a man named Rochus who walked the same route through town each day, no matter what the weather—up the main street from his mother’s house where he lived, through the grain elevators, past the café, grocery store, and bar. And when he
went by the Stock Grower’s Bank, he would shout “big shot, big shot,” at the top of his lungs. Every day. And sometimes if we kids came into his path, he’d stop and smile at us, as if he was just a very big kid in overalls himself, and he’d point his finger at us and yell, “How much, how much? Two cents? Sold!”

All this was terrifying and inexplicable, but it was explained away to us by the adults as nothing to worry about, because Rochus was not all there.

It’s okay, we might say to ourselves about the unnamed state of the Midwest, we’re just not all there. The streets you drove, the places where you slept, the willows and beech trees under which you wept and fell in love—not all there. The haunted places of my youth, like the alley of raspberry bushes on the way to my grandmother’s house or the dip in the moraine east of my hometown where we used to have keg parties—just blank creases in topographical maps until someone takes the time to remember, to bring a word, then a phrase and sentence to them. To remember is to re-member, after all, as in reattach something like a lost limb, to bring story back to an unstoried landscape.

I’m willing to fight about this. I’m willing to argue—and come to fisticuffs in bars, drink a Budweiser even, surrounded by jars of turkey gizzards and billiard tables—that the Midwest is not a no-place. Not in the way that Gertrude Stein meant it about her own hometown, Oakland, California, when she said, “There is no there there.” Despite what the world of maps, letters, and history don’t have to say about the Midwest, there is plenty of there there.

More accurately, I think we are a “true” place, in the way that Herman Melville meant it when he wrote, “It’s not down in a map. True places never are.” No more aw-shucks-ing about the place where we live. No more digging our toes in the dirt. From now on, let’s just declare the Midwest a true place full of open secrets, most of them delicious and horrifying. We have such a backlog of work to do! Whole centuries of odd facts and bizarre occurrences to record about what’s
really been going on here, the details of which we must now regretfully disclose to the rest of the known world.

Debra Marquart is a professor of English and the Coordinator of the MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University. She is the author of five books, including a memoir, The Horizontal World: Growing up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere, which received the Elle Lettres Award from Elle Magazine, an Editors' Choice commendation from the New York Times, and the 2007 PEN USA Creative Nonfiction Award. Her work has been the recipient of many prizes, including the Shelby Foote Nonfiction Prize from the Faulkner Society, the Headwaters Prize, a Pushcart Prize, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Marquart’s latest book, a poetry collection titled Small Buried Things is forthcoming from New Rivers Press in 2014.