Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally
by Jenny Kerber

Review by Sue Sorensen

Writing in Dust is the latest title in the Environmental Humanities series from Wilfrid Laurier, a series which indicates a growing academic commitment to ecocriticism. For the Canadian west, says Jenny Kerber in her Introduction, literary ecocriticism “offers a new set of vocabularies for honouring the past while attending to its wounds, putting the local in dialogue with the global, and incorporating the indigenous worldview into regional identity rather than simply relying on agrarian myth” (19). She argues that past assumptions about prairie literature have tended to fluctuate between an unrealistic Edenic conception and an equally untenable emphasis on the destructive and desolate qualities of the region. Her goal throughout this study is to complicate such simple interpretive binaries, especially in the reading of classic early works like W.O. Mitchell’s Who Has Seen the Wind and Robert Stead’s Grain, urging us “to re-read early prairie texts as complex interventions into the social, political, and environmental debates of their own times as well as our own” (31).

Although I am not entirely convinced that these early novels were ever received as simplistically as Kerber suggests, her readings of a range of important prairie texts are unusually full and knowledgeable. She strives in this study to provide a broader sense of context for prairie literature – emphasizing politics, agriculture, and particularly settler-aboriginal relations – and there is a sense of urgency to her analysis. Always in full focus for Kerber (and especially for one of the key writers she encounters, Trevor Herriot) is the fragility of the prairie environment – and the damage the land has already sustained.

Kerber studies twelve writers in considerable depth, and her choices are admirable. Her first chapter, on the fiction of Stead, Mitchell, and Edward McCourt, and her third, on the poetry of Tim Lilburn, Louise Halfe, and Madeline Coopsammy, are both capable and intelligent. However, the other two sections are particularly good. Her analysis of the nature memoirs of F.P. Grove, Wallace Stegner, and Trevor Herriot is original and refreshing. And possibly the best chapter here is the one on “storytelling as environmental work” by Thomas King, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Laurence. Kerber’s insistent honouring of aboriginal perspectives and, surprisingly but agreeably, theological ideas is generous and careful.

Indeed, Kerber can be overly careful at times. Desiring to be helpful, she moves at times too quickly to broad assessment or overview. Her own close readings of literary works are always more interesting than the offered aggregation of critical concepts from the field of environmental criticism, which tend to be dry and strangely unrooted. I suspect this book was once a doctoral dissertation, and thus Kerber has been obliged to demonstrate her extensive knowledge of the field, but this can harm the impetus of her arguments, as when she interrupts her examination of Robert Stead to present not irrelevant but still distracting information about the use of insecticides in the Great War era. Kerber rarely admits doubt, which is too bad, as a little puzzlement can be productive. When she finally uses the word “frustrated” in analyzing Lilburn’s challenging poetry (123), this reader felt relief, but not enough.
Two other small problems with the book must be stated. There is little here about the style of these authors, and while a strictly thematic approach can work for the length of an article, an entire book without reference to style feels odd. For example, Kerber deals ably with both W.O. Mitchell and Tim Lilburn, but someone unaccustomed to these authors might be forgiven for not realizing how very far apart they are in technique and personality. The other problem involves statements of the obvious. It is only natural that a study of this length will occasionally need to offer a pronouncement that is perhaps too evident, but unfortunately I kept coming across such statements. “The presumption that there are right stories about the Qu’Appelle conversely suggests that there might also be wrong stories” (99). “Decisions about the physical environment are often structured in and through assumptions about race, gender, economics, and history” (146). “Wiebe, King, and Laurence collectively suggest that identity, like one’s commitment to place, is always to some extent a critical and creative choice” (202). We cannot disagree, which indicates that Kerber needs to be more provocative.

However, in her detailed and stimulating analyses of individual literary works and her reminder of “the role that language plays in the becoming of places” (9) – a lovely phrase – Jenny Kerber has performed admirably. Her work on Who Has Seen the Wind, for example, is a much-needed repossession from sentimentality. One cannot help but come away from Writing in Dust with a much more grounded and inclusive outlook on prairie writing.

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