A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape
by Candace Savage

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

Candace Savage thought she was just dropping by Eastend, Saskatchewan, for a bit of R and R before facing the daunting challenge of writing a natural history book on prairie ecosystems. Little did she know, back in September, 2000, that she would be drawn into the story of the Cypress Hills, which rise just outside of the small southwest Saskatchewan town and stretch about sixty kilometres west into Alberta.

*A Geography of Blood*, her Writers’ Trust–winning memoir-cum-history, is the story of her immersion in this storied environment. It’s an immersion that leads her to a new understanding of her history and of Canada’s.

She arrives in town for a short stay at the Stegner House writers’ retreat, named for Wallace Stegner, the Pulitzer- and National Book Award–winning American novelist and historian whose book *Wolf Willow* was inspired by his boyhood in Eastend. Almost immediately, she is struck by the mystery and magic of the Cypress Hills.

What we noticed first was the silence. If you stood on the curb in front of the Stegner House and listened, you could feel your ears reaching for sounds, as if they were trying to stand up as sharp as a coyote’s. (18)

Now we stood on the divide between the mundane and the numinous, between the events of our everyday lives and the meanings that were speaking to us. “Stay put,” that still, small voice insisted. “Pay attention.” (17)

And so, over the course of several years of return visits, and the eventual purchase of a home in town, she does pay attention.

Many of her early explorations focus on the region’s natural history. Eastend, like Drumheller, Alberta, is a world-famous treasure trove of dinosaur fossils. She visits the dinosaur museum and recounts as well how the Cypress Hills – a fertile and forested tableland rising more 600 metres above the dry prairie – were formed.

The region’s natural history soon leads to an exploration of its human history, and this leads her to meditate on her family’s history as homesteaders.

In part, this exploration is inspired by her reading of Stegner, whose family homesteaded in Saskatchewan unsuccessfully in the early twentieth century.

Though she acknowledges his achievements as a writer, Savage isn’t always fair to Stegner, whom she accuses of promoting the triumphal vision of progress taming the West. In fact, Stegner’s entire writing career was devoted to reassessing the heroic narrative of the first half of the twentieth century. And when Stegner described the Cypress Hills, in *Wolf Willow*, as a place where “hardly any man, red or white or halfway between, would have dared to go” he wasn’t writing, as Savage suggests, out of “racial prejudice” (60–61) but in recognition that the Hills were contested territory between the Plains Cree and Assiniboine on one side and the Blackfoot Confederacy on the other.
But responding to Stegner is only a part of the book. When Savage is inspired by her own family’s history the book takes flight. Early on, Savage recounts a vision she formed as a child from hearing accounts of the Aboriginal people who lived adjacent to her homesteading grandparents.

In my mind’s eye, I saw my late grandmother (think Queen Victoria in a housedress) crossing the field on the dirt track that led toward the riverbank. Opposite her, at a distance, a young Beaver woman (an Indian princess in buckskin) stood at the edge of the brush, as if she had just come up the hill from the water. . . . No matter how often I conjured them there, they never approached each other, and neither uttered a word. The silence that lay between them seemed impenetrable. (32–33)

In addition to the thoughts of her childhood vision, Savage is prompted to dig more deeply by her own daughter’s response to the Cypress Hills. “It feels like something bad must have happened here,” the daughter says (50). That thought, in combination with her mother’s death, leads Savage to search further into the Hills’ tragic history. “That’s when I, too, find myself staring out at the river hills and thinking about my own ghosts,” she writes (51).

As she digs more deeply, she is determined to “pry open the locked wooden chest labeled ’1870–1885, End of the Frontier’ and reveal whatever moldy, disagreeable truths were stored within” (72).

The stories she recounts fit with the ominous title and cover image of the book (a bleached bison skull on prairie grass rendered red by the setting sun). Savage describes the Cypress Hills Massacre, familiar to students of Canadian history and readers of Guy Vanderhaeghe, and the desperation of Sitting Bull and his Lakota refugees, who camped in Southern Saskatchewan after fleeing the wrath of the American Army following the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

While these stories are, or should be, familiar to any educated Canadian, she also describes the little-known experience of Cree and Assiniboine communities who sought to stay in the Hills rather than move to reserves further east or north. They were essentially starved out by a deliberate policy of refusing to provide food unless they would move to the reserve.

As she learns more about this “geography of blood,” Savage is drawn back once again to the hidden tragedies of the Peace River country of her family’s past and that image, conjured up in the mind of a child, of a silent, anonymous, Indian woman.

The trouble had lurked, like a disquieting shadow, around the edges of my upbringing. Why weren’t there any Indians on the Indian Quarter, where my family went to swim in the dark, spruce-green waters of the Beaverlodge River? Why were the two women of my imaginings unable to move or raise a hand in greeting?” (153)

By the time she has completed her exploration of the past of the Cypress Hills, Savage is ready to see if she can replay that encounter with a better result. Late in the book she visits the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, a minimum security prison for Aboriginal women opened in 1995, and later meets a Blackfoot elder who takes her to sacred and historic sites throughout the region.

In her final words, “to be continued,” Savage acknowledges that these efforts to bring memory, legend, myth and history together in one tragically beautiful place are just part of the beginning of a national conversation. ♠

Bob Armstrong is a Winnipeg writer who has explored the Cypress Hills on foot and wheels.

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