

MONKS AND COYOTES SING

Review of
 Kathleen Norris
Dakota: A Spiritual Geography
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Those who enjoy reflective, poetic writing that strikes at the heart of truth may profit from reading *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, by Kathleen Norris. While *The New York Times Book Review* praised it as a “remarkable work of non-fiction . . . a deeply, spiritual, deeply moving book,” it is much more than that. A conscious blend of spiritual autobiography, reflective essay, cyclical nature writing, poetry, and metaphysics, *Dakota* defies attempts to pigeon-hole it into any one traditional genre. Norris, a Presbyterian, has captured and nuanced for the reader the Benedictine spirit of solitude, hospitality, and its rhythm of prayer and work. She writes both as an outsider and an insider: an outsider to Roman Catholicism, Norris manifests profound respect for its traditions, a respect that Roman Catholics often lose; an insider, an oblate of a nearby Benedictine monastery of sixty-five monks, she knows from experience the value, power, and purpose of solitude.

Dakota is aptly named a *geography*. The reader learns that Norris has journeyed from Hawaii to New York City to South Dakota to claim the house she inherited from her grandmother. We learn the history of her grandmothers — one Methodist, one fundamentalist — in the chapter “Ghosts,” and we learn some details of her local town of 1600 people in the chapter “Where I Am.” This outback, west of the 100th meridian, in the northwest of South Dakota is, as Norris puts it, a “marginal place at the center of North America,” 1500 miles from all four coasts (p. 107). Here she is rooted and rootless — rooted in the land of her ancestors, and rootless as a spiritual sojourner necessarily must be.

Both Kathleen Norris and her husband are writers, an anomaly for the farm residents of that territory. Yet, as writers, they appreciate in an intense way the interpenetration of the physical and the spiritual. “The flow of buttes is like Gregorian chant,” she writes (p. 157). Norris understands that place is not merely an accident of geography, but an invitation to discover the special gift of that space. In the words of the desert monk whom she quotes: “If a man settles in a certain place and does not bring forth the fruit of that place, the place itself casts him out” (p. 182). It is easy to see how fiercely she is committed to bringing forth fruit. For some twenty years, admits Norris, writing had substituted for religion; yet, at the same time, writing acted as a spiritual discipline to help her rediscover her “flesh and blood ancestors as well as the desert monks and mystics of the Christian church. “Dakota,” she writes, “is where it all comes together, and surely that is one definition of the sacred” (p. 131).

It is Norris’s writing about the sacred that is perhaps the most nourishing aspect of this book. After all this is a *spiritual geography*. “Nudged . . . into a quieter life” by living on the Plains, Norris has discovered the truth articulated by Thomas Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and my sister” (quoted by Norris, p. 15). Norris herself has something of a “Fourth and Walnut experience” when she returns to New York City on a

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mission of mercy to visit a terminally ill friend. Indeed, she seems to have learned many lessons from Merton, not only through her reflective reading of *Conjectures*, but also from *The Wisdom of the Desert*. Norris is captivated by the desert fathers, liberally sprinkling her text with cryptic stories of spiritual insight. She is taken, too, by the wisdom of St. Benedict, the medieval mystics, particularly Hildegard of Bingen and Mechtild of Magdeburg, as well as more contemporary writers such as Emily Dickinson, Flannery O'Connor and Matthew Kelly. For Norris, the Plains are a kind of renewing desert where she is challenged to develop "the gifts of fast and feast" (P. 111); and her frequent visits to the area monasteries provide a renewing and challenging experience of hospitality. She writes: "[T]he most surprising thing to me about the hospitality I found is that it is powerful without being seductive; it does not lead aside or astray, but home. It won't necessarily make you a follower or even a fan of monks; instead it will encourage you to examine and define your own deepest commitments" (p. 198).

Having been invited to share a week-long retreat with Benedictine women religious, Norris comments on the different quality of sustained silence, "the kind of silence that sinks into your bones. I felt as if I were breathing deeply for the first time in years" (p. 183). Such an insight echoes, for me, Merton's explanation of his new-found deeper solitude: "What I do is live. How I pray is breathe" (*Day of a Stranger*, p. 41). And, like Merton, Norris does not view prayer or the sacred as being only a personal and inward-looking experience. *Dakota* is sprinkled with examples of prayer externalized as she travels to writing workshops across the state. The reader recognizes, with Norris, the embodiment of Psalm 131 ("like a weaned child on its mother's lap") in the dozing mother and child across the aisle on the train (p. 186); and we are touched by the practical solution of the little Indian girl who, having no paper at home, keeps poems in her head. "That's where they live until I write them down" (p. 43).

Interspersed between these very readable chapters are snippets of Dakota weather reports chronicling the changes of scenery and reinforcing the sense of the holiness of time. January to December becomes a sacred cycle, a lived *Benedicite* to bless the Lord. "Suddenly, fir trees seem like tired old women stooped under winter coats" (March 25, p. 44). "Hanging up wet clothes gives me time alone under the sky to think, to grieve, and gathering the clean clothes in, smelling the sunlight on them, is victory" (June 30, p. 89). "The stillness under stars . . . It is so cold it hurts to breathe. This is the side of the moon that no one sees" (December 4, p. 219). These Weather Reports — not merely intertext — deepen her sense of place and her Benedictine sense of stability. As weather reports, they may not describe where the reader lives, but we understand the message, the insight, and the learning they offer. Throughout, *Dakota* is both a comfort and a challenge to our own inner silent awareness. We are challenged to hear the "gentle lullaby of vespers and compline, at one with the rhythm of evening, the failing light and the rise of the moon." And we are comforted with the promise that "Together, monks and coyotes will sing the world to sleep" (p. 217).