

JOHN E. MILLER

## Is South Dakota Experiencing a Literary Renaissance?

South Dakota has many nicknames, among them the Blizzard State, Sunshine State, Red State, Mount Rushmore State, Land of Infinite Variety, Fly-Over Country, and the Outback. It has also been associated with various geographical and cultural features, including the Corn Belt, the Wild West, the Missouri River, the Black Hills, the Badlands, cowboy culture, conservative politics, and political populism. “The Literature State” is not the first label that most observers would apply to South Dakota. In using that terminology for the feature story in the “Life” section of its issue for 27 January 2013, the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* was no doubt trying to attract attention and provoke discussion. Reporter Jennifer Gerriets, in her article “South Dakota: The Literature State?,” describes “a literary renaissance of sorts” that “experts” on the state’s “writing scene,” had detected. The question mark in the headline of her piece suggests that the notion is only a hypothesis to be contested, rather than an established conclusion that will persuade everyone.<sup>1</sup>

Proposing to call South Dakota “the Literature State” will undoubtedly seem counterintuitive to many readers, if not a considerable exaggeration to most of them. The state’s sparse and scattered population obviously limits its literary potential, not only in terms of providing a steady base for writers, readers, and book buyers but also in establishing a supportive institutional environment of libraries, book stores, college literature departments and writing programs, book clubs and book festivals, sources of book reviews and publicity, and all of the other factors that might nourish and encourage both writers and readers. Nonetheless, a brief consideration of writers who qualify for the

1. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 27 Jan. 2013.

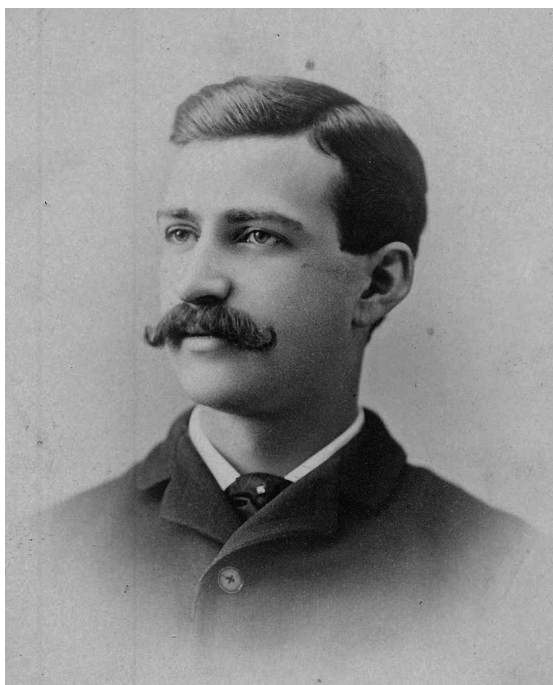
pantheon of South Dakota literary luminaries yields a rather impressive list of names, ranging from Kathleen Norris, Linda Hasselstrom, Vine Deloria, Jr., Kent Meyers, Pete Dexter, and Dan O'Brien to Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Patrick Hicks, Allison Hedge Coke, David Allan Evans, and Joseph Marshall III.<sup>2</sup>

Nor does South Dakota need to be ashamed of its standing in the field when the time line is extended backward in history. Volume One of the *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* (2001) features 370 authors.<sup>3</sup> Of these, fifteen (4.1 percent) have South Dakota connections: L. Frank Baum, Black Elk, Leo Dangel, Charles Eastman, Hamlin Garland, Linda Hasselstrom, Herbert Krause, Rose Wilder Lane, Frederick Manfred, Oscar Micheaux, Kathleen Norris, Ole Rølvaag, Luther Standing Bear, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird). Any such listing, obviously, invites debate of issues such as inclusion and exclusion, who counts as a South Dakota author, and the number of authors deserving such recognition, but it does provide a useful starting point for discussion. At first glance, it might appear that with only 4.1 percent of the authors on the list, the state was underrepresented (an equal division among the twelve states in the midwestern region would have allotted each one 8.3 percent of the slots). Considering the relatively small population of South Dakota, however, it actually enjoys a disproportionately large number of representatives on the list when considered on a per-capita basis.

A number of factors and forces are currently operating to energize literature and writing in South Dakota. Whether they add up to a full-fledged literary "renaissance" will be for readers to judge for themselves. Other terms such as "ferment," "evolution," or "flowering" might

2. A complementary list of historians who have written extensively on South Dakota history during recent years would include Steven J. Bucklin, Richmond L. Clow, Herbert T. Hoover, Nancy T. Koupal, Jon K. Lauck, R. Alton Lee, James D. McLaird, John E. Miller, Michael J. Mullin, Paula M. Nelson, Gary D. Olson, Lynwood E. Oyos, William C. Pratt, Harry F. Thompson, and David A. Wolff.

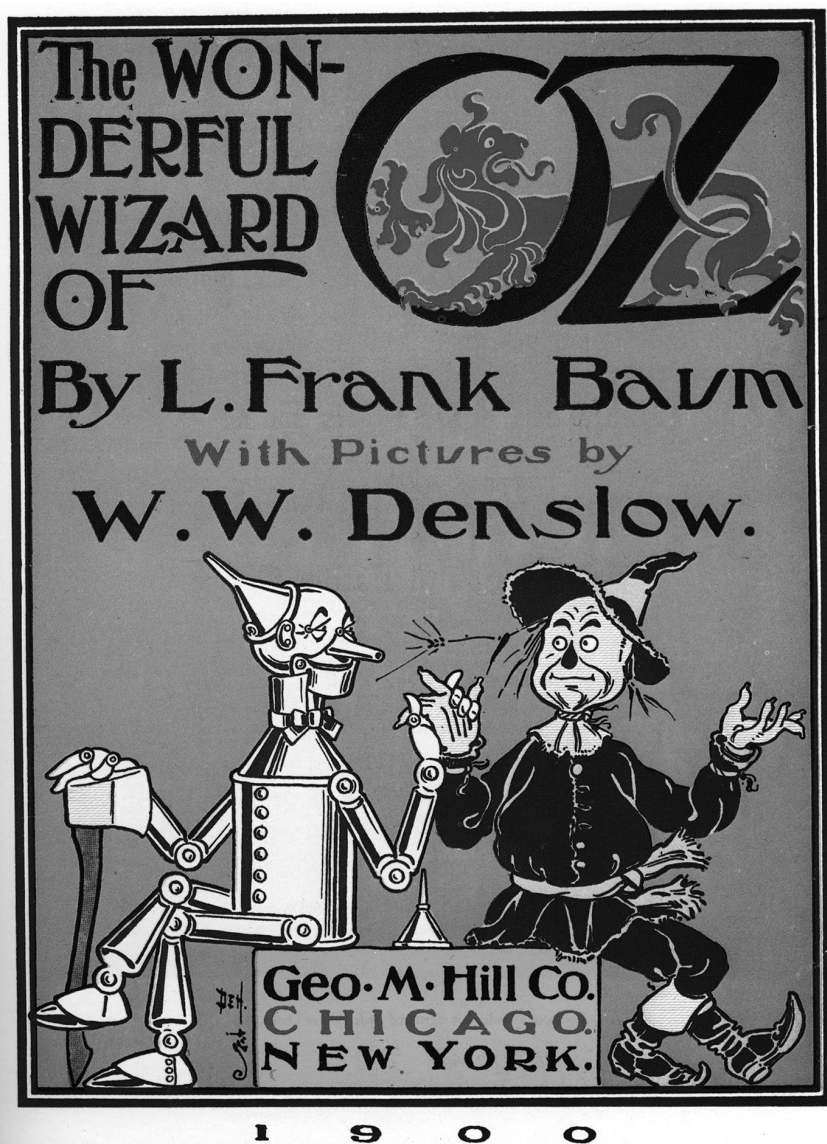
3. Philip A. Greasley, ed., *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, vol. 1, *Authors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For other historical treatments of South Dakota authors, see John R. Milton, ed., *The Literature of South Dakota* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Dakota Press, 1976), and Arthur R. Huseboe, ed., *An Illustrated History of the Arts in South Dakota* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1989).



L. Frank Baum was a newspaper editor and businessman in Aberdeen from 1888 to 1891, around the time he posed for this portrait.

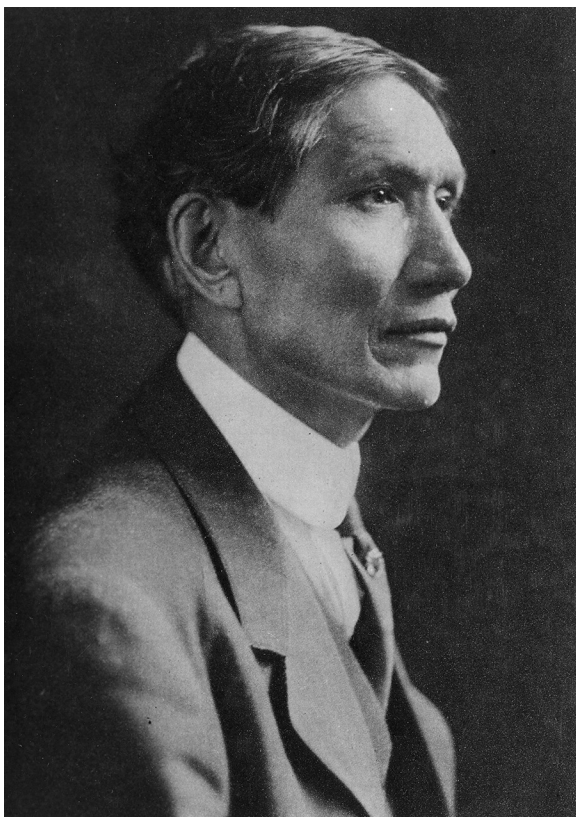
seem a better fit. Whatever terms are employed to describe these developments, they are cause for celebration and should provide incentive and further encouragement for those who value literature, history, and other forms of writing and scholarship. In dealing with the term “literary renaissance,” I interpret “literature” in its broadest sense, to include poetry, fiction and nonfiction, historical works, journalism, biography and autobiography, and other types of sociological and investigative reportage. While works of merit and stylistic sophistication are especially favored here, productions at all levels of skill are in the mix. Eclecticism and inclusiveness are the watchwords.

History, whether it be that of the state, the region, or pre-statehood Dakota Territory, has always been an appealing subject for South Dakota readers and writers, and books interpreting the past have attract-



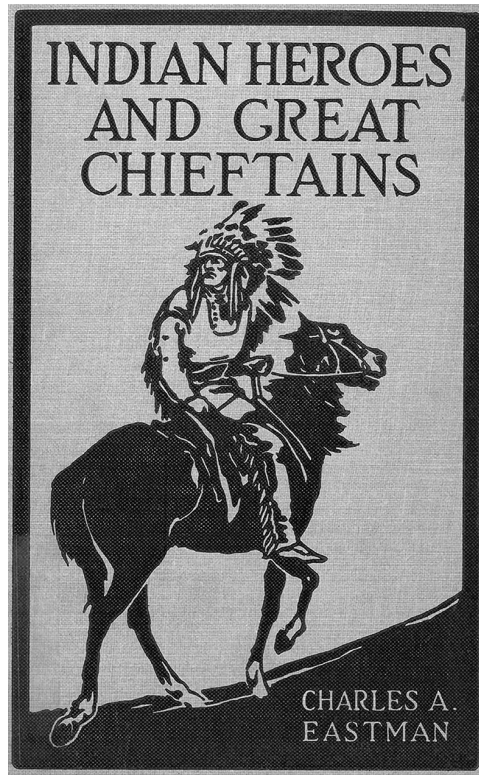
Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* became an American classic following its publication in 1900. Later editions carried the shortened title *The Wizard of Oz*.

ed a wide audience over the years. A disproportionately large portion of these volumes have focused on the earliest time periods, including works on the original inhabitants of the land, European exploration of the region, military operations, contacts between American Indians and whites, the process of settlement, and the first several decades of statehood. Exemplary specimens would include William E. Lass, *A History of Steamboating on the Upper Missouri* (1962); Howard R. Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (1956); Gilbert C. Fite, *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman* (1948); Robert M. Utley, *The*



The Santee Dakota physician Charles A. Eastman, or Ohiyesa, was among the first American Indians to write about native culture and history.





In 1918, Eastman published *Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains*, a collection of biographies of prominent leaders from many American Indian tribes.

*Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963); Renée Sansom Flood, *Lost Bird of Wounded Knee: Spirit of the Lakota* (1995); and Jon K. Lauck, *Prairie Republic: The Political Culture of Dakota Territory, 1879–1889* (2010).

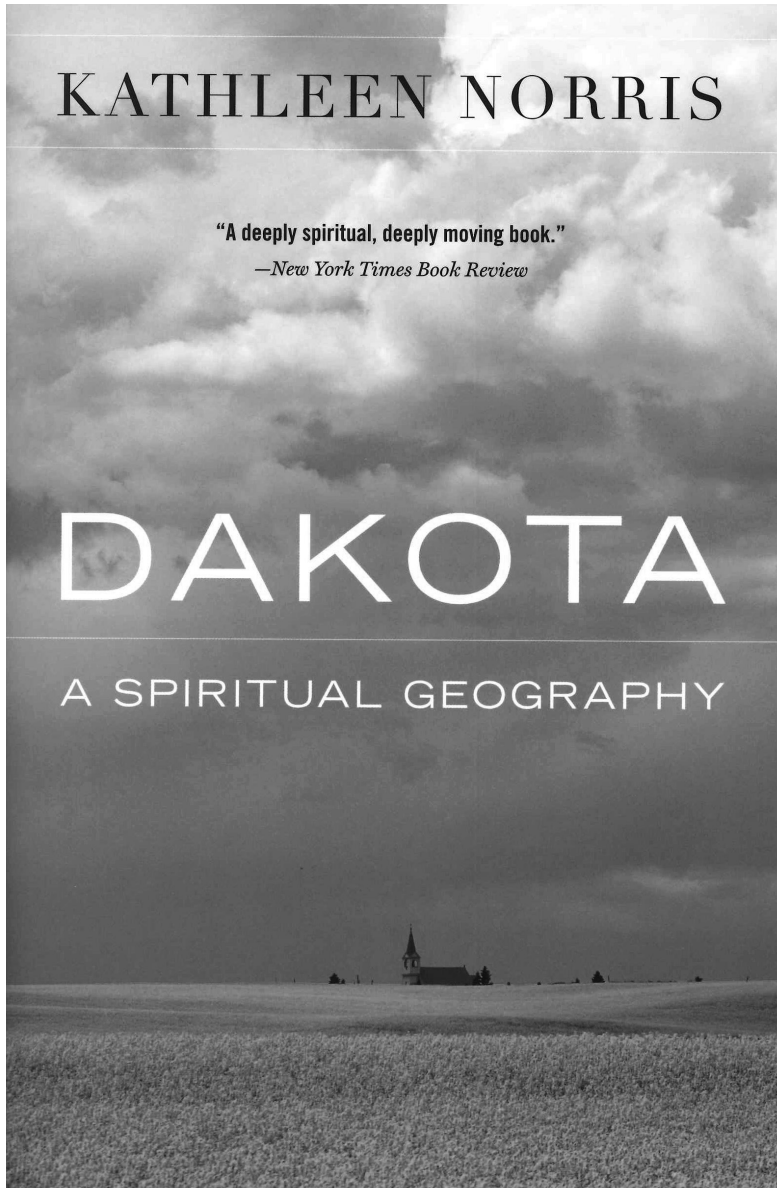
The time span since the Great Depression has also engendered a number of distinguished works, but compared to the earlier period, it has received less attention and suffers from large gaps in coverage, leaving much work for future investigators. Representative examples include Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996); Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and*

*the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992); Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians Revisited: The Continuing History of the Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux* (2009); and Peter Carrels, *Uphill against Water: The Great Dakota Water War* (1999).

While historians have been relatively slow to turn their attention to the state's recent past, journalists, fiction writers, poets, essayists, and social scientists are naturally geared to write about the current scene, and much can be learned about contemporary South Dakota by reading their work. Kathleen Norris and Linda M. Hasselstrom, especially, stand out in this regard. I suspect that when coastal residents want to learn something about South Dakota, they will turn to books like Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993), or to one of Hasselstrom's works such as *Land Circle: Writings Collected from the Land* (1991), *Going over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher* (1987), or *No Place Like Home: Notes from a Western Life* (2009). Today's novelist to read regarding South Dakota life is Black Hills State University English professor Kent Meyers, whose *The Work of Wolves* (2004), *Twisted Tree* (2009), and other writings have made him popular not only in the state and region but also as far away as France, where he went on an extended lecture tour in 2013. From a somewhat different angle, a sprightly and highly imaginative memoir-cum-rumination on South Dakota culture is Josh Garrett-Davis, *Ghost Dances: Proving Up on the Great Plains* (2012).

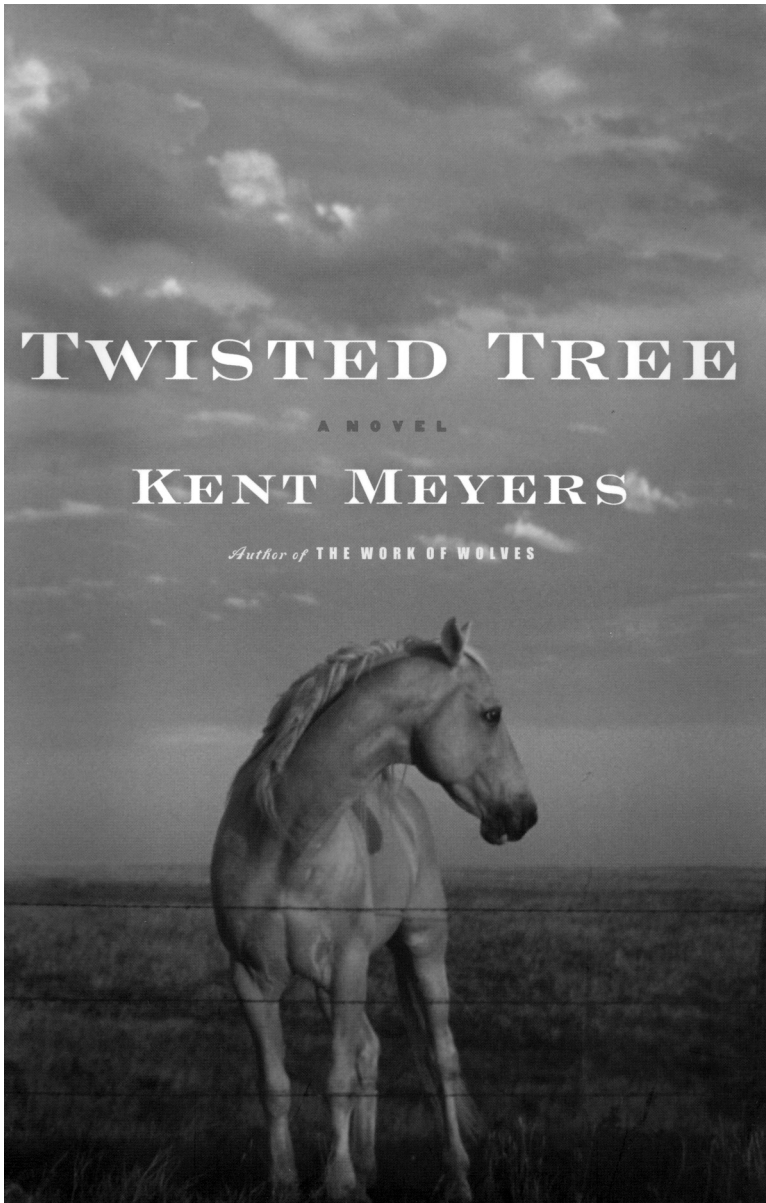
Frequently, authors from outside South Dakota have produced the most compelling interpretations of it, perhaps because of their greater willingness to cast a critical eye on what goes on in the state. Such writers include Ian Frazier with *On the Rez* (2000), Peter Matthiessen with *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983), and Edward Lazarus with *Black Hills/White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (1991). By any estimate, the literary scene—both fiction and nonfiction—in recent years has been a vibrant one.

What evidence is there, then, that some kind of literary renaissance is in progress? Gerriett's *Argus Leader* article noted two significant recent developments that highlight the quantity and quality of literary output in the state—the establishment of the South Dakota Historical Society Press in 1997 and the launching of the South Dakota Festival of Books in 2003 under the auspices of the South Dakota Humanities Council.



Originally published in 1993, Kathleen Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* is a meditation on Great Plains life.





Kent Meyers's 2009 novel *Twisted Tree* explores the impact of a teenage girl's murder on the inhabitants of a small town in western South Dakota.

Gerrietts also offered several examples of representative authors who are part of the process and placed special emphasis on new technologies such as online publishing.<sup>4</sup> While these developments by no means constitute an airtight argument for designating South Dakota as the “literature state,” whatever that phrase might mean, I think they do suggest that something special is happening on the state’s literary scene—a state of affairs that deserves recognition and further attention.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of literary ferment is extensive. Writers need readers, but they also need publishers, journals, periodicals, and other means of getting the printed word into readers’ hands. There has been a measurable increase in publishing outlets during the last several years, even as some of the more traditional means of dissemination have declined or disappeared. South Dakota remains one of the few states that lacks a true university press. Indeed, many other states have two or more such vehicles available to circulate the research of historians, social scientists, and other writers—sometimes even novelists and short-story writers. The University of South Dakota has had a press of sorts, but it did not constitute a consistent, long-term commitment to scholarly publishing, and publications from other higher educational institutions in the state have always been issued on an ad-hoc basis. There has been nothing like Harvard University Press or those located at Yale, Chicago, Columbia, North Carolina, California, and other such institutions. Now, with the rise of the South Dakota Historical Society Press, which turns out five to seven books a year under the direction of Nancy Tystad Koupal, historians, other scholars, and even children’s book authors have a quality publisher available to them in-state—an organization that, in many respects, operates like a full-fledged university press.

4. Electronic publishing is even reaching down into the high schools to find authors. See, for example, “Lincoln Teen Has Book in School Libraries, on Amazon Website,” *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 1 Feb. 2015.

5. All of these developments need to be placed within the broader perspective of a national cultural scene in which reading, especially of the “long” variety, libraries, bookstores, education, and the arts in general are encountering massive challenges, if not enduring an actual crisis. See Scott Timberg, *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), and Neil Postman’s classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

One of the most important literary events in the state's history began in late 2014, when the South Dakota Historical Society Press, headquartered in Pierre, released Laura Ingalls Wilder's previously unpublished autobiography. *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* has generated huge public interest and explosive sales.<sup>6</sup> That story is yet to run its course, but with about 150,000 copies in print as of July 2015 and with reviews or other stories appearing in multiple venues from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and National Public Radio to the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *National Enquirer*, the phenomenon constitutes one of the wildest success stories of any publication ever produced in South Dakota. This risky venture for the press has paid off in spades. The volume, edited by Pamela Smith Hill, flowed directly out of Hill's earlier work *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* (2007), the first book published in the press's South Dakota Biography Series. Successor volumes on Seth Bullock and on Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane have continued this popular and well-regarded series.<sup>7</sup>

The Center for Western Studies at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, for its part, has turned out a significant number of books for many years. *A New South Dakota History* (2005), a collection of essays edited by center director Harry F. Thompson, is a notable contribution. An earlier work of distinction was *An Illustrated History of the Arts in South Dakota* (1989), written by Arthur R. Huseboe, Thompson's predecessor. The publication of *A Harvest of Words: Contemporary South Dakota Poetry* (2010), edited by Augustana professor and writer-in-residence Patrick Hicks, marks a major milestone in poetry writing in the state. Part of the center's ongoing Prairie Plains Series, the volume features the work of fourteen authors, ranging from that of Hicks, South Dakota poet laureate David Allan Evans, and Leo Dangel to Debra Nystrom,

6. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, ed. Pamela Smith Hill (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014).

7. Pamela Smith Hill, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2007); David A. Wolff, *Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009); James D. McLaird, *Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011).



Begun in 1997, the South Dakota Historical Society Press has published more than seventy titles. Here, marketing director Jennifer McIntyre greets a visitor to the press's booth at the 2013 South Dakota Festival of Books in Deadwood.

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, and Christine Stewart-Nuñez. The center's latest book, *Little Business on the Prairie: Entrepreneurship, Prosperity, and Challenge in South Dakota* (2015), by Robert E. Wright, traces economic changes in the state from prehistoric times. In addition, the center publishes annual volumes of papers delivered at the Dakota Conference on History, Literature, Art and Archeology, providing a highly useful supplement to *South Dakota History*, the quarterly journal of the South Dakota State Historical Society.

On the other side of the equation, the discontinuance of the biennial *South Dakota Historical Collections* (1902–1982), which published a wide variety of articles, memoirs, and reports, as well as entire master's theses and doctoral dissertations, has to be regarded as a setback, but it is one that coincides with trends elsewhere and was necessitated by budgetary pressures. Compensating for its demise in recent years has been the growth of the South Dakota Historical Society Press. Another loss for South Dakota authors and readers was the closing down of

Pine Hill Press in Sioux Falls following the 2011 death of its owner Joe Mierau. While not a full-fledged press with an editorial staff, Pine Hill for many years printed more books in the state than any other source. Authors or organizations wanting to publish their own books will have to seek out other places to do so, which turns out in many cases to be local newspapers or commercial printing offices.

Because there are few publishing houses in the state and only a short list of independent printers with much experience in putting out books, it has been more difficult for South Dakota authors to get into print than is true in many other states. One new entrant in this field is the South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum Press in Brookings, begun by Mac Harris, the museum's executive director from 2006 to 2011. So far, the press has published three books: *Peril and Promise: Essays on Community in South Dakota and Beyond* (2007), edited by South Dakota State University English professor Charles L. Woodard; *The Picture of Health: A View from the Prairie* (2008), a collection of newspaper columns written by Dr. Rick Holm of Brookings; and *Action, Influence, and Voice: Contemporary South Dakota Women* (2015), edited by Meredith Redlin, Christine Stewart-Nuñez, and Julie M. Barst.

Periodicals and newspapers provide other channels for authors' work to find readers. By far the most successful such venture in recent decades has been *South Dakota Magazine*, a highly professional, bimonthly glossy magazine founded by Bernie Hunhoff of Yankton. It compares favorably with magazines of its type in other states, as attested by its ever-growing list of subscribers, now up to fifty-two thousand. Although many of its articles are staff-written, the lavishly illustrated publication has provided opportunities for a number of authors to get into print.

Poets, essayists, and short-story writers, many affiliated with colleges and universities, have likewise found a high-quality outlet for their work in *South Dakota Review*, which was founded in 1963 and edited for many years by English professor John R. Milton at the University of South Dakota. The journal continues on under the stewardship of his successors in the English Department, Brian Bedard and Lee Ann Roripaugh. The *Review*, like *South Dakota History* and *South Dakota Magazine*, is a highly regarded, award-winning publication that has

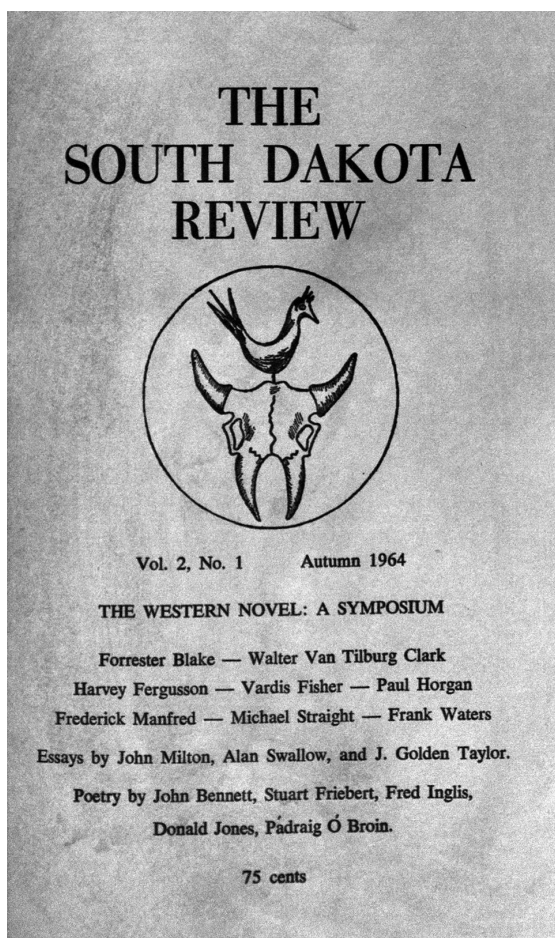


earned the respect of readers throughout the region and around the nation. *Pasque Petals*, the magazine of the South Dakota State Poetry Society, has been published since 1926. During the late nineteenth century and far into the twentieth, newspapers in towns of all sizes across the United States regularly published poetry written by anyone from local rhymesters to celebrity authors such as Edgar Guest and James Whitcomb Riley. Today, outside of publications like *South Dakota Review*, *Pasque Petals*, and *South Dakota Magazine*, poetry seldom has a practical means of dissemination to the general populace. Newspapers, literary reviews, and occasional publications at high schools, colleges, and universities remain places where students can get their poems, essays, and short fiction published.

Book reviewing in the state has both its bright spots and more problematic aspects. *South Dakota Magazine* generally runs about three reviews or notices per issue, sometimes more, and frequently does stories on books and authors. *South Dakota History* carries anywhere from three or four reviews to as many as a dozen in every quarterly issue, along with occasional shorter “Book Notes,” and it can safely be said that virtually every book of major significance relating to South Dakota history and many of regional consequence will be covered in its pages. Much chancier is the probability that even major books relating to the state will get reviews or stories in South Dakota newspapers. Until recently, the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* carried one page on books, often with South Dakota themes or settings, in the “Life” section every Sunday. Newspapers in larger towns such as Rapid City, Pierre, Aberdeen, Mitchell, and even some smaller communities run occasional reviews and stories on literary happenings and developments. It should be noted that with Amazon, Google, and other websites available to them, many modern readers no longer bother with reading print reviews, preferring to rely upon what they can find out about books on the Internet.

With the book reviewing and book publishing scenes presenting ambiguous and contradictory faces, perhaps the most promising and exciting venue for promoting the publication and readership of books is the development of literary conferences and book festivals. Outstanding in this regard is the South Dakota Humanities Council’s Festival

of Books held each fall, alternating between Sioux Falls and the Black Hills. Since 2003, Executive Director Sherry DeBoer and her associates at the council have brought in an eclectic roster of local, regional, and national authors, ranging from Elizabeth Berg, Louise Erdrich, and Michael Dirda, to H. W. Brands, Pete Dexter, and Joseph Amato. The council's Center for the Book has promoted writing and reading in a variety of ways. Other humanities council activities include the One



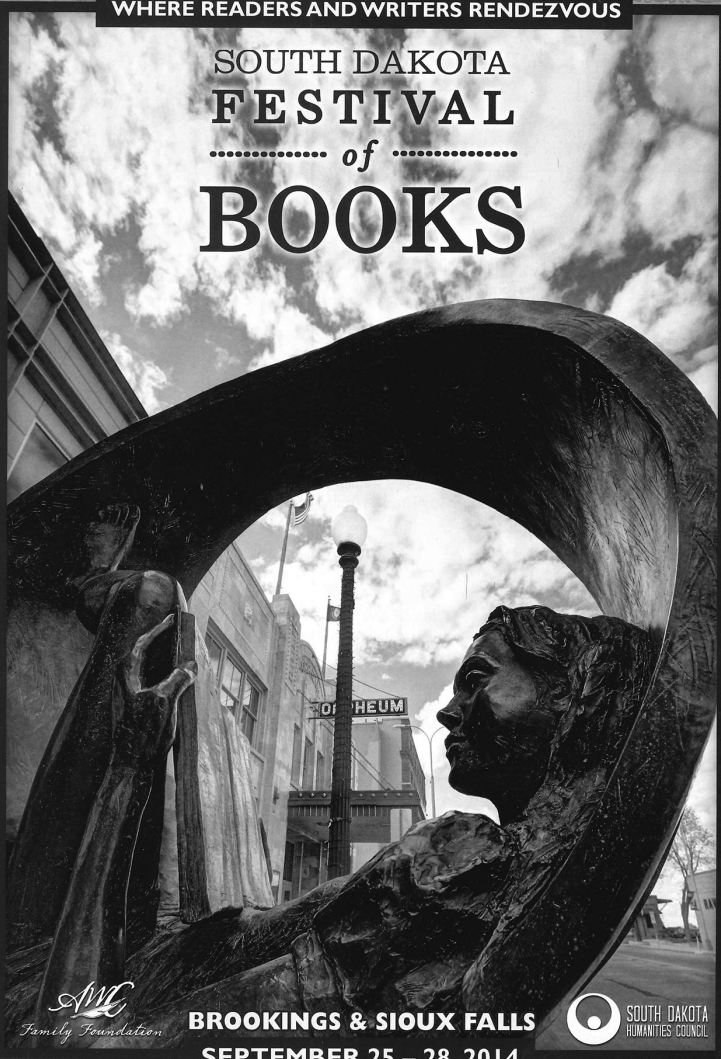
In its early days, *South Dakota Review* featured a simple, utilitarian design.



In 2013, *South Dakota Review* marked a half century of providing regional writers an outlet for their work with a triple issue featuring this striking cover design.

Book South Dakota program, a broad-ranging speakers bureau, reading-group toolkits, traveling exhibits, media and discussion programs, humanities institutes for teachers, and research grants. The council has sponsored collections of short pieces written by South Dakota citizens on country schools and churches, the home front during wartime, and stories of life on the farm and the ranch that have proved to be quite popular.

The Dakota Conference on Northern Plains History, Literature, Art and Archeology, held at the Center for Western Studies on the Augustana College campus every spring, has provided a unique meeting




WHERE READERS AND WRITERS RENDEZVOUS

SOUTH DAKOTA  
**FESTIVAL**  
..... of .....  
**BOOKS**

*MC*  
Family Foundation

**BROOKINGS & SIOUX FALLS**  
**SEPTEMBER 25 – 28, 2014**

 SOUTH DAKOTA  
HUMANITIES COUNCIL

The South Dakota Festival of Books has provided a meeting place for authors, illustrators, and readers since 2003.



ground during its forty-seven years of existence for authors to present their findings and exchange ideas. The meetings provide myriad opportunities for learning about new (and old) books, including an autograph party for authors of recently published volumes. Conference proceedings are published annually. The West River History Conference, held every fall since 1993, provides a similar venue for writers, readers, and students of the history of western South Dakota and the surrounding region. Rapid City has been the meeting's home since 2003. Other conferences of note are the annual Great Plains Writers' Conference at South Dakota State University, begun in 1976; the biennial John Milton Writers' Conference at University of South Dakota, started in 1998; and the McGovern Center Conference at Dakota Wesleyan University, launched in 2002 and typically held every year. A meeting worth special notice is the University of South Dakota Student History Conference, which brings undergraduate and graduate students together during the spring in Vermillion to present historical papers, giving them a taste of the research process and inspiring them to further investigation. A final example of a literary flowering in South Dakota is the third LauraPalooza conference, held at South Dakota State University in July 2015 after two previous editions at Minnesota State University, Mankato. This conference brings together between one hundred and two hundred authors, scholars, and fans of Laura Ingalls Wilder from all over the United States and several foreign countries.<sup>8</sup>

A variety of writers' groups have emerged and expanded in recent years, providing instruction, feedback, support, encouragement, and inspiration for writers of all types. Linda M. Hasselstrom's writers' retreat near Hermosa may be the best known and most successful of these groups, working with dozens of authors since 1996. Under her leadership, several impressive volumes of work by women writers have been brought to fruition in recent years, including *Leaning into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West* (1997) and *Crazy Woman*

8. South Dakota Public Radio has also been a major platform for talking about books and authors, especially on its *Dakota Midday* program with Karl Gehrke.



*Creek: Women Rewrite the American West* (2004), both of which were edited by Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier, and Nancy Curtis.

What Hasselstrom has done with women writers at her ranch, Charles Woodard has similarly accomplished by working with American Indian authors gathering since 1993 at South Dakota State University's Oak Lake Field Station near Clear Lake. The retreats held by the Oak Lake Tribal Writers' Society have provided a nurturing environment for American Indian writers under the mentorship of Woodard, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Joseph Marshall III, Ted Kooser, Susan Power, LeAnne Howe, Jodi Byrd, and others. The volumes published by members of the society include *Shaping Survival: Essays by Four American Indian Tribal Women* (2002) and *This*



The Center for Western Studies at Augustana College hosts both professionals and amateurs at its annual Dakota Conference on Northern Plains History, Literature, Art and Archeology. This luncheon session was part of the 2013 event.

*Stretch of the River: Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Responses to the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Bicentennial* (2006). Less well-known literary groups include a poetry society in Miller, whose members get together on a regular basis to share their own poems. There are several active writers' groups in the Black Hills, including one called Black Hills Writers and a group of veterans that meets at the Rapid City Public Library. Both include authors in their ranks who have published nationally recognized books.

Much of what is happening on the literary scene is accomplished with little or no outside support. However, expert advice and monetary support is always helpful to stimulate a thriving literary culture. Grants and subsidies to underwrite research, travel, conferences, communication, and other activities conducive to the production and dissemination of the written word are of especial importance. The South Dakota Arts Council (SDAC) awards grants to writers in its artist grant and organizational project grant categories. In the past, the council has recognized writers with fellowships and grants for specific projects, as well as technical assistance to help them publish and market their work. The council has also funded *Prairie Winds*, a twenty-five-year literary project that recognizes the writing of both students and educators. Writers have always been included in the arts council's Artists in Schools and Communities program, which places professional artists in schools and community settings to conduct residencies of a week or longer.

Any comprehensive analysis of the South Dakota literary scene should also take account of bookstores and other methods of book dissemination, including the school system, the state's colleges and universities, and its archival repositories. Independent bookstores have come under severe pressures in recent years with the rise of chains such as Barnes and Noble, the expansion of Internet retailers, especially Amazon, and the rapid growth of online publishing. The ability to obtain information about and purchase books online has certainly been a boon to many readers, however. A number of independent bookstores such as Zandbroz in Sioux Falls, Cover-to-Cover in Brookings, Prairie Pages in Pierre, and Prairie Edge in Rapid City continue to thrive, in large part because they have succeeded in cultivating a loyal customer base. In addition, bookstores in venues like Wall Drug, Al's Oasis, Mount



# 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

## OAK LAKE TRIBAL WRITERS' RETREAT

JOSEPH MARSHALL III

**STORYTELLING, STORYKEEPING:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF  
CULTURE-BASED WRITING"**

**READINGS, PANEL DISCUSSIONS,  
AND WRITING WORKSHOPS  
SEPTEMBER 16 AND 17,  
9:00 AM-4:00 PM, 7:30 PM  
VOLSTORFF BALLROOM, UNION ROOMS  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY**

THIS CONFERENCE CELEBRATES THE 20-YEAR  
EXISTENCE OF THE OAK LAKE TRIBAL WRITERS'  
RETREAT AND THE OAK LAKE TRIBAL WRITERS'  
SOCIETY WHICH WAS CREATED AS A RESULT  
OF THE RETREAT. THE FEATURED SPEAKERS FOR  
THE CONFERENCE, ALL NATIONALLY KNOWN  
TRIBAL AUTHORS AND ACADEMICIANS, HAVE  
SERVED AS MENTORS FOR THE ASPIRING  
DAKOTA, LAKOTA AND NAKOTA WRITERS  
WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE ANNUAL  
RETREAT AT SDSU'S BIOLOGICAL FIELD  
STATION AND IN OTHER SOCIETY ACTIVITIES.

FOR MORE  
INFORMATION:  
**CHARLES WOODARD,  
SDSU ENGLISH DEPT.,  
688-4056/692-5512**

LAURA TOHE

GORDON HENRY

KIM BLASSER

ROBERTA HILL

ELIZABETH COOK-LENN

LEANNE HOWE



This poster commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Oak Lake Tribal Writers' Society features prominent American Indian authors from the region.

Rushmore, the South Dakota Art Museum, the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center, and other locations provide a much-needed service for consumers. Internet commerce has both helped and hindered sellers of used books. An increasing fraction of their business now comes from distant places over the Internet. Despite all the talk about the decline of book-buying and problems facing publishers and booksellers, books continue to be sold and read in large quantities. Religious bookstores, garage sales, library book sales, and the dissemination of Scholastic Books in the schools provide other means of distributing books.<sup>9</sup>

Anecdotal evidence, polling data, testimony from students, and reports in publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggest that reading in the United States is in decline, that it is increasingly resisted by young people, and that there may even be a “crisis of reading” occurring in our schools.<sup>10</sup> Yet, many observers would argue that while there may be some deterioration in the quality and quantity of reading done by average students, the best ones are better-read than ever. Reading programs, writing contests, advanced placement courses, school literary magazines, debate competitions, and events like National History Day promote reading among students in one fashion or another. These activities in our elementary and secondary schools enhance opportunities for reading, even if they do not guarantee that large numbers of students will take advantage of them.<sup>11</sup> If some students manage to coast through college by reading only small snippets of literature on the Internet while avoiding lengthy texts, other young people continue to read extensively.

9. A sign of the times: I recently visited a college bookstore with no books on the shelves. I was told that it was a “virtual bookstore.”

10. For discussions relating to a “crisis of reading” in the United States, see, for example, Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2008); Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994); Mark Edmundson, “On the Uses of a Liberal Education,” *Harper’s* 295 (Sept. 1997): 39–49; and Robert Kiose, “Where Have All the Readers Gone?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 Feb. 2007.

11. On South Dakota First Lady Linda Daugaard’s campaign to promote reading among school-age children, see, for example, *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 9 May 2014; *Rapid City Journal*, 6 May 2013.

A final source of institutional support for reading and writing lies in archives located in colleges and universities, the South Dakota State Historical Society, county and local historical societies, libraries, and other places. Archival collections often provide the grist for books, magazine articles, newspaper stories, and other kinds of literary productions. The largest archival collection in the state, held by the South Dakota State Historical Society at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre, contains an eclectic variety of personal and organizational papers, including those of state historian Doane Robinson, Senator James Abdnor, and many governors, including Arthur C. Mellette, Joseph J. Foss, and Richard F. Kneip. The South Dakota State University Archives, based in the Hilton M. Briggs Library, holds the papers of former United States senator Thomas A. Daschle, poet and essayist Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and former South Dakota poet laureate David Allan Evans. In 2009, poet and essayist Kathleen Norris began transferring her papers to the archives. The University of South Dakota Archives and Special Collections acquired the papers of former governor William J. Janklow in 2012, adding to its extensive collections documenting the careers of figures such as former governor and United States senator Peter Norbeck, former United States senator Larry L. Pressler, historian Gilbert C. Fite, and artist Oscar Howe. Among its diverse holdings, the Center for Western Studies at Augustana College holds papers and books belonging to its founder Herbert Krause, as well as John R. Milton, Farmers Union leader Emil Loriks, and novelist Frederick F. Manfred. At Dakota Wesleyan University, the McGovern Library houses a portion of the papers of former United States senators George S. McGovern and Francis H. Case.<sup>12</sup>

I asked several writers, editors, librarians, and others involved in the field to comment on whether they thought something was brewing on the literary front in South Dakota during recent years—whether it be called a ferment, a revival, a flowering, a renaissance, or something else. While no party line emerged from the inquiry, there does seem to be a sense that “something” is happening and that it is mainly for the good.

12. Most of McGovern's political papers are held by the Seely G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.



When asked to share his thoughts on that “something,” Sioux Falls lawyer and writer Ron Parsons cited the South Dakota Festival of Books as “the major driving force” behind the perceived vitality. “Interest in literature produced by our own authors has never been greater in my opinion,” he observed. “The ease with which technology allows people to access and disseminate literature” is another factor. After the publication of Gerriett’s January 2013 *Argus Leader* article, dozens of people told Parsons that they were working on novels, memoirs, poetry, or historical investigations. He pointed to the many book clubs operating in Sioux Falls that consciously choose South Dakota and mid-western books for discussion. “Publishing a book of short stories has been a passport to the literary world, not just locally, but nationally,” he said. “Publicizing it has brought me into contact with other authors, literary agents, publicists, booksellers, critics, scholars, and readers all over.”<sup>13</sup>

Harry Thompson, executive director of the Center for Western Studies at Augustana College, has his own take on the phenomenon. “What I think is happening,” he writes, “is that there is a growing awareness of the degree to which South Dakota has played and continues to play an important role in defining the lives, both actual and imagined, of this area of the Northern Plains. It may, indeed, be a renaissance in terms of literary works, but it is most clearly a renaissance in self-discovery. South Dakota is moving from reticence to pronouncement of identity through the voices of its many and varied authors, writing not only about themselves and their state but also offering significant assessments of authors from other states and regions.”<sup>14</sup>

Augustana College writer-in-residence Patrick Hicks, who recently published a novel, a book of poems, and a volume of short stories all within a year’s time, also ponders the appropriateness of applying the term “renaissance” to what is happening and likewise perceives that something of importance is going on. He thinks the South Dakota Festival of Books has had “an enormous impact on the health of writing in South Dakota.” It inspired him to edit *A Harvest of Words* (2010),

13. Ron Parsons to author, 4 July 2013.

14. Harry F. Thompson to author, 14 Feb. 2013.

which anthologizes the work of fourteen poets currently working in or writing about the state. He believes that volume was the first to suggest that something like a literary renaissance is going on in South Dakota. Having said that, he continued, “I’m not sure we have a renaissance, but we’ve got something. It’s not a revival either. Maybe it’s a renewed focus of energy from a new group of very talented individuals with wide-sweeping perspectives and ideas. Whatever it is, I’m just happy to be a part of it.”<sup>15</sup>

Joseph H. Bottum IV, known informally as “Jody,” moved back to the Black Hills in 2011 after an editing and writing career in New York City. He observes that discussion of a renaissance suggests that there

15. Patrick Hicks to author, 5 July 2013. The volume of poetry Hicks edited is *A Harvest of Words: Contemporary South Dakota Poetry* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2010). For recent news reports on the vitality of poetry in the state, see *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 5 Nov. 2014, 25 Jan. 2015.



Kathleen Norris signs a copy of her book for Patrick Hicks at the autograph party that has become a regular Dakota Conference event. Lakota author and illustrator S.D. Nelson is at left.

is a historical standard against which to judge the current situation, noting that a number of impressive authors have been associated with the state over time, from Doane Robinson, Hamlin Garland, and Laura Ingalls Wilder to Ole Rølvaag, Badger Clark, and Herbert Krause. This list has to be placed in broader perspective, however:

Compared to Boston or New York City, South Dakota literary history is awfully thin on the ground, and even the great figures of the golden age seem minor in comparison to their national contemporaries. But I think the period before the Second World War was actually a pretty good one for a low-population state—good enough, in any event, that I just don't think the current crop of authors has measured up, so far. We have yet to have a true national bestseller, or a seminal figure in a literary school, or anybody even with widespread name recognition across the country, or any identifiable shared characteristic among the authors apart from their location. But another measure of literary movement is the excitement generated within the authors. And there, I think, there may be a case for literary renaissance. Almost every author—almost every reader—I meet out here is excited about South Dakota books, South Dakota authors, and South Dakota thought. We're in a lively time, and that counts for a lot.<sup>16</sup>

Novelist and essayist Kent Meyers agrees that using the word “renaissance” implies a historical comparison with an earlier period of activity and ferment. “Just because a state has a lot of writing going on,” he reminds us, “doesn't mean there's a renaissance going on; a renaissance requires a lot of quality. I suspect that in a true renaissance there will be both quantity and quality—a lot of writing going on, and then out of that, some few very good works. I don't think the two are antagonistic, but I certainly do think that if you're going to claim a renaissance, you have to make some attempt to show that there is both quantity and quality emerging.” He goes on to suggest, “My own sense of a renaissance—or, for that matter, on art in general—is that it emerges out of two things: a big tension, or set of tensions; and a certain amount of luxury/free-time/support-for-the-arts.” The kinds of tensions he is thinking about include American Indian/European relationships and land-use issues. Both of these forces “are very powerful, and they influence politics and social life and ways-of-thinking across the state. We're

16. Joseph Bottum to author, 2 July 2013.

at a point in our history, perhaps, where these tensions are inspiring writers; certainly they've inspired me. I am vitally interested in these questions, and I suspect that many writers in the state are." Regarding the second point, he writes, "We're at a point in our history where people have the excess time and wealth, in one form or another, that allows them to devote time to thinking and to art. We're no longer working sixteen hours a day just to feed ourselves."<sup>17</sup>

In addition to her own writing, Linda Hasselstrom mentors aspiring writers in person at her writing retreats and online. She enthusiastically comments:

Since 1996, when I created my writing retreat, an amazing number of people, many from South Dakota, have come to my ranch retreat to work on their writing or photography or art projects. In particular, I have hosted many older women who were deflected from writing by families and careers, or were told they should "stay home and have babies." These wives, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers often worked at some profession as well as living busy lives. Gaining in years and wisdom, they want to record words from their experience, to create writing that will outlive them. These are precisely the people, women, whose stories have often been missing in western history—because they were too busy to write. They arrive here to find solitude and a useful library as well as the encouragement and direction they need to become published authors. And while major publishers are floundering, self-publishing and publication by smaller presses are becoming more accessible with advances in technology. Therefore work that in an earlier era might have remained hidden in notebooks or diaries can now be made available to readers and other writers everywhere. Stories that have never been told are now emerging. I think that's a renaissance, and I'm pleased to be part of it.<sup>18</sup>

Bernie Hunhoff, whose *South Dakota Magazine* has done much to bring authors and writing to the public's attention, writes:

South Dakotans' fondness for a good story predates the state, and even the territory. One of the things we all love about Native American culture is its richness in story-telling, albeit often an oral and pictorial history. Stories

17. Kent Meyers to author, 11 June 2013.

18. Linda Hasselstrom to author, 4 Aug. 2013.



Linda M. Hasselstrom writes about life on the Northern Great Plains and mentors other writers from her ranch retreat at the foot of the Black Hills.

help us understand who we are as a people and place. It does seem that we have had more than our share of story-tellers, and not just the learned variety. Fortunately, we have also been blessed with an impressive number of professional writers, especially for a state of 800,000 people. Being spread over 50 million acres, they don't always know one another. If we were all one city of a few square miles we could fill a big hotel restaurant with monthly writer's clubs of some of the most interesting people in America. Instead, our writers mostly eat and live with farmers, store owners, factory workers, and truck drivers. Writing can be a lonely craft in South Dakota; you can't always talk about the latest *New Yorker* articles over lunch, or lament about those damn editors who won't return your e-mails. Yet we have more than our share of good writers, and the surge of publishing of recent years would indicate that we have the readers to match.<sup>19</sup>

Historian Jon Lauck is also aware of the difficulty writers encounter in achieving a sense of camaraderie or community in a state whose

19. Bernie Hunhoff to author, 11 July 2013.



population is scattered over a large area, but he notes recent positive developments:

The story in the *Argus Leader* included the comment that a revival or renaissance is dependent upon an active “cohort” of writers, whose interaction and level of cooperation varies case-by-case. I think we have achieved that critical mass—or critical cohort of writers—that allows a field to prosper and grow by drawing upon multiple works. It’s hard to get something going on one’s own, but when there are multiple voices at work, a conversation grows. From a conversation one draws inspiration and solidarity and, importantly, a sense of dialogue, a back-and-forth, a way of debating Large Questions and smaller nuances. Monologues don’t allow for that. When a larger conversation gets going, others want to join in. The process gets bigger and more organized.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most surprising and significant recent developments on the literary scene, not only in South Dakota but in the entire Midwest, is the lead Lauck has taken in creating a new Midwestern History Association and an accompanying scholarly journal, *Middle West Review*. The association, which was organized at the Northern Great Plains History Conference in Sioux Falls in October 2014, already has more than five hundred members. The group’s initial success demonstrates a strong demand among historians for a regional history organization devoted to the Midwest. The journal provides a major new publishing outlet for work on the region, which will stimulate much new research and writing. These developments, along with the publication of the Wilder autobiography by the South Dakota Historical Society Press, have put South Dakota on the literary map and have made it the subject of national cultural news for much of 2014 and 2015.<sup>21</sup>

20. Jon K. Lauck to author, 25 July 2013.

21. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and National Public Radio are among the media outlets that have featured the new organization and journal. Truman University Press has announced the launching of a new series devoted to Midwestern history, and more developments of this type can be expected in the future. Lauck’s book, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013) has emerged as both a concise interpretation of how midwestern history has fallen from grace in recent decades and a rallying cry for promoting a new midwestern history. For another book making the case for attention to the Middle West, see John E. Miller, *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

Although various factors and forces operate within South Dakota to promote or retard the development of literary talent, production, and consumption, it should be clear that broader national and international influences set the general parameters for change. In many ways, these external forces are the “elephant in the room,” outweighing anything that individuals or groups within the state can do themselves. While online retailers such as Amazon have made it much easier and often cheaper to purchase all kinds of new and used books, they also increasingly pose severe threats to traditional means of delivery. Eric Alterman of the *Nation* magazine observes, “In our big towns and cities, Amazon has waged war on independent booksellers, using its no-tax advantage to decimate their ranks to the point where we read in the August 12 *New York Times* that many are forced literally to beg customers for donations to survive.”<sup>22</sup> Suffice it to say that broad social forces are operating both to encourage and to limit literary production in the state. Where South Dakota literature will go in the future remains an open question. Exactly what is happening right now is likewise a worthy subject for debate. That there will always be some kind of literature to amuse us, instruct us, enlighten us, and prod us to action seems incontrovertible. What we, as readers and writers, make of the situation is ours to determine.

22. Eric Alterman, “Death of the Old Order?” *Nation* 297 (2 Sept. 2013): 10.

*Picture credits:* All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except for those on the following pages: pp. 191, 196, 209 (bottom), from Sioux-land Heritage Museums, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; p. 230, from Alexander Mitchell Public Library, Aberdeen, S.Dak.; pp. 246, 252, from John E. Miller, Brookings, S.Dak.; p. 255, from Linda M. Hasselstrom, Hermosa, S.Dak. (photograph by Tamara Rogers); p. 274, from Emma L. Swartz, comp., *History of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Dakota* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Daily Journal Steam Printing House, 1900).

*On the covers:* The prohibition of alcohol was a much-debated topic in early twentieth-century South Dakota, generating strong opinions among both “wets” and “drys,” as seen in these postcards distributed by prohibition advocates. In this issue, Chuck Vollan details the campaign to limit alcohol through a constitutional referendum in 1916 as well as the aftermath of voters’ approval of the measure.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.