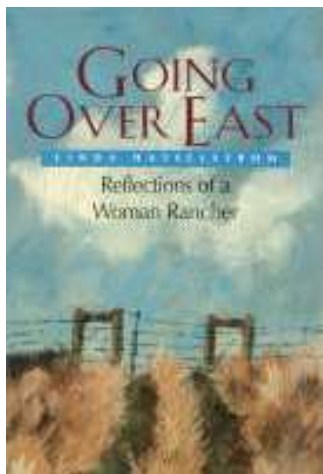


## About the Book



Linda Hasselstrom. *Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1987.

### Synopsis

Poet and essayist Linda Hasselstrom (born 1943) has become nationally known for her evocative descriptions of the ranching life and small town milieu in western South Dakota. This volume, organized around a trip which took her in and out of twelve gates on the land east of her ranch home near Hermosa, provides everyday — and often profound — reflections on what it means to be a rancher, a woman, an environmentalist, a citizen, and a neighbor. Topics include agriculture, corporate behavior, the vagaries of weather, values like frugality, community, memory, history, privacy, story-telling, names, water, politics, time, efficiency, technology, and junk.

### Summary of the Book

In 1987, 44-year-old Linda Hasselstrom, who had previously published a collection of poems, came out with three new books that launched her literary career; a second volume of poetry, a series of journal entries covering a year's time, and *Going Over East*, a collection of ranching essays organized around a pickup journey with her husband, George, and her stepson, Michael, to the east pasture of the family ranch, eleven miles from their home. To get there, they had to open and close twelve gates, going both ways. This progression provides the structure for the book: twelve essays or meditations on ranching life, the land and environment, and the way people do and ought to live, sandwiched between two introductory chapters and a concluding one tying the entire volume together. With these books and another half-dozen volumes and three major edited collections of other prairie women's writings, Hasselstrom has established herself as South Dakota's most influential woman writer and one of its most important ones of either gender.

In describing the challenges, joys, ups, and downs of life on a ranch near Hermosa, just east of the Black Hills, in *Going Over East*, Hasselstrom also prescribes ways of living in community and in harmony with the natural world. One of her former students from her days of teaching in Columbia, Missouri, when she was attending graduate school there, wrote her to say that his fellow participants in a reading club had disliked the book because they did not believe it was true. They figured the author had made most of it up, because they could not believe anyone would choose to live and stick with a life as hard as the one she described in the book. Hasselstrom was stunned and, for a time, angry, because it had never occurred to her that people did not realize this kind of life was normal on a Great Plains ranch.

Always a poet, Hasselstrom, before switching to nonfiction and memoir-writing as her primary genres, had early on tried her hand at fiction. Unlike some writers, she draws a distinct line between fiction and non-fiction and has always been utterly devoted to the kind of fact and truth she believes is demanded by the latter form. She approvingly quotes George Orwell on the question: “During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” A major reason for the popularity of her work derives from her readers’ sense of the authenticity of the stories she tells and the integrity with which she analyzes and pronounces upon serious questions facing people and society.

Among the themes addressed in *Going Over East* are the practice and economics of ranching, corporate behavior, family, interpersonal relations, ecology, plants and animals, the vagaries of weather, values like frugality, community, memory, history, change and continuity, privacy, story-telling, names, water, politics, time, efficiency, technology, and junk. Trying to fit these variegated concerns into a single volume poses a daunting task. The organization of the book around a reconstructed journey across the countryside provided a practical solution to this organizational problem.

Beyond particular subjects Hasselstrom addresses in the book, her central interest is to illuminate (and defend) life as lived in South Dakota. On page 199, she mentions that her professors at the University of Missouri tried to woo her from life in the hinterlands and “smiled indulgently at her rural ideas,” joking that she “actually believed South Dakota was the center of the universe.” To her, however, the idea was no joke. The loss to college teaching became literature’s and South Dakota’s gain. “The center of the universe *is* South Dakota,” she triumphantly affirms on page 200. This statement, though, should not be taken as a simple-minded, unreflective cheerleader point of view. Hasselstrom is always thoughtful, always critical but open-minded, always probing and judicious in her hard-won insights. She understands (see page 8), “No single truth is possible,” and she emphasizes the complexity of the ranching life (page 16). She insists that it is necessary to get out of the “ivory tower” and onto the ground where real people live and struggle with every-day challenges that make up ordinary lives. She would trade a pound of theory for an ounce of experience, fact, and practicality every time.

Her father provides a model for her kind of thinking. He knows that “someone who pays attention to the messages the natural world sends can bring cattle home the day *before* a blizzard nine times out of ten. It’s a matter of instinct, experience, and self-reliance.” That is the approach Hasselstrom takes in *Going Over East*. As seen on page 4, she also understands that in ranching there are few rules: “You learn by doing it.” This book is an effort to set down on paper a few of the things she has learned.

One of the major things she picked up from her parents — perhaps the most important lesson — was frugality. She chose to bypass life in a college environment, which would have been more financially stable, for a return to life on the ranch. She pokes gentle fun at her parents’ penurious ways (Tom Brokaw in his memoir also smiles at his parents’ penchant for saving soap, string, and other items) only to note the importance of her own junk pile and the recycling of every conceivable object on the family ranch. Her descriptions are obviously meant to be more than self-revelation. Hasselstrom believes that American society lives way beyond its means — and its needs. The personal becomes the political when she takes up the theme of ecology, which stands at the center of her whole world-view. South Dakotans, Americans, and citizens of the planet in general need to learn the lessons of simple living, she suggests. Traditional Native American culture has some valuable things to teach us, if we would only observe and listen carefully. Especially threatening and dangerous to our long-term survival on the planet is the rise of corporate farming, which sacrifices care for the land and the environment for immediate efficiency. Short-term profits, in her view, are short-sighted.

Though Hasselstrom devalues theory in favor of personal experience and practicality, she does not hesitate to draw broad lessons from her observations, which might look and sound much like theory to others. Her observations about the cycles of life and nature provide an example of this. On page 79, she strikingly paraphrases nature writer John McPhee: “ecology means who’s eating whom, and when .... Everything, when it dies, goes back to grass and earth to feed whatever follows.”

But always she subordinates broad, general pronouncements and principles for careful observations and subtle distinctions. Complexity overrides simplicity. Even ecological awareness is not an uncomplicated goal. Planting trees, for instance, is a laudable practice, especially when one has to haul water long distances to nurture them. But efforts to prevent all burning in the Black Hills have been counterproductive. She notes that “just as loving a person you don’t know can be disastrous, so can blind love of the land.” It is possible to have too many trees or too many in the wrong places. Disastrous forest fires in the Black Hills might happen less frequently if controlled burns were more often allowed. Thus, she advises on pages 139 and 140 that we “make intelligent, informed choices based on facts rather than naked emotion.”

In the end, Hasselstrom, in addition to being a story-teller, rancher, ecologist, and observer of the human scene in general, is an ethicist. She appeals to our better natures to learn how to live with and behave toward our fellow human beings and to execute our mutual

responsibilities as neighbors and public citizens. A supreme individualist, she is also a convinced proponent of community. Her most recent book, *No Place Like Home: Notes from a Western Life* (2009), focuses directly upon the latter theme. Linda Hasselstrom is one of South Dakota's outstanding writers and one of its greatest cultural treasures.

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**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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