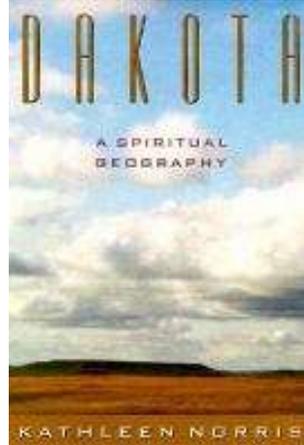


About the Book



Kathleen Norris. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. 1993, New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993.

Synopsis

No book about Dakota life and culture written during the last several decades has generated more interest outside the state and region than *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Norris's literary friends in New York thought she was crazy in 1974 to move out to Lemmon, South Dakota, where her family had roots and she inherited a house after her grandmother's death. Staying longer than she had anticipated, Norris wrote a book casting a bright light upon Dakota life and culture, ranging from religion, values, social interaction, and group behavior to weather, gossip, economic dependence, and the importance of place.

Summary of the Book

With the publication of *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* in 1993, Kathleen Norris became one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of the culture of the two Dakotas and of the northern Plains in general. Contained in this endlessly perceptive and thought-provoking book are meditations on rural people, small towns, community, the land, personal identity, ethics, spirituality, regionalism, and society in general.

By training a poet and by experience an inquisitive seeker after meaning, Norris wears many hats in composing these essays, thus enabling the volume to operate at several different levels. Most obviously, there is personal biography describing her move in 1974 from New York City to Lemmon in northwestern South Dakota, on the border between the two Dakotas, in order to avoid the sale of her grandparents' farm after her grandmother's death. Instead of a brief residence there, however, she wound up staying permanently. This book is the story of her experiences as a small-town resident, sometime visiting poet in schools, fill-in Presbyterian pastor, Benedictine monastery oblate, and — mostly —

professional writer. She describes her experiences being neighbor to 1,600 residents of Lemmon, where she learned to live and interact with people in ways different from those she had experienced growing up and living in Hawaii, Virginia, Illinois, and New York City, and attending Bennington College in Vermont. She became, in effect, a reporter of the people and the activities she observed. In another sense, she operates in some ways like a sociologist or cultural anthropologist, placing what she observed into broader social and cultural context. She is less of a historian, although some history is included here. In the deepest sense, she operates as an ethicist, philosopher, and theologian, asking questions like “What is the good life?” and “Where is spirituality to be found?” and “How are we to treat our neighbor?”

Norris’s friends in Manhattan were stunned and horrified to learn that she was actually moving out to what they perceived as a barren waste. Had she lost her mind? But beyond providing a solution for her family’s desire that the family farm where her maternal grandparents had lived and her mother had grown up not be auctioned off, her translocation from America’s busiest place to one of its most remote rural areas provided several inchoate but real motives for this important and ultimately life-changing decision. After years of frequently moving about from one urban area to another, “It was a search for inheritance, for place. It was also a religious pilgrimage; on the ground of my grandmother’s faith I would find both the means and the end of my search (page 93).” Not incidentally, the move also provided her with material that formed the basis of her writing for several decades. As an apprentice poet, “I suspected I would find my stories,” she wrote (page 11). Did she ever! Needing grounding for her work as an author, in Lemmon, South Dakota, she found it.

While growing up, she had visited her grandmother a number of times during summer vacations, so she was familiar with the place, making her something of an “insider.” Now she would try to make the place her own. As an “outsider”— a status she spends considerable time discussing in her essays — she was both at a disadvantage and at an advantage. She would never fully be part of the local community, but she brought with her alternate perspectives, enabling her to perceive things in different ways and to make imaginative connections between it and the broader society. Most importantly, perhaps, she understood that a singular, linear way of writing about the town and the area would yield less literary fruit than a kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted way of looking at things. On page 85, she refers favorably to the work of Canadian Plains author Robert Kroetsch, who adopts a “complex and often fragmented narrative style” to try to encompass multiple and often contradictory realities he is trying to interpret. A number of the pieces in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, because they were published earlier in various periodicals, are somewhat repetitive and take up themes previously discussed. Norris’s nonlinear approach to organizing and writing her material includes essays, brief notes, and prose poems in the form of “weather reports.” The result resembles the multiple colors of the spectrum that are separated by a prism as light flows through it, reminding us of the complexity and often contradictoriness of life on the Plains.

Norris calls her book a “spiritual geography.” Geography and “place,” although less important in the book than spirituality, are nonetheless profoundly important to her. She is writing about the West River (west of the Missouri River) regions of both Dakotas, which bear more resemblance to each other than does either state in its east-west configuration. This is America’s “outback” (so-called by *Newsweek* magazine), a harsh but beautiful landscape, characterized by vast, relatively empty spaces, hugely variable weather, harsh environmental conditions, and limits on economic enterprise. Other authors, from John Steinbeck and Gretel Erlich to William Least Heat-Moon and Ian Frazier have written compellingly about the region, but Norris makes clear in her own way how the land, the environment, and “place” matter hugely in people’s lives. The Great Plains possesses its own unique identity, but it can also be conceived of as a frontier or as a border, dividing the Midwest from the West proper. However it is viewed, people living there are distinctly aware of their minority status within the broader American culture. This has economic as well as social and cultural implications. Norris is at her best in describing and evoking the ways of living and thinking that characterize small towns like Lemmon and those surrounding it. In the broadest sense, however, we should think of the book as not merely a regional take on a distinctive piece of ground but as a broader meditation on the whole human condition.

This volume, in addition to being a geography of the imagination, constitutes an inquiry into “spirituality.” Readers in South Dakota, whose level of religiosity has been measured as one of the highest in the United States, may find the discussion to be the most interesting part of the book. There is no objective or scholarly analysis of denominational variety or religious history but rather a highly personal and idiosyncratic discussion of the “spiritual,” broadly conceived. We learn from several of the essays that Norris has roots in the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations, that she largely abandoned formal religion for almost two decades after college before coming back to an almost obsessive quest for identifying the spiritual, that she had a brief experience filling in the pulpit of local Presbyterian congregations during a pastoral vacancy, and that she ultimately found faith in a Benedictine monastery (she further describes her religious quest in *The Cloister Walk* (1996) and *Amazing Grace* (1998)). Her self-identification on page 91 as “a complete Protestant with a decidedly ecumenical bent” therefore comes off as something of an understatement.

Norris is no conventional pew-sitter. Her brand of spirituality remains distinctively eclectic, representative more of her peripatetic childhood and young adult life, as well as her education at Bennington and vocation as a poet. She sometimes seems to “try on” religions like some people try on clothes (page 94), but her many and deep musings on what it means to be religious, to love one’s neighbor, to recognize the holy, and to know God ultimately force readers to think much more seriously about their own notions on the topics. Her musings on gossip alone (the term derives from words originally meaning “akin to God”), on page 72, are worth the price of the book.

These comments only scratch the surface of the rich observations and interpretations packed in this deeply thoughtful tome. Many will want to re-read some of the essays to discover the deeper implications missed the first time through. With this book, Kathleen Norris took her place as one of the foremost interpreters of Dakota culture and as a national literary personage. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Verlyn Klinkenborg, calling the book “remarkable,” enthusiastically judged, “She writes as well about the dynamics of small-town American life as anyone I have ever read.” Bob von Sternberg in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* praised her for having “the ear of a poet, coupled with the eye of a brilliant reporter.” This book, whether we love it or hate it, agree with it or not, stands as an important marker of our ideas about the two Dakotas.

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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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