This River Beneath the Sky: A Year on the Platte


A few years ago, I had the pleasure of spending a couple of days in late March watching Sandhill Cranes (Antigone canadensis) along the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska. I can still conjure up the sight and sound of tens of thousands of cranes flying in to roost for the night on sandbars in the river and leaving again at sunrise. It was deafening and exhilarating. In This River Beneath the Sky, Doreen Pfost’s lyrical prose brings this grand spring spectacle alive for the reader, but goes beyond the cranes to describe a river that has undergone tremendous changes since Europeans arrived in the area and, more recently, limited restoration. This book is an ode to falling in love with a place where Pfost had despaired of finding magic to hold her (she admits to having hated almost everything about the area when she first moved there).

This River Beneath the Sky is a collection of 12 chapters (essays, really) roughly corresponding to the calendar year, starting with welcoming the cranes back in late March (Chapter 1: “Swept up in a wind-borne river”). In Chapter 2 (“Regarding the aftermath”) Pfost discusses the impact of diverting over half of the Platte’s flow for agriculture and power generation. This means not just less water overall, but also narrower, incised channels and fewer sandbars; no seasonal flooding of riverside meadows that the cranes depend on for feeding; changes in the timing of the flow; and more riparian forest and invasive weeds because spring floods no longer scour the seedlings away. Pfost goes on to describe these changes in other chapters, through careful observations during rambles throughout the seasons.

While historical anecdotes are sprinkled throughout, Pfost highlights the first impressions of emigrants on the Oregon and Mormon trails in Chapter 3 (“Swept up in a wind-borne river”). In Chapter 2 (“Regarding the aftermath”) Pfost admits to having hated almost everything about the area and, more recently, limited restoration. This book is an ode to falling in love with a place where Pfost had despaired of finding magic to hold her (she admits to having hated almost everything about the area when she first moved there).

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