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*What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi,
Missouri, and Platte* by Lisa Knopp (review)

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Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 122-124 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2014.0023>



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actions outweigh the intended ones. Planning itself has been highly controversial since the mid-twentieth century, and several of the essays touch upon the issue. This leads into a discussion of democratic decision making and who has the right or responsibility to make decisions about transportation, land use, buildings, education policy, and institutional direction. Several essays draw conservative lessons from their investigations, suggesting that the closer to home decisions are made the more democratic they will be, leading them therefore to be more practical and desirable, too. Clearly, discussions of place, as is pointed out in essays by Ted V. McAllister, Pete Peterson, Christine Rosen, and others, expand into discussions of what the “good life” is and how vital community can best be enhanced. Place and community are inextricably intertwined. Partisan politics plays little role in these essays, but pieces by Brian Brown and William A. Schambra make it clear that groups and individuals ranging from left to right on the political spectrum make place a major concern of theirs.

In the end, I come back to the essay by Joe Amato, whose writing has done as much as anybody’s to help us rethink place, locality, region, and community thriving. Perhaps in part because he was trained as a European historian, the wildly eclectic and innovative ideas and concepts that he brings to the study of the regional history of the Midwest (and local history in general) provide a kaleidoscopic kit of tools for investigating our particular places or regions. His advocacy of rural and regional history as “a natural link between immediate experience and history” helps put all of the other essays in this volume into useful context. “It confirms,” he contends, “the idea that one’s own home—thus, one’s youth—is worthy of study and, again in the words of [Lewis] Mumford, promotes ‘a decent self-respect,’ and it is that ‘form of self-knowledge which is the beginning of sound knowledge about anyone else’” (222).

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Lisa Knopp, *What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 248 pp. \$19.95, paper.

In her collection, *What the River Carries*, Lisa Knopp starts by letting readers know that she originally hails from Catfish Bend and concludes by describ-

ing her current address on Phantom Creek. In between are essays that offer tribute, in print, to the “dangers, mystery, beauty, bounty, and persistence” of the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Platte Rivers: the biggest riverine lines on the map of Knopp’s life in the Midwest.

The rivers Knopp profiles are streams of consequence and distinction. The Mississippi cuts an upright centerline through the Midwest. North of St. Louis, the Missouri makes up its muddy and twisting western twin. Together they comprise one of the world’s great river systems. Knopp’s essays provide snapshots of the midsection of this northern half of the system: the Mississippi from the Twin Cities to St. Louis and the Missouri from Fort Randall Dam on the South Dakota—Nebraska border to its junction with the Mississippi. The Platte, the famous corridor for the first third of the Oregon Trail, is of a piece with the Great Plains, originally wide, shallow, braided, and ever shifting. All three of these streams are now heavily altered to serve human needs. The Upper Mississippi has been dammed into a series of navigable pools, the Missouri partly tamed by reservoirs, and the Platte sapped and diminished by crop irrigation.

Knopp sees the world through a bioregionalist lens, prejudiced to love the sandhill cranes whose fossilized wing bones, eight million years old, have been excavated in Nebraska, and to resent devastating invasives like Asian carp, purple loosestrife, and zebra mussel, as well as the tons of agricultural silt that have made native bivalves like the Higgins’ eye a federally endangered species. She laments that silt has changed the bed of the Mississippi from a passage cobbled with pearly, sediment-cleansing mussels to an often dead and mucky sluiceway.

Knopp expresses herself most distinctively in lists. Not surprisingly, then, the title essay, “What the River Carries,” is a list of what gets swept south in the Big Muddy. The topical subheadings of the chapter (state lines, oxygen, commodities, evidence, sediment, sunken treasures, reflections, politics, and philosophies) show that Knopp understands the Mississippi as a political boundary, a natural and unnatural mixture of chemicals, a transport route, a flood danger, a place to hide corpses, a repository of wrecked boats and detritus, and a force encountered from highly contradictory perspectives.

In addition to lists, Knopp writes best when she links the personal with the expository. In her essay “Mound Builders” she reviews the grave-mounding prehistory of the Upper Mississippi as she works to come to terms with the recent death of her father. In “Gone to the Beets” she con-

nects the life of an elderly neighbor to the sugar beet industry that often drains the North Platte to a trickle. “Meanderings,” the final essay in the collection, yokes Knopp’s discovery that her winding street was once a creek to hydrogeology and the aesthetics of the serpentine line.

Knopp writes that she was trained as a poet, coming later in life to the essay. The literary strength of these essays are in those places where they resemble poems, where they are lyrical or touched by personal feeling, as when Knopp describes, as a girl, wearing her great-aunt’s button shell “like an awkward, fingerless glove.” Outside of such passages the essays are dominated by explanation and description, devoid of the voices and stories of living persons beyond Knopp or her intimate family. The narrative is often a muted framework for Knopp’s review of the written history of a place.

Knopp, who opens her collection with the words, “I love rivers,” recognizes the importance and complexity of these streams. As she was learning to know the Missouri she writes that she longed for “[a] native guide, one who has a long history of closely observing this place, who sees the terrain as steeped in the personal and communal stories and associations that confer value upon a place.” Part of Knopp’s family history is her great-grandfather drowning when he drunkenly toppled into the Mississippi, the river she knew from childhood. Her essays about the Missouri and the Platte are often about the process of experiencing, becoming steeped in the knowledge of these streams, and developing a love for them in spite of her early conditioning to think of the Mississippi as the “real river” against which all others were pale and unsuccessful copies.

In *What the River Carries* Lisa Knopp does the work of a native guide, mixing personal observation and scholarship as she narrates points of interest in the life and history of three of the Midwest’s most important and deeply storied rivers. It would be good for these beautiful but embattled streams if, learning to see them through Knopp’s eyes, readers learned to love them as she does.

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