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Embracing Fry Bread: Confessions of a Wannabe by Roger
Welsch (review)

Wynne Summers

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(Review)

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he is also a Returner: he comes back, at least temporarily, to research his family for an MFA at Columbia, a project that takes him to Nebraska and ultimately to California. There he reconnects with an older cousin, herself a model Achiever.

One way to appreciate *Ghost Dances* is to see it as an amalgam of two other books about middle America—Ian Frazier's *Great Plains* (1987) and Debra Marquart's *The Horizontal World* (2007)—combining travelogue with autobiography, even spiritual geography, in the manner but without the tone of Kathleen Norris. Rather than choosing Lawrence Welk as an example of someone who made it out, Garrett-Davis gives us his cousin Ruth Harris, a music teacher turned activist from Nebraska who traveled the world in pursuit of peace and justice.

The third and final section of the book is called "Buffalo Commonplace," a pun on Frank and Deborah Popper's response to the depopulation of the rural Great Plains by proposing the creation of a vast bison commons. In many ways, the entire book is a commonplace, where the author has assembled retellings of his encounters with such ghost dancers as Scotty Philip, Willa Cather, William Jennings Bryan, William Janklow, and park ranger Bob Menasek. Here also are Fred Phelps, the Westboro Baptist pastor who fomented hatred of gays, and the gay cowboys of Cap Iversen's novels. In their own paradoxical way, each is seeking a vision, hoping for utopia, moving toward a time when the oppressors will vanish and the buffalo will return, as prophesied.

HARRY THOMPSON
Center for Western Studies
Augustana College
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Embracing Fry Bread:

Confessions of a Wannabe.

By Roger Welsch. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. x + 256 pp. \$19.95 paper.

It was with some trepidation that I first opened Roger Welsch's book, having come from a history of teaching Native American literature for over eight years as a "non-Indian," and having encountered Sioux writer Vine Deloria Jr.'s essay "Indians Today, the Real and Unreal." In this essay Deloria states, "Those whites who dare not claim Indian blood have an asset of their own. They *understand* Indians." He goes on to emphasize, "We need fewer and fewer 'experts' on Indians. What we need is a cultural leave us alone agreement in spirit and in fact." My trepidation left as I encountered Welsch's work on "Wannabes." Perhaps this term is best understood in the beginning of the book when he writes that he avoids radical activism and polemics regarding Indian interests because he is not Indian and therefore cannot speak for Indians. "American Indians speak quite well enough for themselves, thank you very much, so I sit back and listen." Throughout, Welsch manifests himself as a listener who has spent fifty-five years involved in Native culture where he has made uncountable friends. His ability to write honest prose, both informative and erudite, captivates from the beginning.

The choice to start with a coyote story is both applicable and ironic. Coyote, a trickster figure in Native American cosmology, is one who both contradicts and illuminates. According to Welsch, those who are Wannabes become that way for a variety of reasons, which are equally contradictory (to non-Indians and Indians alike) and illuminating. Welsch clarifies all this and more in subsequent chapters full of personal anecdotal information and his-

torical undercurrents. His chapters are engaging, full of pertinent and reliable information, and often glide into humor—his and what he terms “Indian humor.” The information covered extends from cultural and religious traditions regarding Native people to information on Native foodways, gift giving, and “Indian time.” He informs throughout, but his voice is never condescending, apologetic, or didactic. He writes from years of long experience and a love for Native culture and its people. Welsch makes it clear at the end of his book that Wannabes must be strong people who can endure the shattering of their perception of reality and shift into “another cultural gear” without needing to control or assume superiority. One should not take charge, he states, but pull back. Listen. It is evident in his book that he has indeed pulled back and allowed “another cultural gear” to become a part of his life and spiritual reality.

WYNNE SUMMERS

Department of English
Southern Utah University

Dale Nichols: Transcending Regionalism.

By Amanda Mobley Guenther. Foreword by Mark L. Moseman. Introduction by Paul Manoguerra. David City NE: Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art, 2011. ix + 197 pp. Illustrations, photographs, notes, index. \$34.95 paper.

Amanda Mobley Guenther's monograph provides useful foundation scholarship on Dale Nichols, a Nebraskan best known for his paintings of red rural barns and snow scenes produced from the 1930s through the 1950s. The investigation includes a thorough biography chronicling Nichols's formative years in his birthplace, David City, his artistic training

in Chicago, and his subsequent life as an artist residing primarily in Arizona and later Guatemala, with extensive additional travel in Mexico, Alaska, and the American South. Despite Nichols's wanderlust, the artist avowed that his memories of farm life in Nebraska formed his personal sense of place, as is seen in his depictions of agrarian subjects as well as landscapes from other regions. Guenther explores Nichols's ideology through the artist's writings and goes on to assess his pictorial content, style, and technique. This analysis and a wealth of illustrations of Nichols's paintings, drawings, prints, and commercial illustrations from his first painterly forays in 1934 through the 1970s provide a useful resource for readers interested in Nichols as an example of artists associated with the American Scene.

The “American Scene” or “American Wave” are broad terms that have been used since the 1930s to describe a noted shift in American art of that period toward the regional, capturing the look and the feel of this country while often eschewing the influence of European modernism. Within this trend we find three artists who were specifically identified as regionalists: John Steuart Curry of Kansas, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and Grant Wood of Iowa. Nationally prominent dealers and critics promoted these artists as a trio, and their art, though stylistically quite different, tends to mythicize or idealize aspects of midwestern life. Guenther's assertion, however, that Nichols should be rightly considered the fourth member of this trio reveals a problematic lack of understanding about how the notion of regionalism emerged. Nichols entered the conversation just a few years too late, never attained the national prominence of these artists, was not significantly connected to them, and did not identify himself as a regionalist. Nonetheless, a more general sense of region-