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

Bernard Quetchenbach

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mere thriller or horror story—it's too real, both too close to home and too far from anywhere else.

Eric Heyne
University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Lisa Knopp, *What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2012. 248 pp. \$19.95.

As its subtitle establishes, Lisa Knopp's *What the River Carries* consists of "Encounters with the Mississippi, the Missouri, and Platte." The collection's eighteen essays take the reader on a journey along these storied waterways, with Knopp, born in Burlington, Iowa, and now an associate professor at the University of Nebraska, serving as an experienced, knowledgeable guide. Though the essays are generally narrative, like the rivers themselves they are inclined to meander, a tendency Knopp turns to her advantage in the title piece, a montage cataloging the flow of everything from sediments to pollution-related political maneuvering along these complex watercourses. The essays themselves carry enough information to support the collection's detailed reference list; an index would also have been helpful.

Knopp pays tribute to the rivers' iconic inhabitants. The opening essay, "Catfish Bend," introduces both the Mississippi and perhaps its most characteristic creature, "a fish like a cat that sports graceful, sweeping whiskerlike barbels" (4). And of course, the Platte River's sandhill cranes make their obligatory appearance in "No Other River." "Mississippi Harvest" traces the story of the pearl-button industry bestowed by freshwater mussels on Muscatine, Iowa. As a child Knopp was introduced to "button shells" (30) by a great-aunt, and as an adult she preserves her family's tradition of collecting buttons for future use. The essay concludes with current efforts to restore depleted mussel populations.

Perhaps the twin keys to the book's overall quality are Knopp's graceful, unobtrusive prose and her ability to find interesting, evocative centers for each essay, braiding channels of natural and human history, local knowledge and national culture, personal ex-

perience and research. The goals Knopp sets for the collection are modest—she compares her essays to “the little morsels on toothpicks that you sample in the grocery store on Saturday mornings” (xi). Knopp rarely ventures beyond the rivers’ middle reaches, but for the country the essays inhabit, the rivers’ sources and destinations may be less important than their immediate presence as a central feature of the landscapes they define.

What the River Carries doesn’t break new stylistic ground, and essays such as “Nine-Mile Prairie” in the Platte section seem to be reaching to find a viable river connection, but the graceful blending of a personal voice and a researched, well-chosen context is in keeping with the honored traditions of creative nonfiction and of the nature essay especially. *What the River Carries* rewards careful reading for anyone who has explored, or would like to become familiar with, North America’s watery center. Knopp acknowledges that readers who truly want to know these rivers must travel them firsthand, but her own venturing down channels and into coves is perhaps the next best thing.

Bernard Quetchenbach

Montana State University, Billings

Kayann Short, *A Bushel’s Worth: An Ecobiography*. Salt Lake City: Torrey House, 2013. 215 pp. \$14.95.

Kayann Short’s collection of essays in *A Bushel’s Worth* is a fine addition to the bumper crop of farm memoirs that recently have become so popular. Focused on the Stonebridge Farm CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) that she runs with her husband, John Martin, on the front range of the Rockies in Colorado, Short’s collection ranges broadly on farm-related topics, including cooking for threshing crews, painting a barn, seed saving, and so on. Although these sound like old-fashioned farm topics, Short is careful not to color them with the nostalgic gloss that I’ve seen in other memoirs addressing similar subjects. In her description of her North Dakota grandmothers cooking mountains of hearty food during the endless days of harvest season, she acknowledges that we may be sentimental about the bygone days of cooking for threshers but goes on