PROJECT MUSE®

A Bushel's Worth: An Ecobiography by Kayann Short (review)

Evelyn Funda

Western American Literature, Volume 49, Number 2, Summer 2014, pp.
232-234 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2014.0053>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/549221>

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

to contextualize the scene, first with the 1934 Grant Wood painting titled *Dinner for Threshers*, which allows her to discuss women's traditional labor on farms, and second with Meridel LeSueur's 1929 short story "Harvest," in which a threshing machine symbolizes the uneasy transition from human labor to mechanization.

Then Short recasts and updates the threshers' dinner scene by describing the annual pancake feed held on Stonebridge Farm for CSA volunteers after a long day of harvesting. The menu includes decidedly modern, gluten-free pancakes made with rice milk, but Short is more interested in discussing the social function and cultural implications of such events in the here and now, writing that "[i]n the highly individualized consumer culture of the US today, sharing [work, food, tools, and machinery] is a custom we rarely practice" (91). However, the "ethics of sharing" that are at the foundation of the CSA movement mean that "maybe, in these times, working cooperatively can come back" (79).

Short's focus on a CSA makes this memoir distinctive from other recent farm-related nonfiction. Within the genre you will find dozens of memoirs about, for instance, the "urban farming" movement (Novella Carpenter's *Farm City*); raising backyard chickens (Michael Perry's *Coop* comes to mind, as does Manny Howard's *My Empire of Dirt*); farmers selling specialty items at farmers' markets (*Heirloom* by Tim Stark); the transition from modern agricultural methods to organic methods (Forrest Pritchard's *Gaining Ground*); the locavore challenge to eat only food grown and produced locally (Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* came out in 2007, the same year *locavore* was word of the year); and back-to-the-landers (Josh Kilmer-Purcell's *The Bucolic Plague* shows that these tend to focus on the comedic possibilities of the unlikeliest farmer "going country"). There are also dozens of how-to books about starting a CSA, gourmet CSA cookbooks, and journalistic nonfiction on the CSA's role in the rebirth of small-farm culture and "ethical" eating.

But I know of no other memoir about a CSA. The closest thing I am aware of is the 2005 award-winning documentary film *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*, which is by and about John Peterson, the quirky, eccentric, small-town-boy-turned-hippie who started one of the country's first CSAs just outside of Chicago. Like Peterson, who emphasizes that CSAs offer "shareholders" a sense of ownership in

farms, Short focuses on what she calls farmgiving, a concept that links land stewardship with a sense of reciprocity within community. In other words, farming has a cultural function, something she points to when she writes, “the biggest crop we grow at Stonebridge is community” (14).

If I have any quibble with the book, it is that Short gives insufficient attention to her coined term *ecobiography*, which she uses as her subtitle and to describe the writing workshops she offers at Stonebridge Farm. While she does discuss how the term is different from nature writing on the farm’s web site, she lets the subtitle stand without full explanation. As a scholar I think a term like *ecobiography* bears discussion. But that is a small issue with an otherwise satisfying read.

Evelyn Funda
Utah State University

Kim Stafford, *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared*. San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2012. 202 pp. \$16.95.

The title *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do* brings to mind a Boy Scout manual, with its tricks for tying knots and starting fires, and Kim Stafford’s book, indeed, includes some scouting adventures and wilderness skills. This memoir, however, is an instruction manual on the most primitive arts of all: loving and losing.

The subtitle of Stafford’s poignant memoir is *How My Brother Disappeared*, evoking his relationship with his older brother, Bret, and Bret’s suicide at the age of forty. The narrative is a collection of vivid childhood memories that conjure a powerful brotherly bond. Stafford recalls the “bridge game” he and his brother enacted before sleep as little boys, stretching their bodies across the space between their two beds and crawling across each other’s backs before reciting a good night blessing. Together they seemed to exist at a precious angle of repose. “When it was just my brother and me,” Stafford writes, “we were like two pillars forming a tent of knowing, and we relied on each other” (44).

What happens, then, when one pillar disappears, and the “tent of knowing” collapses? Bret’s suicide calls into question the future,