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The Heart of Things: A Midwestern Almanac by John Hildebrand
(review)

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John Hildebrand, *The Heart of Things: A Midwestern Almanac*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2014. 200 pp. \$22.95.

The rich tradition of Upper Midwestern nonfiction includes a number of practitioners skilled at uniting regional and natural history, a sense of place, and personal experience. Patricia Hampl, Bill Holm, Carol Bly, Paul Gruchow, and Kathleen Norris come immediately to mind, but there are several others. And the term *regional* as I use it here means what midwestern fiction writer Jon Hassler intended: “Every writer is regional; the good ones are universal at the same time. . . . Themes are universal, but the settings and sometimes attitudes are regional.” Living with a frequently pejorative use of the term “regional”—that is, out of touch or second rate—is it any wonder midwestern writers tend to write with chips on their shoulders?

Enter John Hildebrand, who both writes in the tradition of those I have mentioned and does it without rancor or defensiveness. He takes a stand against damaging midwestern stereotypes, of course (many of them “rural values, hardly changed since the late eighteenth century”), but in this book he is mainly interested in observing and celebrating where he lives. His scope is far ranging, from deep woods to church suppers, from river systems to the midwestern vernacular. His use of the almanac format in the tradition of his mentor Aldo Leopold seems particularly apt for this collection of short essays.

One of Hildebrand’s most interesting perspectives—and a theme that is carried through the collection—comes early on: “Tourists and travel writers often make sweeping assumptions about a new locale and pass this nonsense off as a *sense of place*.” The insider, on the other hand—the person who lives in a particular place, who is immersed in it—has a far more complicated point of view. As the author muses, “The longer I live here, the harder it is to say exactly what *here* means.” This has certainly been the premise of much of the best midwestern writing in recent years.

What impresses me most about *The Heart of Things* is Hildebrand’s power of observation, especially in those passages dealing with the natural world—the vivid details with which he describes something as surprising as a snapping turtle in the road, for example, or as commonplace as lilacs in a field; from the intricate patterns of deer or dobsonflies to fishing, before it “became a branch of applied electronics.”

Often, as midwestern poets such as Ted Kooser have done so well, Hildebrand strives to make his reader aware of what is easily taken for grant-

ed, to notice the uniqueness in the ordinary. This emphasis on *seeing* is indeed what I've long believed is the central theme of contemporary midwestern literature, especially as we become more and more immersed in the increasingly intrusive and distracting world which surrounds us. Were I still editing anthologies of contemporary midwestern literature, such insightful and enjoyable essays as "A Sense of Snow," "Parade Season," or "Summer Night" could certainly be included.

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Adam Jortner, *The Gods of Prophetstown: The Battle of Tippecanoe and the Holy War for the American Frontier*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

310 pp. \$27.95.

In the predawn of November 7, 1811, in what is today northwestern Indiana, a pan-tribal force of American Indian warriors under the spiritual guidance of Tenskwatawa, known to Anglo American contemporaries as the Shawnee Prophet, launched a preemptive attack on an American army under the command of William Henry Harrison, the Indiana Territorial Governor. Harrison was leading his own preemptive invasion of Indian country, hoping to cow and discredit Tenskwatawa's movement. Despite the nighttime surprise and a determined Indian assault, Harrison's forces held. Subsequently Tenskwatawa's followers abandoned their town, and Harrison's forces destroyed it and its valued agricultural stores. Adam Jortner's *The Gods of Prophetstown* is an ambitious dual biography of the two antagonists whose followers met at this battle, known to history as the Battle of Tippecanoe.

This is not an untold story. Immediately following the battle, Harrison's provocative actions were debated among his partisans and rivals. Superiors chided him for potentially prompting an unnecessary Indian war. Fortunately for Harrison, the outbreak of the War of 1812 on the heels of battle accommodated some artful revisionism. Although occurring before the outbreak of war, Tippecanoe was recast as a successful chapter in a war that advanced America's destiny as an expansive, continental empire. In pursuit of the Presidency, Harrison played no small role in this revisionism. Others, more interested in what the battle had to say about Ameri-