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The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works ed. by
Ron Riecki (review)

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Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 135-137 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0004>

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Ron Riecki, ed., *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013. 280 pp. \$18.99.

The Way North, a collection of poems and short stories gathered by editor Ron Riecki, deserves a place on everyone's bookshelf. Riecki made his selection with one thought in mind—to show off the best contemporary pieces from authors associated with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. So often the organizing principle of anthologies is contrived—the best poems or short stories published in a single year or the best offerings from a single literary magazine. Not so with the forty-eight poems and twenty short stories found in *The Way North*. They share a sense of place. It is the Upper Peninsula, the UP as its residents call it, a unique, sparsely settled boreal forest redolent of the northern reaches of New England. The UP, however, differs from all other places in one important respect. Lake Superior borders its northern boundary. The lake is a vast presence and a formative dynamic in most of the stories and poems found in *The Way North*. It becomes the pure touchstone of unvarnished truth. For those who believe that a writer's culture is rooted in his or her environment, *The Way North* provides a compelling argument.

It would be a mistake to think of Lake Superior and the stories and poems of Riecki's collection as idyllic escapism. For sure there are Hiawatha's rustling birches, clean sand beaches stretching empty for miles, and the impossibly blue summer skies. But as with any true wilderness, the savage is ever at hand. It is a world of the hunter and hunted, of the predators—bears, cougars, fishers and eagles—and the prey—deer, hare, chipmunk and fish. The humans appearing in *The Way North* sort themselves out along the same lines: fighting husbands and wives seeking a feasting dominance, children fleeing cruel parents and winter starvation, grandmothers watching silently like perched owls as the ugliness of their own history brings down their children and grandchildren.

The seasons assume greater importance in the UP than in most other places. The winters are long, dark, and often extremely cold, but there are no more glorious springs than those that follow a severe winter. The woods and fields bud at once and the countryside shows chartreuse, deep green, and rust. The open air celebration that is spring finds no better spokespersons than the authors of *The Way North*. The classified pages fill with summer jobs such as waitressing, roofing, pizza chefs, and camp counselors.

Tourists arrive, blueberry fields turn purple, walleye run, and woodland trails dry and harden. The roads fill with Florida and Arizona plates and logging trucks carrying off white and red pine, birch and aspen. Teenagers have some spending money and romance and a brief sense of well-being fills the UP. Such is the stuff of comedy and tragedy, all found within Mr. Riekki's collection.

Commonplace images dominate. Reading *The Way North*, you will come to appreciate a roaring wood fire in the depths of winter, homemade fall applesauce flavored with cinnamon, a clean house with a newly sewn table cloth to grace a worn kitchen table. But balanced against the commonplace are brief glimpses of the UP's extraordinary beauty. There are the stories of the lonely, cold hitchhiker transfixed by an arctic sunset, of the freighter deckhand who while wringing the neck of a Canadian goose becomes lost in a fantastical building mist, of the frightened child who watches the spring sun's warmth break up ice floes and so comes to believe again his life is a miracle. It is a hardscrabble existence for the poor. Yet again and again the stories and poems bear witness to the fact that it is the beauty of the UP which sustains all its resident poor and wealthy alike. As the reader moves from poem to poem and short story to short story, the understated truth of wilderness with its many moods leaves an indelible thirst for the Northwoods and its landscape.

The Way North reflects the diversity of the UP's human inhabitants. Originally it was the Anishinaabe alone living here, but then the French arrived in search of furs. Later New Englanders started logging, and mining companies brought in European migrants. About one in five residents in the UP today are native. That percentage will increase as the UP continues to lose population, and so *The Way North* wisely includes native writers. One tells of ritually sewing ornate dresses to dance at powwows; another recreates her grandparents' dreams of old Lac Vieux Desert while handling a brick from their home. Often Anishinaabe phrases are interjected, a reminder of the earliest days along Lake Superior. Sometimes the Anishinaabe is set side by side with French and Latin, a living relic of the Jesuit missionaries and the fur trade.

Many well known authors are included in *The Way North*. There is Steve Hamilton, Sue Harrison, Beverly Matherne, Matt Frank, and John Smolens, among others. To the tried and true Riekki has added strong pieces by lesser known authors such as Marty Achatz, Ellen Airgood, Sally Brunk,

and April Lindala. All contributors equally demand your attention. Riecki has an ear for good literature, and he has put together an impeccable collection. It is worth your time.

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Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, eds., *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2013. 752 pp. \$25.00.

For some of us, Willa Cather's novels are frozen in time—junior or senior high school to be exact—when a teacher assigned *My Antonia* or *O Pioneers!* Our hazy memory may evoke a quaint Nebraska story written by a Victorian author. Expect any such preconceptions to be overturned when reading *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. As this collection makes clear, the sophisticated Pulitzer Prize—winning author fueled her literary imagination with memories of Nebraska, yet she was neither born there nor spent most of her life there. Cather lived her first nine years in Winchester, Virginia. Her father, like many breadwinners in the 1870s and 1880s, saw opportunity in the west. Drawn to Nebraska's good weather and vast prairie land for farming, he moved his wife and seven children to Webster County, Nebraska, in 1883.

The Selected Letters follows the budding writer's correspondence beginning with letters from the family farm while in high school, through college at the University of Nebraska, to jobs in Pittsburgh and Manhattan before establishing herself as a fulltime writer with a national and international reputation. Yet, Nebraska was never far from her mind or affections.

Early in her time at University of Nebraska, for example, she expressed homesickness to a friend, Mariel Gere. "I feel awfully lonesome since all you fellows are gone, and am consoling myself with French History, Gorge Eliot [sic], and endless rides over the prairies," she wrote. (We see the author's spelling and writing improve with each passing year.) At the university, Cather considered becoming a doctor and is said to have administered chloroform to a patient before an amputation. However, an English professor, impressed by a paper Cather wrote on Thomas Carlyle, submitted it without Cather's knowledge to the *Nebraska State Journal*. It was quickly accepted. Seeing her name in print was very satisfying, she recalled later.

One of the delights of reading Cather's correspondence is to see a writer