PROJECT MUSE®

Flyover Lives: A Memoir by Diane Johnson (review)

Nancy Bunge

Middle West Review, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 155-158 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0016>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578249>

will always have” (13). Yet Michael is quick to suspect people he identifies as foreigners—Sofia’s cousins and also Etienne—despite the lack of any evidence that would implicate them in the burglaries, thus calling into question just what it is that the residents of Ilios Lane will always have. Another neighbor, Dan Kowalski, elaborates on Michael’s comment, telling a reporter that even though what the residents have lost is just stuff, “[w]e’re still the haves. Take our shit and we’ll still *be the haves* . . . We want to meditate and do yoga and eat our vegetables and tell ourselves we aren’t the haves. Or we don’t have to think about being the haves because you only think about *haves* when you’re a *have not*, right?” (234). The words of blogger Candy Kane resonate as the reader proceeds through the novel: “[e]ven the stoic Ilios Lane resident from the news tonight . . . might recognize, in time, that what he’s lost is actually quite something” (88).

As we tease out the multiple ambiguities and ironies in Michael’s statement, we are confronted with Snyder’s point: integration, diversity, and multiculturalism are not the simple matters that liberals and conservatives sometimes make them out to be. The comments of Michael, Dan, Candy and others, as well as key incidents of plot in the novel, induce us to reflect carefully on these ideals and the contemporary context in which they play out. We never find out who perpetrated the Ilios Lane burglaries, but we do find out that the ideals of the sixties and seventies are not so easily put into practice in twenty first century America.

Marcia Noe

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE—CHATTANOOGA

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Diane Johnson, *Flyover Lives: A Memoir*. New York: Viking, 2014.
288 pp. \$26.95.

Diane Johnson points out in the preface to her memoir *Flyover Lives* that “no one writes much about the center part of our country, sometimes called the Flyover, or about the modest pioneers who cleared and peopled this region. Yet their Midwestern stories tell us a lot about American history” (xv). She sets out to correct this elision by writing about her childhood in Moline, Illinois. Johnson also discusses the ancestors about whom she discovered documents after a French friend commented that Americans know nothing about their history. Indeed, although most Americans have a distinct

sense of other regions' histories, complete with vivid images of pilgrims, plantations, or cowboys, midwestern history lacks any colorful characterization. Its people seem to have emerged from the earth like corn.

Johnson offers seductive descriptions of a girlhood spent in an environment distinguished primarily by the kindness and decency of the people with whom she shared it: "These were all mild, principled affable people accepting of other people's foibles" (155). She recalls encountering no ethnic or racial prejudice in Moline, a place where the pursuit of wealth also played little significant role. She remembers the adults enjoying themselves more persistently than they worked, presumably because this alternate universe free of greed and ambition contained few people driven to achieve conventional success. Instead, the citizens of Moline relished in their lives.

When Johnson studies her ancestors' writings, she discovers the foundation for this appreciation of ordinary existence: the people who migrated to the Middle West struggled against illness and the harsh, untamed environment to survive. Many failed. To tolerate their difficult lives, they turned to religion, which helped sustain their faith in life's goodness. Johnson explains midwesterners' passion for their primitive summer cabins as a reflection of a desire to share their ancestors' trials and, appropriately, the handling of the challenges of cottage life nourished a confident independence in them.

Despite her attractive portrait of midwestern life, Johnson always wanted to escape the region. This longing clarifies her otherwise bewildering conclusion that "wars have played a distinctly broadening role for Midwesterners" (142). Her evidence for this consists of letters written by her father when participating in World War I as well as the correspondence of a relative named Charles Stewart Elder during the Civil War talking of his bountiful meals. Since thirty-one thousand of the 618,000 Americans who died in the Civil War came from Illinois, most of the other soldiers from Elder's home state probably did not find the experience pleasant, let alone "broadening." Moreover, the midwestern tendency to forgive others their failings and ignore racial and ethnic differences clashes with the enthusiasm for killing people who differ from oneself central to warfare. As a result, many midwestern writers have produced antiwar literature, including William Dean Howells's "Editha," Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Willa Cather's *One of Ours*, the poetry of William Stafford and Robert Bly and, most recently, Toni Morrison's *Home*. In these writings, those who survive war happily return home, as did Johnson's father.

Johnson's longing to escape Moline may also help explain an unresolved tension in her book between her positive characterization of the Midwest and the stories set in France which bookend her memoir. In the conclusion, she seems to try to explain what role France plays in a book about the Middle West: "Looking at the Midwest of long-departed people and even my own childhood could remind of things people talk about as being missing in America today and help remedy our apparent inability to learn from other cultures that might be doing things that if we did them too would restore the charm and goodness of our own society" (263). But the party she describes in France involves a group of competitive individuals completely free of the kindness that Johnson remembers saturating her childhood in Moline. Moreover, these people appreciate good food and lovely flowers while Johnson points out that midwesterners exchange casserole recipes calling for canned soups and decorate their homes with homemade, undistinguished art. The get together Johnson describes does not recall Moline as much as the parties in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel about midwesterners who go east to establish glamorous lives and wind up with empty ones. At both Gatsby's Long Island home and at the French gathering Johnson describes, the lovely surfaces cannot obscure the reality that these people are lost precisely because unlike the laidback citizens of Moline, they have constructed their lives around a search for triumph, principally over each other. So, finally, Johnson's book presents the same kind of double vision that distinguishes Nick Carraway's narration of Fitzgerald's novel, revealing simultaneously the gorgeous appearance and the desolate reality of the beautiful people those in Moline, thankfully, must watch from afar.

Johnson explains that she writes out of her unconscious, so whether she intended this ambivalent portrait remains impossible to determine, but one episode suggests that although Diane Johnson appreciates Moline in retrospect, she sometimes loses touch with the decency that constitutes its greatest strength. She tells of her amusement when the "delightful, smart and funny" (200) director Mike Nichols confuses the waiter at a French restaurant in Las Vegas by addressing him in French. The good people of Moline might well wonder why anyone would expect a waiter in Las Vegas to speak French. But their kindness would probably keep them from asking larger questions, such as: why would a renowned director amuse himself by humiliating someone just trying to earn a living? And why would a distinguished American writer consider this fundamentally mean act a significant contribution to a memoir about the Midwest? Johnson offers

a compelling portrait of her personal and historical past in the Midwest, but the sections of her book rendering contemporary life seem to have a tangential connection to the ostensible subject of *Flyover Lives*. Although perhaps intended to show the impressive life her Illinois roots nourished, these sections occasionally suggest that Johnson may want to spend more time back in Moline.

Nancy Bunge

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

East Lansing, Michigan

Eric Dregni, *By the Waters of Minnetonka*. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 216 pp. \$29.95.

Mention Lake Minnetonka and most Minnesotans think of summertime recreation and the well heeled bedroom communities west of Minneapolis. The name conjures boating and waterskiing lazy summer afternoons away. A friend of mine comes from the area and her husband uses a shorthand to refer to it: Lake Tinky-tonky. It's hoity toity.

It's had that reputation since plush resort hotels began appearing in the 1870s. Minnetonka had long been regarded as one of the most attractive lakes in the state that boasts ten thousand plus. In 1853 Governor Ramsey called it "a perfect inland sea." Franklin Steele was an early well connected settler; we'd refer to him as an entrepreneur today. About Minnetonka, he said: "Here is the most beautiful climate and country I have ever seen, wanting only a touch of labor to make it a veritable paradise."

Author Eric Dregni grew up in the town of Minnetonka, Minnesota, and in his new book *By The Waters of Minnetonka*, he takes a deeper dive into life and lore along the more than one hundred miles of winding shoreline. The lake looks more like a rorschach inkblot than a nice round kettle lake like Lake Calhoun or Lake Harriet, its Minneapolis neighbors. Minnetonka is actually made up of many kettle lakes, connected by a series of bays and inlets.

Dregni sets out a goal: to show that Lake Minnetonka is a microcosm of the development of Minnesota and the United States as a whole. Dregni specializes in the history of the curious detail. Here he does it again, and covers a lot of ground in a series of "Did you know?" moments. Did you know that one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People worked as a waiter at the Lafayette Hotel? Did you