

Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest

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the rune stone story, particularly in the face of renewed immigration to Minnesota from other parts of the world and new communities competing for Minnesotan—and American—identities.

This is an excellent contribution to the long history of rune stone discourse. Krueger's disciplinary background brings a fresh and potent perspective to the subject. Scholarly in his approach and format, Krueger supports his ideas with deep knowledge of rune stone texts, events, pageants, comic books, and speeches and the views of both prominent supporters and detractors. In addition to its local interest, the book will be fascinating for anyone exploring how civic myths are constructed, and in this case how a region can appropriate civil religious ideas for its own purposes and to help construct its own identity by reimagining its history, creating its own rituals, and defining itself against other groups in a national context. Krueger's study makes a valuable contribution to regional and immigration history and elucidates the role that civil religious rituals play in defining a community's identity.

Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest, by Jason Weems. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxvi, 340 pp. Illustrations (some in color), notes, bibliography, index. \$122.50 hardcover, \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Jane Simonsen is associate professor of history at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. She is the author of "On Level Ground: Alexander Gardner's Photographs of the Kansas Prairies" in *Recovering the Prairies* (1999).

Barnstorming the Prairies makes the Midwest's dubious reputation as "flyover country" worth a double-take. In this image-rich investigation of prairie landscapes, aerial views become the defining angle of a modern perspective that shaped agricultural policy, regional art, and architectural innovation in the first decades of the twentieth century. Earlier midwesterners primarily experienced the landscape as horizontal, but the prospects enabled by flight shifted their visual axis to the vertical, reorienting ocular perceptions of "progress." Weems's study performs a similar function, creating a fresh take on visual studies of midwestern landscapes by ascending to the aerial.

Elevated prospects were not an entirely modern invention. Bird's-eye views date back to the Renaissance and were a common way to represent the expansionist's romance of distance. Gridded landscapes—emphasizing equality, control, and individual opportunity—operated in conjunction with other methods of spatial understanding, including topographical maps, farmstead lithographs, and citizens' profiles. Agricultural crises during the interwar years made this idealism untenable

just as flight enabled new prospects. Aerial surveys, especially those made by the government, became directives validating the need for new forms of federal management, in part by convincing farmers of the limitations of their earthbound perspectives.

The final two chapters are devoted to Grant Wood and Frank Lloyd Wright, arguing that airborne prospects influenced their artistry in complex ways. Wood's work as a wartime camouflage artist evolved into aerial/terrestrial tensions that are essential to the ambivalent renderings of past and present, modern and nostalgic, yeoman and capitalist, that characterize Wood's paintings. Wright, known for his horizontal Prairie Style architecture, nonetheless drew on vertical vision in an attempt to subvert growing disjunctures between urban and rural landscapes. His plan for "Broadacre City" anticipated a midwestern modernity that Weems terms "Jeffersonian urbanism" (218).

As it was for the aerial photographers he studies, Weems's strength is his ability to link seemingly disparate cultural elements into a unified whole that unsettles familiar perspectives. Alfred Andreas's 1875 *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, which brought together aerial views with town maps and narratives, serves as a touchstone for reading the comprehensive nature of even single photographs. Each of the chapters takes on an oft-studied topic — the magisterial gaze of the grid, Farm Security Administration photographs, Wood, Wright — and locates new "visual homologies" (191) in texts ranging from advertisements to geographic information system readouts that, taken together, attest to the interlocking influences of aerial systems of knowing. For example, although the grid has been studied as a system of control, few scholars have interrogated how the grid operated in conjunction with other nineteenth-century systems of knowing and seeing. Furthermore, Weems traces the elevated view into the twentieth century, exploring its evolution in conjunction with technological, cultural, and political change. Images of comprehensive — and thus abstract — aerial views are deftly linked to farm life photographs to indicate how the magisterial gaze inflected even seemingly domestic visions. A slightly elevated Soil Conservation Service image of a farmer plowing his field becomes evidence of the photographer's intent to "disrupt the expected trajectory of vision" in order to validate modern farming techniques (67).

Weems convincingly argues that the aerial gaze was deeply influential, yet the conflation of *midwesterner*, *farmer*, and *landowner* raises questions about who constructed these views, to whom they were most available, and who was most likely to adopt them as part of their worldview. Weems is successful in divorcing the magisterial gaze from a simple association with power, connecting it, in most cases, to views available

to the masses. Yet the visionaries and viewers Weems investigates are primarily male — from photographers, boosters, mapmakers, and artists to an implied audience of land-owning individuals who bought property, worked with agents, and made decisions. Gender is apparent in some analyses; Weems makes an intriguing connection between a photograph of quilters and the ways that *Life* editors may have imagined resonances between domestic ritual and the “agricultural future” (123). What happens when women claim aerial perspective? Would the perceptions and experiences of women working on farms in the 1930s and 1940s have been affected in the same way by aerial views as men’s were? Perhaps, but that possibility is only hinted at in the conclusion, which begins with a discussion of the “cognitive transformations” intimated by Dorothy’s aerial exodus to the land of Oz in the influential 1939 film (254).

The conclusion, like the rest of the book, opens the door to new interpretations of midwestern landscapes, particularly as they pertain to mass culture. Enthusiasts of visual culture, history, and rural life should welcome this book, which performs significant cultural work itself in re-orienting scholarly views of the Midwest, and is a strong contribution to the current recentering of the Midwest in American culture studies.

Missing Millie Benson: The Secret Case of the Nancy Drew Ghostwriter and Journalist, by Julie K. Rubini. Biographies for Young Readers. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. viii, 123 pp. Illustrations, sidebars, appendices, notes, bibliography. \$28.95 hardcover, \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Michella M. Marino is assistant professor of history at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. Her master’s research focused on young girls growing up in the Midwest during the World War II era.

Much like author Julie K. Rubini, as a young girl I, too, was drawn to the yellow-spined mystery novels starring the independent amateur sleuth Nancy Drew. Despite my interest, I never gave much thought to Carolyn Keene, the author of the Nancy Drew books. Had I looked more deeply into Keene’s life, it would not have mattered, because, as Rubini explains, “There is no Carolyn Keene. There never was” (1).

Thus, Rubini establishes a mystery surrounding the original ghostwriter of the series, Millie Benson, and why she only gained authorial recognition after a 1980 court case and a Nancy Drew conference held at the University of Iowa in 1993. Rubini sets up her biography for young readers in the same charming, formulaic manner as the Nancy Drew books, right down to her use of “holding points,” the concluding hook at the end of each chapter that compels readers to turn the page.