

The following is an excerpt of the introduction by Janet Daley (Lysengen), editor, to a special issue of *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* (62.3, Summer 1995) featuring essays by North Dakota authors about the theme, “Language of the Land: North Dakota’s Literary Heritage.” It is reprinted here with the permission of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. “Language of the Land” was a program co-sponsored by the North Dakota Center for the Book and the State Historical Society of North Dakota in conjunction with a traveling exhibit on loan from the Library of Congress. The exhibit, “Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America,” identified American authors and explored how their writing became an interpretation of their regional landscapes.

Introduction to “Language of the Land” by Janet Daley Lysengen

Like the Fall 1982 issue of *North Dakota History* that featured the state’s literary heritage, this special issue of the journal grew from an event by and for North Dakota authors at the North Dakota Heritage Center. That first presentation, “The Land in Literature: An Evening with Tom McGrath and Larry Woiwode,” was held on June 25, 1981, as part of the Heritage Center’s grand opening. The “North Dakota Writers’ Issue” of *North Dakota History* which followed in 1982 included contributions from both McGrath and Woiwode, other North Dakota writers, and an essay by the program’s moderator, who is also represented in this issue, Kathie Ryckman Anderson. In affirming the appropriateness for a history journal to publish an issue devoted to the state’s literary heritage, the late editor/historian Larry Remele wrote:

History is literature. The process of *doing history* involves the creative compilation of verifiable facts organized so as to interpret the past in a meaningful way for the present and future. The written word is integral to virtually every step in the process. Imagination, the ability to *see with the mind’s eye*, plays no small role in this exercise.

And literature is unquestionably history. Not only does most prose and poetry create and capture moments in time, but the results of the writer’s work represent the state-of-mind of a particular society at a given moment in history. Literature expresses a present-minded interpretation of its subjects, be they deep in the past or far in the future. For the historian, literature is a way to learn, a source for re-creating the past.¹

What inspired this issue of *North Dakota History* was “Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America,” a writers’ series and museum exhibit at the North Dakota Heritage Center on the capitol grounds in Bismarck during the cold, snowy months of February and March 1994. Co-sponsored by the North Dakota Center for the Book and the State Historical Society of North Dakota, the traveling exhibit, on loan from the Library of Congress identified American authors and explored how their writing became an interpretation of their regional landscapes. Staff from the Museum Division of the State Historical Society prepared a special panel on North Dakota authors to accompany the exhibit.

In the introduction to the program brochure, I wrote about the importance of recognizing the talents of North Dakota’s gifted authors, and why writers like those represented here have sometimes remained unknown or unappreciated in their home state. That introduction is reprinted below:

North Dakota produces wheat, potatoes, and sugar beets, but sometimes even North Dakotans don’t know that we produce writers as well. The state’s people have been described as warm and friendly, helpful to neighbors and strangers alike, but also somewhat

reserved. Is it our modesty? Have those homilies from earlier generations about not blowing our own horns kept us from acknowledging with appropriate fanfare the wonderfully talented writers in and from our midst? Or, rather, is it because we shrink from having our secrets revealed, as they can be in the poetry and fiction these writers produce? To know the people and this country well enough to write a story in which North Dakotans recognize themselves and the place they call home, writers must spend time here. They find their characters and plots in the life experiences of the folks who live here, on farms and ranches, in small towns, on the Indian reservations, and in the cities.

But it is the landscape that haunts these storytellers. Our climate and our landscape keep us humble. Farmers dare not declare a good season until the harvest is completed because they know that hail or drought or an early frost can lay low the greatest expectations. Even children on their bicycles watch the changeable summer sky for signs of an impending thunderstorm. People here know the power of the wind and a heavy snow, or an unrelenting summer sun and, like Joseph Conrad's sailors, we cannot be overly impressed with our power to control the elements. The result is at once a deep sense of spirituality and self-reliance, mixed with a saving touch of humor. But, unlike some who grow up surrounded by trees or mountains or even skyscrapers and find security and comfort there, we find assurance in being able to see for miles in all directions, an unobstructed vision.

As the daughter of a potato broker in the Red River Valley, I grew up to the reality and the poetry of potatoes. I listened to my dad's conversations and heard the names roll off his tongue in a rhythmic cadence: Kennebecs, Norchips, Burbanks, Pontiacs, Russets, Cobblers, and La Sodas. I learned that potatoes are a lot like people, and you ought not to trust appearances when you deal with either one. The rows in the fields may be green and lush, but underground, the tubers may be undersized or nonexistent. The only way to know is to dig them up and see what's underneath all that promising and showy green. Like some people, potatoes seem so hardy, but, surprisingly, their skins are delicate—they bruise easily and need a constant environment to thrive—and even a perfectly shaped, deep red potato can hide some serious deficiencies: blight or hollow heart. It's ironic that, after waltzing my mother all over the dance floor at the Eagles Club one evening just before his forty-ninth birthday, my robust dad died of a massive coronary. Hollow heart.

In the same way that potatoes became a peculiar but important symbol of North Dakota for me, the writers gathered together for this series, "Language of the Land," have drawn from their own lives on the Dakota prairies rich and diverse images, symbols, and stories. They come from different areas of the state, different ethnic and family backgrounds, and one, Kathleen Norris, though not born here, has settled in and claimed this region as home.² Some of these writers may no longer live here—Louise Erdrich, Lois Phillips Hudson, Richard Critchfield, Larry Watson, and Kathie Anderson—but their literary roots run deep, and what we recognize in their writing is this overwhelming sense of place we have never before put words to, but we know as home. David Solheim has lived here all his life, while Larry Woiwode left but has come back, and we are grateful for their presence.

If North Dakotans need a reminder that we have the bragging rights to good writers, this lecture series should serve the purpose. "Language of the Land" is an opportunity to explore the imaginary and literal landscape these writers have created. We know ourselves better because of the language they use to tell our stories. Welcome home.

1. Larry Remele, "Introduction to a Special Issue," *North Dakota History*, 49.4, Fall 1982, pp. 4-5.
2. Kathleen Norris, a resident of Lemmon, South Dakota, whose critically acclaimed book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, describes Dakotans from both an outsider's and an insider's perspective, was ill and unable to participate in the writers' series as scheduled on March 18.