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Paxton, Nebraska (population 542) may look like another blink-and-you-miss-it Midwestern town, but Charlotte Hogg, in her book *From the Garden Club: Rural Women Writing Community*, reveals how much her hometown has to teach us about rural places and the literacy practices of the women who live there. This book does essential work by providing theoretical frames for those interested studying rural places and their literacies. Not only that, but it is a joy to read.

In the first chapter, “Landscapes of Literacy,” Hogg renders her personal story and how it fostered a love of place in her work. After opening with a brief meditation on *Northern Exposure*, a sitcom in which the “simple” rural folk of Alaska were frequently outwitting their “worldly” new physician from New York, Hogg describes the hold that the Great Plains and Nebraska have on her. She reflects on her move away from Paxton to attend graduate school in Oregon and on all those people so invested in the small town, especially her grandmother. She also rehearses the misperceptions of the many who hold that rural Midwestern folk are “backward, uneducated hayseeds” and acknowledges that many living in such places have internalized that stereotype (7). But surely, she affirms, there is more to the literacy experiences of the women of Paxton than an outsider might perceive.

In the second chapter, “Settlement,” Hogg provides the most significant contribution of this work for rural studies: using settler and traveler ideologies as tools for analyzing the literacies in Paxton. Hogg writes compellingly about how the Great Plains and other rural places are often considered “flyover states” by a culture tied to economic, cultural, and educational interests on the coasts. Even during westward expansion, many saw Nebraska as a place to pass through on the way to Oregon or California. She uses the work of anthropologist James Clifford to describe the different ways of knowing that arise from one’s perspective as a traveler or a settler, whether one plans to seek greener pastures or stick with the already-prettily-green grass below one’s boots. She writes, “Within…larger culture, my generation was taught that to be a traveler meant to be a success; to stay in one place was perceived as failure” (33). Hogg values both the traveler and settler epistemological stances, arguing that “settlement…suggest[s] understanding a necessarily specific place in which one is grounded intimately enough to see what the traveler disregards or ignores” (31). She describes how the women of Paxton wrote memoirs, read widely, and carried on literate lives embedded in place; their articles for the *Keith County News*, their subscriptions to *Nebraska Farmer* and *McCall’s*, and especially their writing for the unpublished community memoir Hogg enlists for her research, “Early Paxton,” affirm the value of “settlement amid travel” (33). As the author describes Paxton’s history and residents with all the care and subtle joy of a local giving a tour of town, I understood in much greater clarity that there are some things a person traveling through would miss: Ole’s Big Game Bar, featured on the 1980s TV show *Real People*; the economic boom of the late 1930s and early 40s created by the construction of...
the Kingsley Dam; and the fact that, despite having “only” a few grocery stores, residents don’t feel deprived.

Hogg addresses notions of the public and private in chapter three, “Adjusting to Scale.” Here, as in much of the book, Hogg sees few clear distinctions between such dichotomies; rather, she argues the women of Paxton perform literacies along a “spectrum of public and private that allows for a range of possibilities that do not use one ideology as a touchstone or standard” (65). While they were, in many ways, relegated by the sexism of their times to the “private” sphere of home and family, these women enacted many literate practices within the public sphere. It was clear to them that “the daily activities in which women…took part deserved attention” beyond domestic spaces (73). Much of this work involved writing: newspaper articles for the Courier Times, “Early Paxton”, as well as their own personal memoir projects (some intended for public distribution, some not). These public literate practices blend with the private: the history captured by Paxton’s women, for example, rarely uses material from official public spaces (city hall, etc.) but rather makes the private realm of social calls and familial gatherings public.

The fourth chapter, “From the Garden Club,” opens with one of the book’s more memorable scenes. Hogg’s mother and grandmother are at a Tupperware meeting in Minneapolis in the 1970s. The women in the room each tell a story of what they get from being a “Tupperware lady,” including pride, an independent income, and an identity outside of that conferred by motherhood and housewife status. When it is her turn to speak, Hogg’s grandmother tells the group, “I am Dorlis Hogg. Mrs. George Hogg. I’m a wife, mother, and grandmother. That’s all the identity I’ve ever needed” (85). For Hogg, this anecdote belies the complex ways the women of Paxton use literate practices to both affirm and resist the narrow identities available to rural Nebraskan women. This chapter focuses on the literacy sponsorships available to (and from) these women within and outside of the home. The Garden Club, through which members engage in a variety of gardening and horticultural activities, is a particularly compelling site of literacy sponsorship. The value of these clubs resides in “the exchange of knowledge through literate practices…[in which] the women exercise authority and reap the benefits of sponsorship” (106). As an affiliate of a regional and national organization, the Garden Club locates the literacies of these women on the public-private spectrum: they are concerned with growing the finest bunch of cabbage their backyards can muster, yet they attend club meetings in which the state horticulturist speaks and they represent their chapter at regional and national conferences. These are all powerful literacies that might go unnoticed in a traveler’s scan of Paxton.

Hogg opens chapter five, “Sponsoring Pride and Identity,” with personal vignettes to underscore her place as one of the sponsored: “I come to this project as one who has been sponsored by the women I now study and talk to” (131). Indeed, this chapter delineates the ways the women of Paxton groomed their children to be successful and highly literate, as well as how the community contributed to that task. This sponsorship comes informally from older residents sharing stories and experience about, for example, the town’s history with the younger ones, and formally from groups, such as library

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volunteers, actively encouraging children to read, especially outside of school. But Hogg emphasizes that it is the “actions of these women [that] contribute to Paxton’s distinctiveness in its commitment to education” (141). It was clear that children were expected to make something of themselves, and the women of Paxton were the prime sources of these expectations. Hogg uses the words of Deborah Fink to capture some of their motivation: “A woman could prove…she was not a loser if…[her child] was a winner” (137).

One of the most compelling, and for some perhaps confounding, elements of the book is Hogg’s research methodology and presentation. At the start of chapter three, she reports she has “had to justify projects [like this one] that blurred the distinctions between ‘scholarly’ and ‘creative’ (two…terms viewed dichotomously that really aren’t)” (61-62). This text, much like the lives of the women in Paxton, complicates such dualisms. Hogg gives a reasonably rigorous accounting of her methodology, theoretical frame, and standpoint(s)—and even goes so far as to provide a small section, titled “Caveat,” in which she spells out her biases, mentioning, among other things, that she “risk[s] sentimentalizing rural life” (25) and that she wants to defend places like Paxton against the traveler mentality. But she also remarks that the book is its own best argument for blending the creative and scholarly, the personal and the professional.

Hogg may be deeply invested in her project, but I don’t think she sees only what she wants. From the Garden Club is an important benchmark in the emerging field of rural literacy. With this book and the recent publication (with Kim Donehower, Eileen Schell, and Robert Brooke) of Rural Literacies, Hogg proves a champion for the rest of us interested in this understudied group.