

“TO LIVE ONLY IN BOOKS”: READING AND WRITING RESTORATION

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Abstract: The ongoing struggle to restore prairie throughout the Midwest is being waged valiantly on one-acre remnant prairies, multi-thousand-acre degraded farmscapes, and everywhere in between. The work of ecologists and enthusiasts alike to transform the landscape physically is the most visible manifestation of the work of restoration ecology. Away from the fields, however, an equally important cultural transformation must also take place. As far back as George Catlin, writing and painting in the 1830s, the destruction of the prairie—including its indigenous plants, animals, and people—was a foregone conclusion. Catlin saw his work as the taxonomy of a “lost landscape” which would soon vanish from the land. Unfortunately this image of the prairie as a dying, if not already dead, environment was perpetuated by writers and artists throughout the nineteenth century and has persisted to today. Authors from Walt Whitman to Cormac McCarthy have written compelling accounts of the prairie’s destruction, disappearance, or absence. It is not surprising, therefore, that few Midwesterners could describe a prairie, let alone have seen one in person—if they would even care to. Fortunately the hope offered by physical restoration is being matched by the work of cultural restoration, by writers who have taken it upon themselves to counter images of loss and disappearance. This paper will examine a sampling of this written work—by a diverse array of authors, including Mary Oliver, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday and others— and address its importance to the larger tasks and goals of restoration ecology.