Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics and Promise of the American Prairie

Richard Manning
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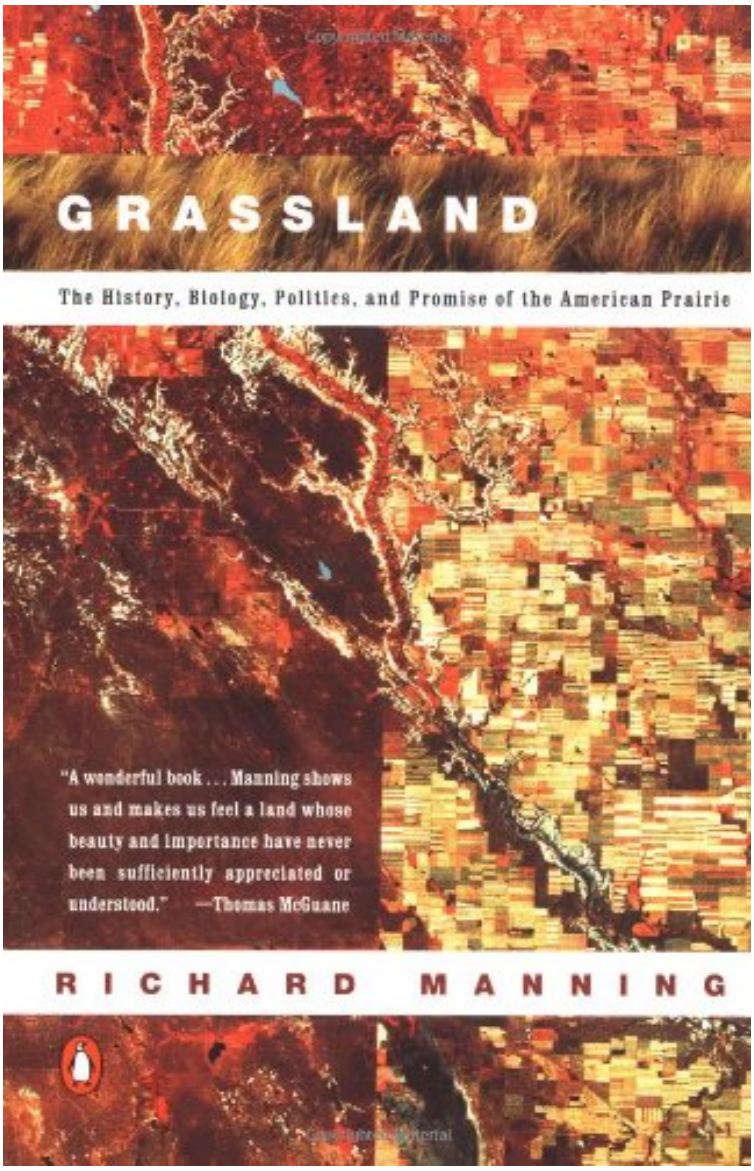

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Richard Manning : Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics and Promise of the American Prairie before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics and Promise of the American Prairie:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A "destination" vacation...By John P. Jones IIINot! The Grasslands

are a substantial part of what our bi-coastal "cousins" routinely and rather patronizingly refer to, as "the fly-over zone." For decades now, large areas of the Grasslands have been de-populating, so much so that counties in Nebraska, such as Cherry Co., now have a population of less than two people per square mile, which is the somewhat arbitrary population density that Fredrick Jackson Turner used to define "the frontier." In the 1990 census, Cherry Co.'s population was 1.1 persons per square mile. Indeed, our Grasslands constitute what could be called our "Empty Quarter." And for those of us, certainly including myself, who love trees and our forests, it takes a significant shift in mindset to realize that it is proper and necessary to remove the trees in certain sections of the Grasslands to restore the ecological balance. And then there is the matter of the endless vistas, infinity realized. All things considered, therein lies the fascination, sufficient to remove the "Not" at the beginning of this paragraph. Cherry Co., along with the poorest county in the USA, per What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America, nearby McPherson Co., can still rest easy: an infestation of the "dreaded tour buses" is unlikely.Richard Manning, who lives in western Montana, wrote this essential complement to such a vacation, almost two decades ago. By background, he is a reporter, and therein lies some of the strengths and weaknesses of this book. He "draws the reader in" with his story of Earl, the elk, who walked 1800 miles from the Sweet Grass Hills, above the "Hi-Line" (US Route 2) in northern Montana, to Independence, Missouri. Thereafter, Manning takes the reader on an eclectic tour of the ecology of the grasslands; why and how they are what they are today. Arid is the operative word, and the author repeatedly draws on the observations and ideas of John Wesley Powell, which were expounded in Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West. He articulates a well-reasoned case, in the aptly named chapter, "Gridlock," that it was the unintended consequences of the orderly and "rectilinear views" of Thomas Jefferson, and his independent small farmers who were to be "backbone" of democracy, that caused so much harm when they were imposed on the West, of too little rainfall.Manning's book is rich in vignettes, historical and present, which have impacted the Grassland. Frank Meyer, for example, was a Dutch immigrant who traveled the world (mainly Asia), returning with the seeds of plants that he considered suitable for our dry regions. For this, he earned the epithet "Typhoid Mary" from one biologist, for introducing so many alien species. A Vermont cowboy is the "main man" on Ted Turner and Jane Fonda's ranch, where they are proving that the raising of bison is both ecologically sound and profitable. Manning visits "the Bloods," a sub-tribe of the Blackfeet Indians, in Canada, as they are attempting to re-introduce Bison, with the attendant intra-tribal protests. Another interesting section involved a Bison conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin, with protests from the animal rights folks. I agree with Manning that far more damage and harm is done by planting wheat in the wrong place. The author also convinced me that I need to read Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres: A Novel to understand the dark underside of prairie life. Two of his best sections involved a depiction of the Sand Hills, in Western Nebraska, containing the above mentioned Cherry Co., and a trip to the U. of Arizona in Tucson, to review theories on why so many large American mammals became extinct approximately 12,000 years ago. Did "Clovis" man kill them all?On the downside, there is the all too familiar flaw of a book pasted together by a reporter's vignettes: numerous redundancies such as the number of feet the plains declines per mile to the Mississippi; and the hoary old adage that "...a weed is just a plant out of place." At times, I felt I was being machine-gunned by a random staccato of factoids. And his advocacy veered towards excessive "preachyness." Consider: "Some of us are not willing to make the trade, and we will arise as the true inhabitants of the West. We will accept reduced material circumstances in exchange for the privilege of the place." Must we? Or does Manning accept "their" definition of material circumstances? Alas, also, I really should be inured to the inherent bigotry of such statements: "...even the seat lodges of these days, which are presided over by Vietnam vets, recovering alcoholics, and other Blackfeet people trying to deal with the complexities of this world by learning the rites of the old. The sweat lodge is a ritual of purification." But I am not. Though I don't mind being associated with other Blackfeet people. 4-stars.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Quick and easy read but lacking in depthBy ReadsAlotThis book's strength is it weakness. It is very readable. It is semi-romantic in the tradition of Walden. Some of the sentences are very poetic. It is quasi- scientific with warnings of ecological disaster and definitions of ecological terms. It interviews ranchers in a journalistic tradition. But fails to be journalism. Unfortunately, by trying to be romantic, scientific, journalistic and even spiritual, the book fails to do any of these really well..It is a fast and easy read if you are interested in this part of the world but not deserving of the highest praise.4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Compelling story, beginning to show its ageBy Jeff Schulte3.0 out of 5 stars Compelling story, beginning to show its age, August 13, 2009By Stacey A Schulte - See all my reviewsI read this book in two sittings, that means it was well written. I'm a huge fan of Manning's other book "Against the Grain". That being said, there are minor factual errors, and perhaps could be updated with a new addition.Roadside restorations have been a huge success. As has Holistic management on ranches. Grass-fed beef has become a mantra of the Slow-food and local food movement. While I found the story convincing, I would have liked to see more information on bringing the other herbivore back, the elk. I also would have like to hear more about the effects bringing bison back has on the land. The time scales and land values would be important information. While Manning briefly touches on this subject, he does so almost second hand. He relates a conversation with Ted Turner's Ranch Manager.The botanists and other conservation biologists are not consulted on the bison issue, but rather only on the difficulties of exotic species and prairie restoration. However

most of these are nit-picks of a well-informed reader. Its doubtful these flaws will show up to most readers.A couple of interesting caveats too. I finally learned why we call a dollar a buck. I suspect parts of this book will be added to anthologies of the modern land movement. It is a well-written example of creating defining the need for a story. A story is necessary to define ourselves within the landscape. More than this book is about prairie, it is a book about our story as Americans.

More than forty percent of our country was once open prairie, grassland that extended from Missouri to Montana. Taking a critical look at this little-understood biome, award-winning journalist Richard Manning urges the reclamation of this land, showing how the grass is not only our last connection to the natural world, but also a vital link to our own prehistoric roots, our history, and our culture. Framing his book with the story of the remarkable elk, whose mysterious wanderings seem to reclaim his ancestral plains, Manning traces the expansion of America into what was then viewed as the American desert and considers our attempts over the last two hundred years to control unpredictable land through plowing, grazing, and landscaping. He introduces botanists and biologists who are restoring native grasses, literally follows the first herd of buffalo restored to the wild prairie, and even visits Ted Turner's progressive--and controversial--Montana ranch. In an exploration of the grasslands that is both sweeping and intimate, Manning shows us how we can successfully inhabit this and all landscapes.

.com In an exploration of the grasslands of North America that is both sweeping and intimate, Manning makes interesting connections between economics, botany, farming, and democracy. His discussion of the impact of romantic ideals of landscapes upon this biome is insightful, and his travels with botanists, biologists, buffalo and a visit to Ted Turner's ranch put faces and feet on the story. The message: by a careful reading of nature's design, we can more successfully inhabit this and all landscapes. Recommended.From Publishers WeeklyOur culture's disrespect for grasslands has produced an environmental catastrophe, charges the author. By allowing overgrazing on public lands, our government is wiping out an ecosystem as vital as the Brazilian rain forests. In this sweeping exploration of the prairie, Manning (A Good House) makes an eloquent plea to restore it. Cattle, loss of habitat, fragmentation, climate change and invasion of exotic species have wrought severe damage. Manning takes us from Ted Turner's bison ranch in Montana to Wes Jackson's Land Institute in Kansas; from the Sandos ranch in Nebraska to the Walnut Creek Preserve in Iowa, which is being restored to native tall-grass prairie. Any restoration, he stresses, must include bison. The author urges that we change grazing practices, arguing that ideally there would be bison grazing on open ranges, with cattle as a second choice-but only on large tracts. He states that we need to match agriculture to conditions, instead of remaking the conditions. A thoughtful and provocative look at prairie ecology. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.From BooklistManning vividly depicts the most catastrophic environmental disaster in our history--the devastation of North American grassland--in a fascinating narrative of the successive assaults by imported livestock, yeoman farmers, monoculture, corporate farming, and exotic grasses that have irrevocably degraded a once exquisitely balanced biome. Fifty million bison, which thrived year-round solely on prairie grasses, were slaughtered and gradually replaced by 45.5 million head of climatically unsuited cattle that now consume 70 percent of U.S. grain production, thereby necessitating the dedication of vast acreages to cattle fodder. Among the consequences of this agricultural system are soil erosion, pesticide and fertilizer pollution, aquifer depletion, and the loss of biodiversity, and Manning provides disturbing statistics that gauge their magnitude. Further, he assesses the culpability of governmental agencies abetting factional interests and discusses current efforts, notably on the Ted Turner ranch, to reinstate the bison, and by the Nature Conservancy to reestablish and preserve native grassland tracts. Brenda Grazis