

## Growing Up in Minnesota

### A Pedagogical Review

by  
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*Growing Up in Minnesota* (edited by Chester Anderson, University of Minnesota Press, 1976) includes eight essays depicting twentieth century childhoods. The essays are useful in composition classes (and other classes) as examples of good prose, but also as journeys into the lives of other people. The investigations into the psyches and personal geographies of others help students to sort out their own autobiographies. From childhood Christmases to attempted suicide, the book provides a wide spectrum of human experience, and each essay has the stamp of its author's style and personality. Most of my freshman composition students grew up in Minnesota, but not all of them did. Those who spent their childhoods elsewhere, however, are not alienated by lute-fisk and north woods. The students who did grow up in Minnesota find examples of descriptive and narrative writing that provide images of their very backyards. "I live just a few miles from Aurora" they tell me. One of my current students graduated from high school with Robert Bly's son. In class, as I do here, I group the essays by place (rural or urban); each writer provides a portrait of a Minnesota childhood framed by place and personal circumstance.

Some of the essays (especially Bly, LeSueur, the Hongs, and Schoonover) provide images of the connection between Minnesotans and the land. Even Minnesota city dwellers vacation at the lakes; my students have strong feelings for the rural landscape. I encourage them to write about these feelings, to focus upon the importance of geography and climate in their lives. We discuss whether Robert Bly would be as creative if he had attended a school with more than five students, if Schoonover would be a writer if her childhood had included brothers and sisters and neighbors instead of the northern Minnesota farmscape. The Hongs' collective essay has as its thesis the relationship of climate to the shape of a Minnesotan's personality and value system. Howard Hong remembers his Willmar childhood:

. . . sleeping on the porch at the cottage on Eagle Lake in the worst of weather, calmly peering out from his blankets and tarpaulin at the commotion of driving rain, thrashing branches, and whitecap waves—tramping with a pocket of cheese and old bread, during snowstorms through the dry cattails around Foot Lake to Robbins Island and back—skating in the bitter cold with his pals at the Sand Pit and roasting potatoes over an open fire in a dug-out fireplace in the bank. Each such experience deposited its gossamer threads of palpable, sensuous delight. No, he is neither an anachronism nor an accident, that white-haired man who climbs in his

battle-scarred World War II jeep at midnight (if that is when the snowfall abates), pulls down the earflaps of his fur cap, clamps a lighted cigar between his teeth, and chugs forth to plow the drive-ways all up and down the road. He is a prodigal squandering his inheritance.

Most students have not spent too much time reflecting on the effects of their childhood experiences upon their young adulthood, but they quickly grasp the idea. Their insights into the *Growing Up* essays are sometimes surprising in their understanding of the complex psyches of human beings.

As the Hongs relate their love of home and hearth to the harsh Minnesota climate, Meridel LeSueur describes her grandmother's prairie home as a "haven against the wild menaces of our time." LeSueur uses geometric images of lines and circles to juxtapose the man-built linear houses to the female curvature of the earth. LeSueur's "cosmic lyricism" (editor Anderson's words) is difficult for some students—for that reason I usually leave her essay for last. But LeSueur provides the kind of intellectual stimulation that college students should have. When she writes of a kind of geometric war, she provides students with an example of using concrete images to explain abstract ideas. Also, the troika of influences upon LeSueur's life provides a look at western society in microcosm. Her prohibitionist, Protestant grandmother typifies the upright, self-reliant American of the nineteenth century. Her Socialist, feminist mother gives radical color to an otherwise Puritan existence; and the Indian woman, Zona, provides an alternate theory about life, death, and human achievement.

The Indian idea that all is now, in the present, is especially interesting to students. It is good for them to see, as Meridel LeSueur did, that history does not have to be viewed as a time line of continuous progress from past to present. The Indian belief that time, like the earth, is circular, repetitive, is a mind-bending concept. Equally interesting are Zona's prophecies concerning pollution and soil erosion and her pointed condemnation of the white man's habit of dividing the circular earth into squares.

LeSueur's essay also serves as a feminist tract as she describes what the three very different women in her childhood had in common:

They had suffered from men, from an abrasive society, from the wandering and disappearance of the family. They lived a subjective and parallel life, in long loneliness of the children, in a manless night among enemies.

The women of LeSueur's "maternal forest" were not waiting for the railroad to come through; they were not hoping to strike it rich in the gold fields. Instead, they were instrumental in starting schools, bettering roads, helping at births and deaths.

There was always this mothering in the night, the great female meadows, sacred and sustaining. I look out now along the bluffs of the Mississippi, where Zona's prophecies of pollution have been



fulfilled in ways worse than she could dream. Be aware, she had cried once. Be afraid. Be careful. Be fierce. She had seen the female power of the earth, immense and angry, that could strike back at its polluters and conquerors.

Robert Bly continues the theme of closeness to the land by stressing the value of physical labor on the farm. He relates the physical replenishment one experiences after hard work, and then rest, to the creative or spiritual replenishment one experiences during the creative process. Bly also includes a portion of his childhood diary, some early poems, and a wonderful story about his father coming to the aid of a hired man who had been unjustly imprisoned.

Shirley Schoonover also writes of the country life in an essay that portrays a lively young girl's imagination and resistance to the adult world. She provides composition students with excellent examples of descriptive writing. The purpose of description is evident in lines such as "the ore-red road cut like a wound through the black woods of northern Minnesota." She describes autumn as a time when "the fall came tricking me with its colors, and the leaves flamed and fell, and a box of crayons, waxy and blasphemously bright, tumbled out of the willow tree, and I knew it was time to go back into the house."

The other side of life in Minnesota — city life — is represented by Salisbury, Gunderson, Vizenor, and Kyle. Harrison Salisbury remembers Minneapolis as a city of huge Victorian houses, horse-drawn fire engines, ice wagons. Like LeSueur, he recalls a time when progress had no drawbacks, when the rape of the earth was not a concern. Salisbury also provides, along with a glimpse of a Minneapolis of another era, a view of the midwest from within and without. He tells of the superiority he felt when he became a New Yorker (he tells us of a man he met who had not been west of the Hudson), and relates how he came to be proud of his Minnesota roots. "Leaving Minnesota, but never really leaving it after all, for what is in one's life is there to the end of one's days."

Keith Gunderson's childhood world was primarily confined to the neighborhood surrounding the apartment building where he spent his growing up years. He remembers his childhood vividly and writes as though he were reliving it, so the reader almost needs to be reminded that this is an historical account (or at least, that his account is not very recent history).

And I got tired of hearing how famous Janice was because she once won second prize in a doll buggy decorating contest. I wasn't sure if she won her prize in Zumbrota or at Powderhorn and didn't bother to find out, though I did ask what the *first*-place doll buggy looked like. Every year when the Southside picnic would roll around and someone would mention that someone on the block was entering the doll buggy decorating contest, a big picture of famous Janice and her famous *second*-place doll buggy would be dragged out and everyone would force me to stare at it.

Gerald Vizenor's childhood was not filled with doll buggies and grape soda as Keith Gunderson's was. Instead, Vizenor's father was murdered when Jerry

was a toddler; his childhood was one of foster homes, poverty, and crime. Gunderson's city environment was one of park picnics and family fun; Vizenor experienced street gangs as an adolescent and visited a house of prostitution in St. Paul when he was eighteen. Vizenor's graphic descriptions of his rough childhood are balanced by his sensitivity and his growing awareness of his Indian heritage.

Toyse Kyle, too, experienced a rough childhood. A mentally ill mother, poverty, and prejudice provided obstacles that Kyle not only survived, but overcame while developing her perceptive intelligence. Kyle's essay is always the favorite of my students. Many of them have had limited contact with blacks and do not have an accurate concept of what it is like to be a minority class member. Many of them, also, believe that the North is less prejudiced than southern states, and they are genuinely surprised to read of the problems Kyle encountered in Minnesota. Students are shocked at the abuse Kyle suffered from her own mother—Kyle relates an incident when her mother threw rocks at her, for example. While we are shocked at the abuses Kyle suffered, I think some students are relieved to read about others who have suffered family problems and social obstacles and survived. The Kyle essay usually leads to a good discussion of prejudice, past and present, and the progress, or lack of it, our society has made to this day.

For me, our move to Portland Avenue became an emblem of the desperation—in both black and white America—to become Dick and Jane. We live under the delusion that at the end of *Home of the Brave* white Mingo will ask black Peter Moss to become his business partner and that we will all live happily after. But even in Minnesota—this northern utopia—life goes on below the surface of what most people are willing to see.

A writing assignment could easily accompany each of these essays although I usually have students write one formal essay at the end (they write informally for and during class). Assignments could have themes concerning weather, geography, prejudice, pollution, urban life, rural life, etc. Also, the book was made for discussions of the uses in writing of description and narration. Some of the essays are more tightly organized than others, and this can be discussed and pointed out.

I assign students to write their own growing up essay, remembering to have a thesis, to not ramble on or try to tell every detail of their lives. I tell them I don't want too many autobiographical facts, unless those facts add to their story or description. Most students find it easy and enjoyable to write about themselves, but they do have trouble narrowing their focus. This, however, is one of the reasons the assignment is worthwhile.

Students like *Growing Up in Minnesota*; they like reading about their state and thinking about the comparisons to their own lives. The ten writers offer different backgrounds, different writing styles—a literary potpourri from a state that can be rightfully proud of its thinkers and writers.

Appendix: The table of contents is reprinted here to give the titles of the essays and their correct order.

*Growing Up in Minnesota:*

*Ten Writers Remember Their Childhoods*

Introduction: From Tepee to Ax and Stump	by Chester G. Anderson
The Ancient People and the Newly Come	by Meridel LeSueur
The Victorian City in the Midwest	by Harrison Salisbury
I Know What You Mean, Erdupps MacChurbbs: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors	by Gerald Vizenor
A Portrait of my State as a Dogless Young Boy's Apartment	by Keith Gunderson
Route 1, Box 111, Aurora	by Shirley Schoonover
Minnesota Black, Minnesota Blue	by Toyse Kyle
Being a Lutheran Boy - God in Minnesota	by Robert Bly
Remembering is a Forward Movement	by Howard and Edna Hong and Mary Hong Loe
Biographical Notes	