



Shelley Armitage, *Walking the Llano: A Texas Memoir of Place*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. 216 pp. Hardcover \$24.95.

It may seem difficult, after finishing Armitage's narrative, to separate the book's two principal subjects. The memoir genre implies that readers will follow the author's life, and often Armitage draws upon her childhood and adult experiences in the Texas Panhandle. Yet, the book's title and wanderings suggest that place becomes an equally important subject. In addition to learning about Armitage, readers explore the Llano as she hikes from her family farm outside Vega, through the Middle Alamosa Creek and its surrounding canyons and mesas, until the creek reaches the Canadian River.

Structurally, chapters follow the author's various hikes along the creek, although the author weaves personal, family, communal, regional, natural, and geological histories into extended, intimate observations regarding the land's geologic structure and biological communities. The resultant chapters create an invitation, as if readers are expected to wander the physical and mental landscapes that Armitage and her companions travel.

As a professor emerita of English and American Studies, Armitage flexes her academic knowledge. (At various points, she and her hiking companion joke about the author's inclination for research.) She cites scholarly and literary sources regarding the Llano; doing so creates a persuasive counter-argument for those who perceive the southern High Plains as the uninhabitable, nineteenth-century "Great American Desert" or a utilitarian, twenty-first century commercial hinterland. Instead, Armitage provides historical evidence for prehistoric trade routes and indigenous, Hispano, and Anglo settlements, and details material remnants from ancient and modern settlers. The historic and material evidences combine with Armitage's family's history to establish a genealogy that links her to the Llano and its people.

Moreover, Armitage writes herself into a lineage of nature writers, particularly women writers whose writings dwell in undesirable, "waste" places. She explicitly cites from Mary Austin, Peggy Pond Church, and Leslie Marmon Silko. The book's publisher connects the memoir to Terry Tempest Williams, whom Armitage does not mention but whose influence is especially felt in those chapters that detail the author's mother's declining health. This impressive knowledge of female nature writers in no way suggests that Armitage's narrative is derivative. On the contrary, she situates her own experience within a larger literary heritage.

Armitage's memoir is a remarkable read, because its personal and place-based narratives are compelling. Readers will feel an emotional connection to Armitage, who writes honestly about personal loss and a desire for emplacement. They may also experience an urge to visit the Texas Panhandle, to hike and encounter those locations so intimately described. But perhaps more persuasive, the narrative encourages readers to define their sense of place, at a time when contemporary influences recommend otherwise. And Armitage suggests a course that readers can follow: Get to know your place, through exploration and story.

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