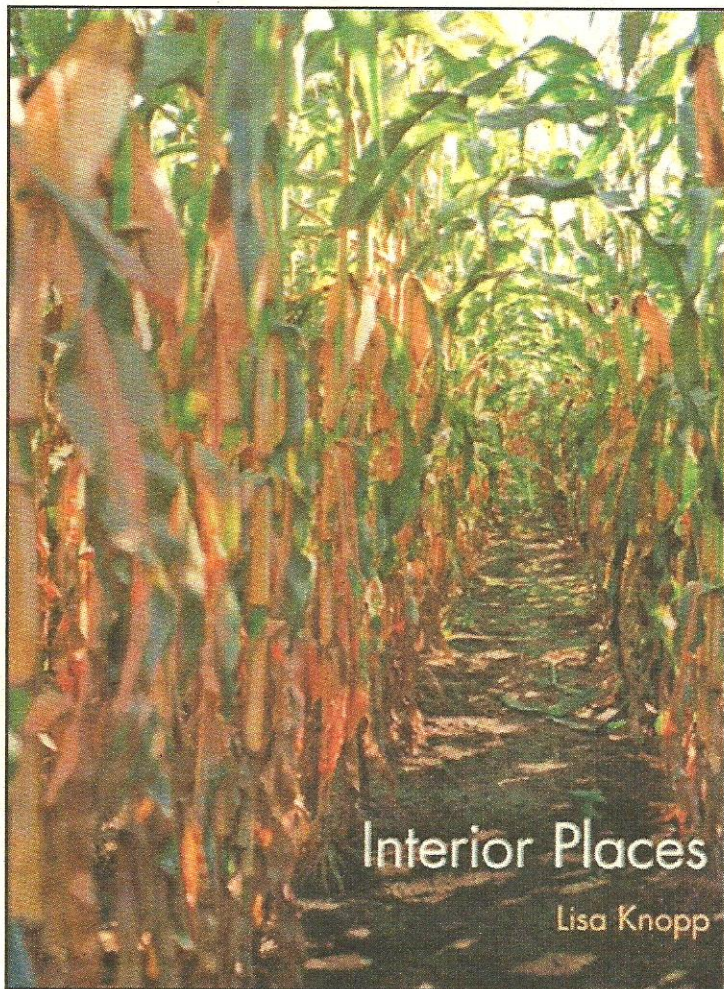


'Interior Places'

Midwestern tales abound in Lisa Knopp's new book



Interior Places

Lisa Knopp

BOOK REVIEW

"Interior Places," by Lisa Knopp

Occasionally, a book comes from out of nowhere and wakes us from our self-imposed inertia. "Interior Places," by Lisa Knopp, is one such book. To label such a book creative nonfiction doesn't do it justice. Knopp mixes themes of nature and spirituality with part-biography, part memoir, part investigative writing, into

a perfect chorus of intricately woven stories. This elegant and well-informed collection of 16 essays meanders through life in the Midwest landscape, showing us glimpses of everything from bird banding to life as a volunteer at a social welfare agency, and shows her compassion for nature from her reverence of corn to the ecology of creeks. The beauty of her lyrical voice mirrors the beauty of the natural world around her.

Knopp is a careful and caring observer; she holds a magnifying glass close to the world around

her and misses nothing. The pull of nature courses through her writing in "The Way In," as she uses her love of collecting geodes as a way to understanding our Midwest landscape: "The center, heart, or interior, whether of a region, season, song, or love affair is where one finds the most intense expression of the thing." She scrutinizes the tiniest details and easily lulls the reader in to her entrancing story.

"In the Corn" is an education on the history and hybridization of corn, and Knopp's observations of the land on which it grows illustrate her affection for the prairie: "If all human life were to vanish tomorrow, cornfields, too, would

perish. But prairie, whether hand-planted or a never-broken relict of the original prairie, would not only persist but reclaim the land." A melancholy shows through her writing as she tells how the land yields to consumption and our tallgrass prairies disappear in the depleted geography.

In "Surrender," a more reflective essay, Knopp takes us on an outing to the Platte River as she gets sidetracked by a bird bander. In a touching conclusion, the releasing of a fragile titmouse into the wild parallels the writer's own struggles with letting go of her maturing children: "To allow a creature to perch on one's open palm requires surrender, deep and constant, renewed moment by moment. The bird or the child senses the surrender and knows that it's free to depart and return when it pleases."

By far, one of the more significant essays in the collection is "The Fence," a compelling account of thousands of fenced-off acres in southeastern Iowa, home to "the plant" – the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant. Knopp retells the history and ongoing horrors of the IAAP, one of the federal Superfund's list of worst toxic waste sites. Knopp takes us into her own family's accounts and other personal survivors' stories of working – and dying – at the plant. Tales of disappearing records, radiogenic cancers and denied compensation claims are right out of Silkwood. Knopp's keen observations in her literary journalism recall images of Joan Didion.

In all, Lisa Knopp's great breadth and talent of storytelling will keep even the finicky reader absorbed. Her prose is elegant and stories vital. She successfully paints a picture of life that is the mosaic of our Midwest landscape. **CB**

– Elizabeth Mack