



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

PLACES IN THE HEART—ESSAY

Essay by Suzanne Ozment

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Images from the **Picturing America** collection celebrate scenic as well as manmade wonders—those carved by the forces of nature (Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke*, 5A, and Albert Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 8A) and those crafted by human ingenuity (Walker Evans's photograph, 13A, and Joseph Stella's painting of the Brooklyn Bridge, 14B). Some also suggest ways in which human experience is shaped by place (N. C. Wyeth's romantic cover illustration for *The Last of the Mohicans*, 5B, and Richard Diebenkorn's abstract view of the stamp of the city on the land in *Cityscape I*, 20A).

The books chosen for **Places in the Heart** present a similar message about the influence of place and are set in an urban ghetto (*Brothers and Keepers*), along one of the great scenic rivers in North America (*A River Runs Through It*) and in small towns from Colorado (*Plainsong*) to Iowa (*Gilead*) to Maine (*Empire Falls*). Situated in richly realized settings, they demonstrate the wonderfully varied topography of America but also the constants in human experience, for these five books are first and last about relationships. In three of the five, the central relationships are between brothers. While some of the characters' fortunes and troubles arise from or are connected to where they live—a dying mill town, a metropolitan slum—the books are primarily about strengths and weaknesses, longings, and impulses that transcend time and place to speak to the human condition.

The books in the series also pose questions about the rootedness of individuals in a particular setting. Is our connection to place determined by a sense of security generated by the known and familiar, by family associations, by a romantic notion of "home," by an inability to imagine a different life? **Places in the Heart** explores the extent to which individual identity is fashioned not only by the people with whom one lives but also by the place(s) where one lives.

Richard Russo *Empire Falls*

Aptly named for its proximity to the nearby falls on the Knox River and for the decline of its industrial base, the town of Empire Falls in central Maine has seen its better days. The once-prosperous mill town has become a place of shuttered factories and shops and a diminished and pessimistic populace.

Miles Roby, the central character, manages the Empire Grill, a local diner that is owned, like nearly everything else in town, by Francine Whiting, from whom Miles expects to inherit the restaurant.

At age forty-two, Miles is negotiating his way through middle age. He longs to move from his hometown to Martha's Vineyard to open a book store but finds himself constrained by his misplaced sense of obligation to Mrs. Whiting, who takes a malicious satisfaction in his dependency; his unwillingness to exert himself to protect his own interests in his impending divorce from his wife, Janine; and his unqualified love for his teenage daughter, Tick.

Even as she takes advantage of it, Mrs. Whiting joins Miles's brother and mother-in-law in pointing out to him that he has "an overdeveloped sense of responsibility." His counterpoint is his father, Max—irreverent and unreliable—whose response to all life's problems and his own personal failings is repeatedly summed up by his two-word credo, "So what?" But the freewheeling Max is the exception in the world of *Empire Falls*. Russo himself has pointed out that most of the major characters feel trapped. "Miles is trapped more interestingly and more completely [than the others]—by the past, by his faith, by an old love, by his devotion to his daughter, by his own decency." That decency is nearly his undoing.

Patient, mild-mannered, and self-sacrificing, Miles tolerates his father's fecklessness, deflects his ex-wife's criticism, and befriends the town's misfits. Meanwhile, beneath the minor vexations and superficial sameness of daily life in Empire Falls, serious tensions mount. They surface most dramatically in the violence perpetrated by Tick's classmate, the outcast John Voss.

Miles retreats with Tick to Martha's Vineyard to distance her from the horror she has witnessed and to provide time for her (and for himself) to heal. Before he is ready to return to Empire Falls, Miles must reconcile himself to revelations about his family's past and overcome his paralyzing fears for his beloved daughter's future. He must come to accept that even the most loving and devoted parent cannot always shield his child from emotional and physical harm.

The novel opens with a prologue describing the decision decades earlier on the part of the wealthy young mill owner, C. B. Whiting, to correct what he deems "God's basic design flaw" by rerouting the stretch of the Knox River that runs between the "hacienda" he has built on one river bank and the factories he operates on the other. His presumption, and that of all the characters who attempt to control forces outside themselves, leads to misfortune.

By the end of the novel, Empire Falls and the people who live there have begun to recover. The Knox River has regained its God-ordained channel, commercial investments are reinvigorating the town, and people have renewed their commitment to what is most important in their lives.

Russo captures the cadence of small-town life in a book that is at times wonderfully comic and at others deeply affecting.

From **Picturing America**, Charles Sheeler's ironically titled painting *An American Landscape* (15A) speaks to the themes of Empire Falls. Factories and railroad cars dominate the canvas, defining the skyline, reflecting back from the surface of the river, and reducing to insignificance the one gray human figure crossing the railroad tracks.

Norman Maclean *A River Runs Through It*

An autobiographical novel published in 1976, when Maclean, a retired English professor, was seventy-three, *A River Runs Through It* recounts the story of Norman's relationship with his younger brother, Paul, whose self-destructive behavior ends in his being murdered at the age of thirty-three.

From their father, Paul and Norman learn the patience, self-discipline, and close observation required of good fly fishermen. Bound together as much by their love of the physical world and skill as anglers as by blood, they feel closest when they are fishing together. Contemptuous of those who fish with worms, the Macleans see proficiency at fly-fishing as a measure of manhood. Maclean attempts to make a convert of the reader with extended accounts of casting technique and descriptions of hand-tied flies.

Much of the book takes place in the summer of 1937, the year before Paul dies, in western Montana on the Blackfoot River, a powerful stretch of water on the Continental Divide that Norman refers to as "our family river."

Critics have often commented on the lyrical quality of Maclean's prose and the elegiac tone of his memories of his brother and their fishing expeditions. "Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart," he says. The book captures

a sense of that perfect world: the “rhythms and colors” of the canyon, the play of light and shade on the water, the glacier lilies, the black and red and yellow fish.

Fishing on the Blackfoot River with his father and brother, for what turns out to be the last time, Maclean is conscious of being part of an ancient, holy place: “It was another world to see and feel, and another world of rocks. The boulders on the flat were shaped by the last ice age only eighteen or twenty thousand years ago, but the red and green precambrian rocks beside the blue water were almost from the basement of the world and time.”

Fishermen talk of “reading the water” they are fishing. When they fish together, Norman and Paul are also able to read each other. The unspoken love and strong sympathy between them is communicated.

At the end of the novel, the narrator confides that he has grown “too old to be much of a fisherman.” But on occasional evenings, he still fishes the “big waters alone.” “Then,” he tells us, “in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.” By the book’s final pages, the reader, like Maclean, feels “haunted by waters.”

Several images in **Picturing America** accord with the representation of the natural world in Maclean’s book. Fallingwater (16B), Frank Lloyd Wright’s striking house situated on the side of a cliff with a waterfall dropping immediately beneath it, looks, from certain vantage points, as if a river runs through it.

The grand scale of natural beauty on both sides of the continent is captured in two large canvases painted in the nineteenth century: Thomas Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)* (5A) and Albert Bierstadt’s *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* (8A). In the former, Cole suggestively paints himself in miniature between the rugged, mountainous terrain on the left of his canvas and the pastoral farmlands spreading across the right half. But no figure intrudes on the majesty of Bierstadt’s image of Yosemite Valley.

John Edgar Wideman *Brothers and Keepers*

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean acknowledges, “. . . I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as ‘our brothers’ keepers,’ possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go.”

John Edgar Wideman is driven by the same instinct. Like Maclean, he has a troubled younger brother. Like Maclean, he turns to writing as a way to come to terms with those troubles and the “grief and waste” generated by them. In November 1975, John’s brother Robby was involved in an armed robbery during which a man was killed. He remains in prison, serving a life sentence without parole.

Whereas Maclean creates a novel from his first-person account of his family story, Wideman does not choose a fictional frame or structure. Throughout the book, he struggles mightily to be accurate, to be fair, to be honest. Most of all, he struggles to listen to his brother and to compel the reader to listen as well. Not to dismiss or excuse or condone, but to listen and understand. Together, he and Robby produce an account that John describes as a “mix of memory, imagination, feeling, and fact.”

John admits, “One measure of my success was the distance I’d put between us.”

But as John and Robby reminisce, as John hears the painful stories Robby relates about his past, he is forced to acknowledge how much they are alike—how many of the mistakes that Robby has made he has made as well—lying to and wronging those who love him most and ultimately lying to and betraying himself.

John and Robby try to make sense of how the same neighborhoods and family could produce John, a Rhodes scholar, college professor, and award-winning novelist, and Robby, living largely on the streets, caught up in drug dealing and armed robbery. Robby and John consider several different beginnings to Robby’s troubles—when Robby is born, when his friend Garth dies, when the family moves to a different neighborhood, and when Robby defies his father.

Regardless of when Robby's course is set, the brothers realize that the explanation for his choices lies in part in where they grew up—Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—and then the black neighborhood to which they moved—Homewood—that degenerated into a ghetto. Much of the book is focused on the influence of place—on their childhood neighborhoods and on Western Penitentiary, where Robby is incarcerated.

Brothers and Keepers is very much a book about writing a book, about uncovering truth and having the courage to reveal it. It is about trying on "the other person's point of view." *Brothers and Keepers* is a penetrating, unflinching reflection on issues of economic and social justice, of right and wrong, of love and betrayal.

Among the **Picturing America** images, four in particular deal with similar themes: Charles Sheeler's 1930 painting, *American Landscape* (15A); Martin Puryear's carved *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (20B); Romare Bearden's *The Dove* (17B); and James Karales's photograph of the *Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965* (19B).

Kent Haruf ***Plainsong***

A finalist for the National Book Award in 1999, *Plainsong* is set in the small town of Holt on the High Plains of northeastern Colorado.

A definition of "plainsong" as a "simple and unadorned" melody serves as epigraph to the novel and as an apt description of Haruf's own style of storytelling in this affecting, yet un sentimental, narrative.

The book unfolds in a succession of short chapters that shift focus among seven central characters. Tom Guthrie and Maggie Jones, who both teach at the local high school; Tom's young sons, Ike and Bobby; and two elderly bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPheron, who raise cattle on a ranch outside of town—all of whom are brought together by a pregnant teenager, Victoria Roubideaux, who has been deserted by her boyfriend and disowned by her mother. In one way or another, each of the others has suffered loss and loneliness as well. Tom has been left by his wife, and, absorbed in his marital and work-related troubles, leaves Ike and Bobby to take care of themselves much of the time and to puzzle out the reasons for their mother's departure. Maggie shares her home with her father and struggles to care for him as his dementia steadily worsens. And the McPherons spend their days engaged in hard, grinding work and their evenings alone in the comfortless farmhouse they inherited from their parents.

Contrary to clichéd notions of the closeness among residents in small towns, at the beginning of *Plainsong*, the lives of the citizens of Holt seem marked by discord and isolation. Still, people do come together in surprising ways. Abandoned children find surrogate parents, and childless adults "adopt" children to create redefined families.

The two pairs of brothers—the elderly McPherons and the young Guthrie boys—have much in common—most obviously, their earnest, generous natures and their fierce attachment to each other. Just as Ike and Bobby instinctively reach out to an eccentric old woman on their newspaper route, Harold and Raymond perceive the rightness of giving Victoria a home when Maggie makes the suggestion. Clumsy but well intentioned, the McPherons rescue Victoria, who in turn brings new life to them, literally and figuratively.

For much of the novel there is little description of place. Yet with occasional deft references—in spare, compelling prose—Haruf creates a strong sense of small-town life. The independence and resilience cultivated by life on the Plains is matched by the strength of human connections, however unlikely or unconventional they may be.

The final chapter—unlike all the others, which are named for characters—is titled "Holt" and is set at the ranch where Maggie and Victoria prepare to call the Guthries and the McPherons in to dinner. The closing sentence promises no happy endings, makes no neat pronouncements, but is forward-looking and hopeful: "They stood on the porch a while longer in the evening air seventeen miles out south of Holt at the very end of May."

One work from **Picturing America** that may especially resonate with readers of Haruf's novel is Winslow Homer's 1865 painting, *The Veteran in a New Field* (9A), in which a single laborer, turned away from the viewer, toils at the edge of a vast wheat field.

Marilynne Robinson *Gilead*

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, Marilynne Robinson's 2004 novel is set in a small Iowa town called Gilead. The book takes the form of an extended letter written by a seventy-seven-year-old Congregational pastor, John Ames, to his seven-year-old son.

Gilead is described in the Bible as a place of refuge. According to Ames, the name is appropriate for the town, which was originally a place where early settlers and land developers who were moving west could pause in their travels to "heal and rest." He feels an unabashed, unqualified love for his hometown, a place he has never been tempted to leave.

Ames declares, "I love the prairie! . . . Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view."

Ames is keenly aware of his physical surroundings. He comments on the wonder of light ("This morning a splendid dawn passed over our house on its way to Kansas"), on the "miracle" of water, on the different way one experiences very familiar surroundings at night. Much that he witnesses he finds "remarkable"—it is one of his favorite words.

In a book review for the *Boston Globe*, Jane Vandenburg suggests that Ames's narrative may be read as a kind of "sermon"; *New York Times* reviewer James Wood describes it as "devotional"; Olivia Boler, writing for the *San Francisco Gate*, calls it a "meditation"; and Roy Charles in the *Christian Science Monitor* refers to it as a "testimony"—all words that signal the book's preoccupation with matters of the spirit.

There is gentle humor and disarming candor in Ames's epistolary memories and musings. While advanced years have brought him deeper love and deeper insight, he is mindful of how much he has yet to appreciate, to understand, or reconcile himself to. He expresses concern about how his son will remember him. As he reflects on the alienation between his own father and grandfather and the heartache his best friend's son has caused, he tries to untangle the complexities of the love between fathers and sons.

He perceives, "When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters." Although he has written and delivered hundreds of sermons, John Ames still feels the need, before the ordinary course of things comes to an end, to capture on paper for the adult son he imagines will one day read his words what matters most to him about Gilead and the deep satisfaction he has found in the life he has been able to make there.

In the **Picturing America** collection, Louis Comfort Tiffany's exquisite stained-glass window, *Autumn Landscape—The River of Life* (13B), captures the rich beauty and tranquility that John Ames admires in the natural world, even as the setting sun and the luminous autumn leaves depict the season that symbolizes Ames's time of life.

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PLACES IN THE HEART— RECOMMENDED READING

The following works are recommended for those who would like to continue reading and discussing books on this theme.

Short Novel Series

Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Set in the quaint seacoast village of Dunnett Landing, Maine, Jewett's story depicts the quiet lives and carefully preserved traditions of the self-sufficient villagers in a late-nineteenth-century whaling community.

Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*. In his early fifties, the title character seems to have merged with "the mute melancholy landscape" of the isolated New England farm where he struggles to make a living, but twenty-four years earlier, Ethan had made a desperate attempt to escape his oppressive community and loveless marriage.

John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*. A haunting story set in Depression-era California of a young man's loyalty to his slow-witted but good-hearted friend.

Larry McMurtry, *The Last Picture Show*. McMurtry's coming-of-age story is set in the early 1950s in the small Texas town of Thalia, where community life revolves around high school football games, the local pool hall, and the picture show.

Paul Auster, *City of Glass*. Part of *The New York Trilogy*, *City of Glass* opens with the detective novelist Daniel Quinn receiving a mysterious telephone call in the middle of the night, "with the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not"—in fact, asking for Paul Auster. Quinn's efforts to unravel the mystery and protect the caller, whom he accepts as a client, lead him on extended ramblings through New York City in this clever detective story that probes the nature of identity.

Memoir Series

Mamie Garvin Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. In a collaboration with her granddaughter, Karen Fields, begun in earnest when she was ninety years old, Mamie Fields offers a memorable account of the first sixty years of her life (1888–1948) in sharply segregated Charleston, South Carolina.

Haven Kimmel, *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana*. A warm, witty reminiscence of growing up in the 1960s and '70s in a Midwest town of 300.

Bobbie Ann Mason, *Clear Springs: A Family Story*. Spanning the twentieth century, three generations of Masons make a life on a small family farm in Clear Springs, Kentucky.

Reynolds Price, *Clear Pictures*. An engaging account of his childhood and adolescence by the distinguished North Carolina author.

James McBride: *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. McBride, an author, composer, and jazz saxophonist, tells of being raised as one of twelve children in a Brooklyn slum by a strong-willed, resourceful mother.



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