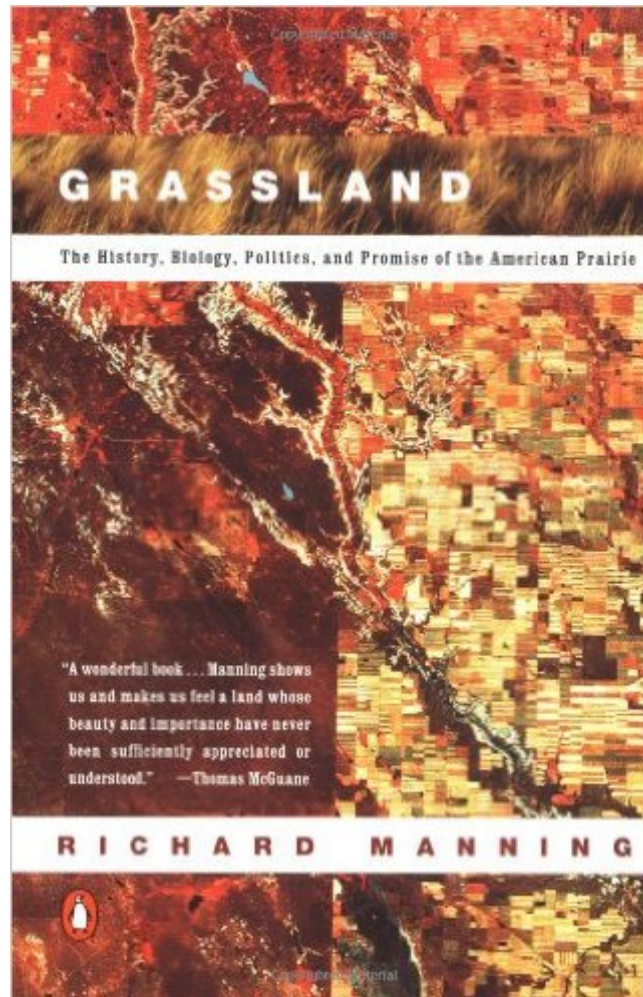


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Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics And Promise Of The American Prairie



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First and most important, this book will change the way you think about the American prairie. I live here at the edge of the prairie near Indianapolis, and there are a few spots maintained as native prairie. Manning isn't talking about these little islands but about a huge, free ecosystem and the horrors that we have inflicted upon it and its fauna and flora. I confess that the image of grizzlies chasing elk calves across the grassland is beguiling, and illustrates what we are missing. He makes a persuasive case that we need lots and lots and lots of grassland, maintained as such. Manning

has a good story-telling sense, and a good eye for explaining the grassland. You will not look at the prairie in the same way again. There are some nicely provocative bits. His vision of the prairie rests on bison ranching, with the animals eating native grasses without irrigation, fertilizer, or other capitalist agriculture. As if that's not controversial enough, he makes a serious case that a meat-and-leather prairie economy rests easier on the land than food crops such as wheat or corn. These crops have destroyed the prairie and harm the broader environment because of the extensive irrigation and fertilization required. Obviously, this strategy of making our agriculture conform to the land instead of forcing the land to conform to our agriculture would be a major change for Americans and others around the world. Manning is not afraid to take the next logical step, and he makes a principled argument against vegetarianism. Eating free-range bison raised on natural grasslands, he argues, would sit more lightly on the ground and would probably use less (petroleum-based) energy. This is not your conventional environmentalist, to say the least.

I have encountered few books like Richard Manning's *Grassland*. Manning's manifesto - reserved for the final chapters - is audacious, even quirky. *Grassland's* subtitle, *The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie*, suggests a reasoned, broad-based analysis, and that is what Richard Manning provides. Nonetheless, his conclusions are breath-taking in their originality. My initial skepticism remains, but Manning does have me thinking about his proposal. Maybe, just maybe, he is on the right track. The mountain wildernesses with their "charismatic megafauna", deserts, wild rivers, forests, seashores, and wetlands have little difficulty attracting environmental advocates, but how do the grasslands, the largest single biome in North America, fit into this picture? Manning is slow to unfold his unorthodox proposals, preferring first to educate his readers. Thankfully, Manning's style is more narrative and anecdotal than pedagogical. His topics are wide ranging: Indian cultures, exotic weeds, Pleistocene extinctions, Jefferson's agrarian theory, disappearing aquifers, buffalo hunting, and industrialized farming. Manning has definite opinions, but he is surprisingly fair; he clearly outlines and explains contrary ideas. I questioned some of his interpretations and occasionally even his facts, but all in all Manning's thesis appears credible. I had some qualms about revealing Manning's manifesto in absence of his preparatory discussions. Even in context, his proposals are unexpectedly original. With caution, I proceed: Richard Manning advocates eliminating large scale, industrialized farming and cattle ranching on America's extensive arid and semi-arid grasslands.

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