Kathleen Norris was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up “all over,” but spent most of her childhood summers in Lemmon, South Dakota. After high school in Honolulu and college in Vermont, she worked as arts administrator at the Academy of American Poets. In 1971, she published her first book of poems, *Falling Off*, which was followed by three other volumes, including *How I Came to Drink My Grandmother’s Piano* and *The Year of Common Things*. She has also edited *Leaving New York: Writers Look Back*, a collection of essays and poems by various New York writers.

Several years ago she returned to her grandparents’ farm in Lemmon, where she finds, as do many writers, that she must put together a crazy-quilt of jobs to make a living—writing and reviewing, managing her family’s ranch and a small cable television company, and appearing as an artist in the schools for the North Dakota Council on the Arts.

Her most recent book is *The Cloister Walk*.

### A Conversation with Kathleen Norris

**What is a “spiritual geography”?**

At its Greek root, geography means “writing about a place,” and the vast, almost sculptured landscape of the western Dakotas has a spiritual quality that I couldn’t ignore. “Spiritual geography” also describes the way a place shapes people’s attitudes, beliefs, myths. The spiritual geography of the Plains is complex. But the stark beauty of the land—its strength—also inspires strength in people, in part because it reminds us of human limits. I believe...
A CONVERSATION WITH KATHLEEN NORRIS

WHAT IS A “SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY”?  
At its Greek root, geography means “writing about a place,” and the vast, almost sculptured landscape of the western Dakotas has a spiritual quality that I couldn’t ignore. “Spiritual geography” also describes the way a place shapes people’s attitudes, beliefs, myths. The spiritual geography of the Plains is complex. But the stark beauty of the land—its strength—also inspires strength in people, in part because it reminds us of human limits. I believe that the challenge of living on the Plains is like the challenge any of us faces in the ’90s, having to live with limits.

WHY DO YOU CONNECT THE PLAINS WITH THE FOURTH-CENTURY MONASTIC DESERT?  
First of all, many people refer to the Plains as a desert, and there are desert hardships here. But any desert, if you observe it long enough, offers surprising gifts. Many country people I know tell stories that have the same wry humor as ancient monastic stories.

WHAT DOES MONASTIC LIFE OFFER MODERN URBAN PEOPLE?  
A chance to step aside from the noise of modern life. In a monastery one feels: I don’t have to rush, there’s time for everything. Many people have realized that we’ve become too competitive and individualistic for our own good. We talk about the need for community but don’t know how to find it. Monastic people have had about 1,500 years to experiment, and they seem to be trying to nurture values that in turn nurture community.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THESE PIECES FOR THE BOOK?  
I began writing Dakota when I noticed strange reactions to the farm crisis in the early 1980s among small-town people. Writing about this led me to reflect about other aspects of life here— gossip, the role of writers, and of truth in small-town society—and, by extension, American society as a whole. The Dakotas are part of that larger society, even though we’re isolated from the mainstream. And we seem to offer a kind of early warning system.

HOW CAN CITY PEOPLE MAKE CONNECTIONS TO A “SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY”?  
Any place has a spiritual geography. People can love Brooklyn or Chicago as passionately as a Dakota rancher loves the land, and there is much in American literature that attests to this. People tend to create small towns wherever they are. We don’t live in big cities so much as in communities of friends, colleagues, relatives.

DAKOTA

“[A] moving and substantial contribution to the literature of the changing contemporary Midwest, and a welcome reminder of the peace that open spaces and extended silences can confer.” —Washington Post Book World


Twenty years ago Kathleen Norris, with her husband, fellow poet David Dwyer, moved from New York City to her late grandmother’s home in Lemmon, South Dakota (population 1,614). Their stay was to be temporary. They are still there. It is clear why, in Norris’s loving descriptions of this vast and starkly beautiful landscape, of its extremes of weather and topography, and of its townspeople and farmers.

She also touts the rewards of monastic life, which leads her to a deeper understanding of herself. This self-knowledge heightens her appreciation of the concept of community, both social and spiritual, and of how we might apply monastic values to daily living in order to attain a stronger sense of community and of self.
**FOR DISCUSSION**

We hope the topics and questions below, coupled with the “Conversation with Kathleen Norris,” may stimulate a deeper understanding of *Dakota*.

1. Norris presents Dakota as “my spiritual geography, the place where I’ve wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance.” What are the circumstances that make up her story? In what ways do the other inhabitants of western Dakota experience this “spiritual geography”?

2. In addition to providing us with a sense of Dakota weather and the Dakota landscape through the course of a year, what purposes do Norris’s “Weather Reports” serve? Do they have any elements in common that have a unifying effect on the book?

3. There are repeated references to the cardinal virtues of Christianity—faith, hope, and charity. How do these virtues fit into the context of life in the Dakotas? What additional virtues—e.g., hospitality—does Norris suggest have primary value, and why?

4. In “The Beautiful Places,” Norris writes that “especially in western Dakota we live in tension between myth and truth.” What “myths” and “truths” does she present that illustrate this theme? Does she suggest ways to resolve this tension, or is it characteristic of all communities?

5. What constitutes a healthy sense of community in Norris’s view? What are the main characteristics of such a community? Can such a community exist, or is it more an ideal—like a monastery—that one strives for but never attains?

6. The concepts and varieties of “gossip” and “story” are important to Norris. What kinds of gossip and story does she identify, and what values does she ascribe to them? Does her own “story” share elements of both?

7. What role do women play in Norris’s rediscovery of faith and worship and in her exploration of life in the Dakotas? Does she see a difference in the ways men and women respond to the same landscape and various aspects of spirituality?

8. Norris speaks fondly of the “playfulness” of monks. Why does she view this playful way of being as a paradigm for life? Can it be an element in our own daily lives and, if so, in what way?

9. Norris presents a series of extreme contrasts as characteristic of western Dakota geography, weather, life, history, etc. In what contexts do these extremes occur? How do they affect the attitudes of native Dakotans and Norris?

10. In several places, Norris speaks of “the desert wisdom of the Dakotas.” What are the primary qualities of that “desert wisdom”? What is the link between that wisdom and the contemplative life?

11. In “Frontier,” Norris writes, “The spirit of the land is not an abstraction in western Dakota, but a real presence.” How does she make this evident throughout the book? How is “the spirit of the land” a real presence in the lives of Dakotans? What connections are there between this spirit of the land and Norris’s own spiritual quest?

12. Several of Norris’s very brief chapters are entitled “God Is in the Details.” How does she discern the presence of God in these details?

13. How does Norris illustrate her statement, in “Gatsby on the Plains,” that “It is the community that suffers when it refuses to validate any outside standards...”? How does a community suffer in such a situation? Does Norris present any specific communities that benefit or suffer from either adopting or resisting outside standards?

14. Norris maintains that Dakotans feel they are “in the middle of the world rather than, as others would have it, in the middle of nowhere.” How does she support this idea in the book? Is it enough to change your view of how you imagine Dakota?

15. Comparing poets and Christians, Norris writes that “we are people who believe in the power of words to effect change in the human heart.” How does she show this belief at work? Does she exhibit a change of heart by the end of the book. Do we?
FURTHER READING

Beyond the Bedroom Wall • Larry Woiwode

The Bones of Plenty • Lois Phillips Hudson

The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems • William Stafford

Desert Notes • Barry Lopez

Giants in the Earth • Ole Rolvaag

Love Medicine • Louise Erdrich

Lake Wobegon Days • Garrison Keillor

My Ántonia • Willa Cather

O Pioneers! • Willa Cather

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek • Annie Dillard

PrairyErth • William Least Heat-Moon

Rising from the Plains • John McPhee

The Solace of Open Spaces • Gretel Ehrlich

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind • Ivan Doig

Walden • Henry David Thoreau

The Wisdom of the Desert • Thomas Merton, editor

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