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Book Review by Jon K. Lauck

## BORN IN A SMALL TOWN

*Flyover Lives: A Memoir*, by Diane Johnson.  
Viking, 288 pages, \$26.95

*Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*, by John E. Miller.  
University Press of Kansas, 528 pages, \$29.95

**D**IANE JOHNSON GREW UP IN MOLINE, Illinois. Her father, originally from a small town in southeastern Iowa (Bloomfield), was a school principal and her mother, originally from a small town in Illinois (Watseka) near the Indiana border, was an art teacher. The Johnson family lived in a little house at the top of a ravine above a modest meandering brook. She had a younger brother who was an Eagle Scout and ultimately became a doctor. Moline, which was inhabited by civically-minded nice people, was first put on the map by John Deere, who built his plows there and sold them to the millions of farmers around the rural Midwest. Deere and his factories were also friendly to Scandinavian immigrant workers so Johnson grew up with lots of tall, blonde kids who were forced to eat lefse. Johnson remembers how the town treated the few African-American kids with great affection and how the only real slurs were mild ones against Catholics (“mackerel-snappers”). Everyone watched football and basketball, played cards, golfed, went to church, and joined local clubs (Illinois, one

study noted, was known as the “heartland of the service club movement”).

Johnson was recently prompted to think about her old home in the Midwest after spending a weekend in the south of France. During this long encounter in Saint-Pantaléon, a French woman, “Simone,” insisted that Americans failed to know their history or where they come from, unlike Europeans. Johnson did not resist the claim too much, but instead started to think about her Midwest, which, from the perspective of other American regions, is greatly neglected. “No one writes much about the center part of our country, sometimes called the Flyover, or about the modest pioneers who cleared and peopled this region,” Johnson notes. She recognizes the “scorn that people in more fashionable places felt for the plump, bespectacled, respectable folks” of the region. Johnson responds with an impressive roadmap, a way of seeing and understanding the Midwest, and charts a path toward a greater consciousness of the history of the region, which remains at a far remove from the popular imagination.

**J**OHNSON IS NOT SPEAKING AS A WOUNDED booster of a local Midwestern Rotary club, plaintively making her case against coastal neglect. She speaks from a place of authority within the central currents of American high and popular culture. After college in the Midwest (Stephens College in Missouri), Johnson landed in Los Angeles and later England and France and started writing novels and screenplays and ultimately wrote for Francis Ford Coppola, Sydney Pollack, Mike Nichols, Stanley Kubrick, and other famous directors. When Kubrick wanted to make a horror movie and was looking for a story, he passed over a novel by Johnson in favor of one by Stephen King (*The Shining*), but he had Johnson write the screenplay for it. Johnson was also a finalist for a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. If one wants to hear about the Midwest from a veteran artist who has seen the trenches of cultural production, in other words, Johnson is the person and her new memoir, *Flyover Lives*, is the book.

Given her strong Hollywood and Paris bona fides, many of which are recounted in her new



memoir, Johnson begins her search for the Midwest from an unexpected but critical point, one of genuine vision and empathy, not one of “revolt from the village” resentment. She knows her home was a decent place so she is not out to criticize the region, but simply to understand its history. After a lifetime of global travel, Johnson knows the world’s dark places so she is more capable, with her seasoned perspectives and literary eye for detail, of seeing the Midwest’s humaneness. She remembers the books in her house, the happy homes of Moline and its environs, the local sports teams, playing gin rummy, the beauty of the local Carnegie Library, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope on the radio, summers in a cabin in northern Michigan near the Straits of Mackinac, the local Mexican immigrant who wrote of his love for Moline, and her love for all her uncles (“Do people have uncles anymore?”). Her family, she says, “could have stepped out of a Norman Rockwell illustration.”

**W**HEN JOHNSON ASKS HER FRIEND Stephanie Peek, a painter who also grew up in Moline, if she was remembering the peace and beauty of Moline correctly, Peek responds, “Are you kidding? It was Brigadoon.” That Johnson needed to confirm with a friend that her memories were accurate says much about the current state of our culture and our thinking about the Midwest. Too many Americans do not think well of the peaceful little towns of the region but instead assume the Midwest is a regressive backwater full of buffoonish rednecks. (It’s an old refrain among American intellectuals, trotted out again recently in Ryan Poll’s Marxist screed, *Main Street and Empire: The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalization* [2012], and ably analyzed in Fred Siegel’s *The Revolt Against the Masses: How Liberalism Has Undermined the Middle Class* [2014].) Perhaps the greatest service of Johnson’s memoir is to dispel such stereotypes, to send a signal that it is acceptable to recognize the Midwest’s inherent decency and, more generally, to serve as a beacon of normalcy in the enveloping fog of sensationalism, scurrilousness, and vapidness that blankets our culture.

Johnson’s memoir is a great relief from a common form of stereotyping that burdens the Midwest and a rare dissent from the dominant culture, but its collective force takes a reader much deeper, down to the foundations of American history. Johnson notes that “California, where I’ve lived for fifty years, has never felt as much like America as Illinois does.” There’s a reason for this, of course, which the author pinpoints. California is much more given to trendiness, pop culture, and the social churning of transplants and drifters than are the more rooted and historic parts of the Midwest. The Midwest

is the product of specifically American forces which gathered after the American Revolution and spread through the area, indelibly shaping a purely American region, one shorn of the undemocratic remnants—aristocratic and theological—of colonial New England and the racist political cultures of the Southern planter colonies. Johnson spends the central chapters of her memoir excavating her family story from this forgotten Midwestern history and provides a model for others to use when exploring their own family histories in the region.

**B**ESIDES HER UNDERSTANDING OF THE workings of the nation’s coastal-dominated cultural institutions, her artistic flair, and her family’s personal history in the Midwest, which all inform and animate her work, Johnson makes a good witness to entire swaths of the American past which are in danger of being lost altogether. She notes how, for example, the basic way of life in her hometown was simple and open, a place where people were not censorious or judgmental and nobody obsessed about rigidly adhering to local customs but instead focused on generally trying to do the right thing. People took life as it came and rolled with the punches and were practical and they weren’t twisted into incapacity by anxieties and self-absorption. “Moline was not oriented to troubles of the spirit,” she notes, and was not given to counseling and psychologizing. When discussing yet another uncle (a banker, and one who refused to foreclose on anyone during the Depression), she recognizes that “[t]hese were all mild, principled, affable people, accepting of other people’s foibles, not expecting much excitement in their lives.” They embraced an unexacting religiosity: “in Sunday school we were not told much about sin or hell, or anything else disturbing, only about goodness and service.” The two Jews in Johnson’s school were handsome, successful, and genuinely accepted. (A Moline mother’s much greater fear was that a daughter would marry a Catholic from across the river in Iowa.) Johnson only encountered anti-Semitism and racism later, when she lived in California.

Johnson does identify a flip side to the light touch of Midwesterners and their world of live-and-let-live decency. While describing the basic components of Midwestern goodwill and helpfulness, Johnson also wonders if Midwesterners are “more detached than some sorts of family, more timid of interference.” “I fear,” Johnson says, “our perfect toleration contains a tinge of lazy laissez-faire.” She wonders, one supposes, if there is more to be gained from the pushiness and aggressive table talk and personal meddling more common to other regions and cultures. It is doubtful that Johnson, a free-spirited but fair-

minded Midwesterner, means it, but it is a fair point to raise about what she calls her “unsuitably harmonious and monotonous town.” One guesses that, in the end, Johnson would agree that passive support is preferable to active meddling, but, as a good Midwesterner, she does not press the matter and instead leaves it open.

Johnson counts as a dissenter from the predominant influences of the artistic world because most art comes from personal pain. Writers tend to be tormented souls (just read some literary biographies). But the worst childhood memory Johnson can recall is her mother inadvertently neglecting her May basket: “That’s it, my most traumatic memory.” Her worst memory of Moline is that a “neighbor boy killed some newborn rabbits with a spade.” “What a setback for a writer,” she jokes, “to have no more than this to complain of.” But what a relief for millions of Americans weary of a culture choked with tales of anguish, oppression, and narcissism and who know another America exists, different from that projected on the silver screen and promoted in the *New York Times Book Review*. Maybe finding that other America again can help us all. Johnson thinks that her book and that “looking at the Midwest of long-departed people and even my own childhood could remind of things people talk about as being missing in America today” and generally “restore the charm and goodness of our own society.”

**B**ESIDES DIANE JOHNSON’S RECENT RECOLLECTIONS, those looking for a more in-depth treatment of American small town life can turn with great enthusiasm to historian John E. Miller’s new opus, *Small-Town Dreams*, a deeply-researched and brilliantly-conceived account of the small town experiences of a series of Midwesterners whose names many over-50 readers will instantly recall. Like Johnson, Miller, to his great credit, foregrounds his book with a recognition of the great neglect of the Midwest’s history. But the crucial ingredient in Miller’s tome, which he has been laboring on for two decades, is a recognition of the centrality of place in most people’s lives, especially those born well-before the 1950s, during which mass culture and technology began to heavily degrade the power of physical place in socialization and identity formation. In contrast to the main currents of cultural Marxism and critical theory, a body of work which tends to focus on categories of analysis such as race, class, and gender, and generally takes a dim view of place, Miller zeroes in on the decisive role that maturing in a small Midwestern town had on the lives of the two dozen individuals he studies.

Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, grew up in the town of Portage, Wisconsin, and went on to occupy the highest echelons of American



intellectual life. Turner's essential insight, which came to him while earning a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University, was that few of his peers and mentors had experienced anything like he had on the early Wisconsin frontier and in the small towns of the Midwest. From this basic insight grew Turner's unique theories about the role of the frontier in American history and the importance of regional attachments in American development and an entire school of historical thought that occupied center stage in American intellectual life until roughly World War II.

Or consider the case of Meredith Willson, who ascended the heights of the nation's cultural professions, moving from small town Iowa

to Juilliard to playing in the New York Philharmonic to composing symphonies to conducting symphonies to directing various radio programs to writing four books and serving in World War II. Through it all, Willson never stopped talking about his wonderful upbringing in Mason City, Iowa, memories of which finally prompted him to write *The Music Man*, which became a Broadway smash in 1957. "I didn't have to make anything up for *The Music Man*," Willson said. "All I had to do was remember." Willson personifies Miller's point about the "profound importance of one's childhood origins and sense of place" and supports his argument "that place or geographic context exerts a strong impact on

people's lives." John Miller's *Small-Town Dreams* and Diane Johnson's *Flyover Lives* demonstrate that to find the Midwest, the best starting point is not the abstractions of dated and ideological theories, but instead personal stories, biography, memoir, and a recognition of the intense power of place.

*Jon K. Lauck is an adjunct professor of history at the University of South Dakota, leading the Midwestern History Working Group, and serving as associate editor and book review editor of the Middle West Review. He is the author, most recently, of The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History (University of Iowa Press).*