Truth to tell, I have always found regional books to be an odd, if perfectly understandable, specialty of university presses. Universities exist in specific places (even those online have a locus) and should serve, as best they can, their communities. And while the publication of reference books for those interested in exploring facets of a particular part of the country cannot be impugned, the implicit boosterism that seems to define the genre has often struck me as the proof of just the opposite: region-esteem anxiety. This paradoxical tension between championing and defending a region is perhaps never more apparent than when literary writers join the fray. After all, the “literary” itself is a contested site for those seeking to achieve—or define—“success” within or outside the “East Coast establishment.”

In this largely entertaining, often redundant, anthology of “literary nonfiction,” forty-one writers, self-identified as Midwesterners (by birth, choice, or both), offer their snapshots of this region of the country recently blamed and credited for the re-election of George W. Bush to the presidency of the United States. My invocation of the current Bush administration is not coincidental. Two of the major criticisms of the Midwest by both natives and “outsiders” are its dogmatic conservative politics and its generalized xenophobia. One would think that these themes would receive extensive treatment—if only as rebuttal—in an anthology devoted to debunking many myths about the Midwest. Yet, not only is there no subsection entitled “Politics,” the subject itself is studiously avoided or marginalized.

Such absence buffers the familiarity of so many of these essays. Indiana readers, for example, will recognize the cheeky back-to-nature Transcendentalism of Scott Russell Sanders and swell with pride at the rambunctious “a Hoosier is a Hoosier is a Hoosier” logic of Michael Martone. Illinois readers will no doubt howl with glee at James McManus’s hilarious ode to suburbia and applaud S. L. Wisenberg’s laudatory cityscape. And all transplanted Midwesterners will instantly understand, even sympathize with, “outlander” Robert Grindy, who makes the quite sensible argument that small towns in different states have more in common with one another than big cities and small towns within the same state. His essay is found in one of the better sections of the anthology, “California, Midwest,” which concerns population movements between the Midwest and the West. The best section, however, is the first one, “Outskirts,” which
begins with a typically epiphanic narrative by Stuart Dybek, simply titled "Midwest," reaches its apex with the McManus piece, "Your What Hurts?," and concludes with Jaimy Gordon's harrowing "Little Man in the Woods."

That being said, the best essay overall is Dan Guillory's "Being Midwestern," a rhapsodic tribute to the prairies of rural Illinois and their transformative effect on a Louisiana native. Guillory, like several other essayists here, manages to evoke the sublime features of the plains and flatlands. His ability to draw links between different parts of the country simultaneously elevates the "ordinary" of the Midwest and demotes the "exotic" of the other, "sexier" (East and West) coasts. Of course, as a Louisiana native, Guillory has recourse to his own "third" coast. Perhaps it is this dialectic between the coastal and landlocked in general that makes his essay—and several others—so enlightening. They remind us that Middle America has its own charms, charms which, viewed from some "elsewhere," can be as evocative and rewarding as we sometimes imagine other places to be.

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Wilderness Journey
The Life of William Clark
By William E. Foley

William Clark and the Shaping of the West
By Landon Y. Jones

The publication of James Holmberg's expertly edited volume, Dear Brother: Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark (2002), shed new light on several lingering historical events in which the Virginia-born partner of Meriwether Lewis participated. But in what context should these fifty-five letters be appreciated? Three years ago, there was no authoritative, full-length scholarly biography of William Clark (1777-1838). There is now. Wilderness Journey, by William E. Foley, a retired professor of history at Central Missouri State University, is the product of a forty-year flirtation with the career of William Clark. Foley is the author or editor of six books on Missouri history and in his research he frequently reviewed deci-