



## Theme Essay

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“Does Annie Pike Greenwood like Idaho, or not?” one of my college students asked some years ago, clearly wanting a simple answer. On the one hand, he noted, Greenwood writes extended lyrical descriptions of the South-Central Idaho landscape’s wide vistas, distant peaks, beautiful light, clear stars. On the other, however, she spends a lot of time lamenting the “awful downsides” (as he put it) to living in that space: violent storms, droughts, plagues of pests that make farming marginal at best; neighbors’ poverty, ignorance, and misery; blatant exploitation by those who control the markets for farmers’ goods. The proper answer, of course (as the class soon pointed out to him) is that relationship to place is often complicated, that a person can feel utterly uplifted by a particular landscape yet sometimes simultaneously frustrated and beaten down by what it means in practical terms to live there.

Ranging across cultures and time periods (from pre-history to the exploration and early settlement period, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day in Leslie Leek’s most recent book), the books in this series invite you to consider how humans from a variety of cultures responded to the landscapes of Idaho and the Intermountain West. Why were people drawn to particular places, and why did they stay (or leave) when things got tougher than they expected in environmental, personal, and/or interpersonal ways? How did living in a specific place touch the people who settled there, not just in terms of their economic fortunes but their psychological, emotional, and social make-up, and their internal sense of who they were? Such questions promise to spark wide-ranging discussion, for their answers are as varied as human nature itself: from Elinore Pruitt Stewart’s, Grace Jordan’s, and Nelle Portrey Davis’ cheerful self-actualization in frontier settings; to the darker family/community environments of Janet Campbell Hale’s, Carol Ririe Brink’s, and William Kittridge’s stories; to the literal links between individual health and environmental health that Terry Tempest Williams traces.

While research in the field of environmental psychology has long demonstrated that natural landscapes hold the power to reduce humans’ stress, foster introspection and spirituality, and provide perspective on personal issues, the specifically *western* landscapes referenced in this series’ books also raise more narrowly-focused questions. What, for example, were the effects of living in a landscape marked by long vistas and large sweeps of unpopulated country? Of

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# TOUGH PARADISE

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arriving (alone, as Osborne Russell does, or as a group like the LDS settlers in *Lives of the Saints*) in a place which had seen little, if any, human development yet held rich—almost dauntingly rich—resources of timber, water power, mineral wealth or grazing land? Of realizing that paradise wasn't quite (or at all) "paradise" (Greenwood)? Of inhabiting a landscape known intimately through generations of one family/group (the Native American books in this series; Mary Blew's *Balsamroot*) or utterly foreign (*Thousand Pieces of Gold*)?

Coming to this series in the twenty-first century might inspire discussion of yet another aspect of human relationship to place, one we didn't think so much about back in the 1990s when the Idaho Humanities Council developed this theme as part of Idaho Centennial programming: the issue of how people respond when a beloved familiar landscape *is becoming* "tougher" because it's undergoing radical change. This subject, of course, is on everyone's minds these days, as Idaho seems well on the way to becoming a different sort of place. In-migration means that our state's iconic open space is disappearing in some regions; diversity is increasing daily; the basis of our economy is changing, as is social culture in many parts of the state. National divisiveness has touched our state too, pitting interest groups against each other and breeding sometimes violent dissention; national problems like drug abuse now live here; climate change is impacting that landscape Idahoans so treasure. Some might even say that Idaho is no longer "paradise" at all; others that good can come from change. As you discuss these books, you might consider how the people in these books dealt constructively with the challenges that made their paradises tougher ones than they'd expected, what you might learn from their struggles and failures, and how their resilience and adaptability might inspire your own.

Finally, and on a more personal level, reading these books might move you to think about (and perhaps talk about with others) the dynamics of why you love the exact places in Idaho and the Intermountain West that you do, even if they aren't quite perfect. What features of appearance, what psychological triggers, what memories or aspirations inspire you to "topophilia" (as those who study psychological response to landscape term strong attachment to a specific place)? How has one such place influenced who you are, how you think, what you believe? What challenges has your love for that place brought to your life, and how have you/might you negotiate them? Consider writing about your relationship with this place and sharing that work with others.

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In any case, I hope that as you talk about these books in the weeks ahead, you and your neighbors might find that the common “landscape” of shared insights, experiences, aspirations, memories, and hopes builds a deepened sense of community among you—in its own way the kind of “paradise” so many of these books’ protagonists most craved, the kind we ourselves so need today.

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