

IS THERE A MIDWESTERN LITERATURE?

While we were looking to buy our first home, our realtor continuously comforted us with the punch line to his one and only joke: three things determine the VALUE of a piece of property: "Location, location, and location." We laughed the few times he applied this reason to perfect houses well exceeding our budget, but gradually it occurred to us that the more laughable idea was the price range we had in mind. That place alone could determine everything! That location could subsume all other, presumably different reasons! Well, if that answer provided little comfort to me as a potential homeowner, it did summarize my feelings about this question "Is there a Midwestern literature?" Three things determine the value of Midwestern literature: location, location, and location. But I'd rather the word "value" exchange its financial meaning for its moral one, as in human values.

Before I elaborate how my realtor's reasoning applies as well to Midwestern literature as to my Midwestern house, I'll want to admit that the more I tried to bear down on the question, "Is there a Midwestern literature?" the more alternative temptations threatened my attention. For example, couldn't we describe (or dismiss) Midwestern literature with a list of the clichés commonly ascribed to the region? Clichés, to earn their weight in the fool's gold, must possess a fraction of (certainly not the whole) truth. Could Midwestern literature be a homespun web of small towns, general stores, flat lands, immigrant ancestors, middle-class families and conservative tendencies? (I'll grant you, an answer of "yes" would have made my work easier.) But I had to begin with "no." I had to begin by answering the question "Is there a Midwestern literature?" by saying "no." Even though I am a writer in the Midwest who directs a program and a bookstore designed to feature such regional writers and writing, I wanted the practical ignorance of the ancients who looked upon the undisciplined world with less proven superiority than plain suspicion. Rather than say "yes" and go about proving such a thing, rather than list specific and favored

books that should be on a Midwestern reading list, I wanted to start, as much as I could, with the blank sky over the Midwest, and by making out individual positions of light, accumulate a figure for such a heavenly body of literature. The ancients required the word *considered* for this act, *con sidereal*, meaning to bring the stars together, and this is the sort of scrutiny I wanted to use: to bring seemingly random points (for we are vast, and vastly misrepresented) into a figure whose character traits might influence, like a zodiac sign, everything born under it. I wanted to employ the astrologer's tricks of squinting to force the dimmer proliferations into the background, of looking off to one side to force more reluctant points into the eye's rods, and of repeatedly applying the common, recognizable, indigenous shapes of the known world—silo, ear of corn, skyscraper, or some such archetype—in order to assign a figure that might best assemble the daunting randomness above us.

I thought it essential to clear the air of obstructing, distracting, dimming views, to find a place outside the city's bright lights and not inside the impenetrable groves of academe. Therefore, I am not considering the following, possibly interesting questions. "Is there literature in the Midwest?" using the word "literature" the way the bookstore chains use it, a qualitative category, a synonym for "classics": those steadily-selling, perennial books which remain constant while the space around them changes every season—"literature" to be distinguished from "Fiction": quick-selling, soon-to-be-remaindered books which change every season while their allotted space remains constant.

I am also dismissing from our forming canon those books that simply contain geographical information about the region, whether used as a mere background (as in anywhere with a few writerly details) or as foreground (as in a study of itself that our bookstore can relegate to the token holdings in Nonfiction: social sciences, nature, photography, or travel). I don't mean to quibble over their claim to the word "literature," but I wish to confine our attention to the realms of diction and poetry where, to paraphrase Diderot, the Midwest will not be the thing itself but the light in which the thing can be seen. Our book of Midwestern literature will offer information about ourselves and not about itself.

I am also declining the engaging or perhaps academic question, "Are there Midwestern writers, writers who were born under the sign of the Midwest?" Obviously, writers live in the Midwest;

some have written a body of work or a specific book that could be found within our purview, but we can hardly subsume everything written by that geographical congress as Midwestern literature. Neither would we want to exclude a book because it was written by a non Midwesterner, however we define that--by birth, or by experience, or by something ineluctable like sensibility. Rather than haggle over what defines a person's claim to a region, I'll insist that our designs should attend the specific work itself.

In fact, the most unexpected and apt idea that occurred to me, is that it is not the publisher, the writer, the book, or even the writer's story that earns a book its place in the Midwestern canon, but the readers that, collectively, determine it: Is there a Midwestern reader, readership that chooses appealing, engaging, relevant books that might constitute this body of Midwestern literature? In other words, can the question of a Midwestern literature be best addressed by what appeals to a reader rather than by what occurs to us as writers, critics, or publishers? And could the tenuous but logical leap suggest this question: Could the interest in such Midwestern books extend to contemporary readers in general because they satisfy a national interest, desire, or even hunger for a kind of writing that has been thwarted, abandoned, or exhausted elsewhere?

But before enumerating those attractive qualities that a reader might be looking for in Midwestern literature, I had to be rid of that field of distraction I mentioned earlier: the troubling and simplistic temptation to consider Midwestern literature the embodiment of a set of salient features, that would either exclude arguable significant works by insisting on the presence of, say, agricultural preeminence, or include irrelevant works by insisting on the importance of, say, the family unit. Consider, for instance, the characteristics of density, population size, and degree of development (a huge spectrum that would have to incorporate farmland, a county seat, the rivertowns, the metropolis, the industrial complex). Can the Midwest find an emblematic value, a sign, by connecting St. Louis, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis--a few of the larger lights? Wouldn't the constituent values of that set be a more accurate compilation of large city traits, sharing more in common with other large cities throughout the nation than with the Midwest as a whole? Wouldn't that be "Urban Literature?" Would our emblem for the Midwest be any more accurate if our connections were drawn only through Leroi, Illinois, Prairie

City, Iowa, Circleville, Ohio, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and Morocco, Indiana? In this group, wouldn't the common properties show greatest affinity to those of other small-sized towns, even those near the coasts? "Rural Literature." And what shall we do with those bright points (on the map or in the sky) that don't quite fit into our first or second constellation but whose fixity, like a planet, is undeniable? Is Ann Arbor more like a Midwestern town or any town where a major university has shaped the population? Would a book set there be in our canon? Is the character of Detroit governed more by its placement in the Midwest than by the last seventy-five years of the automobile industry? Isn't it more like other places where a given industry (rubber in Akron, cereals in Battle Creek) has conscripted the lives of its inhabitants? Would a book set in Detroit be in our canon?

Well, you can see my increasing discomfort. Each time I try to secure an identifiable trait for the region, even when I say that the trait can be the full, complementary range--the rural, the metropolitan, *and* the magnetic field that exists between and because of their polarities. To choose an image as *representative* must disclaim, as in a travel brochure, that there's just too much variety to show, just too little space here to do justice--ending with a phrase like "you'll just have to see it for yourself."

There is room on our shelves for other works where the Midwest is featured in a more dilute, a less dramatic, way, but for the books to be organized with the same Midwestern call numbers, I will hold out for a place that integrates the individual within the contexts of family, community, neighborhood, and even local politics, so that each concentric or contiguous unit shapes and is shaped by the others. A place of interdependency, a product of individual choices to be in a given place. Quite simply, in a Midwestern book, place would provide a solution to an individual's place in the world--even when it appears to provide a problem.

The endemic qualities of a particular setting would create a living system bent on self-preservation (however threatened), a system that would provide a means of understanding and assimilating the enormous, overwhelming world that impinges upon that place. And for the first time in history, I think that readers in America must acknowledge the rest of the transmitted world. The book we are speaking of would show the *effect* of whatever news it both creates and receives in its particular place. I suppose this stems

from my sense that literature is untimely journalism. Thus, the literature we are defining should demonstrate the impact of the world upon a singular Midwestern place, should live within a particular settlement of news.

This is not to extol the mere celebration of the idiosyncratic and locally colored, the peculiarities of locale and citizenry. No, our Midwestern book must transform those specific, unique details, in order to trick us into accepting its conventions, seduce us into lowering our resistance, convince us to empathize with the essential human qualities that cross any such regional boundary. We, as readers, can embrace such nourishing, comforting, and revelatory experiences only through the conduit of individual and local details that our senses can select from the white noise (the onslaught of information, the numbing inundation of news, the manufacturing of mass culture) that accompanies our lives. Our book works to sensitize the reader, reinforce his own sensitivities beyond the mere reading of a book, and it does this by providing an apprehensible, organized world in which honest perception, rewarded attention, and clear thinking are acknowledged. (The complexity of our lives outside a book rarely provides such elegant or enhanced opportunities for self-discovery.) The Midwestern setting should not only affect the lives of its characters but also the lives of its readers.

This is not the exclusive province of Midwestern literature, to be sure, but it seems that regionalism has found a particular receptivity of late, and this I would credit to a sense of place that exceeds the idea of "setting" we learned about in high school (a concept to be compared to and contrasted with character, plot and theme). Instead, setting is that identifiable source that nurtures, expresses, and influences those other essay questions: character, plot, and theme. Ah, then there are four determining values in our Midwestern book: location, location, location--and, location.

And perhaps in the Midwest, location is still an untapped resource of specificities, a place of unretold, unexhausted trappings that can yet catch a reader off-guard, can yet keep a reader reading, paying attention, paying heed. I suspect contemporary interest in the writing of other nations, the popularization of translated literature--South American, Eastern European, Australian, and so on--is not unlike this keen interest in the Midwest: readers seeking a more curious, unpredictable, devious, delighting literature that, despite--

no, *because of*--its foreignness and novelty offers the reader the ultimate reward of recognizing the essential, extraordinary conditions to which the human spirit is subjected.

Flannery O'Connor wrote: "It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking." She, of course, referred to Milledgeville, Georgia, but her words apply to the writer in the Midwest who has undertaken the finding of the foreign--"what others have to go elsewhere seeking"--in his own home. William Maxwell compounds this idea in *The Folded Leaf*: "The great, the universal problem is how to be always on a journey and see what you would see if it were only possible for you to stay at home." In both instances, the primary quality that the reader feels most assuredly, is that the home place creates a lens through which things are focused, a vanishing point from which things are drawn, a language in which perception is wrought.

I'll suggest that the very popularity of Midwestern literature, the discovering of what has already been produced and what is just being produced, the novelty of regional-voices series, and even the resurgence of the personal essay is being generated by readers who desire the presentation of an apprehensible literature, whose values are recognizable, integratable, and even heartening, if that can simply mean to "give heart," as in to revivify feelings, however complicated, frustrated, or elated each might be. The Heartland reader would be a reader interested in the values yet possible in the storytelling of this region because he is tired of the bright lights of the big city and the cannibalizing of Manhattan. He is fed up with receiving less than zero from a book about the precocious, privileged, jaded youths (a novel, but frustrated attempt to find a naive, less arch voice). He is irritated with yet another new stylistic route to the Indies--this time from the point of view of the spices. He is resentful of the fiction of inexpressible velleities, glowering disinclinations, and moot recognitions that leave him asking, where are you calling from? what did I miss? as if it were his fault that the writer's world lacked gravity, seasons, or a heaven--location. Symposia and conferences throughout the country are being prompted by a need to discover a body of literature that provides something different than these august and aggrieved expressions of style. Could it be that the proliferation and interest in regional literature is a will toward reading books about ourselves (and if there are not such books, toward writing them) because

contemporary literature has not been telling our story, that is, when it has even deigned to tell a story?

Now that I'm in over my head, I might as well enjoy the plunge by proposing that Midwestern literature has less interest in experimentation and more in oral histories and dialogue, clear narrative and genuine conflict, and that this is attributable to the possibility that a vocation in writing for someone in the Midwest has been, until recently, less a recognizable, knowable choice. The creative writer was less available in the form of mentors, communities, creative writing classes, bookstores. There had been no cachet to being a Midwestern writer. Until the last two decades, writing as a voluntary enterprise (as opposed to technical writing or business writing) hasn't been held at any premium, except in elementary school, or in some private colleges. The professions of fiction and poetry (as decidedly different from the widespread amateur's interest) weren't as imaginable, so that one critical aspect underlying much of Midwestern literature--and its popularity--could be this very ingenuousness about being a writer, a refreshing innocence about the plausibility of the Midwest as the setting for literature. Perhaps this individual discovering that underlies Midwestern literature, the lack of a late style and its problematic thrashings, is what appeals to contemporary readers. Furthermore, our Midwestern reader, as well, could possess this ingenuousness.

Of course, such a young generation of writers could err on the side of wistfulness, zeal, ineptitude, but those errors would still effect the reader differently than self-consciousness and discontentment with traditional forms of narrative. And to defend this idea of ingenuousness, or humility, I'll call again to the witness stand Flannery O'Connor: "To know oneself is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from the world. The writer's value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he ceases to see that country as a part of himself, and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility, and this is not a virtue conspicuous in any national character."

Perhaps it is humility on the part of the writer which distinguishes Midwestern literature--a place where the writer understands that his value is the value of his region. And perhaps it is this humility which allows the reader an opportunity to sense himself--I mean,

to both employ his senses, and to detect himself.

And so I come now to an image from an essay by the profoundly Midwestern Michael Martone, an image of the Midwest as skin as he suggests in "The Flatness." Consider a Midwestern book, consider the location it contains, the skin of the reader. It acts as a membrane that provides both a personal (an "I") and a collective (an "us") identity. It is permeable to (accepting of) some things, impermeable to (resistant to) others. It insulates, protects, stores. It acquires, bringing the sensation of temperature and pressure, discomfort and pleasure and most significantly, kinesthesia: placement and orientation at any given time. And as a result of all these properties, it creates homeostasis: a means of remaining compatible with or comfortable within a changing environment.

Finally, I want to offer a rather hefty poem. For the last five years I've been composing the life of a character named Gordon Penn in verse. He is a soon-to-retire salesman who travels in notions, a widower, a family man with a dispersed family, and, he is not, despite his often solitary attempts to understand the predicaments that a somewhat privileged life presents him, a writer. Or even a reader for that matter. But I think, in terms of his life's work of traveling our region, he capitulates to some of the same principles of pleasure that he would were he the Midwestern reader I've been proposing. I developed the character as it dawned on me that I had a cache of materials—in notebooks, in the margins of my attention—that was plaguing me and pleasing me because they weren't assailable in the forms of poetry that I had been practicing. In other words, Gordon Penn was a third person that could indirectly assume something of my Midwestern background, my Jewish upbringing, my accumulating concerns with the way in which we interact with one another or with the world, so that I wouldn't have to don the mantle of the poet and try to apologize for my sentiments, camouflage my indignation, or delete any of those difficult, odd, passionate things that I had learned to edit out of my previous work. I wanted to write a poem that would embrace the readerly qualities that I've been at pains to describe. I didn't want to write a poem about the Midwest, I wanted to write a Midwestern poem. Thankfully, I wrote the poem first, and fretted about its Midwestern pretenses months later.

Well, with such a remarkably overdetermining, unhumble introduction, here is "Penn Concedes His Territories."

Penn Concedes His Territories

I.

A man named McCleary is Penn's replacement. Spence McCleary. Unmarried. Early thirties. By autumn, the territory will be his alone, but now, he's Penn's new partner, passenger, office mate, shadow, heir, and challenger, whose major experience in the notions line, was with a competing firm, was all West Coast, Seattle to Sacramento.

With colored ball-tipped straight pins (a stock item whose annual sales Penn has watched decline in recent tallies), Penn and Spence are plotting the Midwest region, claiming each destination like an explorer or an astronaut with color-coded pins instead of flags. "Looks awfully random," Spence observes, retreating a few feet from the map as if searching among the clusterings of given points for a constellation to name The Great Midwest.

Penn's region borders the Great Lakes, touches the Great Plains, includes Great Falls, MO, and the States' great river—but Penn has failed to convince Spence that there is a claim to greatness here, within or throughout, yet it does seem great to Penn, who has worn this very route into the material of the heartland—or, rather, repaired across the heartland, as a darning mend mends a patch in a threadbare, but favored garment.

"Looks like a lot of remnants," Spence concludes, waving his hand over the map's dramatic swatches, "the stuff nobody wanted in the middle of nowhere." Penn's heard (albeit never seen) the boasted grandeur of his colleague's West. It bored him, quite frankly. Big-scale bores him. It's too demanding. It's plain depriving. Ta dah.

And even if no one else is around, you feel obliged to be a tourist with a tourist's feelings.

"I'm the first one to admit," Penn says, "it's not as though we keep the country on pins and needles, but still we've got essentials. It's not that thumbtacks *can't* compare to microchips they *don't*. And you don't compare places, either," Penn says, "unless you think geography is built of opposites. The opposite of mountains isn't flat, of ocean, the dry land. Things fit together, Spence. You don't look at a town and say it isn't a city yet, or a countryside and think, undeveloped. I don't think a farm is behind the times just as a shopping mall isn't ahead." Spence takes a highlighter and Xs Kansas with an iridescent orange: "The place where time stands still." This flusters Penn, but eggs on his untenable defense. "Look, Spence, each place is just one time out of a lot of possible times. Topeka, for instance, isn't backward or ahead, it's near or far, depending on where you go."

With Kansas successfully tainted, Spence moves on: Wisconsin is pink, Iowa, chartreuse. The markers, another popular item, are scented: key lime and passionfruit confuse the air. "But even the name," Spence rejoins, "'Mid-', meaning muddle, neither here nor there. And '-western,' what's that supposed to mean? *not* eastern or southern or northern or Californian? *That's* obvious." "I always thought it implied 'frontier,'" Penn answers, "As in 'Go west, young man.' " "*Frontier*? Maybe centuries ago but not since a seventh of the world saw Neil Armstrong pussyfoot around the moon, not since Cousteau explored Atlantis," Spence says, pushing the last few pins in Illinois. "You know, the lost continent." Penn knows.

Penn unwinds a nylon thread to link the pins

into the radiating travel routes
that are as much Penn's own as the rehearsed
synaptic paths of Penn's motor neurons.

"You're right, Spence. What's lost today is not
a continent like old Atlantis, but regions,
the little parts that don't combine into one
giant green meaning everything
between Canada and Mexico."

What's lost on Spence, at least on their first round
on the road, is the indigenous, the details
that recognition, not surprise, reveals.

Penn can remember when a regions boundaries
were real. Each had its own identity,
its own news, its separate history.

One place found out about its neighbors only
when there were disasters or visiting relatives.

"Telegraph, telephone, and tell-
a-traveling salesman, used to be the news.
But now," Penn concedes, in fairness to Spence,
"news is nothing new. It travels
from everywhere to everywhere like lightning
before the thunder--and all you've got to do
is count the seconds before the inevitable."

On their initial trips together, along
with notions, Penn found that he was selling the region
to Spence whose disaffection followed them
cross-country like an imminent storm.

"Tell me, Gordon, wasn't there a day
when you thought about the world you were missing?"

Spence asked, amid his running commentary
on how every locale through the region was flat
and dreary and so like the one before and--ready?--
his ultimate charge, "plain uninspiring,"
as though a salesman refueled on inspiration
like his car on Unleaded Supreme.

Penn took the occasion (assault) to explain
the difference between their outlooks with Velcro,
an item featured fully in their samples.

"Let's say that everything has tiny hooks."
Just for effect, Penn passed Spence a keycase
sealed with complementing strips of Velcro.

"Now, if something is going to catch the attention,

the other surface can't be slick or hooked itself,
it has to have that roughened, tangled pile.
You with me here?" Penn asked as Spence offered
a token glance in each hook-filled direction.
"Well, you have to quit looking for the grand
to knock you over. Think about fraying
a little. Relax. Wear down your smooth ideals
and, by degrees, you'll get attached to things."

It troubled Penn to defend the Midwest,
the place where he was born, reared, where
he traveled half his life, and where he'll retire.
On drives (alone) through Waukesha and Xenia,
another kind of map unfolds in his mind.
Clearly unnegotiable (as if
a soul besides Penn would give a damn),
this map is hand-tinted with a local color,
highlighted not with monuments, museums,
exits, or parks, but with one traveller's views :
places off and on the beaten path
where Penn has spent his time: the succession
of storefronts--new car showroom, Baptist church,
Chiropractic clinic--that he can trace,
squares where a circus or a farmer's market camped,
man-made lakes bordered with cottages
and trailer homes with gerry-rigged additions.
Here would be Penn's hours on and off the job,
as though one crossed the state of Work as simply
as a county line, and *here*, his rests, his meals,
his clients, considered family by Penn,
that Spence will marry into, for better or worse.

II.

Other than these last few rides with Spence,
Penn never shared his travels with anyone.
He kept them to himself, made few efforts
toward capturing or recreating what passed
before and then, neither all too slowly
nor all too quickly, behind him.
If Penn were selling vacations rather than notions,
he would have gleaned much more than souvenirs
from stops along his routes--souvenirs!

each one pretends to claim, *you're somewhere else*,
but woodburned, glittered, or handpainted,
they all insist, *remember, you're going home*.

Penn remembers a program in the Great Escapes Travel Series that he and his wife attended at the auditorium of the local college where Penn and Marian were graduated enough years earlier that the same lectures governed a world that Palestine, Chosen, Persia, and Latvia had occupied. The slide show, "Hitting Below the Corn Belt" (at least Penn dubbed it that afterwards) included three carrousels of black-and-white decrepitude, abandonment, distress, and quote/unquote, the Midwest's rustic charm. Penn found himself profoundly, personally, misunderstood by each and every frame, and while he'd never considered himself an expert on anything but his few lines, Penn grew self-conscious on his next few trips, sighting would-be slides of what he would portray.

Twice after that, Penn had the inclination to share his travels—he wouldn't have said "a lifetime of travel" at the time, thought recently and with reluctant pride, he's heard himself pronounce the term. One anniversary, Marian bought Penn a compact Polaroid and Penn returned each trip with stacks of snapshots, each as thick as a slide sandwiching a foreign specimen within its fluids, and with the unwieldy atlas, spent an evening at the dinner table reassembling his week-long journey with pictures of quirky motels, gingerbreaded public buildings, pastures, crosshatched fields, old-fashioned pharmacies (old-fashioned *anything*, as though the past were more authentic, more emblematic, to Penn), and civic monuments commemorating people that Penn would learn about from inscriptions but then, passing the photo at home, would forget. Penn kept the camera with him for a year,

regaling the family with full-color installments of Marco Polo Penn's Midwest: a collectable set like the volumes at Shopper's World.

But Penn observed, even before the children (who were too old to feign enjoyment, too young to admit to their father they felt none), that one photo was so much like the next-- it *was* the next: a photo, and, incidentally another place. And the fault? the camera's? Penn's? or maybe a problem with tenses: no future, at least immediate, would be returning anyone but Penn to those very spots. Though never formally expressed, Penn concluded travel is even less communicable than a *hobby* (a word that's used to justify time to people with other sympathies).

Penn's second attempt began with "Writing for Life," a class at the community college that he took as part of his pledge with Marian to be home Mondays, to learn to share more of their time apart. They both kept journals: a travelogue for Penn, a book of memories for his wife. Penn's trouble was making the Midwest, familiar places he'd been so many times before, sound as if he'd actually travelled there. What Penn would choose seemed to have been written before he arrived; his whole notebook read like a diary of staying home with Marian, while Marian struggled to find any distance to impose on her life, so that she could look anywhere but just around. Her journal was set in Missouri, in those foreign years before she met her husband, before Ohio, before the house that Penn sold when she died. They each kept a pair of journals, alternately writing in one and then the other, and trading the latest pages the day that Gordon would leave so each could read about and write to the other. The children were out of the house by then, his wife had fallen ill, and for three years their journals crisscrossed in a conversation of their own,

for Penn and Marian rarely talked of them.
Her illness finally ended the exchange;
by then, there was no time to spend apart.
Penn remained bedside, while medication
kept her traveling outside the here and now
of pain and self-pity and Gordon Penn.

After her death, his territory changed,
emotionally, that is. Penn ceased to log
anything but mileage and expenses.
Returning to towns he'd never thought twice about
made him see, despite his late or fraught
attempts at sharing his routes with his wife,
that she was what distinguished one place from the next.
She was variation itself, the constant
north of the compass needle, that oriented
Penn to home regardless of the distance.
One place is different from another place
not because of the people living there--
for people live everywhere the same when you think
of people as reasons for living--but because
of someone at home or in the car beside you
on whom no news, however known, is lost.

III.

In retrospect, what Penn is picturing,
unfolding still in his head, is not a map
but something like an acupuncture chart,
where every yellow and red and blue pin
would chart the keenest points of pleasure and pain
discovered by asking and by accident
along the body of his territory.
And just as oddly as in that ancient science--
a needle inserted at one point, effects
its benefits at a second, distant point--
Penn can't explain his general well-being
by pointing here or there in his Midwest,
citing each attachment with a reason.
It's this that Spence McCleary won't inherit.

I won't hazard an explication of my own work but I have to pause on Penn's impromptu metaphor of Velcro—the Velcro Theory of Met Expectations. (I still shudder when I think that I've apotheosized Velcro in the process.) The Midwestern literature we are looking for is made of a compatibility, met expectations between reader and writer, experience and language, which requires the joining of loops and hooks: the roughened loops of recognition (cycles, patterns, repetitions, Penn would know that, technically, this half is called "the female") which are needed to engage the hooks of surprise (snags, interruptions, points, poignancies, or "the male" half). Whatever would be surprising about a book would engage the reader's ultimate recognition; whatever would be recognizable about the book, would engage the reader's initial surprise—so that, in the progress of reading, there is a continuous combination of linkages, a ladder to shared creation that is not unlike the recombining of DNA strands between the male and female genes.

Finally, I must leave you to assign your own shape to our Midwestern literature. I suppose I can accept, by way of conclusion, that I have found, by tracing with a flashlight, gazing skyward in my own backyard, and balancing Thornton Wilder, William Maxwell, Toni Morrison, Wright Morris, James Purdy, Willa Cather, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge, and several other armloads of books, the Sign of the Reader—an earthly figure after all, a grounded rather than a lofty sign. In fact, The Sign of the Reader can adopt, instead of the North Star, the North on Penn's compass needle that, regardless of the distance travelled or the foreign surroundings, provided an orientation, a constant from which to begin a return. In each book on our shelves of Midwestern literature, there is compass needle, and whether the characters consult it or not, it points to the home place, where the reader, wherever he is reading in this vast and vastly misrepresented world, can find himself.