

10-5-2001

Author Draws Reflective, Affectionate Portrait of Forbidding, Rewarding Land of South Dakota

University of Dayton

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Recommended Citation

University of Dayton, "Author Draws Reflective, Affectionate Portrait of Forbidding, Rewarding Land of South Dakota" (2001). *News Releases*. 10215.

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Oct. 5, 2001
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NEWS RELEASE

AUTHOR DRAWS REFLECTIVE, AFFECTIONATE PORTRAIT OF FORBIDDING, REWARDING LAND OF SOUTH DAKOTA

DAYTON, Ohio — The tale of one woman's journey — from New York to South Dakota, from ambivalence about religion to joining the Benedictine monastery as an oblate (associate), and from life as a published poet to a job managing a farm — won praise in 1993 as a "notable book of the year" from the *New York Times* and was selected as one of the best books of the year by *Library Journal*.

Kathleen Norris, the woman who chronicled her life and faith in *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography*, will address "Dakota and Beyond: What's the Use of Memoir?" at 8 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 16, in the Kennedy Union Ballroom at the University of Dayton. The address, which is free and open to the public, is part of the University's 2001-2002 Distinguished Speaker Series.

"I began writing *Dakota* when I noticed strange reactions to the farm crisis in the early 1980s among small-town people," Norris said. "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."

Dakota was Norris' first nonfiction book, although she had published seven books of poetry. She followed up with *The Cloister Walk*, which delves more deeply into her monastic experiences.

"I have been fortunate enough to hit at the time when the baby-boomer generation of

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seekers wants to read about monastic retreats and isolated places," she said in a 1997 interview with *U.S. Catholic* magazine. "That's probably a major reason why the books have sold as well as they have. It's been fascinating.

"Of course, in the town where I live, the high-school rodeo team is much more important than anything I do. So I can live there and write."

Lemmon, S.D., is where Norris moved when she inherited her grandmother's house. Noted for the presence of the Petrified Wood Park, it's in the High Plains where drought, hail and wind rival stunning wide-open vistas and small pleasures as its main characteristics.

In *Dakota*, Norris writes of the sense of isolation and disintegration of the small towns on the prairie, her own progress in faith and spirituality and the weather. She muses on the personalities that inhabit her community, the 4th-century monks that inform her religious reflections and her sunrise walks.

"The temperature can reach 110 degrees above or plunge to 30 below for a week or more," she wrote in the book. "Say what you will about our climate, in Dakota we say it keeps the riff-raff out."

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For more information on the Distinguished Speakers Series at UD, contact **Lou Talbott** at (937) 229-4114 or via e-mail at lou.talbott@notes.udayton.edu.