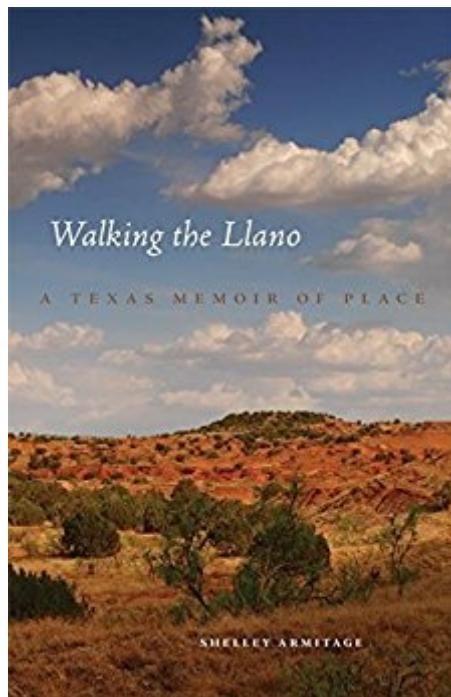


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Walking The Llano: A Texas Memoir Of Place



Synopsis

When American explorers crossed the Texas Panhandle, they dubbed it part of the "Great American Desert." A "sea of grass," the Llano appeared empty, flat, and barely habitable. Contemporary developments—cell phone towers, oil rigs, and wind turbines—have only added to this stereotype. Yet in this lyrical ecomemoir, Shelley Armitage charts a unique rediscovery of the largely unknown land, a journey at once deeply personal and far-reaching in its exploration of the connections between memory, spirit, and place. Armitage begins her narrative with the intention to walk the Llano from her family farm thirty meandering miles along the Middle Alamosa Creek to the Canadian River. Along the way, she seeks the connection between her father and one of the area's first settlers, Ysabel Gurule, who built his dugout on the banks of the Canadian. Armitage, who grew up nearby in the small town of Vega, finds this act of walking inseparable from the act of listening and writing. "What does the land say to us?" she asks as she witnesses human alterations to the landscape—perhaps most catastrophic the continued drainage of the land's most precious resource, the Ogallala Aquifer. Yet the Llano's wonders persist: dynamic mesas and canyons, vast flora and fauna, diverse wildlife, rich histories. Armitage recovers the voices of ancient, Native, and Hispano peoples, their stories interwoven with her own: her father's legacy, her mother's decline, a brother's love. The Llano holds not only the beauty of ecological surprises but a renewed realization of kinship in a world ever changing. Reminiscent of the work of Terry Tempest Williams and John McPhee, *Walking the Llano* is both a celebration of an oft-overlooked region and a soaring testimony to the power of the landscape to draw us into greater understanding of ourselves and others by experiencing a deeper connection with the places we inhabit.

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Customer Reviews

MEMOIR/TEXASShelley ArmitageWalking the Llano:A Texas Memoir of PlaceUniversity of Oklahoma PressHardcover, 978-0-8061-5162-5 (ebook also available), 216 pgs., \$24.95February 15, 2016Out of sorts as her mother ages and her brother falls ill, learning what it means to be in a space between what something was and what it is becoming, Shelley Armitage embarks on what she calls the summer of hikes, looking to the land she loves to ground her. A handsome volume that includes historical as well as contemporary photographs, Walking the Llano: A Texas Memoir of Place is her exploration of, meditation on, and homage to her home "the place where she grew up and has always returned to, searching for a place for women amid the cowboys" the Llano Estacado.Armitage grew up in Vega, a tiny farming community in the western panhandle of Texas, and on Armitage Farms, her family's two sections of land just outside of town. She is interested in how place shapes us and how we best fit into that landscape, looking for continuities in the places made by time and space, between before and after.Armitage feels that time is compressed in the Texas panhandle. The end of the Old West and the burgeoning wind energy generation are separated by a little more than one hundred years. She explores still-discriminable bison trails and archaeology sites; hunts for and discovers fossils, petroglyphs, and hidden springs; thrills to each wildlife sighting "golden eagle, mule deer, porcupine, pronghorn antelope, bobcat" and notes the health of cottonwood, willow, mesquite, and cholla; marvels that the color, shape, texture, and attitude of the rocks signal the movement of wind, water, gravity in striations of ochre, purple, and orange.

When you see yourself as part of a story, then you're really living, Shelley Armitage writes. The lucky reader of her Walking the Llano: A Memoir of Place experiences really living the discoveries of springs, creeks, canyons, ridges, bison trails, eagle nests, deer, petroglyphs, colorful

rural folk, and more. Armitage invites the reader to come along on her memory excursions and her present-day walks, to discover the land in a way only the most observant and most mindful walker on the earth might. The land Armitage grew up on is part of the Llano Estacado, so named by the Spanish who explored the grassy High Plains region of North America centuries ago. In literally walking the land between Vega, Texas and the Canadian River some 30 miles to the north, a walk that took place in numerous excursions over a period of time, she seamlessly weaves together an intricate pattern of histories—geological, archaeological, ancient and modern human history, wildlife, and plant life of the region, along with anecdotes of the writer's own personal experiences growing up there. Along the way readers meet the many peoples who participated in the clash of cultures on the Llano, including ancient humans, Spanish and Mexican explorers and residents, farmers with their water diversion techniques, ranchers with their fences, and oil producers—all of whom bring changes to the land. Many of those changes appear to be irreversible. All in all, this is a breathtakingly comprehensive tour of a place, its waters, the many peoples who have populated it, and of the animals and plants that have and do live within. Armitage speaks of her deep relationship with all these elements as part of a sacred mystery • and of the experience of interrelationship with all.

I've driven across the Panhandle of Texas almost yearly since I was 32 years old when I first moved out of the Lone Star State. I've felt the region's stern, restless winds toss me six feet away from my RV when I opened its door during a big gust. I've been awed at suddenly coming upon Palo Duro Canyon which hides itself below the flat-as-a-pancake plains. But mostly I've seen this Llano landscape as dull and uninteresting, just something to be endured so I can visit family that lives in greener, hillier, and less dusty areas of the state. But after reading Shelley Armitage's *Walking the Llano*, I know I will never again view this landscape with the same eyes or mindset. An English professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, Armitage inherited an aunt and uncle's farm near Vega. Having grown up almost next door, she knows the names of the grasses of the area as well as most people know the flowers that grow in their backyard. While her long walks were a personal pilgrimage to discover more about the landscape where her roots had been planted, it was also one to learn, from the land, about the people who had lived and died in this short-grass prairie thousands of years before she was born. We are nothing without our stories, she writes, noting that she believes man to be part of the landscape. The lyrical descriptions and ponderings of Armitage, at a difficult time when her mother was dying, brings the Llano landscape to life. "Walking these plains...I lean into a north wind. It's winter, a brown-scape tinged in ochre, dried buffalo and gamma

grasses, a touch of green in the wintered-over yucca and bear grasses...The side oats gamma wave like sailboat flags, their tiered semaphores flexed in the wind...

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