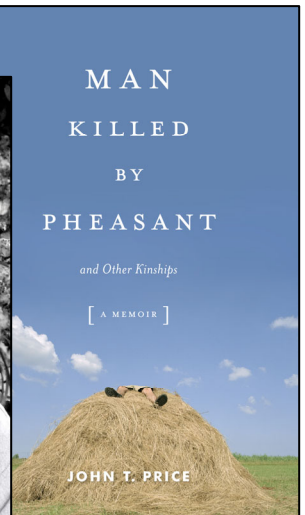




***A Talk with***  
**John T. Price**

***Author of***  
**MAN KILLED BY PHEASANT  
AND OTHER KINSHIPS**  
**A Memoir**

**Da Capo Press, April 2008**



**The title of your book is rather unique. Care to explain it?**

Well, it's based on a unique experience—nearly being killed by a pheasant. While I was still in graduate school, when my wife and I were living in a small Iowa town, I was driving down a rural highway when a pheasant flew in my open driver's side window, flapped around in my face and nearly caused me to dump the car in a ditch. Luckily I knocked it back outside and was able to safely pull over, where I remained for a long time, trying to recover myself.

The surrounding landscape was also experiencing some dramatic surprises that summer. It was the summer of 1993, during some of the worst state-wide flooding on record. The rural countryside along my commute had become nearly unrecognizable, a mixture of massive destruction and surprising natural beauty. Flooded cornfields were full of wild birds, and the unmown ditches erupted with native grasses and wildflowers. For most of my life I had thought of my home landscape and its wildlife as ordinary, overly-familiar and predictable—that wayward pheasant and the floods changed my thinking. I got a brief glimpse of what Iowa used to be, a rich ecology of wetlands and prairies, a place of surprises and danger, which is one way to define wilderness.

The ordinary suddenly became extraordinary, and it transformed me and my relationship to the place in which I had been born and raised. Having spent most of my life wanting to leave home, I was now longing for a deeper relationship to what remains of wildness here, a new sense of kinship with place. I see that process as a kind of death and then re-birth, which I believe is what happens during the most profound experiences of our lives—this memoir is about those kinds of transformative experiences. But we don't usually recognize their significance until much later. At the time of the pheasant incident itself, I was just frightened out of my mind and embarrassed—who expects their obituary to read “Man Killed by Pheasant?”

**You're known as a writer of place, in particular the Midwest. How do you define the Midwest and what makes it unique?**

The great thing about places is that, like people, they resist definition. This is certainly the case with the Midwest. If you ask a group of people to define the borders of the Midwest, my guess is you'll get a very wide range of answers. Some might paint a broad geographical swath running from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains all the way to, perhaps, Pittsburgh. Others might zero in on the mostly rural center of the country, excluding major metropolitan areas, like Chicago and Detroit. Others will focus on more abstract concepts like “the heartland” and conjure up images of “the simple life.” The Midwest, like all places, is anything but simple and its resistance to easy definition is part of what makes it interesting to me as a writer and resident.

When you look closely at the natural environment, however, unique features do emerge. For me the Midwest or any other region should ultimately be defined by its native ecosystems, one of which—the one I happen to live in and write about—is the tallgrass prairie. Unfortunately, most of that prairie has been lost (less than one percent remains in my home state of Iowa), which has created significant challenges for those of us trying to anchor our identities to the natural environment. Much of my writing has focused on my personal journey to recover a sense of place and identity rooted in that environment.

### **What have been some of the aspects of that personal journey for you?**

I think learning to love and commit to a place is very similar to learning to love and commit to another human being. Much of it is accidental (like nearly getting killed by a pheasant) and instinctive, deeply spiritual, and beyond our capacity for expression. Much of it is also a matter of choice, of conscious searching, hard work, and articulation. There are moments full of elation and sentimentality and humor, and other moments full of self-doubt and even despair. Learning to respond successfully to the challenge of committed love—for people or places—begins in childhood, which is a big part of this memoir. I grew up surrounded by several generations in a family who, despite serious challenges and personal losses, remained dedicated to their communities and to each other. So I had that example from very early in my life. Nevertheless, I spent most of my adolescence wanting to leave home, which is nothing unusual for a young person in America today.

I was guided back home by the land itself, by the beauty and fragility of its native habitats, but also by stories about that land told by my family, by writers past and present, and by my own articulation of life in this place. It was also a matter of recognizing what I refer to in the book as a state of kinship: “the familial embrace of nature, body, and spirit.” Kinship is not something you choose, it is something you are given. The choice is whether or not to return that embrace and live fully within it. Ultimately, *Man Killed by Pheasant* is meant to reach out to others who may not identify themselves as environmentalists or Midwesterners, but who are likewise seeking to settle more deeply within the kinships that define and sustain them.

### **Do you think writing can be influenced by place and, if so, how has the Midwest influenced yours?**

I think it does so at many levels. Place provides the specific details and settings from which a work of literature is constructed. I’m also intrigued by the possibility that it can influence style and form. Patricia Hampl observed that the style of *Man Killed by Pheasant* “replicates the laconic surface and passionate undercurrents” of this region, and I think that’s true of a lot of Midwestern writing. Regardless of where we live, place influences the way we look at the world, our patterns of thought and behavior, and I think that inevitably influences the way we put words together. I think the form of this memoir is a lot like the Midwestern landscape as I’ve experienced it: segmented, divided into plots, some a little wilder than others, some smaller or larger, each observed from slightly different points of view, but all interrelated. I also think the humor in this book is a product of growing up here. Many Midwesterners are raised to be self-deprecating, and learn early on how to deal with life’s challenges using humor.

### **What role do you see humor playing in nature writing?**

I think, in general, writing about the environment lacks humor—and there is good reason for that. When one considers the state of the environment today, there is much to be depressed about. There is also much to be hopeful about, and that’s where humor can help us. The kind of humor I’m talking about doesn’t arise from a sense of superiority, but just the opposite: a sense of humility rooted in the knowledge of our smallness and fallibility. That knowledge can also lead to a sense of helplessness—What can I do that will make any difference?—but humor tends to disarm that fear and open us to the possibility of making positive changes, no matter how small. If we can honestly examine our lives, acknowledge our contradictions and failures, and then laugh at some of them, maybe we’ll treat the world and its creatures with a little more care, affection and gentleness.

## Who are your inspirations among nature writers and writers of place?

Henry David Thoreau, Ed Abbey, and Annie Dillard were some of my earliest influences. Also, Loren Eiseley and Aldo Leopold, both of whom were Midwesterners and who blended science and ethics and art in ways that are still a revelation to me—I admire writers who seem to live in the boundaries, as they did. Following the floods in 1993, I sought out conversations with contemporary grasslands nonfiction authors committed to living in the region they write about—Linda Hasselstrom, Dan O'Brien, William Least Heat-Moon, and Mary Swander—and those visits became part of my first book, *Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey into the American Grasslands*. Their example helped guide me through an important stage of my life as a writer, when I was just considering the possibility of committing to place.

Since becoming a father, I've been especially drawn to authors who are writing about nature and animals from within the context of family, work and community. These include contemporary writers Wendell Berry and Scott Russell Sanders, but also the works of E.B. White, James Herriot, and Gerald Durrell. In *Man Killed by Pheasant*, I write from within a similarly personal context, exploring the ways nature has informed everything from the decision to get married to our efforts to have a baby to the ways I memorialize my grandfather.

## How have you encouraged your own children to connect with the natural world?

Our sons are young—five and seven years old—but when it comes to nurturing a connection to nature, I don't think you can start too young. There are many ways to do this, I think. The final chapter of *Man Killed by Pheasant* describes an afternoon we spent as a family on a small Iowa prairie, identifying wildflowers and telling the stories of our immigrant ancestors, in the hopes that our children will see their lives as being intimately entwined with place. We've also taken extended family trips to natural areas, but that's not always possible given limited time and resources. So, most of our efforts are concentrated on the daily, often unexpected, but still informative encounters with nature occurring closer to home—in the backyard, with pets, in the garden.

I write about a number of these small encounters in this memoir, in the lives of my children and in my own childhood. I think children can teach adults a thing or two about intimacy with nature, as well, and that has certainly been the case for me. They're more willing than most adults to explore the world with their senses, and to openly marvel at what they find there. They're also more willing to defend the defenseless—to help the injured bird, to mourn the fallen tree, to pick up the stray can or candy wrapper. They're not afraid to get their hands dirty. I think part of my job as a parent is to be a good steward of my child's sense of kinship with the natural world, to nurture it and learn from it myself. I don't know if it will make a difference in their lives or in the life of this planet—I certainly hope it does—but I already know it has made a positive difference in my own.

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