



## Small-Town Boy, Small-Town Girl: Growing Up in South Dakota, 1920-1950

by [Eric B. Fowler](#)

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I have always been fascinated by the American West and I guess South Dakota qualifies as at least the eastern edge of the West. And, having grown up as a small-town boy in the forties and fifties myself (in Michigan), how could this title not have intrigued me? In the past year I can think of two other Dakota memoirs I read and enjoyed. One, from North Dakota, was Debra Marquart's *The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere*. The other, from South Dakota, was M.J. Andersen's *Portable Prairie: Confessions of an Unsettled Midwesterner*. Both are wonderful books, and perhaps fueled my growing interest in the Dakotas. (There is also Kathleen Norris's spiritual memoir, *Dakota*.)

Eric Fowler and Sheila Delaney are not professional writers, and yet their stories grab you early and don't let you go until the ride is

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over. Fowler's style is not quite as engaging as Delaney's, lacking the sense of humor that bubbles to the surface of most of Sheila's memories. In the rare instances where Fowler's story did make me laugh, it seemed almost unintentional, like the story about the old radio program, "The 64-Dollar Question." What engaged me most, perhaps, were Fowler's tales of making toys out of bits of string, elastic, wooden thread spools, and empty oatmeal boxes, or repairing his sister's homemade paper dolls with a "piece of butcher paper and flour paste." He tells of teaching himself how to swim, in creeks which he and his playmates damned up themselves to creat makeshift swimming holes. He tells of early radios and crystal sets, put together from leftover parts and depleted and discarded batteries, overhauling engines in Model T's and building canoes in basements. But perhaps the most interesting - and often the grimmest - parts of Fowler's stories have to do with work. Orphaned at a young age, Eric Fowler learned early about working hard and doing things right. It is to his credit that he made it through high school and even went on to college, having been a product of the Depression and some of the hardest economic times this country has ever known. He worked in a blacksmith shop, in a granite works, on harvesting crews. During the Depression he worked various positions for the WPA before enrolling in college. After finishing college, he worked for many years as a research scientist. Eric Fowler's life is, in sum, a testament to the value and virtue of hard work and determination. He has every right to be proud of his accomplishments.

Sheila Delaney, born half a generation after Fowler, grew up in a much more privileged environment. Her father was a doctor and one of the most respected citizens of their town. As the doctor's kid, Sheila enjoyed a much easier life than Fowler, which could explain why her memoir seemed a lot more fun to read. Perhaps one of the most important qualities she got from her Irish parents was a robust and ribald sense of humor, which shines through on nearly every page of this delightful and self-effacing story of South Dakota life in the thirties and forties. The youngest of six children, born several years after the first five, Sheila grew up almost as a solitary child, envying and admiring her older siblings, and also benefiting from having those other five "teachers." Something of a tomboy, she ran with the neighborhood boys, and had one best friend, a neighbor boy two years older, who taught her to read by the age of three. Books became a refuge and salvation for her during her childhood and always remained important in her life.

There is considerable print spent on her family's Catholic-ness here. She tells of how her tall, fearless father strode into the midst of a local Ku Klux Klan meeting and offered to lick any one of them, one at a time. He had no takers. She also tells about her, and her siblings before her, having problems understanding the concept of the Holy Trinity. Her sister Nan had to stay after school -

"because she asked her teacher about the Holy Ghost. 'Who is this Holy Ghost, anyway, Sister?' she had asked. 'Just what the heck does He do? Jump out of the tabernacle and turn summersaults?' My father laughed when he heard that. He said when he was a little boy, he asked the nun at his school to explain the Circumcision. Did he ever have to stay after school! I am surprised he is not still there covered in cobwebs, his long legs sticking out under his little desk."

Delaney does not spare herself in telling her story. She tells of her two marriages that ended in divorce and of trying to make ends meet as a single mother. And yet she perseveres in finally - years later - finishing college and making a productive life for herself in New Mexico. She still feels the loss of her beloved parents, even after more than half a century, in the case of her father.

Sheila Delaney's story is one of a life filled with love, laughter, living and loss. And she writes like she was born to it. I was very sorry to see her story end, and wished there were more. I know that Delaney is into her eighties by now, but I hope there will be another book. And I thank editor Molly Rozum for bringing both these stories into print, in cooperation with the South Dakota State Historical Society. When you really think about it, you realize that everyone's story, no matter how ordinary it may seem, eventually becomes history. You only have to wait long enough. By writing down their own unique stories, Fowler and Delaney have each contributed significantly to the history of their state and of this country. They deserve attention and our gratitude. (★★★★★)

[TimBazzett](#) | Mar 14, 2010 |   [flag](#)



This review was written for [LibraryThing Early Reviewers](#).

Memoir is tricky, to write, read, and review. How much information is enough, too much? How hard should the writer try to give a work the kind of cohesiveness and perception possessed by the best examples of the genre? How appealing should the writer make the subject, especially if the subject is himself or herself? Should the writer be the star or a supporting player in a bigger story? That's