

Notes From No Man's Land, by Eula Biss

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Two years ago, blogger Christian Lander struck satiric gold by chronicling the interests and motivations of [white people](#).

Lander's valuable insight was that as members of a privileged majority group, we tend to think of ourselves as simply part of the overall culture—when in fact we comprise a racial subgroup like any other.

I thought of this earlier this month when I heard Eula Biss speak at the Printer's Row Lit Fest in Chicago. Among other things, the essayist talked about how difficult it is to find good writing on the subject of whiteness. "White people don't make it easy for each other to talk about race," she said. Instead, "we punish each other and police each other."

Biss read excerpts of "No Man's Land" from last year's [Notes From No Man's Land](#), winner of both the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism. The book's about race and racism, and this particular essay looks at gentrification alongside the pioneerism of America's past, offering some clear-minded analysis about violence and fear. Here's an excerpt, one of several on *Little House on the Prairie*:

For some time, the front door of the little house that Laura's pa built on the prairie was covered with only a quilt, but when Pa built a door, he designed it so that the latch-string could be pulled in at night and no one could enter the house from outside. Pa padlocked the stable as soon as it was built, and then, after some Indians stopped by and asked Ma to give them her cornmeal, Pa padlocked the cupboards in the kitchen.

These padlocks now strike me as quite remarkable, considering that Pa did not even have nails with which to construct the little house, but used wooden pegs instead.

In one scene of *Little House*, the house is ringed by howling wolves; in another, a roaring prairie fire sweeps around the house; in another a panther screams an eerie scream and the girls are kept inside. And then there are the Indians. The Indians who ride by silently, the Indians who occasionally come to the door of the house and demand food or tobacco, the Indians who are rumored—falsely, as Pa reveals—to have started the prairie fire to drive out the settlers. Toward the end of the book, the Indians hold a “jamboree,” singing and chanting all night so that the family cannot sleep. Pa stays up late making bullets, and Laura wakes to see Pa sitting on a chair by the door with his gun across his knees.

This is our inheritance, those of us who imagine ourselves as pioneers. We don’t seem to have retained the frugality of the original pioneers, or their resourcefulness, but we have inherited a ring of wolves around a door covered only by a quilt. And we have inherited padlocks on our pantries. That we carry with us a residue of the pioneer experience is my best explanation for the fact that my white neighbors seem to feel besieged in this neighborhood. Because that feeling cannot be explained by anything else that I know to be true about our lives here.

The Believer [published this essay](#) before the book came out, and I wrote a brief [post](#) on it then. I meant to order the book then but somehow forgot. I’ll do it now—Biss's writing is astonishingly smart, honest and lyrical.