Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson (1919) Anderson’s (1876-1941) short stories articulates the loneliness and frustration of life in a small American town. Originally described as stories of the grotesque, the Inner and often painful lives of some of the citizens of Winesburg are portrayed in vignettes that seem “grotesque” and familiar at the same time.

Through the eyes of young George Willard, the inner lives of many of Winesburg’s inhabitants open to us – most of whom will be familiar to those who may have grown up in the small towns dotting the High Plains. Through Anderson’s art we relive a powerful portrayal of community life and experience the isolation its close atmosphere can engender. A classic portrait of American life, Winesburg, Ohio profoundly influenced a generation of fiction writers with its deeply moving poetic realism.

That Old Ace in the Hole by Annie Proulx (2003) Although radio is not central to this story, the impact of public radio on the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles is a minor theme and thus fits nicely with the 2022 Fall Read. From Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Annie Proulx comes an exhilarating story brimming with language, history, landscape, music, and love. Bob Dollar is a young man from Denver trying to make good in a bad world. Out of college and aimless, Dollar takes a job with Global Pork Rind, scouting out big spreads of land that can be converted to hog farms. Soon he’s holed up in a two-bit Texas town called Woolybucket, where he settles into LaVon Fronk’s old bunkhouse for fifty dollars a month, helps out at Cy Frease’s Old Dog Café, and learns the hard way how vigorously the old Texas ranch owners will hold on to their land, even when their children want no part of it. This is a story of the American West over the past century, a story with memorable characters and a story that will stay with readers for some time after the last page has turned.

How the Post Office Created America: A History by Winifred Gallagher (2017) A masterful history of a long-underappreciated institution, How the Post Office Created America examines the surprising role of the postal service in our nation’s political, social, economic, and physical development. The founders established the post office before they had even signed the Declaration of Independence, and for a very long time, it was the U.S. government’s largest and most important endeavor—indeed, it was the government for most citizens. This was no conventional mail network but the central nervous system of the new body politic, designed to bind thirteen quarrelsome colonies into the United States by delivering news about public affairs to every citizen—a radical idea that appalled Europe’s great powers. America’s uniquely democratic post powerfully shaped its lively, argumentative culture of uncensored ideas and opinions and made it the world’s information and communications superpower with astonishing speed.
Admittedly, I am somewhat of a newbie to the High Plains having lived here for only a couple of decades but in that time, I’ve driven to numerous small communities. Traveling has given me a deep appreciation for the vastness of the High Plains as well as its beauty – the muted palette, the skies – cloudy or clear--the panorama and for its temperamental weather. More importantly, I’ve learned to ask, not “how many miles is that,” but “how many hours is that?” I’m currently VP for Academics Dodge City Community College, where I formerly chaired the English Department. I hold a doctorate in American Studies from Saint Louis University (Missouri) and have published short fiction, essays and poetry in various journals and anthologies, including Cottonwood, Hurricane Review, MacGuffin, Red River Review, Sou’wester, South Loop Review, The Langdon Review; Guilty Pleasures, Out of Line, and Elegant Rage. For the purposes of the book discussion, I want you to know that I’m just like you – a person who loves reading.

Alex Hunt (above left) is professor of English at West Texas A&M, where he came in 2002 after living all over the West--Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and Colorado. Director of the Center for the Study of the American West, he has published broadly on topics related to the American West and Southwest, High Plains history, environmental studies, and sense of place, including works on Annie Proulx’s That Old Ace in the Hole (set in the Texas panhandle). He is editor of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Review.

D. Nicole English was born in Texas and raised bilingual in two cultures. A second generation academic and folkloric dancer, she studied at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Now at Fort Hays State University, she specializes in the areas of sociology of dance, arts, and community, LatinX studies, and technology. Her research interests include the social impact of the arts and performance, (esp. dance), culture, and community, and their relationship to health and well-being across the life span.

Mike Strong is a photographer, videographer, software programmer, tech writer, and web programmer. He is a former astronomic and geodetic surveyor/computer, massage therapist, baker and—of course, bartender and waiter (“proudly so!”). He also worked as a newspaper and radio reporter in Nebraska and upstate New York. He holds a degree in Journalism from the University of Kansas. Known in the Kansas City dance communities for his dance photography and videography, as well as for his online publication, www.KCDance.com, Mike has focused on dance since 1994 and continues to do so.