

Laura lives with her father, Pa, on a prairie (a large area of grassy land without many trees) in South Dakota in America. While Pa makes hay with his mowing machine, Laura observes a range of animals including gophers (a burrowing rodent) and muskrats (large mice).

1 The mowing machine's whirring sounded cheerfully from the old buffalo wallow south of the
2 cabin, where bluestem grass stood thick and tall and Pa was cutting it for hay. The sky was
3 high and quivering with heat over the shimmering prairie. Half-way down to sunset, the sun
4 blazed as hotly as at noon. The wind was scorching hot. But Pa had hours of mowing yet to
5 do before he could stop for the night.

6 Laura drew up a jug of water from the well at the edge of the cabin and filled it with fresh,
7 cool water, corked it tightly, and started with it to the hayfield. Swarms of little white
8 butterflies hovered over the path. A dragonfly with gauzy wings swiftly chased a gnat. On the
9 stubble of cut grass the striped gophers were scampering. All at once they ran for their lives
10 and dived into their holes. Then Laura saw a swift shadow and looked up at the eyes and the
11 formidable claws of a hawk overhead. But all the little gophers were safe in their holes.

12 Pa was glad to see Laura with the water-jug. He got down from the mowing machine and
13 drank a mouthful. "Ah! that hits the spot!" he said, and tipped up the jug again. Then he
14 corked it, and setting it on the ground he covered it with cut grass.

15 "This sun almost makes a fellow want a bunch of sprouts to make a shade," he joked. He was
16 really glad there were no trees; he had grubbed so many sprouts from his clearing in the Big
17 Woods, every summer. Here on the Dakota prairies there was not a single tree, not one
18 sprout, not a bit of shade anywhere.

19 "A man works better when he's warmed up, anyway!" Pa said cheerfully, and chirruped to
20 the horses. Sam and David plodded on, drawing the machine. The long, steel-toothed blade
21 went steadily whirring against the tall grass and laid it down flat. Pa rode high on the open
22 iron seat, watching it lie down, his hand on the lever.

23 Laura sat in the grass to watch him go once around. The heat there smelled as good as an
24 oven when bread is baking. The little brown-and-yellow-striped gophers were hurrying again,
25 all about her. Tiny birds fluttered and flew to cling to bending grass-stems, balancing lightly.
26 A striped garter snake came flowing and curving through the forest of grass. Sitting hunched
27 with her chin on her knees, Laura felt suddenly as big as a mountain when the snake curved
28 up its head and stared at the high wall of her cotton skirt.

29 Its round eyes were shining like beads, and its tongue was flickering so fast that it looked like
30 a tiny jet of steam. The whole bright-striped snake had a gentle look. Laura knew that garter
31 snakes will not harm anyone, and they are good to have on a farm because they eat the insects
32 that spoil crops. It stretched its neck low again and, making a perfectly square turn in itself
33 because it could not climb over Laura, it went flowing around her and away in the grass.
34 Then the mowing machine whirred louder and the horses came nodding their heads slowly in
35 time with their feet.

36 Later, Pa came clambering up to Laura and she told him, "You've left a stack of hay, Pa."

37 "I have!" said Pa, surprised. "Where?"

38 He pushed a way through the harsh, tall grass and Laura followed close behind him. The
39 ground underfoot was soft and marshy and water lay in pools among the grass roots. Laura
40 could see only Pa's back and the grasses all around her, taller than she was. She stepped
41 carefully for the ground was growing wetter. Suddenly water spread out before her in a
42 resplendent pool.

43 Pa looked where she pointed. Then he said, "That isn't a stack of hay; that's a muskrat
44 house."

45 At the edge of the pool stood the muskrats' house. It was taller than Laura, and far larger than
46 her arms could reach around. Its rounded sides and top were rough, hard grey. The muskrats
47 had gnawed dry grass to bits and mixed the bits well with mud to make a good plaster for
48 their house, and they had built it up solidly and smoothly and rounded the top carefully to
49 shed rain. The house had no door. No path led to it anywhere. In the grass-stubble around it
50 and along the muddy rim of the pool, there was not one paw-print. There was nothing to tell
51 how the muskrats went in and out of their house.

52 Inside those thick, still walls, Pa said, the muskrats were sleeping now, each family curled in
53 its own little room lined softly with grass. Each room had a small round doorway that opened
54 onto a sloping hall. The hallway curved down through the house from top to bottom and
55 ended in dark water. That was the muskrats' front door.

56 After the sun had gone, the muskrats woke and went pattering down the smooth mud-floor of
57 their hallway. They plunged into the black water and came up through the pool to the wide,
58 wild night under the sky. All night long, in the starlight or moonlight, they swam and played
59 along the edges of the water, feeding on roots and stems and leaves of the water-plants and
60 grasses. When dawn was coming ghostly grey, they swam home. They dived and came up
61 through their water-door. Dripping, they went up the slope of their hallway, each to his own
62 grass-lined room. There they curled comfortably to sleep.

63 Laura put her hand on the wall of their house. The coarse plaster was hot in the hot wind and
64 sunshine, but inside the thick mud walls, in the dark, the air must be cool. She liked to think
65 of the muskrats sleeping there.