THE SNAKE RIVER PLAIN stretches across southern Idaho, a broad crescent opening north. Once considered an extension of the Washington-Oregon Columbia plateau, the plain now appears to be the result of a distinct volcanic process that stretched and fractured the Earth’s upper crust. Flat, cracked with lava, dry yet rich in groundwater, the land is an arid stage for a long-playing human drama. Over the last 15,000 years, as the Ice Age receded and tundra became desert, human society has evolved with the climate, adapting to global change. Our progress on the plain remains a tense encounter with the same natural forces that shaped the twisted terrain.

What traits make this land unique? How has topography influenced culture? Our book considers five perspectives: geology, ecology, prehistory, history and political science — an interdisciplinary reconnaissance of the Snake River country, a vivid look at the land.