

Common Ground in the Heartland

American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland

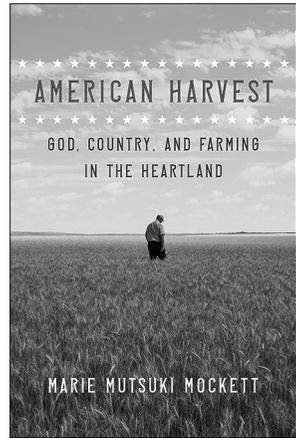
by Marie Mutsuki Mockett. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020. Hardcover, 408 pp., USD\$28.

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The “amber waves of grain” in the 1890s patriotic song “America the Beautiful” was written with the wheat fields of middle America in mind. Christian European immigrants largely planted these fields, which cover millions of acres beneath “spacious skies,” and they still tend them. God and country are intimately intertwined with patriotism and the hard work of growing the third-largest crop on U.S. soil. But while the grain is nearly ubiquitous in the U.S. diet, not many U.S. citizens think about who grows it. And, if they do, those thoughts are often not kind. “It seems like whenever we interest the national news media . . . like when there is a tornado . . . they seem to pick the most ignorant hick out there to put on camera,” said one Oklahoma pastor in Marie Mutsuki Mockett’s ambitious 2020 memoir, *American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland* (196).

In her memoir, which is also a travelogue, Mockett takes part in a five-month odyssey through the wheat fields of the Great Plains to better understand the mostly conservative, Christian, white farmers who grow the staple. These farmers, many of whom believe the Bible to be infallible, have a worldview that is vastly different from that of the cosmopolitan crowds who consume their harvest, or decry it for its genetically modified seeds and synthetic fertilizers. For the latter, the all-natural stamp on food signals goodness and purity, but the use of the terms is “almost certainly a product of our profound alienation from the natural world,” Mockett writes on page 198, quoting Eula Biss from her book *On Immunity: An Inoculation*.

Mockett’s journey through a part of the country that many U.S. citizens experience only from the window of a plane could not be more relevant in today’s hyper-politicized environment, where an “us” versus “them” mentality has literally spilled out into the streets. Even the term “heartland” in the title will come across to some as politically charged, perhaps rightfully so. The term, which has often been used to refer to the middle states of the United States, is often associated with white, conservative Christian cultural values at the expense of others who populate the region. Former Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg learned this after his January



2020 tweet when he referred to the country's need for "a president whose vision was shaped by the American Heartland rather than the ineffective Washington politics." According to a CNN article at the time, thousands criticized the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, a state where wheat is the number-three crop, that his use of the term suggests heartland values "were more important than the values of urban or coastal or southern parts of the country" (" 'Heartland' Values?," para. 3, 4).

Mockett, however, is well positioned to explore this part of the United States. Born to a Japanese mother and a U.S. father and raised on the California coast, she, in her words, does "not precisely look as if I am from any one place. I could be from anywhere too" (310). Her family in Japan runs and owns a Buddhist Temple. Her father's family owns a 7,000-acre wheat field in Nebraska, which during her childhood Mockett visited every summer for the harvest. She had been aware of the admiration her father, an artist and creative type, held for the church-going farmers who planted and cut the fields. These farmers, Mockett recalls, solved problems, fixed equipment, and worked long until after the sun had set. It was not until Mockett became an adult living in New York City that she became aware of the condescension many urbanites held toward this farming population. "I know what I am supposed to think," she writes. "Mall towns, white, ignorant, superstitious—but I don't think these things" (9).

Mockett thoughtfully explores the origins of these assumptions and contemplates what she sees as a growing divide between "country and city." Her reliable guide is Eric Wolgemuth, an evangelical Christian who has been harvesting her family's wheat for decades. In his repeated trips from his Pennsylvania home to the Great Plains to harvest wheat, he too has come to worry about the divide that "once just a crack in the dirt, was now a chasm into which objects, people, grace, and love all fell and disappeared" (24). Wolgemuth invites Mockett to join him for the summer 2017 harvest to share his part of the United States.

Wolgemuth is one of about 450 "custom harvesters" who trek across the plains with oversized loads of equipment and machinery to cut wheat. He is among the more successful harvesters, in charge of nearly a dozen crew members of young Christian men and four semitrucks, whose flatbeds haul combines, tractors, and grain hoppers across a multitude of state lines. The crew, writes Mockett, is intensely loyal to each other and to the farmers who depend on them, using a combination of "skills requiring nothing short of primal masculine mastery" (19).

Mockett's journey is as physical as it is intellectual. By her own admission, she has no discernible skills for harvesting or for cooking for a crowd, a task which is remarkably managed three times a day by Wolgemuth's wife. The team starts in Texas, where the United States' wheat ripens first, and then heads north, wending its way to Montana. They work at the mercy of nature: Wheat ripens at a rate of twenty miles a day, and the weather frequently kicks up hailstorms, rain, and tornadoes. Hordes of wild pigs ransack valuable crops, and Mockett, who has never fired a gun, finds herself taking part in a hunt. When the crew rests on Sunday or is delayed by weather, Mockett visits small towns that have been hollowed out by the difficult economics of farming. She attends church services and talks with pastors and members of a variety

of conservative Christian faiths. Along the way, she finds communities clinging to a way of life that is literally, for them, a biblical calling.

A large part of her exploration comes from the conversations she has with the crew. She shares with them her struggle to understand their Scripture in today's world. How can they, she asks them, not believe in evolution but accept genetically engineered crops? Would the concept of God change if Mars were colonized? What do they think of geology in the context of the age of the earth according to the Bible? Wolgemuth and his son are the ones who take the most interest in these questions and their well-considered responses are often surprisingly inclusive and grounded in love. Other members of the crew are less forthcoming, out of fear she will misrepresent them.

Many works of narrative nonfiction come to a decisive end or carry a clear message about a singular issue. Such books make for a relatively "easy" linear discussion for book clubs and classrooms. Do not expect this for *American Harvest*. Mockett's memoir is as far ranging as the wheat plains themselves, raising issues of race, identity, faith, and the displacement of Native Americans. Too, she contemplates the science behind modern agriculture in the context of United Nations warnings of food shortages in our lifetimes. But if one were to draw an overarching lesson, it would be to convey to all citizens of the United States the importance of taking a journey similar to Mockett's, to find the "others" in our own lives and spend time with them, because with knowledge comes understanding and, hopefully, common ground. In this case, it is the soil upon which we all depend.