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Book Review: *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle* Edited by Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson, and Rick Welsh

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Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle. Edited by Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson, and Rick Welsh. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. xvii + 296 pp. Figures, tables, maps, notes, references, appendix, index. $62.00 cloth, $27.00 paper.

The central question of Food and the Mid-Level Farm is both complex and fascinating: how can we renew an agriculture of the middle? To a large degree, the answer lies with what we think an “agriculture of the middle” is.

For decades, we have heard of a trend toward “bi-modal agriculture” in which there are very many small farms, relatively few giant corporate operations, and not much in the middle. Most discussions of this “middle” go no farther than the scale of the operation, that is, the acreage, number of animals, and that sort of thing. The approach here moves us into richer territory: the “middle” is a marketing phenomenon. Some farms are too big to rely on direct marketing, but too small to be viable in a world of global contracts and input processing.

The various chapters of the book seem to take different views on what is the “middle” and, therefore, what policies should be pursued. There are recommendations in some chapters that appear strictly related to scale, and others favoring policies that presume most farmers in the middle either are, or ought to be, bigger siblings to farms that market products directly to consumers. It is here, I think, that the book could use some clarification. We are told more than once how many farms fit the scale criteria, but information on how many fit the market criteria is much harder to find.

There are four sections to the book: motivation for concern about the agriculture of the middle; various ways agriculture might be organized to better serve that part of our farming system; strategies for bringing consumers and mid-level farms closer together; and policy directions. Apart from any concern the reader might have for an agriculture of the middle, many of the chapters provide strong background for the study of even broader issues facing today’s farming system.

Are most midsized farms no more than the trailing edge of a massive shift to a global commodity system? Can they be saved with redirection toward markets that meet more specialized consumer preferences? And can anything be done for the midsized farm if, as one chapter says, “our purpose is not to challenge or change commodity agriculture”?

Questions such as these will be with us for years to come. Food and the Mid-Level Farm should be required reading for all who seek the answers and policies a sustainable 21st-century agriculture will require. Richard A. Levins, Department of Applied Economics, Emeritus, University of Minnesota.